Parent Involvement in Urban Charter Schools: New Strategies for Increasing Participation

Joanna Smith, Priscilla Wohlstetter, Chuan Ally Kuzin, and Kris De Pedro

Abstract

Decades of research point to the benefits of parent involvement in educa-tion. However, research has also shown that White, middle-class parents are disproportionately involved. Charter schools, as schools of choice, have been assumed to have fewer involvement barriers for minority and low-income parents, but a 2007 survey of charter leaders found that parent involvement re-mains a significant challenge. This qualitative study utilizes Epstein's model of family involvement to examine parent involvement programs at twelve charter schools across six U.S. states. Findings suggest that parent involvement *activi-ties* in the study sample of urban charter schools fit Epstein's typology fairly well. However, the *strategies* used to implement these activities and to attract hard-to-reach parents are fairly innovative: Study schools offered wrap-around services, incentives, and contracts to enhance and ensure participation; uti-lized technology for advertising parent volunteer opportunities; and involved parents in the decision-making and governance of the school. Overall, these strategies were linked with increasing parents' self-efficacy and comfort level in participating in their children's education.

Key Words: parents, involvement, urban, charter schools, charters, education, parental, choice, family, families, activities, strategies, innovation, contracts, technology, decision-making, governance, self-efficacy, contracts

Prior Research on Parent Involvement in Education

Before turning to our qualitative study of parent involvement in urban charter schools, the following sections outline the prior research on the benefits of parent involvement, the barriers to involvement that exist, and the potential of the charter school context to reduce these barriers.

Benefits of Parent Involvement

Decades of research point to the numerous benefits of parent involvement in education for not only students but also for the parents involved, the school, and the wider community (Barnard, 2004; Epstein, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Despite the challenges in establishing a causal link between parent involvement and student achievement, studies utilizing large databases have shown positive and significant effects of parent involvement on both academic and behavioral outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2007). For example, research has found that parent involvement is related to a host of student achievement indicators, including better grades, attendance, attitudes, expectations, homework completion, and state test results (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Cancio, West, & Young, 2004; Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Sheldon, 2003). Additional academic outcomes such as lower dropout rates (Rumberger, 1995), fewer retentions, and fewer special education placements (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999) have been found as well.

In addition to academic outcomes, parent involvement also appears to have positive effects on students' behavior. Brody, Flor, and Gibson (1999) found that parenting practices contributed to an increase in students' ability to self-regulate behavior. Higher levels of social skills and improved overall behavior were also documented. In a study of American Indian students, researchers found that a parent intervention approach reduced students' disruptive behavior in the classroom; students were less aggressive and withdrawn after parent participation in the program (Kratochwill, McDonald, Levin, Bear-Tibbetts, & Demaray, 2004). Other studies have documented the ways in which parent involvement supports children's social competencies in school (Hill et al., 2004; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004). Some researchers have found that only specific types of parent involvement appear to correlate with student achievement. These studies conclude that involvement at home, especially parents discussing school activities and helping children plan their programs, appeared to have the strongest impact on academic achievement (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Van Voorhis,

2003). Other researchers found involvement at the school site made the key difference (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Lee & Bowen, 2006).

A dominant theme in the parent involvement literature is the lack of common understanding between school staff and parents about what constitutes parent involvement; parents consistently report higher levels of involvement compared to teachers' reports (Barnard, 2004). In one study, parents described involvement as keeping their children safe and getting them to school punctually, while teachers expected parents' presence at the school. While both teachers and parents felt that involvement was important, the lack of consensus around what constitutes parent involvement has caused teachers to blame families and parents to feel unappreciated (Lawson, 2003). On the other hand, DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane (2007) found in their survey that parents did know the activities expected of them, such as attending school events, but they might not know the benefits of such involvement.

Barriers to Parent Involvement

Research has shown that family demographics are a significant factor in the level and type of involvement in their child's education. White middle-class parents are traditionally the most visibly active in public schools (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Manz, Fantuzzo, & Power, 2004; Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). Mathews (2009) suggests that "the importance of parental involvement, at least in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, has been exaggerated, probably because middle-class commentators have been imposing their suburban experiences on very different situations" (para. 4). Federal policy through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 has long mandated parent involvement in disadvantaged communities through parent advisory councils, but barriers continue to exist, particularly for urban, low-income, immigrant, minority, and working-class parents. Language barriers, work schedules, and a sense of disenfranchisement have generally resulted in lower levels of (at least visible) parent involvement by working-class parents, in particular, those from ethnic and racial minorities. While a growing body of research continues to advocate for parent involvement in urban schools as a key to increasing student performance, parent involvement remains elusive (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Desimone, 1999).

