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Building School-Family Partnerships Through Partnerships For Academic Success Meetings

Emily Gartner
Hamline University

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BUILDING SCHOOL-FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS FOR

ACADEMIC SUCCESS MEETINGS

by

Emily Gartner

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Primary Advisor: Laura Halldin
Content Expert: Jane Riordan
Peer Reviewer: Sarah Braun

To my students: past, present, and future.
I learn from you and am inspired by you every day.

"Each of us must come to care about everyone else's children. We must recognize that the welfare of our children and grandchildren is intimately linked to the welfare of all other people's children."

-Lilian Katz

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this capstone project is to answer the research question: *How can families, students, and school staff come together to engage in authentic partnership through Partnerships for Academic Success (PAS) meetings?* By participating in Partnerships for Academic Success (PAS) meetings, all stakeholders will be engaged in supporting students' success. Families will be empowered with resources to understand what data about their students actually means, and with activities to help their students outside of school. Teachers and school staff will have opportunities to engage with families beyond the typical brief conferences, and will build partnerships with families that will ideally extend beyond the PAS meetings. Most importantly, students will experience a community of support surrounding them and witness adults in their lives partnering for their academic success.

This chapter will consist of three sections. First, I will share the story of how I arrived at this topic, including the history of family engagement in my own experience as a teacher, as well as my school's history of family engagement. This first section will also explain my background with PAS meetings and my experiences with these meetings during the 2016–2017 school year. The second section will explore my rationale for

expanding the PAS model schoolwide. The last section will provide a summary of the first chapter and will look ahead to the following chapters.

My History of Family Engagement

My first teaching position was at a well-regarded public school on Manhattan's Upper West Side. It was the school where I had been a student teacher the previous year, and I was excited to be offered a teaching position. I was 21 years old, newly graduated, and by far the youngest teacher on staff. Most teachers at the school had been there for several years or more, and some had been there for decades. I was the only new hire the year I started, and although I still had a close relationship with the woman who had been my cooperating teacher, I felt very much alone in my role as a new teacher.

The school was known for having very "involved" families. Family involvement took many forms: organizing a fundraising gala that raised enough money for a SMART Board in every classroom, being vocal members of our School Leadership Team, and, in my case, standing outside my classroom door observing and discussing my performance with one another. I not only felt as if I was being watched, I was, in fact, being watched. These parents were not used to having a new, inexperienced educator teaching their children, and their unease with the situation was clear.

I also happened to have 36 sixth-graders in my class this first year. Needless to say, these parents were not pleased with the situation. Rather than approaching me about their concerns, these parents went straight to the principal. When I attended a School Leadership Team meeting to discuss sixth grade class sizes, I fought back tears as I listened to one particularly vocal parent read aloud a letter he had written expressing his displeasure with such an inexperienced teacher leading such a large class. He offered

evidence of how unprepared I was to handle the task, such as the fact that it had taken me a full week to grade and return his daughter's published writing piece. *He's never mentioned any of these issues to me!* I thought. *This is the first I'm hearing of them!* I felt attacked, unsupported, and alone.

Of course, in retrospect, these parents had very valid concerns, and should have been advocating for their children to have a smaller class size. Looking back, I also realize my own role in the situation. Rather than proactively reaching out to parents to address their concerns, I avoided contact whenever possible. Rather than welcoming a dialogue, I was intimidated by their watchful eyes and tried to keep my distance. Although I loved my students and ended up having, in many ways, a successful first year of teaching, I felt ill-prepared to manage relationships with families.

I taught at the school for two more years. I worked alongside the other sixth grade teacher to revamp our curriculum and developed a successful campaign to retain students for our middle school program. I established a reputation as a well-liked and respected teacher. Although my confidence as a teacher continued to grow, I still never felt fully comfortable communicating with families. I sent home newsletters, spoke with parents at conferences, and, when absolutely necessary, made phone calls home, but I did not truly engage the families of my students.

In 2010, I moved back to Minnesota and started teaching first grade at a charter school in North Minneapolis. Here, I had a very different experience. Unlike the mostly affluent families at the school in New York, nearly all of my students in North Minneapolis were living in poverty. The parents of my students were often difficult to reach; phone calls frequently went unanswered, and, in some cases, phone numbers and

addresses changed frequently. While almost all of my students were black, I am white, leading to cultural differences that I did not always feel fully equipped to navigate.

Still, my relationships with families improved in this new position. I lived in the neighborhood and sometimes ran into families outside of school. I made a concerted effort to communicate more effectively with families. I continued to send newsletters and make phone calls, and attended nearly every school event. Over the course of the two years that I taught at the school, I developed positive relationships with many of my students' families. However, conversations about students' academic performance were still typically one-sided, with me delivering information and parents receiving it.

In 2012, I accepted a position teaching fifth grade in Columbia Heights. Unlike my previous two schools, here there was true diversity—racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic. There was also a wide range of family involvement: some families were very visible in the school; others, I never met. I continued the forms of communication I had put in place in my previous schools, and also began to open up more to families. It also helped, I believe, that I no longer suffered from the "imposter syndrome" I had experienced in my first few years of teaching. By this point in my career, I felt confident in my abilities as a teacher and was no longer as intimidated by communicating with families.

Schoolwide at this school, parents are asked to identify and write down hopes and dreams they have for their students at the beginning of the year. These hopes and dreams become something we return to at each conference. I changed how I conducted parent-teacher conferences; instead of simply delivering information to families, I now began conferences by asking families what their goals were for their students and discussed

each party's "next steps" in order for the goals to be met. While these efforts made a difference in my communications with parents, the fifteen minutes of our conferences always felt rushed, and the conversations were still largely one-sided.

This started to change in 2013, when teachers in the district had the opportunity to participate in a home visit training provided by the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers. The training was voluntary, as were the home visits, but I was happy to take advantage of the opportunity. Along with several other teachers from my school, I was trained in how to conduct home visits with families. The training was led by both parents and teachers, and it was exciting to hear about the wonderful things that had been happening in Saint Paul and around the country related to home visits.

At the beginning of the following school year, my colleagues and I offered home visits to my students, and nearly half of them took us up on the offer. The visits went even better than I had expected. Parents told us their stories and shared information about their children in a completely different manner away from school. Students gave us tours of their homes, proudly pointing out their bedrooms or their toys. We learned families' histories, something we rarely have the opportunity to hear about— joyful stories as well as stories of extreme hardships that had been faced. We gained insight into how our students spent their time away from school: the activities they were involved in, the hobbies they had at home, the responsibilities they had with caring for younger siblings, etc. We were able to have relaxed, open conversations, without looking at a clock or feeling that we needed to rush through information. There was no agenda other than getting to know one another.

