

# Community Partnerships: Working Across Institutions to Support Parent Advocacy and Education

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## Abstract

In this article, the authors analyze the evolution of parent advocate education standards that illustrate what parents need to know and do to effectively support their children's learning in 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade. Focus groups conducted with parent participants revealed that parents were often unaware of the distinction between helping their child graduate from high school and helping their child prepare for college. Our analysis includes a discussion of how the language used to convey these standards could either build or breakdown communication essential to distributing critical information to working, immigrant parents in urban public school systems. The article has three objectives: (1) to highlight the responses of principals, teachers and parents to parent advocate education standards; (2) to highlight the participants' critique of the written language used to convey those standards; and (3) to uncover the disconnect between what parents, principals and teachers believe parents should know and what parents actually know about school systems and classroom instruction.

**Keywords:** parent advocacy, parent engagement, secondary education, academic achievement, college preparedness

Decades of research have shown that parent involvement positively affects student achievement (Epstein et al, 2002, Quezada, 2003). Further research confirms that when parents know the role schools need them to play and feel they can effectively play that role, they are more likely to become involved in their children's education (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005) The impetus for this study was to provide information to families, school staff and community organizations that would help them set academic goals for students in grades 6 through 12. More specifically, it was a collaborative effort between representatives from a university and a community based organization to develop parent advocate, education standards (6-12th grade). To write the standards, we reviewed parent engagement literature and the workshop objectives of a community organization; then we asked parents, teachers and principals what they thought parents should know and do to effectively support their child's academic success.

## Conceptual Framework

There has been a range of research pointing to a positive correlation between parent involvement and student achievement (Epstein, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey, 2005; NMSA, 2000; Valdez, 1996; Vaden-Kiernan, 2005). This correlation initiated the research that led us to develop parent advocate education standards. As our project progressed, however, we increasingly relied on scholarship that outlined the socio-economic challenges working, immigrant parents face in order to frame both our research and the standards themselves.

Scholars documenting parent involvement have highlighted the social networks that working-class, immigrant parents activate in order to exchange resources (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Jackson & Cooper, 1989; Moll, 1992). Through ethnographic analysis, Luis Moll identified the cultural wealth in Latino communities, conceptualizing it as “funds of knowledge.” His work became an impetus for educators willing to acknowledge the biases often found when teachers and principals work with low-income parents. Those biases include the assumption that working-class parents’ homes are void of the culturally significant resources that educators claim contribute to a well-rounded learning experience. Moll’s critique of “accepted perceptions of working-class families as somehow disorganized socially and deficient intellectually” ultimately served as a lens through which we viewed our own language (1992, p.3).

Moreover, when discussing the difference between what parents know about the school system and what teachers and principals want them to know, the authors examined the factors that often lead to knowledge gaps for working-class, immigrant parents. Smith (2008) states, “the true differences are created by possession or absence of information about college and substantial experience with college” (2008, p. 3). He implies that experience enhances one’s understanding of crucial information. Based on this perspective, the authors questioned how to distribute critical information to parents who had little experience with the American public school system, college course requirements and collegiate scholarships. Ultimately, our revision of the parent advocate education standards came from a belief that the action needed to implement these standards would be “based on a model in which parents help other parents to create individual action plans to address parent complaints that are sensitive to cultural contexts” (Carter, 2007, p. 6).

A socio-cultural perspective helped us create a document that was both informative and responsive to the needs of the parents for whom it was intended. Sociocultural theorizing emerged from the work of L. S. Vygotsky (1978), who argued that learning did not occur in isolation within an individual, but rather took place in socially mediated contexts. Socio-cultural theory focused our attention on the beliefs and practices of working-class, immigrant communities. Specifically, it enabled us to identify how information traveled through social networks and the necessity of activating those networks in schools and communities where finances are low. Moreover, a socio-cultural perspective reinforced a belief that parent advocate education standards are best created through negotiation and co-interpretation.

## Methods

### Participants

Thirty-five parent participants [6 fathers and 29 mothers] came from working class neighborhoods in a large urban area. Most were first generation immigrants from Mexico; nearly all were Latino. Their backgrounds varied with respect to immigration status, years of education and years spent in the United States. Parent focus groups were conducted in Spanish.