Some have called for research that takes into account the particular experiences of urban minority parents when evaluating their involvement in public schools. Auerbach (2007), for instance, asserts that parent involvement is socially constructed and politically contested through the lenses of race, class, culture, and gender. She presents a parent involvement continuum for minority parents that range from "moral supporters" to "ambivalent companions"

to "struggling advocates." Moral supporters encourage their children without making appearances at the school. On the other end of the continuum, struggling advocates work hard to fulfill their role according to traditional expectations but often face barriers when they try to be present at the school. In the middle are ambivalent companions, parents who want their children to do well but do not make efforts to advocate on their behalf. To this point, David Levin, co-founder of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), concludes that initially, low-income parents may often be consumed by the challenges of trying to make a living, but if their children become successful at school, gratified families will support the schools in any way they can; good schooling comes before parental support, not the other way around (Mathews, 2009).

This strand of research bringing a critical lens to the study of parent involvement points out that educators may be unaware or unappreciative of the invisible strategies that minority or low-income parents use to support their children's education, such as making sacrifices so children can attend better schools or limiting children's chores to allow for study time (Mehan, Hubbard, Villanueva, & Lintz, 1996). López (2001) found that other forms of parent involvement exist among ethnic minority parents, such as parental transmission of sociocultural values: "translating the lessons of working hard in the field into lessons for working hard in school" to their high-achieving children, and he argues that these forms should be recognized as legitimate parent involvement (p. 433). Similarly, Delgado-Gaitan (1994) revealed that cultural narratives are a form of involvement among some ethnicities, yet are not recognized by Eurocentric models of involvement.

These authors argue for an expanded conception of parent involvement that gives value to the actions of minority parents. Overall, these studies expand the dimensions of parent involvement, but they lack a coherent framework for analyzing the quality and quantity of involvement among urban parents. Questions arise from these studies as to how schools can increase the participation of traditionally underrepresented parents in activities valued by the school while at the same time valuing the less overt efforts made by parents to foster positive educational outcomes for their children. To this end, this study provides exploratory research into the parent involvement practices and strategies in place in urban charter schools, a context in which urban families may have increased avenues for participation beyond the traditional classifications.

Charter Schools: Opportunities for Innovations in Parent Involvement?

The rise of the charter school movement has been seen as an opportunity for urban parents to play a more central role in their children's education. The

majority of charter schools have been established in urban areas and dispropor-tionately serve minority and low-income students, that is, students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch (Christensen & Lake, 2007). As such, urban charter schools have been touted as a setting in which the traditional barriers to parent involvement can be alleviated, since charter schools are typically small "community schools" with missions tailored to their student populations. In 15 states, the opportunity for parent participation is one purpose written into the charter school law; many charter schools are established by a founding group that includes parents (Center on Educational Governance, 2008). For example, Tennessee's law states, "The purpose of this chapter is to…afford par-ents substantial meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children" (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-13-102(a)(6)), and Utah's law says, "The purposes of charter schools are to…provide opportunities for greater pa-rental involvement in management decisions at the school level" (Utah Code Ann. § 53A-1a-503). In addition, parent contracts have emerged as a common approach for charter schools to encourage involvement once the school is op-erational (Corwin & Becker, 1995).

Not surprisingly, there is an underlying assumption that charter schools involve more parents both quantitatively and qualitatively. The theory posits that charter school parents, because they actively choose to send their child to a charter school, will be more involved than parents whose children are automat-ically assigned to a district-run school (Goldring & Shapira, 1993). Due to the greater autonomy enjoyed by charter schools, researchers have found that these schools tend to adopt stronger and more specific parent involvement policies than traditional public schools (Bulkley & Wohlstetter, 2004; Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000). An early study of charter schools—one of the few that com-pared charter school parent involvement to that of non-charter public schools in the same neighborhood—reported greater parent involvement in charter schools. Using nine measures, including volunteering and attendance at school events, the authors found that, across the board, parents spent more time at the charter schools filling a variety of roles (Becker, Nakagawa, & Corwin, 1997). Other researchers also have found that parents were more involved in charter schools, and, most importantly, they were involved in more significant ways, for example, serving on charter school governing boards (Finn et al., 2000). While charter school laws vary a great deal across the nation, many states em-phasize the role of parents in the creation as well as the governance of a charter school, as noted above. The involvement of parents in the governance of char-ter schools is particularly significant for minority parents. One study found that when minority parents were represented in the governance of a school, the overall parent involvement increased and better cultural understandings existed between school staff and parents (Marshall, 2006).