I conducted home visits again the following two years. Not all families accepted the offer, but I experienced similarly wonderful results with those who did. Not only did I gain valuable insights about my students and their families, but the relationships that we established made every other meeting throughout the year more comfortable and more productive. When parents sat across from me at conferences, it no longer felt like I was delivering information to a stranger.

In the 2015–2016 school year, my school began a pilot of Partnerships for Academic Success (PAS) meetings. The pilot started with fourth grade, and although I was not teaching a grade level that was participating in the meetings, I was intrigued by the process and wanted to know more. Through conversations with a fourth grade teacher, I learned that PAS meetings were modeled on the work of Maria Paredes. In the mid-2000s, Dr. Paredes developed Academic Parent-Teacher Teams (APTT) as part of her doctoral action research project. In the APTT model, there are three classroom team meetings per year. During these meetings, parents are provided with data about the entire class, as well as about their particular student. Parents and teachers review this data together, and then set a 60-day goal for the student. The APTT meetings also include parents learning an activity that can be done at home with their student, as well as time for parent discussions to share tips. In addition to the classroom team meetings, there are thirty minute in-depth individual conferences that occur.

Although the school and district staff were inspired by the APTT model, because teachers at our school had not been officially trained in the model we were not able to use the term "Academic Parent-Teacher Team" to describe our family meetings. Instead, we would use the name Partnerships for Academic Success (PAS) meetings. Parents who

participated in the fourth grade team's PAS meetings that first year provided positive feedback, as did the fourth grade teachers. It was decided that PAS meetings would expand to fifth grade the following year.

The timing of this happened to coincide with my becoming a parent. I was pregnant with my first child during the year that the fourth grade team piloted PAS meetings. My son was born in June of 2016, and when the following school year began, I was still on parental leave. I returned to school after Thanksgiving, and, while I initially had mixed feelings about returning to the classroom, I soon found that I now approached my work with new passion. Things that I had always known in my head, I now understood with my heart. If my own child was this precious and amazing, that meant that *every* child was precious and amazing. Thinking about what I would want for my own child led me to see everything through a new and powerful lens.

This new perspective also led me to approach relationships with families differently. I was on leave during the fall when the first PAS meeting of the year occurred, but when I returned to work I still found myself having more frequent and more open conversations with parents. I was less hesitant to make phone calls, both for concerns and for positive things. I was more likely to stop and engage parents in conversation at school events. I communicated more frequently and more clearly about what we were doing in our classroom. By the time the spring PAS meetings came around, I had established positive relationships with many students' families.

The fifth grade team advertised the spring PAS meeting for weeks with our students, encouraged them to write the date in their planners, and sent home multiple flyers and emails. We advertised that there would be food available at the meetings. We

offered childcare for younger siblings and transportation for anyone who needed it. We scheduled interpreters for the event. Our planning paid off: on the night of the PAS meeting more than half of my students' families were in attendance.

We began the meeting with a version of a Morning Meeting, a type of community circle that is how we begin each day in our classrooms. Each family introduced themselves and their student and shared something they like to do as a family. We played one of our Morning Meeting games, and there were giggles as students watched their families play a game they were used to playing at school. At the end of the community circle, we brought our attention to the theme of the evening, reading fluency.

After a brief presentation during which my fellow teachers and I explained what reading fluency is and why it is important, as well as how students' reading fluency was assessed, families were able to see their own students' data, as well as the data for the class and for the grade. Each student had been randomly assigned a number so that all data looked at by the group was anonymous. We facilitated a conversation about trends that were noticed and growth that had already been made since the fall reading fluency assessment. We also discussed what parents were already doing to support their students' reading at home.

Following this conversation, we taught an activity that families and students could do at home to support reading fluency, and had families practice the activity together. We had books available for students to choose from. Again, there were smiles and laughs as students and families played the game and practiced their reading. At the end of the activity, families kept the materials so they would be able to do the activity at home. Finally, students worked together with their families to look at their individual data once

again and set a goal that they wanted to reach before the next conference, about a month after this meeting.

The evening was a success. Families thanked us on their way out and made comments about how enjoyable the evening had been, and students were still talking about it the next day at school. At conferences a month later, I noticed a difference in the conversations I had with families. The tone of our conversations was friendly and familiar, and we were able to jump right into discussing their students' work. I felt a level of comfort, confidence, and productivity during conferences that I had not experienced previously.

Expanding PAS Meetings Schoolwide

The timing of my first week of the Capstone Practicum course happened to coincide with a conversation I had with the Family Engagement Coordinator for our district. We discussed PAS meetings and how wonderful it would be to expand the meetings schoolwide. A lightbulb went off in my mind during this conversation: this could be perfect for my capstone project!

The idea was solidified the following week as I read Mills' criteria for selecting a general idea or area of focus. According to Mills, there are four general criteria one should consider when selecting an area of focus: something that involves teaching and learning and is focused on your own practice; something within your locus of control; something about which you feel passionate; and something you would like to change or improve (Mills, 2014, p. 43). The selection of PAS meetings as an area of focus satisfies all four criteria.

PAS meetings are closely tied to teaching and learning. PAS meetings help teachers build strong partnerships with families and provide a forum for empowering families with information to understand their students' data and what they can do to support their students at home. Students spend only 20% of their waking hours in school (Lenz & Kingston, 2015). Clearly, if we want students to make as much progress as possible, we need engaged families who will support their students the other 80% of the time. Research also shows that students of highly engaged families earn higher grades, attend school more regularly, and are more likely to graduate high school and pursue postsecondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). By finding ways to engage families, we increase the likelihood of students' success in school and beyond.

Expanding PAS meetings is also within my locus of control. Now that PAS meetings have been successful in fourth and fifth grades, we have a model that can work at other grade levels as well. We have experienced teachers who will be able to share their expertise with staff who are new to PAS meetings, and we have at least one teacher per grade level who will be willing to be involved in PAS meetings. I have the resources and support necessary to make schoolwide PAS meetings a reality.