All ten of the principal and teacher participants taught in schools that served a working-class, and predominately Latino population. According to one middle school teacher, 20 to 30 percent of the parents who have children in the school “recently crossed the border,” and a majority work for a well-known clothing manufacturer or other factories in the area surrounding the school. All teacher and principal participants had been working in their respective schools for five years or more.

### Data Collection

Our method for this study was to conduct focus groups with samples that were comprised of parents, teachers and principals. The focus group sample data ranged anywhere from ten to twenty participants.

Drawing from the work completed by local high schools and community based organizations on the development of standards and guidelines for parents, we created advocate education standards that fell into seven categories:

- Understand Your Child’s Academic Status
- Know How the School System Works
- Choose and Evaluate Schools
- Support College and Career Pathways
- Know About Adolescent Social, Emotional and Physical Health Issues
- Access an Academic Environment at Home & in the Community
- Be Your Child’s Educational Advocate

Once standards were created, the authors ran focus groups and subsequently relied on qualitative analysis to evaluate the discussion that emerged from open-ended questions.

After translating the standards into Spanish, we sought feedback from parents, teachers and principals on what parents need to know and do in order to support adolescents in schools. The feedback was obtained from four focus groups convened in distinct locations: a high school, a middle school, a reading clinic and a community based organization. We began each focus group with the following open-ended questions:

- What do you think parents need to know to help their secondary children be successful in school?
- What do you think parents need to do to help their secondary children be successful in school?

The open-ended questions led to a discussion that enabled us to document information that was not included in our list of standards. This data came directly from participants before we distributed the standards. Consequently, it was never influenced by

information provided through a pre-conceived document.

We then distributed standards we had devised and told principals and teachers to read them and make notes. After they read, we asked the following questions.

- Which standards do you have questions about?
- Which standards within the groups are most important?
- What is missing?

After distributing the standards, we elicited a discussion around what information was missing and how language use affected understanding.

We varied the parent protocol to accommodate parents who were not literate in their first language. With each focus group, we asked if parents preferred us to read the standards to them, or if they preferred to read the standards individually. All of the parent groups decided they wanted us to read the standards. By reading them, the document became an oral\aural one—enabling both researchers and parents to experience it collectively. Hearing the language of the original standards influenced our analysis of the standards, specifically the use of language in each category.

## **Data Analysis**

Given that the goal of the research was to elicit information from distinct groups, we reviewed each session after it occurred to capture fresh impressions. These review sessions were recorded and transcribed. Each focus group session was transcribed. Two researchers then developed analytical notes that captured the common themes that emerged within and across the four distinct focus groups: two parent groups, one teacher group and one principal group. We began analysis by highlighting comments that appeared repeatedly. We noted all comments that triggered strong responses, either in agreement or disagreement, and we noted comments that yielded additional comments from other participants.

Recursive reading of the data led to a reevaluation of the term standard. The process of translating group discussions and the repeated analysis of the document exposed how the language that is often used to communicate between teachers, administrators and parents can be problematic. In addition to the critical feedback we received from parents, reading the standards to parents, and hearing the document, affected our conception of it. Reading forced us to hear the language repeatedly which made us aware of the actual tone that syntax established. For example, the following “standard” erased the economic reality that working class and working poor families face and left no room for parents to discuss their concerns: “Parents need to know that financial aid is available for most students attending college...money is not an obstacle.” The declarative statement—money is not an obstacle—left no room for parents to express a fear of debt or a fear of losing their homes. The finality of the statement denied parents the opportunity to seek and interpret information that would be useful to them.

The oral\aural rendering of the document drove home the necessity of interaction. Consequently, the term standard came to be viewed as a guideline rather than a set of norms upon which parents would be assessed and ultimately judged. We argue that this conception of the term standard will enable the document we created to “live and breathe” within a number of diverse parent networks that exist in one of the

largest, immigrant cities of the United States. The term guideline lends itself to flexibility, discussion and active exchange.