Cooper (1991), on the other hand, found that parents who elect to send their child to schools of choice may feel like that decision alone is sufficient to ensure their child's success, and they have no need to get further involved. Murphy and Shiffman (2002) noted that parent involvement is the "cornerstone of many charter school visions" (p. 97) but that despite lofty goals and good intentions, charter schools varied greatly in how they involve parents. A 2007 survey of charter leaders in three states found that parent involvement is one area in which charter school leaders, lacking confidence in how to increase participation, struggled to translate intent into practice: 29% of leaders reported "major challenges" with engaging parents, and an additional 43% indicated it was a "minor challenge" (Gross & Pochop, 2007). Becker et al. (1997) discovered that despite a greater level of involvement, charter schools did not necessarily take a more active role in trying to involve parents; parent contracts were the only notable outreach method. The researchers also voiced concerns that parent contracts excluded minority and working-class parents from enrolling their children in the school, afraid they would be unable to fulfill the requirements of such contracts. Fuller's (2002) case studies indicated that charter schools did not necessarily escape the issues that plague parent involvement in traditional public schools. Issues like social class differences, language and culture barriers, and the intimidation felt by some parents who did not experience success in school themselves created obstacles for meaningful involvement and communication in charter schools similar to those in non-charter schools. In general, the literature on charter school parent involvement points to a need to uncover strategies that help to encourage and support minority and working-class parents.

New Research on Parent Involvement in Urban Charter Schools

The purpose of the qualitative research presented here was to examine parent involvement strategies in urban charter schools with high levels of involvement. Joyce Epstein's model of involvement was used as a backbone for the study in order to assess whether different strategies are utilized in the charter context. We begin with a description of Epstein's typology of parent involvement in schools. We then discuss the findings from our study of parent involvement in urban charter schools.

Defining What Constitutes Parent Involvement

Parent involvement has been defined as including behaviors at home as well as at school. Some researchers have defined parent involvement by the location in which involvement activities take place, differentiating among home-based

involvement, school-based involvement, and home–school communication (Barnard, 2004; Manz et al., 2004). Lee and Bowen (2006) employed a typology that takes into account both the activities and the location of parent involvement. The measures in their research included: (1) parent involvement at school, (2) parent–child educational discussion, (3) homework help, (4) time management, and (5) parent educational expectations. In all, there is a lack of cohesion around the terminology and definition of parent involvement (Christenson & Hurley, 1997; McCarthey, 2000). For instance, the terms "parent involvement," "family involvement," "parent engagement," "parent empowerment," and "school–family partnerships" are often used interchangeably in the literature. We use the term parent involvement to encompass the gamut of activities parents (and other family members) engage in to help their children succeed at school.

Epstein's Framework of Parent Involvement

Epstein's framework of school, family, and community partnerships is commonly used to analyze parent involvement in school settings. Epstein (2001, 2011) offers a model of family–school–community partnerships based on the theory of overlapping spheres of home, school, and community influences that shape children's learning and development. Although Epstein's typology has been criticized for being school-based and Euro-centric, she recognizes that parents participate in their children's education along numerous dimensions—including at school and at home—and proposes a six-part typology of parent involvement (see Table 1 for the six types and examples of each).

Epstein's model (2001, 2011) has influenced the ways policymakers and school administrators design and implement parent involvement programs. In some states, schools are asked to complete the parent involvement portion of their Title I reports using Epstein's framework. In our study, Epstein's model (2001, 2011) served as the framework through which we examine parent involvement in urban charter schools, as well as a comparison to gauge whether charter schools have developed new strategies for involving parents.

Table 1. Epstein's Model of School, Family, and Community Partnerships

Type	Description of Type	Examples
Type 1	Basic obligations of families	Providing children with basic needs such as health and safety
Type 2	Basic obligations of schools	Communication between school and family such as memos, phone calls, report cards, and parent–teacher conferences
Type 3	Involvement at school	Volunteering at the school to assist teachers in the classroom or attending school events
Type 4	Involvement in learning activities at home	Helping children with homework
Type 5	Involvement in decision-making, governance, and advocacy	Serving in a parent–teacher association (PTA), on committees, or in other leadership positions
Type 6	Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations	Making connections with organizations that share responsibility for children's education, such as afterschool programs, health services, and other resources

Research Methods

The research reported here used a qualitative approach to assess parent involvement strategies utilized by urban charter schools. We acknowledge that not all schools view parent involvement as a goal and that parent involvement activities can fall along a continuum. At one end of the continuum, schools keep parents informed of what the school is doing. In the middle, parents are involved in activities at the home and school to support student learning. At the other end, parents are engaged in the educational program and in setting and implementing school policy. We sampled at this end of the continuum, seeking schools with strong family engagement. Since the purpose of our study is to examine outliers at this end of the continuum, this drove our research methods of exploring the phenomenon in a qualitative way. We sought to uncover the strategies used by charter schools with strong family engagement.