PAS meetings are also something about which I feel passionate. Maintaining motivation for this project will not be an issue; in fact, I feel more motivated than ever before to engage families in every way possible this year. I am also passionate about sharing my knowledge about family engagement and PAS meetings with our school staff, and am hopeful that my colleagues will share my enthusiasm.

Finally, this topic is something I would like to change or improve. Our school has been working towards increasing family engagement for several years. While we have

great attendance at school events, families remain participants more than partners. I would love to have families experience a sense of empowerment and ownership, and I would love to have students feel as if their teachers and families are working together to support them.

Summary

Chapter One examined my personal history of family engagement in my experience as a teacher. I shared the history of Partnerships for Academic Success (PAS) meetings at my school, my experience with these meetings during the 2016–2017 school year, and how I arrived at this topic. Finally, I provided a rationale for expanding the PAS model schoolwide.

In Chapter Two, I review literature related to definitions of family involvement, the benefits of family involvement, and factors that influence family involvement. In Chapter Three, I provide a detailed explanation of how schoolwide PAS meetings were implemented, as well as the final outcomes of my project. I conclude with Chapter Four, a reflection on the project and what was learned.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the literature related to my research

question: *How can families, students, and school staff come together to engage in*

authentic partnership through Partnerships for Academic Success (PAS) meetings? The

review begins with an exploration of the term "parental involvement" and a definition of

the term as it will be used in this capstone. The chapter proceeds to an overview of the

documented benefits of family involvement, the characteristics of effective family

involvement, and the factors that influence families' involvement in schools. The role of

the school in establishing partnerships is also explored. Finally, the work of Dr. Maria

Paredes, whose research inspired the creation of PAS meetings, is examined.

Definitions of Family Involvement

Most of the related literature refers to "parental involvement" as a broad term to

describe the role parents play in schools and in their children's learning. Goodall and

Montgomery (2014) and Epstein (2010) offer more specific definitions of parental

involvement that are more useful in the context of this project.

Involvement as a continuum. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) explain that

parental involvement does not take only one form; there is actually a continuum between

parental involvement in school and parental engagement with children's learning. This

continuum is not a straight line, nor is it a one-size-fits-all description of what parents should be doing. Parents, for many reasons, have varying levels of comfort and ability to be involved and/or engaged. Additionally, some parents may be heavily involved, but not particularly engaged, and vice versa.

Key to Goodall and Montgomery's continuum model is the concept of agency, which they define as "a process of social engagement informed by the past and oriented toward the future and the present and encompassing the possibility of choice and action," which relates, in their model, to "the capacity of parents to act (in a beneficial manner) in relation to their children's learning" (2014, p. 401). Each point of their continuum is defined by where in the relationship the agency lies.

Point one on Goodall and Montgomery's continuum, parental involvement in school, is characterized by agency of the school, wherein the school controls the relationship as well as the information. Although parents are technically "involved" in activities, the school is in control. We can think of many examples of these types of activities, and in many of our schools this type of relationship may be the only one that exists. Family nights, recitals, presentations, and even parent-teacher conferences may fall into this category. This is not to say that this form of parental involvement is undesirable; in fact, there are benefits to this type of relationship, in addition to the practical realities of families needing to be informed of important dates, information, etc. However, although it may be a good beginning point, parental involvement is not the end goal.

The second point on Goodall and Montgomery's continuum is parental involvement with schooling, which is characterized by "an interchange of information

between parents and school staff. The focus of this interaction is schooling – the processes which surround learning" (2014, p. 404). At this point, agency is shared between the school and parents, and parents "are no longer passive recipients of information but are now partners in the construction of a fuller portrait of the student, and acknowledged contributors to the student's academic future" (2014, p. 404). Examples of this point in the continuum include parents helping with homework, home visits programs, and some types of parent-teacher conferences.

Point three in the model is parental engagement with children's learning. At this point on the continuum, agency resides mostly with parents. Parents' actions may be influenced by the school, but are directed by the parents, as parents "are engaged with the learning of their children not due to dictates from the school but because of their own perceptions of their role as parents" (2014, p. 405). Activities at this point on the continuum are likely to take place outside of school. The benefits of parental engagement with children's learning include "raised achievement, raised self-esteem, increased motivation and engagement, and importantly, raised aspirations" (2014, p. 406).

School-family partnerships. Epstein (2010) also redefines involvement, reframing it instead as partnership between schools, families, and communities. Epstein explains that while it is widely accepted that parental involvement is beneficial, schools and teachers are often unsure of how best to promote involvement. Some educators simply wait for parents to become involved on their own. This approach is often accompanied by judgement from educators based on perceived levels of involvement with parents who become involved in their children's education on their own regarded as "good" parents, and those who do not deemed "bad" parents. Other educators, and some

parents, feel that a better approach is for schools to tell parents what to do and expect that parents will respond. Epstein's view, however, differs from both of these approaches:

> Neither of these approaches—waiting for involvement or dictating it—is effective for informing or involving all families. Research shows that *partnership* is a better approach. In partnership, educators, families, and community members work together to share information, guide students, solve problems, and celebrate success. Partnerships recognize the shared responsibilities of home, school, and community for children's learning and development. (Epstein, 2010, p. 3-4)

Six types of involvement. Epstein goes on to further define this concept of partnership, broadening the definition of involvement to include six specific types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Epstein's definition of involvement as partnership between schools, families, and community connects to Goodall and Montgomery's concept of agency. In Epstein's model, all three entities (the school, the family, and the community) have various forms and amounts of agency. However, Epstein defines each type based on the role of the school. Epstein also provides sample practices, challenges, and expected results for students, parents, and teachers for each type of involvement.

The first type of involvement, parenting, helps families "establish [a] home environment to support children as students" (Epstein, 2010, p. 396). Sample practices of this type of involvement include: parent education courses; suggestions for what parents can do at home to support students' learning; family support programs; and home visits. Possible challenges include: providing information to all families, not just those who

show up at school; enabling families to share about themselves and their students; and making sure all information delivered to families is clear and relevant. Expected results for students include respect for parents, positive personal qualities, a balance between time spent on homework and time spent on other activities, better attendance, and an understanding of the importance of school. Expected results for parents include a better understanding of and increased confidence in their parenting and feeling supported by the school and other families. Results for teachers might include a greater understanding of students' backgrounds and greater respect for families (Epstein, 2010, p. 396).