## **Results**

### **Critical Information**

Findings can be distinguished according to two categories: 1. What parents need to know and 2. How that information might be best conveyed. An analysis of the responses to open-ended questions across parent, principal, and teacher focus groups revealed that parents need to distinguish between college preparation coursework and general education requirements. The following interaction exemplifies the kinds of questions parents asked us and each other during focus groups:

- Parent 3: This one [points to a standard] that says if your child has completed Algebra and Pre-Algebra, what does this one mean?
- Parent 4: Is this the same as the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE<sup>1</sup>)?

Principals validated our analysis by strongly stressing the need for information that distinguishes general education requirements from the college access sequence. All stakeholders [parents, teachers and principals] pointed to the need to be familiar with the college course sequence, but each focused on distinct aspects of the sequence. Principals noted the importance of providing information about extra-curricular activities. “And extra curricular activities, that isn’t the end all to itself, it’s what the kids learn being in those extra curricular activities; discipline, persistence, sticking with something for four years, friendships, team work, initiative that the kids learn, and that’s what colleges are looking for when they’re asking for those things.” Another principal suggested “a podcast or a video or something that you could just download or access on a website and then have the assessments or descriptions of the assessments and do it all there” to be used as an online interactive tool at schools.

The third point that generated a general consensus related to the need to know how the system works, specifically, information on how the school hierarchy is structured. Our data showed that parents did not always understand how the school hierarchy functioned, which impeded communication. For example, many could not identify the channels of communication that impacted decisions regarding student achievement. This resulted in parents’ inability to access those channels needed, which in some cases caused missed opportunities.

## **Discussion**

Findings point to the ways effective communication might occur. Principals mentioned the need for active versus passive language that would indicate what parents should do to support the academic achievement of their children. Teachers noted that an interactive tool should accompany the standards. Principals also noted

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<sup>1</sup> The CAHSEE tests students English and math skills. Students begin taking the test as sophomores and can retake it five times by the end of their senior year. The class of 2006 was the first required to pass the exam for graduation.

that an interactive tool was necessary, and recommended that it should be located at the school site where resources and parent liaisons were readily available. One principal has instituted a partnership program that entailed parents touring the school with a template that they fill-out while observing interactions in classrooms and school corridors. After the observations are completed, parents are invited to discuss what they saw with the principal. Another principal suggested “ a podcast or a video or something that you could just download or access on a website and then have the assessments or descriptions of the assessments and do it all there” to be used as an online interactive tool at schools.

Parents, on the other hand, focused on how communication should occur. They were specifically critical of the way standards were framed in the category entitled “Create an Academic Environment at Home.” One standard in the category stated, “parents need to nurture a family that highly respects literacy.” Several described the ways that literacy existed. The criticism led to an assessment of the entire category, as we began to consider whether the phrasing of a standard conveyed a unilateral directive or a guideline for assertive action. Parents openly questioned a standard in the category labeled “Support the College Pathway,” which indicated money was not an obstacle. Many wondered how they would pay back loans while maintaining a home.

The beliefs of each group of participants and the collective reading of a written document reminded us of the need for authentic communication. Language that indicates what parents should do must be conceived in a context that acknowledges what they can do and already do on an ongoing basis. Ultimately, our analysis revealed that educators and community based organization staff should assess how language reinforces relationships between educators (teachers, principals and CBO staff) and parents. That assessment requires interpersonal interaction and a continuous evaluation of how information is received. The principal who encourages parents to visit classrooms and then invites them to discuss what they see demonstrated one way to access parent interpretations of the school environment. We developed a document that should be used to initiate discussion and elicit questions regarding what parents should know and do to support their children’s learning. Similar to an invitation to talk about what parents see in classrooms, the document stands as an open invitation to raise questions regarding critical information on how parents can help their children be successful.

## **Conclusion**

Extant research documents the fact that parent involvement is linked to student achievement (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, there has been less discussion around how to communicate critical information to parents. Parent standards that validate the knowledge, sensibilities and needs of multiple stakeholders remove the barriers that prevent effective communication and move educators toward a practical application of scholarship. This research yielded an important tool that can be used in both parent education curriculum development and in school staff professional development programs.

Finally, the model for the research, cross-institutional collaboration, lends itself to the development and maintenance of an interactive network that supports parents. This

work has been disseminated through numerous partnerships [university credential programs, public schools, and community based organizations] to enhance parent involvement and student achievement.

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