To select our sample, we first reviewed the charter school legislation in the District of Columbia and each state with charter school laws (n = 41) to better understand the legislative context for parent involvement. In our review of the charter school legislation, we uncovered a range of provisions that encourage, require, or hinder parent involvement. For example, 14 states explicitly require a parent involvement plan as part of the charter school application. We selected

states for the study sample to cover a range of provisions related to parent involvement, including:

- Parent support required for conversion from a district-run school to a charter school;
- Parent support required during the application to form a charter school;
- Parent involvement plans required in the application;
- Parent involvement one purpose of the charter school law;
- Regular communication required from the charter school to parents;
- Enrollment preference given to children whose parents were active in the application process;
- Assessment of parent satisfaction required;
- Parents given the power to vote to close the charter school; and,
- School site decision-making team or governing board must include at least one parent.

Study Participants

In order to arrive at a national sample, we identified participants for our study through a multi-step process:

1. Once we had selected states for geographic diversity as well as differences in state laws around parent involvement, we selected cities within each state that were (a) urban, and (b) had between 5 and 35 charter schools with the assumption that this would increase the probability of at least one school with strong parent involvement while also increasing the likelihood that authorizers would know about the specific practices of the schools they oversee compared to authorizers with much larger portfolios of charter schools.

2. We then conducted interviews with charter school authorizers[1] in each selected city to gather nominations of urban charter schools with strong parent involvement.

3. Finally, we used a semi-structured interview protocol to conduct interviews with leaders from nominated charter schools to find out more about the specific parent involvement strategies employed, the resources needed to sustain them, and the various impacts of those strategies.

The final study sample included 12 urban charter schools in 6 states. Table 2 provides demographic data on each of the study schools. Each school leader agreed to have their school named in the study, therefore pseudonyms are not used.

Table 2. Characteristics of Participating Charter Schools

School	Location	Year Begun	Grades Served	# Stu-dents	% Free/ Reduced Lunch	% ELLs	Student Ethnicity
Community of Peace Academy	St. Paul, MN	1995	K-12	684	83%	60%	60% Hmong 30% African American 10% Latino /Caucasian
D. Huerta Learning Academy	Oakland, CA	1999	K-8	215	90%	92%	97% Latino 2% African American
EC Reams	Oakland, CA	1999	K-8	344	45%	12%	81% African American 18% Latino
Erie Charter School	Chicago, IL	2005	K-3	160	88%	3%	69% Latino 17% African American
International Community School	Decatur, GA	2002	K-6	383	63%	22%	56% African American 10% Asian American
Lighthouse Community Charter	Oakland, CA	2001	K-12	359	79%	63%	81% Latino 13% African American
IVY Preparatory Academy	Norcross, GA	2008	6	120	Data N/A*	Data N/A	All girls; Ethnicity data N/A
Manzanita Charter	Rich-mond, CA	2000	6-8	149	48%	33%	70% Latino 9% African American
Neighbor-hood House	Boston, MA	1995	PreK-8	399	72%	66%	55% African American 14% Latino 4% Asian American
Partnership Academy	Richfield, MN	2002	K-6	192	97%	76%	87% Latino 12% African American
Rise Academy	Miami, FL	2008	K-8	200	Data N/A	Data N/A	Data N/A
Univ. of Chicago CS – Donoghue Campus	Chicago, IL	2005	K-5	320	73%	Data not re-corded	97.4% African American

*N/A: not available

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted pilot tests of the interview protocol with three schools and refined the instrument slightly to ensure that the questions elicited the information of interest without bias. The final interview protocol consisted of 11 semi-structured questions (see Appendix). Questions gathered information about current parent involvement activities (e.g., volunteering, homework help, parenting classes), the goals of parent involvement at the school, the techniques employed to obtain high levels of involvement (e.g., parent liaisons, parent contracts, home visits), the ways in which parent involvement is monitored or enforced, and challenges to parent involvement faced by the school. During each 45- to 60-minute interview, we probed administrators to provide specific and detailed information. All interviews were taped with interviewee permission, transcribed, then coded and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software HyperResearch. Coding and analysis were accomplished in a series of three iterations. Three members of the research team worked collaboratively to increase the reliability of the coding process. We started with a code list derived from Epstein's typology as well as with topics generated by the interviews. The first iteration of coding was intended to capture all of the specific ideas that were discussed by the interviewees. Hence, the researchers conducted a pilot coding in which three transcripts were reviewed to generate additional codes to maximize the topics included in the code list. After the pilot coding, any additional ideas not represented by an existing code were given a code of "other" so that in the second iteration, additional codes were created based on the universe coded "other." In addition, during the second iteration of coding, ideas that were deemed multi-faceted were split into two while others were combined. In the third iteration, themes were assessed that linked back to Epstein's typology as well as a category labeled "new" to indicate themes outside of Epstein's framework.