The second type of involvement in Epstein's model is communicating, wherein the school provides parents with forms of communication about school programs and students' progress. Sample practices of this type of involvement include parent conferences, language interpreters, newsletters, report cards, phone calls, and clear information about school activities, programs, policies, etc. Possible challenges include ensuring clarity and readability, consideration of parents who are not native English speakers, and reviewing all major communications. Expected results for students include an awareness of their role as a communicator between school and home, and an understanding of school policies as well as the necessary actions to keep up or improve their grades. Expected results for parents include an understanding of what is happening at school, as well as an understanding of their children's progress. Expected results for teachers include an expansion of the types of communication used with families (Epstein, 2010, p. 396).

Epstein's third type of involvement is volunteering, in which schools "recruit and organize parent help and support" (2010, p. 396). Sample practices of this type of

involvement include classroom volunteer programs, class parents, spaces made available in the school for volunteer work, and annual outreach to encourage and identify volunteers. Potential challenges include recruiting widely so that all families feel welcomed and encouraged to volunteer, providing flexibility in scheduling volunteer opportunities so that all families are able to participate, and dealing with the logistics of organizing volunteer work. Expected results for students include increased learning thanks to additional attention provided by volunteers and increased awareness of the talents and skills of their own parents or other parent volunteers. Expected results for parents include a greater understanding of the job of the teacher, increased confidence in their own abilities and contributions, and a feeling that they are welcomed in the school. Results for teachers could include the ability to pay greater attention to individual students thanks to the help of volunteers, a willingness to involve families in new ways (including families who do not volunteer), and a greater awareness of parents' skills and talents (Epstein, 2010, p. 396).

The fourth type of involvement in Epstein's model is learning at home. For this type of involvement, schools "provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning" (2010, p. 396). Sample practices might include providing families with tips about how to help with homework, ideas about how to practice skills and activities learned in school at home, information about the skills expected to be learned at each grade level, calendars or planners that include suggested activities to do at home, and family involvement in setting goals every year. Potential challenges might be designing interactive homework that requires students to discuss their learning in school with their

parents, coordinating homework if students have more than one teacher, and involving families in decisions related to curriculum. Expected results for students include: improved homework completion, a more positive attitude toward homework and schoolwork, gains in skills and test scores, and a perception of their parent as another teacher and home as another place to learn. Expected results for parents include an increased understanding of what their children are learning as well as how to support their students, and greater discussions about school and schoolwork in the home. Expected results for teachers include increased respect for time students spend outside of school with their families and an understanding of the potential helpfulness of all different types of families, regardless of income, education, and family structure (Epstein, 2010, p. 396).

Epstein's fifth type of involvement is decision making, in which schools "include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives" (2010, p. 396). Sample practices include organizations, councils, and committees that encourage parent leadership (including PTAs or PTOs), district-level family committees or councils, and independent groups that advocate for school reform. Potential challenges include recruiting diverse parent leaders, offering training to parents, and possibly including students as well as parents in decision-making. Expected results for students include benefiting from specific policies enacted by decision-making groups and an awareness that their families are represented in the decision-making process. Expected results for parents include a feeling of ownership and that their voices are heard, connections and relationships with other families, a greater understanding of policies that affect the school, and a greater influence on decisions that affect their children. Expected results for

teachers include a greater awareness of parent perspectives as well as increased respect for families (Epstein, 2010, p. 396).

The final type of involvement in Epstein's model is collaborating with the community, in which the school aims to "identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development" (2010, p. 396). Sample practices of this type of involvement include providing information for families about services available outside of school, including "community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs and services" (2010, p. 396), as well as information about community activities and community-service opportunities. Included in this category is also alumni participation in the school. Possible challenges include informing families of community opportunities, ensuring equity of opportunities, and matching available community contributions with the goals of the school and the needs of students and parents. Expected results for students include benefitting from the resources of the community, as well as an increase in skills and talents due to enrichment opportunities. Expected results for parents include increased knowledge of local resources, greater interactions with other families and community members, and an appreciation of the role of the school in the community. Expected results for teachers include a greater awareness of community resources that might enrich their own curriculum, greater willingness to use community members as resources in their teaching practice, and the ability to provide referrals to families for needed services (Epstein, 2010, p. 396).

"Parental" versus "family" involvement. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) and Epstein (2010) both provide comprehensive models of the various ways schools and

families can and should partner with one another. Although much of the literature refers only to "parental involvement," Academic Parent-Teacher Teams and Partnerships for Academic Success meetings have as their goal much more than parents simply showing up. If looked at through the lens of Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) continuum model, the goal of these meetings is parental involvement with schooling, empowering families to move toward parental engagement with student learning. If considered in the context of Epstein's (2010) model of six types of involvement, these meetings primarily address parenting, communicating, and learning at home.

Additionally, a shortcoming of much of the literature (including Goodall and Montgomery and Epstein) is that it refers primarily or exclusively to "parents" rather than "families." Teachers know that our students come from a diverse array of family structures. The aim of these meetings is to promote and support engagement with the influential adults in students' lives, whether they be mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, or other caregivers. Throughout this chapter, "parental involvement" should be interpreted as including the involvement of all influential adults in students' lives outside of school. Whenever possible, the term "family involvement" will be used.

Benefits of Family Involvement

The many benefits of family involvement have been well-documented; for decades, research has shown that when families are involved, students, families and schools all benefit. In their report *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (2002), Henderson and Mapp found, through a comprehensive review of relevant research, that there is "a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for

students, including improved academic achievement. This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds and for students at all ages" (2002, p. 24). Specifically, Henderson and Mapp found that students of involved families are more likely to have higher GPAs and standardized test scores, are more likely to enroll in challenging courses, pass their courses, and earn needed credits, have better attendance, and demonstrate better behavior and social skills (2002, p. 24).

Improved student achievement. Research has long shown that family involvement is linked to improved student achievement. Specifically, programs and interventions that involve families in supporting their children's learning at home are associated with improved achievement.

While numerous examples exist, one particularly effective example is Project EASE (Early Access to Success in Education), studied by Jordan, Snow, and Porche (2000). Project EASE was an intervention program developed in Minnesota that was designed to increase home literacy supports for young children. The program involved parent education opportunities, parent-child activities at school, and activities at home. Parents were educated about ways to strengthen and support their children's language and literacy development and given specific strategies and activities intended to "strengthen vocabulary, extend narrative understanding, develop letter recognition and sound awareness, produce narrative retellings, and understand exposition" (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000, p. 525). The researchers found that children whose families participated in both in-school *and* at-home activities with them showed greater gains in language development than a control group of students, indicating that parental involvement at home led to improved achievement for the participating students.