Study Limitations

This study reflects the parent involvement strategies employed by a relatively small sample of urban charter schools. To address this limitation, and to aid in the generalizability of the findings, we purposely selected schools in states that differed both geographically and in terms of ways in which the state charter school law addressed (or failed to address) parent involvement. Further, while we only interviewed school leaders, the small size of the charter schools studied placed the school leaders in a key position in terms of both designing parent involvement strategies and in their implementation. A final limitation to the study design was in asking charter school authorizing agencies to nominate schools for selection. While the research team was not affiliated with any

study participants, some authorizers we initially approached were also unfamiliar with the specific parent involvement practices in the charter schools they oversaw, reducing the number of different locations to the six in which authorizers felt sufficiently knowledgeable to provide nominations.

Findings

Analysis of interview data revealed that parent involvement activities in these urban charters generally fall within the typology set forth by Epstein. **Type 1** activities, *basic obligations of families*, reported by interviewees included expecting parents to bring students to school on time. As one principal noted:

> The biggest problem we have is kids getting to school on time….It's really hard for kids, if they've missed the very beginning of the day. Our middle school students every morning have DEAR, Drop Everything and Read, for the first 20 minutes, and if kids are coming in during that, it's really disruptive. Our elementary school students, every morning, each teacher has a little pledge they do, like "I will go to college; I will be successful." If kids come late for that, it's just hard.

As an incentive to arrive on time, the school is holding a competition; the first class to attain 10 days of perfect on-time will be given a party.

However, while Epstein's framework emphasizes the basic obligations of families to provide their children with basic needs such as health and safety, a third of the study schools played this role by offering wrap-around services to students and their families. "[If families] have housing needs or food needs, we provide them," said the leader of a charter school started by a social service provider. Another school ran an employment office for parents, focusing on job opportunities for refugee parents with limited English skills. In addition to direct service provision, 10 of the 12 schools offered GED, English language, college-credit, and parenting classes for parents after school hours. One of these schools held discussions on qualifying for home loans to help parents move toward home ownership. Another principal described a book study the school had started for parents to learn parenting techniques: "We have gotten one of our Hmong staff people who will be facilitating the Hmong group, and we'll also have a group that's in Spanish, and an English group, and we're going to be offering several nights when parents can come in to discuss various portions of the book." Another principal described the opportunity for networking provided by the parent center at the school: "So many new families have moved into the neighborhood, and so the school has really become a hub for parents to find out things like how do you find the best grocery store, or how do I figure out other child care options after the school day."

Type 2 activities, *basic obligation of the school*, were common across all study sites. In addition to sending home report cards and holding parent–teacher conferences, several principals mentioned the use of home visits to ensure communication between the school and family. One principal noted,

> We are very flexible about scheduling meetings, and I think we go the extra mile, even to the point of going to the home rather than having them come here if it really doesn't work for them to come here….If they can't do that, then we'll do it over the phone, we'll do whatever it takes to be in touch with parents.

Common techniques to decrease language barriers were to translate material sent home into the parents' native language and to provide translators for school meetings. As one principal reported, "We have a newsletter that goes to the parents once a week, which is translated…into six languages." One principal described the use of headsets during school meetings so that interpreters can do "real time translation."

Type 3 activities, *involvement at school*, also were reported by each interviewee. Parents commonly helped out in classrooms, served as crossing guards before and after school, attended field trips and special events held at the school, helped out in the office, and participated in school-beautification projects. One principal noted that parents were encouraged to "come sit in a class and observe" until they feel comfortable taking a more active role: "The one thing that we tell all of our parents is after the third time you've come to observe, we're gonna put you to work." In three cases, parent surveys were used to identify what activities parents would be willing to help out with and what skills they had that might benefit the school. As one principal reported, "When parents enroll, we sit down with them, and we go over the family partnership plan and point out the fact that we think it's important that they're involved, and ask if they would be willing to provide some support in the school, whether that might be chaperoning or volunteering, and then we ask what days and times are most convenient for them." The school's parent coordinator used these data when she looked for volunteers. A common technique to increase parent involvement, used at half of the study schools, was to offer a reward for participation; for example, a school that utilized a student uniform gave "free dress" passes to students whose parents attended school meetings.