Another example of a successful early-intervention program focused on mathematics. In a study of low-income children enrolled in the Head Start Program, Starkey and Klein (2000) also found that family involvement at home was associated with increased student achievement. In their first study, the researchers studied a group of primarily African-American families. Families in the study were assigned to either an intervention group or a control group. Families in the intervention group attended family math classes, and were also provided access to a lending library of math kits from which they could check out materials at the end of each class. The materials in the kits were aligned to the week's lesson in the family math class. The researchers then repeated the study, with the same experimental designs and procedures, with a group of primarily Latino families. Once again, parent education and engagement in activities with their children at home was associated with increased student achievement. While both the intervention and control groups scored similarly on a pretest, students in the intervention group scored considerably higher on post-tests. The results were similar for both study groups, indicating that ethnicity was not a determining factor. Gender was also not a determining factor, as both boys and girls made gains. As the authors conclude:

> Our study demonstrates that an important step to take toward achieving the first national education goal, readiness for school, is to provide parents with the tools they need to support their children's informal mathematical development. Across two intervention studies, we found low-income parents willing and able to support this important area of their children's development once they were provided with the training to do so. (Starkey & Klein, 2000, p. 676)

Family involvement at home is linked to student achievement not only in early childhood, but throughout elementary school, middle school, and even high school. When studying parent involvement in high school, Catsambis (1998) examined family involvement of high school students through the lens of Epstein's six types of parent involvement. Catsambis found that by the time students are in 12th grade, some of Epstein's types of parent involvement (specifically, communicating with school, supporting the school by attending events, and communicating with other parents) had little to no effect. However, the type of involvement that had the strongest positive effect was "enhancing learning opportunities at home" (Catsambis, 1998, p. 13). The findings of Catsambis's study indicate that even as the effects of other types of involvement wane, family involvement at home continues to have a positive impact on students.

Increased likelihood of higher educational expectations. Trusty (1998) studied educational expectations of adolescents. Trusty drew his data from a comprehensive study of over 14,000 participants in the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. These young people were surveyed during their eighth grade year, during their senior year of high school, and two years beyond high school. Trusty drew data from both the second and third follow-up questionnaires to examine the participants' educational expectations and postsecondary attendance. In the second follow-up questionnaire, parents were also surveyed about their involvement.

The term "educational expectations" referred to participants' self-identified expectations of what level of education they would complete, selected from one of ten categories (Trusty, 1998, p. 263). Unsurprisingly, Trusty found that educational expectations were strongly correlated to postsecondary attendance; that is, participants

who self-identified as expecting to attend postsecondary schools were more likely to actually attend (1998, p. 264).

Trusty found that parental involvement was the strongest predictor of educational expectations for students of every socioeconomic status, or SES. Significantly, he found that for students at the lowest levels SES, "parent involvement predicted educational expectations more strongly" (1998, p. 268).

Trusty also points out, however, that students of low SES are most likely to "fail to reach their educational potential," and suggests that parental involvement could be a resource for preventing this from happening (1998, p. 268). Trusty recommends that schools and educators target parental involvement as a strategy to support low SES students to pursue higher education, since parents' support and attendance at school activities are most closely correlated with higher educational expectations for students.

Factors That Influence Family Involvement

In the United States, there is a common narrative that education and hard work are the key to escaping poverty and achieving financial stability and success. However, the United States persists in having large achievement gaps (or as some prefer to call them, "opportunity gaps") along socioeconomic and racial/ethnic lines (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Verstegen, 2015). Despite graduation rates rising overall nationally, Minnesota persists in having one of the largest gaps in graduation rates in the nation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

While there is no single cause of these disparities, there are multiple factors that likely play a role. As we have seen, family engagement with learning, especially at home, has a strong positive correlation with academic achievement. However, multiple factors

influence family involvement in schools and in schooling. Several of these factors will be explored in this section.

Cultural capital and socioeconomic status. Much of the literature regarding socioeconomic status and schooling has as an underlying basis the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who introduced the theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural capital includes knowledge that is traditionally valued by the "dominant class" (and therefore more valued by educational institutions, which are shaped by the dominant class). Cultural capital might include, for example, knowledge of history, arts, music, and literature. According to Bourdieu, there is a direct association between cultural capital and educational capital. As he describes it, "the possessors of strong educational capital who have also inherited strong cultural capital, and so enjoy a dual title to cultural nobility, the self assurance and the ease given by familiarity" are at a distinct advantage in the institutions of education (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 81). This is not to say that students of lower socioeconomic status do not have cultural capital; rather, the cultural capital they have is less likely to be the cultural capital that is valued in schools and associated with academic success. Since cultural capital is primarily acquired by families and passed down from generation to generation, a predictable pattern emerges wherein certain students are at a distinct advantage over others.

Cultural capital and family involvement. Sociologist Annette Lareau (1987) explored the idea of cultural capital in a study of two schools, one in a working-class neighborhood and the other in a professional middle-class neighborhood. Lareau studied a class of children in each school over the course of their first and second grade years. She conducted weekly classroom observations, as well as student, parent, teacher, and

principal interviews in each school. Lareau found that teachers in both schools felt that parent involvement was important, and encouraged parents to become involved by notifying them of school events, encouraging parents to read with their children, inviting parents to volunteer, and welcoming questions or concerns from parents.

Although Lareau judged that the efforts of teachers at both schools to involve parents were relatively equivalent, there was a marked difference in the levels and types of parental involvement between the two schools. Parents of students in the professional middle-class neighborhood were more likely to initiate helping their students at home by, for instance, practicing spelling words; they were also more likely to be perceived by teachers as putting undue pressure on their children. Parents at this school also attended conferences and other school events at much higher rates. The contact that parents in the working-class neighborhood did have with teachers was less likely to be related to academics, and Lareau notes that these parents often appeared visibly uncomfortable. As Laureau describes, "the interactions between parents and teachers were stiff and awkward. The parents often showed signs of discomfort: nervous shifting, blushing, stuttering, sweating, and generally looking ill at ease" (1987, p. 78). These parents were less likely to speak with their children's teacher at school events, and conversations, if they did occur, were more likely to be short.