Interviewees from each school described a range of **Type 4** activities, *involvement in learning activities at home*. In many cases, this involved encouraging parents to help their children with their homework, something for which many of the schools offered parent education classes to increase parent confidence and skills. Generally, Type 4 activities were voluntary. As one principal

noted, "We received a grant in which we were able to buy parent texts, books, and activities that are in a little backpack, and parents are encouraged to take them home to do activities with their kids at home." Another principal reported, "We ask all families to read with their children, and make it really clear that they can read with their children in English or in Spanish or in Cantonese, that any of these will help their child's literacy skills." Parents at another school were invited to sit in during their children's tutoring sessions to learn techniques to help their child at home. Some schools mandated involvement at home. As the principal at one school noted,

> One of the things that we mandate is that our parents read for 45 minutes a night with their children and check homework….And that's really regardless of the academic experience or their academic level that the parents may have. We feel like if there's a parent that has some deficiencies, we can give them the help to help their kids, and that's something, as a school, we're managing our resources so that that can happen.

Involvement in decision-making, governance, and advocacy (**Type 5**) was found in 7 of the 12 charter schools studied. One strategy was to hold parent focus groups to help shape school policies. As one principal noted, "We've done a lot of focus groups with the parents to see if there are things that they'd like to see happen in the school; we kind of use that as an avenue to get parent feedback." In other cases, schools utilized a parent survey to gauge satisfaction and to plan new activities. In one school, the principal reported that they conducted an annual parent survey and, in addition, "if there's a particular issue that comes up, we always survey them first," such as changing the school day's start time:

> We don't just collect information and ask parents a few things for the sake of it, we actually use it and make changes to the program based on it, and parents see that their input is taken into consideration, and so they're more apt to give it when we ask for it.

In addition, five of the schools included parents on the school's governing board. One principal reported, "Traditionally, the board of the school has been very parent-heavy—there's a nine-member board, and usually, we have six or seven parents."

Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations (**Type 6**) were utilized by five of the study schools. In some cases, the school was started by a community organization, so that form of partnership was built in. As one principal noted:

> One of the things that our authorizer offers is this community partners program. They're pretty well-connected within the community, and they

help coordinate this program of volunteers….This is one of the avenues that the parents have [available] to be involved, if they have a certain time during the day or a day of the week that they can volunteer, they can work through that program and become a classroom aide, or they can do different projects within that program.

In other cases, community-based organizations and/or faith-based organizations partnered with the school to hold parent classes, trainings, or provide health services. Examples of parent involvement activities reported by the study schools are summarized in Table 3, organized by Epstein's six types.

Table 3: Examples of Charter School Parent Activities Organized by Epstein's Typology

Type	Description of Type	Examples
Type 1	Basic obligations of families	Incentives provided for parents to bring their child to school on time; school provided ELL classes, parenting classes, or wrap-around services to supplement parents' ability to provide health and safety for their children
Type 2	Basic obligations of the schools	Home visits conducted; material sent home translated into the parents' native language; translators at school meetings to decrease language barriers
Type 3	Involvement at school	Parents volunteered in classrooms; served as crossing guards before/after school; attended field trips and special events; helped out in the office; participated in school beautification
Type 4	Involvement in learning activities at home	Parents required to read with their children for 45 minutes nightly; monitor their child's homework completion with a homework checklist; can take home activity books to do with their children
Type 5	Involvement in decision-making, governance, and advocacy	Parents participated in focus groups; completed surveys; served on the school's governing board
Type 6	Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations	School partnered with community organizations to help train parents; offered volunteer opportunities for parents; or provided services to parents

Conclusions and Implications

Our data show that parent involvement *activities* in the study sample of urban charter schools fit Epstein's typology fairly well. However, the *strategies* used to implement these activities and to attract parents traditionally not as visibly active in schools were fairly innovative.

While the study schools expected parents to fulfill their basic obligations (Type 1), they also realized that many of the parents faced situations which hindered their ability to do so, such as working multiple shifts, raising their children as single parents, and struggling with poverty. As noted above, to help parents meet their children's basic needs, several of the study schools offered wrap-around services for the students and their families. Another difference was noted with parent–teacher conferences (Type 2). While these are a standard occurrence at public schools, many schools, especially in urban areas, struggle with low attendance at these conferences. In contrast, the interviewees in our study reported extremely high attendance rates at parent–teacher conferences, with some schools reporting 100% participation. Offering incentives (e.g., a drawing for prizes) for attendance, as well as holding meetings at night, by phone, or in the family's home helped ensure participation.