Lareau attributed the differences in parental involvement in the two schools to multiple factors, the first of which she classifies as "educational capabilities" (1987, p. 79). The parents in the working-class school were, overall, less educated. They were more likely to have had children at a younger age, and many expressed that their own school experiences had not always been positive. They were more likely to express

nervousness or uncertainty about their abilities to help their children at home, especially as their children got older. They were also more likely to express the opinion that teachers were primarily responsible for educating their children, since they are the professionals. In contrast, parents in the middle-class neighborhood almost all had college degrees. They were more likely to view themselves as jointly responsible for educating their children, and more likely to describe their relationship with teachers as that of two equals working together.

Another factor that contributed to differences in levels of involvement was the difference in material resources available to each group of parents. The middle-class parents were more likely to be able to take time away from work for school events, and did not face the same barriers to logistical realities such as transportation and childcare in order to attend school events. They were also better able to buy books and materials and to hire tutors for their children.

The two groups of parents also demonstrated disparities in the amount of information they had about school and what happened at school. The working-class families received most of the information they did have from their students. They knew the name of their child's teacher, where the classroom was, and some major school events. The middle-class families, however, were more likely to know detailed information about their child's teacher, the curriculum used in the classroom, other school staff, and even other students in the class.

Lareau also noted that there were distinct differences in parenting styles among the two groups. Lareau would later go on to devote an entire book to this subject, which will be explored later in this chapter. In this study, however, she primarily noticed

differences when it came to how children's time was spent outside of school. The children of working-class families spent their time outside of school with informal activities, whereas the children of the professional middle-class families spent their time in structured activities and lessons.

While it may not have been possible to pinpoint the exact reasons why there were disparities in parental involvement between the two groups, Lareau concluded that "the evidence demonstrates that the level of parental involvement is linked to the class position of the parents and to the social and cultural resources that social class yields in American society" (1987, p. 81). It could be easy for some to look at this study and conclude that the middle-class group of parents were more involved because they were simply better parents. Lareau cautions against this interpretation, however, pointing out that while the cultural capital of the wealthier parents is more valued by the institution of the school, it is not inherently more valuable. Lareau does suggest, however, that middle-class families have cultural resources that become a form of cultural capital that is more valued by institutions such as schools (1987, p. 83).

Significantly, Lareau also points out that it is, in a sense, the institution of the school that has fostered these disparities in involvement by valuing one type of involvement and one type of relationship with families over other possible models:

It is important to stress that if the schools were to promote a different type of family-school relationship, the class culture of middle-class parents might not yield a social profit. The data do not reveal that the social relations of middle-class culture are intrinsically better than the social relations of working-class culture. Nor can it be said that the family-school relationships in the middle class

are objectively better for children than those in the working class. Instead, the social profitability of middle-class arrangements is tied to the schools' definition of the proper family-school relationship. (1987, p. 82)

While Lareau dedicates only a single paragraph to this point, it is perhaps the most important in the context of this project. Instead of assuming that certain types of parents are more likely to be involved, instead of making value judgements of parents based on their cultural capital in the traditional sense, and instead of persisting with traditional school-family relationship structures that yield the same results, schools have it in their power to change this dynamic. They can do this by providing different types of opportunities to be involved, addressing some of the barriers to involvement that working-class families often face, and aiming to reconstruct the institution's prevailing beliefs (conscious or unconscious) about what parent involvement should look like.

Socioeconomic status and family involvement. Nearly two decades after the previously discussed study, in 2003, Lareau published *Unequal Childhoods*, a second edition of which was published in 2011. The book is an in-depth examination of the differences in parenting styles that are largely along socioeconomic lines. In this book, Lareau defines two distinct childrearing types. The first type, which Lareau terms "concerted cultivation," is typical of middle-class families. Lareau describes concerted cultivation as follows:

Organized activities, established and controlled by mothers and fathers, dominate the lives of middle-class children . . . By making certain their children have these and other experiences, middle-class parents engage in a process of *concerted cultivation*. From this, a robust sense of entitlement takes root in the children.

This sense of entitlement plays an especially important role in institutional settings, where middle-class children learn to question adults and address them as relative equals. (2011, p. 1)

The second type, which Lareau terms "natural growth," is typical of working-class and poor families. Lareau describes these parents as follows:

For them, the crucial responsibilities of parenthood do not lie in eliciting their children's feelings, opinions, and thoughts. Rather, they see a clear boundary between adults and children. Parents tend to use directives: they tell their children what to do rather than persuading them with reasoning. Unlike their middle-class counterparts, who have a steady diet of adult-organized activities, the working-class and poor children have more control over the character of their leisure activities. Most children are free to go out and play with friends and relatives who typically live close by. (2011, p. 2)

Lareau wrote her book based on observations of twelve families who were part of a larger study of eighty-eight children. Each family was visited approximately twenty times, for several hours each time. Throughout the book, Lareau provides in-depth descriptions of these families and their lives, and addresses the differences in how time is spent, language use, and parents' involvement in their children's schooling. Lareau's conclusion is that concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth lead to "unequal childhoods," and that children of middle-class parents who experience the concerted cultivation model of childrearing end up with distinct advantages over their poor and working-class counterparts.

Lareau found once again, as she had in her 1987 study of the two schools in different neighborhoods, that parents took different approaches to involvement in their children's schooling. Working-class and poor parents were more likely to defer to teachers and school staff, whereas middle-class parents were more likely to be vocal about demands and requests.

An additional factor examined in *Unequal Childhoods* that was not mentioned in Lareau's previous study is what she describes as "underlying elements of resistance to the deference working-class and poor parents exhibit toward educators" (2011, p. 198-199). While they were more likely to be silent and deferential at school, at home these parents we more likely to speak poorly about teachers and schools. This was especially true with regard to schools' disciplinary actions. Many of these parents encouraged their students to hit or fight if they deemed it necessary, "specifically including the advice to take their retaliatory actions 'when the teacher isn't looking.'" (2011, p. 199). There was also an undercurrent of fear present for some of these parents that school staff had the power to work with entities that could take their children away. Therefore, they were more likely to go along with what teachers suggested, since "complying with educator's requests, even when they are seen as ridiculous by parents, reduces parents' risk of intervention by state officials" (2011, p. 199). This leads Lareau to question whether these parents' deference may be, instead "hostility in disguise" (2011, p. 216).