Involvement at the school (Type 3) also differed in the sample charter schools from the traditional model of relying on parents to surface as volunteers. Many of the charter school leaders reported using "parent contracts" specifying the number of hours (ranging from 10 to 72 hours) of service required from each family annually. Interviewees reported that this level of expectation helped sustain parent involvement programs which otherwise might dwindle once initial enthusiasm wanes or highly active parents leave the school. In addition, the type of volunteer activity often included school maintenance or beautification, activities not commonly assigned to parents at non-charter public schools. Several school leaders noted the sense of ownership derived from such activities, as well as the community aspect of involving parents in these ways. As one school leader noted,

> The model for the founders was related to the idea of community as defined by Martin Luther King, and it's the idea that we create a community where everybody's safe, everybody is mutually engaged with each other and mutually responsible for each other and mutually obligated to each other. So, the events that we have cover the whole range from just basic grade-level potlucks to work days for parents.

Three of the charter schools in the study reported using technology as a means of notifying parents of volunteer opportunities as well as tracking parent

involvement. Using technology to enable parent involvement had the benefit of instant communication as well as reducing the time costs associated with the school calling parents or sending home newsletters. It also allowed for two-way communication when parents were able to e-mail the school, something not afforded when information is only sent from the school to the parents. In one school, the Web site included a "parental involvement" tab, with links to the school's volunteer needs and to Web sites that the school had vetted and declared "safe" for children and parents to view together and to use to complete class assignments. Each teacher maintained his or her own Web page, updating it weekly with homework assignments, learning objectives, reference Web sites visited in class, and news of upcoming class events. The school also distributed a multi-lingual newsletter and, for emergencies, used the AllCall system in the parent's language of choice. Another school complemented its school Web site with such e-mail strategies as a weekly e-newsletter, e-blast, and Teleparent. The e-newsletter announced school activities and events; a hard copy was also sent home with students. The school used the program Constant Contact to track the readership of and reactions to specific components of the e-mail and to survey parents about school operational issues. The school reported using the e-blast system to disseminate such information as a change in schedule, a last-minute need for parent volunteers, or a special or unusual event concerning the school, parents, or students. E-blasts are short and to the point, to convey a sense of urgency. In addition, the use of Teleparent, an automated parental notification system, allowed school teachers and administrators to send student-specific or general messages home over the telephone or the Internet. It can report school attendance and tardiness, schoolwide emergencies, and messages about individual student performance. Teachers can record their own voices in the Teleparent system, which has multiple language options.

Type 5 involvement, the decision-making role, in the studied charter schools included involving and empowering parents in decision-making and governance of the school to an extent not typically found in non-charter public schools. In some cases, parents elected the charter school's governing board, making the board directly accountable to them. In other cases, parents served as members of the charter school's board of directors, playing a role in school-level governance not available to parents in a district school system, in which one central school board makes policy decisions for all of the schools in the district. This type of school-level governance role for parents is mandated by law in six states[2] (Butler, Smith, & Wohlstetter, 2008), and utilized voluntarily in individual charter schools in many other states. This relationship created a new role not only for parents but also between parents and the school leaders who were hired (and potentially dismissed) by the school's parents. It helps explain

the survey finding mentioned above that charter school leaders lack confidence in involving parents, as this type of relationship is foreign to those leaders coming from a more traditional public school setting.

Finally, involvement in the study schools often was linked with increasing parent's self-efficacy. In some cases, training was provided to help parents become comfortable with school involvement. As one principal reported,

> We had to really teach parents how to get involved. We had to say, "These are the kinds of questions you ask; this is how you behave on field trips. You are not here to just be a parent to your child but an example to all kids…." We made pamphlets that went home with directions on how to get involved and had workshops and monthly meetings with parents about how to get involved.

In other cases, training was provided on how to engage in decision-making, particularly for parents whose cultural norms dictate that school staff members are the "experts" while parents stay on the sidelines. At one school with a Parent Advisory Committee, the principal reported that

> we've had to work really hard over the years to make sure that it is a parent-run thing, not our staff trying to lead the parents. We have had to help coach them along, and it's taken a little bit of time to build their capacity and their confidence in leading something like that, because many of them have never had the opportunity to do so. And so it's kind of like training them and getting them professional development in those areas.

These findings suggest the emergence of new strategies to increase parent involvement. While the study schools differed in school size, percent ELL, and student ethnicity, these factors did not appear to influence the different strategies schools employed. Rather, a mission of parent involvement and dedication to reaching parents not typically involved in visible ways took precedence.