Despite their disparate outcomes, Lareau stresses that neither parenting style is inherently better than the other, and, in fact, that each style has certain benefits over the other. She also points out that advice from professionals about the best way to raise children has changed throughout history. However, while the natural growth model is not

intrinsically inferior, it is clear that concerted cultivation is more closely aligned with what is valued and advocated by dominant social institutions, including schools. As Lareau concludes, the system is not, in fact, fair:

> It is not neutral. It does not give all children equal opportunities. Not only do schools vary, but in schools and in other institutions that sort children into positions in the stratification system, some cultural practices are simply privileged more than others. Our culture's nearly exclusive focus on individual choices renders invisible the key role of institutions. (2011, p. 344).

What then, *should* be the role of the institution? How should schools respond to the realities of the influential and often decisive roles that cultural capital and socioeconomic status have on our students and their families? Knowing what we do about the benefits of parental involvement and school-family partnerships, how can we change our approach? These questions will be explored in a later section.

Barriers to family involvement for Latino families. As Bourdieu and Lareau both argue, certain types of behaviors, knowledge, cultural resources, and family involvement are more valued in schools than others. As was explored in the previous section, this is apparent with families of different socioeconomic statuses; it is also evident with families who speak languages other than English or who are members of nondominant cultures. As many of the students who will be involved in this project are from Spanish-speaking families, this section will focus primarily on research of Latino family involvement.

Despite facing many hardships, Latino families are often still quite involved in their children's education. As Lopez (2001) explains, however, this involvement may not

take the form of the types of involvement that are typically most valued by schools. In a case study of Latino families in Texas, Lopez found that the families considered themselves to be very involved in their children's education; however, these families did not regularly attend school functions. Rather, these families spent time at home emphasizing the importance of education and teaching their children lessons about hard work and perseverance. While a teacher or school staff member may look at these parents and assume that they do not care about their children's education, quite the opposite is true. These parents may not have reviewed specific materials from school at home with their children, but they were still very involved, albeit in a way that is not traditionally valued by schools and other dominant institutions.

Camacho-Thompson, Gillen-O'Neel, Gonzales, and Fuligni (2016) also studied family involvement amongst Latino families. The authors point out that research has consistently found that Latino parents value education and academic achievement, perhaps even more than European-American families; however, Latino families are persistently perceived by teachers as not being involved (2016, p. 1066). This may be because Latino families generally participate in their children's education more at home, and less at school, than European-American families.

Latino families are more likely to be perceived as not being involved, and are also more likely to face factors that negatively impact family involvement. In their research, Camacho-Thompson, Gillen-O'Neel, Gonzales, and Fuligni (2016) also examined the role played by stress in the lives of Latino families; specifically, they examined stress caused by financial strain and major life events. Despite the fact that Latino families typically report high academic expectations, the researchers found that Latino families

were highly likely to encounter stressful life events, and also found that these stressful events were correlated with lower rates of family involvement. The researchers found that, "specifically, financial strain was negatively associated with school involvement, but major family life events were linked with lower levels of home academic involvement" (2016, p. 1070).

A study of middle-income Latino families found that, while these families did not experience the same stress of financial strain, perceived barriers to involvement still existed (Inoa, 2017). While the parents who took part in Inoa's study expressed similar opinions about the value of education and schooling, they also noted obstacles to school involvement:

Other barriers reported by parents within the current study included having multiple jobs and demanding work schedules, living in double-income households, lacking English proficiency, and an inability to provide their children with homework help. Legal status was also listed as a barrier to some, though it was not discussed as a major barrier among participants. Lastly, most parents in this study completed their primary and secondary education overseas which may lead to lesser familiarity with the American educational system when compared to their American-raised counterparts. What is interesting regarding many of these barriers is that they may be linked to poor and working-class families, yet many of the middle-income parents in the current study cited them as consequential to their ability to be involved in the education of their children (Inoa, 2017, p. 331).

Inoa also found that the Latino families involved in her study were often conflict avoidant (2017, p. 330). This led families to avoid some forms of traditional involvement in schools, such as membership in PTAs or PTOs.

Latino families, and in particular immigrant Latino families, of all socioeconomic statuses face barriers to traditional family involvement. However, these barriers are not permanent walls. Examples of effective family involvement programs that have successfully dismantled these barriers exist and can serve as models.

Inviting Family Involvement

Despite the strong influences that cultural capital, socioeconomic status, and cultural background play, these factors need not determine whether and how families are involved. Many examples exist of programs that have forged successful school-family partnerships despite the presence of these factors. Programs that successfully build school-family partnerships invite involvement and address specific needs of families and communities.

In their review of psychological theory and related research, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found that three major factors influence parents' involvement decisions. The first of these factors, parental role construction, refers to parents' beliefs about their role: "In short, what do parents believe that parents are supposed to do in relation to their children's education and educational progress?" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 9). Parental role construction is influenced by many factors, perhaps most powerfully by socioeconomic status, as described earlier by Lareau (1987, 2011).

The second major factor is parents' sense of efficacy for helping their children be successful in school. As the authors explain, the question is whether parents "believe that,

through their involvement, they can exert a positive influence on children's educational outcomes" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 17). Not surprisingly, parents who believe that their involvement will make a difference in their children's educational outcomes are more likely to become involved.

The third major factor influencing parents' involvement is what the authors describe as "general invitations, demands, and opportunities for parental involvement" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 27). In other words, do parents perceive that the school desires for them to be involved? As the authors explain,

> Effective general invitations and demands may come both from children and their schools. Children may hold more emotional influence over parental decisions because of the personal relationship involved, but inviting school environments appear to be similarly influential because of schools' authority and power in children's lives. At this general level, invitations, opportunities, and demands may consist of a child's overt affirmation of the importance of parental approval and participation, a school climate that is inviting, and teacher behaviors that are welcoming and facilitating. (1997, p. 28)

Of the three factors identified by the authors, the third seems to be most within the school's control. While it may be difficult to shift parental role construction or parents' sense of efficacy, schools have it within their control to make it clear that they desire for families to be involved and to create warm, welcoming school climates. Significantly, children can play a large role in this, as children hold influence over their families. If schools can motivate students to encourage their families to participate, families will be even more likely to become involved.

How do schools address these three factors? The work of Maria Paredes offers a possible solution.