However, the survey results mentioned above indicate that many charter school leaders struggle to engage parents. The schools we included in our study, therefore, while providing evidence that some innovation exists, should not be deemed as typical among the charter population. Indeed, the sample was purposively selected as exemplars in strong parent involvement; they were not intended to provide generalizations to the charter population. Rather, the lessons drawn from this study suggest the benefits of an emphasis on involvement *strategies* rather than specific *activities*; while adhering to traditional forms of involvement like parent–teacher conferences, these schools used innovative strategies to ensure high attendance at these events. Leadership programs directed specifically at charter schools can help new leaders create parent involvement plans, as can trainings offered by charter school resource centers and

member associations. While state laws and authorizers can encourage parent involvement, ultimately the schools themselves must implement meaningful opportunities for parents to be involved in their child's education.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study provides a starting point to understanding parent involvement practices in urban charter schools, several questions remain. For one thing, there may be a difference between parent involvement and engagement. Many schools, charter as well as district-run, appear interested in *involvement*—letting parents know the school's expectations, having parent attend school events and meetings—but not *engagement* in which parents are an ongoing presence at the school and set school policy through serving on the school governing board or advisory council. There may be a continuum of parent participation from involvement to engagement, with a critical link to the school's mission. For example, if a charter school is highly academic but serves a low-income population, they may not expect parents who have not graduated from high school themselves to become fully engaged. These schools may set a goal of having the parents involved by being supportive of their child's education rather than expecting them to help out in the classroom. Further research into how a school's mission shapes parent participation would help shed light on this difference.

Also, the study reported here utilized interviews of school leaders, but did not include data from any parents, students, or teachers. As the literature posits benefits to all of these groups and acknowledges differences in interpreting what constitutes involvement, future research that includes the perspectives of these constituents is warranted. Finally, future investigations could include different types of schools of choice—private schools, faith-based schools, magnet schools, schools attended through voucher programs—to assess whether the findings from charter schools are indicative of different types of schools of choice. Such a study could explore the extent to which our findings relate to the geographic dispersion of families versus the characteristics of the parent population.

Endnotes

[1]Authorizers are entities identified by state charter school law to approve new charter school petitions, oversee ongoing performance, and evaluate charter schools' performance to make renewal decisions. Authorizing entities vary by state and include local school boards, universities, state boards of education, municipal bodies, or nonprofit organizations. For more on the role of authorizers, see www.qualitycharters.org
[2]Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, New Hampshire, Tennessee, and the District of Columbia

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Joanna Smith is an assistant research professor at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education, where she also serves as the assistant director of USC's Center on Educational Governance (CEG). Her research focuses on education policy and reform and on innovation. Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Joanna Smith, Center on Educational Governance, University of Southern California, Waite Phillips Hall 901, Los Angeles, California, 90089, or email joannasm@usc.edu

Priscilla Wohlstetter is the Diane and MacDonald Becket Professor of Educational Policy at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education and CEG's director. Her research explores the policy and politics of K-12 urban education and the relationship between school governance and improved school performance.

Chuan Ally Kuzin and Kris De Pedro are both doctoral students at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education. Ms. Kuzin's

dissertation examines the use of parent compacts in charter schools. Mr. De Pedro's research focuses on military families and children, educational epidemiology, and the relationship between school climate and academic achievement.

Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. Tell me a little about the parent involvement (PI) at your school – what types of activities are parents involved in? (prompts: helping out in classrooms, helping out in the office, helping with field trips or extra-curricular activities, helping with their child's homework/studying at home, "parenting" classes, school governance, fundraising).
2. What percentages of parents are involved (in the activities mentioned in #1)?
   a. In your elementary program
   b. In your secondary program
3. Has your school tried to tailor PI opportunities to the needs of working parents or single-parent households? Please explain.
4. What are the goals of parent involvement at your school? (prompts: benefits to the school, to the students, to the whole family/community).
5. To what do you attribute the levels of parent involvement at your school? (prompts: is it something the school makes a conscious effort to promote?)
   a. Were parents involved in the charter application?
   b. Has the level of involvement changed over time?
6. Do you think the level of parent involvement at your school is different from other public schools in your area? If so, why and in what ways?
7. Some schools have specific policies/positions dedicated to PI. Does your school…
   a. Have a parent liaison?
      i. If so, is the position voluntary or paid?
      ii. If paid, does the money come from the general operating budget?
   b. Have a parent center?
      i. If so, what is the space used for and how often is it used?
   c. Have a parent contract?
      i. If so, what is the content of the contract?
      ii. How is the contract enforced?
   d. Have a school handbook for parents/families?
   e. Have a Web site with a specific portal for parent information? (review prior to interview)
      i. If so, what information is it used to convey (prompts: newsletter, students' grades, volunteer opportunities, tracking volunteer hours)
8. What measures do you use to monitor PI at your school? (prompts: counting number of hours, statistics on attendance at events, satisfaction surveys, etc.)

9. What do you feel are the benefits of parent involvement?
10. What challenges do you face in trying to involve parents at your school? [Prompts: involving low-income parents or parents who don't speak English, sustaining involvement in the long term]
11. What sorts of parent involvement would you like to see in coming years?