The Original APTT Model

In 2010, Maria Paredes presented her doctoral dissertation examining "Academic Parent-Teacher Teams," which she described as "an alternative approach to parent-teacher conferences" (2010, p. i). At the time, Paredes was the Director of Community Education for a school district in Phoenix, Arizona. The district was comprised mostly of Hispanic students, many of whom were English Language Learners. The majority of these students received free and reduced lunch, and there was a high rate of mobility in the district. Furthermore, many of the students in the district were children of undocumented parents, adding an additional hurdle to fostering parental involvement, since coming to school could mean risking arrest and possible deportation for these parents. Additionally, the schools in the district were considered low-performing as measured by standardized tests.

Through her analysis of parental involvement in the district, Paredes found that the vast majority of resources for parental involvement were directed towards events and other involvement opportunities that were not connected to academic achievement, such as assemblies, carnivals, and other large-group events. At the time, the only formally organized opportunities for families and teachers to connect and discuss academic achievement were at parent-teacher conferences. Paredes described this imbalance as "the inverted school parent involvement opportunities pyramid" (2010, p. 9). Her findings prompted her to develop a different approach, Academic Parent-Teacher Teams (APTT). As Paredes describes it:

APTT inverts the types of parental involvement activities so the emphasis in the

pyramid is on parental involvement led by the classroom teacher to facilitate

student learning and attainment. The focal point of parent involvement

opportunities becomes the quality and quantity of parent-teacher interaction about

student learning. APTT offers a paradigm shift in school parent involvement for

teachers, parents, students, and administrators. Instead of random social,

celebratory, and informational events being the almost exclusive option in which

parents were involved, the goal became developing partnerships between parents

and teachers with an emphasis on building parents' capacity to be a key member

of the educational team by more effectively supporting their children's academic

growth. (2010, p. 9-10)

As part of an initial yearlong pilot, 10 classrooms participated in APTT. The

following fall, 79 classrooms ranging from kindergarten through eighth grade

implemented APTT. The APTT model Paredes developed had two main implementation

components: 75-minute classroom team meetings that took place three times per year,

and twice-yearly 30-minute individual parent-teacher conferences.

Classroom team meetings. The classroom team meetings had six key elements.

The first element was personal invitation: each parent received a personalized letter from

the teacher explaining the purpose of the meetings and inviting them to participate in

APTT, and also received a follow-up phone call from the school's parent liaison to

ensure that the letter was received. The second element was clear and explicit student

performance data: parents were provided with reading, writing, and mathematics data for

the whole class, as well as for their child, and careful explanation of the data was

provided. The third element was setting 60-day improvement goals: after parents received their student's academic performance as compared to the ideal grade-level performance, they were asked to set a 60-day academic goal and provide a verbal commitment that they would practice with their child in order to reach the goal. The fourth element was teacher demonstration of skills: teachers modeled activities and strategies that parents could use at home with their students, included guidance about how often and when to practice, and answered any questions about how to implement the strategies. The fifth element was parent practice of skills: parents were given free materials to use to practice the skills that had been modeled by the teacher with other parents, and were provided enough time to become comfortable with the activities. The final element was building a social network: parents were given time to talk to other parents in the class, and were encouraged to share with one another.

Individual conferences. The second component, 30-minute individual parent-teacher conferences, took place after the first classroom meeting. The conferences consisted of three elements. The first element was a report of student performance: teachers provided parents with updated student data and details about their students' performance. The second element was an action plan: both parties agreed on next steps that would continue the work students and parents were doing at home to achieve the students' academic goals. The third element was networking: information about the student was shared, including social, emotional, and academic information.

Success of Academic Parent-Teacher Teams. Although APTT took place in kindergarten through eighth grade classrooms, Paredes focused on data from nine first grade classrooms for her study. She collected quantitative data related to students'

assessments and parent surveys, as well as qualitative data in the form of parent, teacher, and student interviews and teacher reflections on the APTT model.

The data showed that students made significant gains, and parents viewed their involvement positively. In the post-APTT interviews Paredes conducted, parents displayed appreciation for being invited to be involved with their students' learning in a new way and expressed dedication to helping their students meet their 60-day goals. Students communicated awareness of their goals, as well as motivation to meet those goals by practicing outside of school with the help of their families. Both parents and teachers said that they communicated more regularly, with more of a focus on academics, than they had before. Teachers' perceptions of parents, as well as their willingness to participate in APTT in the future, both changed for the better. Teachers expressed that the time spent preparing for APTT and conferences was worth it, and both parents and teachers said that they would prefer the APTT model over traditional parent-teacher conferences in the future.

Since Paredes' initial study in 2009, APTT have expanded to more than 250 schools in 16 states (Sparks, 2015). Training in the APTT model is now offered by WestEd, where Paredes is now employed as the Senior Engagement Manager. As part of the paid training, WestEd provides an initial two-day professional development workshop, teacher planning support sessions, classroom observations, facilitated debrief sessions, and support for administrators. The results of APTT continue to be positive: student achievement data and surveys, family surveys, and teacher surveys continue to demonstrate the efficacy of APTT, and families continue to say that they prefer APTT over traditional conferences (Sparks, 2015).

Options for districts. While WestEd clearly provides beneficial training and support for teachers and schools, the expense of paying for such support is likely cost prohibitive in many districts. The APTT model provides an excellent option for school-family partnerships, but schools need not be limited to the exact model (now officially known as a project of WestEd) to implement meetings that engage parents in partnership to support students.

The benefits of the APTT model can be realized through other meeting structures and options. The work of Dr. Paredes, as well as the other research cited in this chapter, indicates that what is most important is for schools to create genuinely welcoming environments for families. The other benefits of the APTT model can be realized by providing families with data about their students and putting that data in context, teaching families specific activities to practice skills with their students, and providing opportunities to follow up on families' goals for their students.

Summary

This chapter has explored the literature related to the research question: *How can families, students, and school staff come together to engage in authentic partnership through Partnerships for Academic Success (PAS) meetings?* Various definitions of involvement were described, specifically Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) continuum model and Eptein's (2010) six types of involvement. Numerous benefits of family involvement were examined, including improved student academic achievement and increased likelihood of higher educational expectations. Factors that influence whether and how families become involved were explored, in particular cultural capital and

socioeconomic status, as well as specific barriers for Latino families. Finally, one model of inviting family involvement, Academic Parent-Teacher Teams, was described.

In Chapter 3, I will apply many of the theories explored in this chapter as I explain the details of this capstone project. I will describe how Partnerships for Academic Success meetings were expanded schoolwide during the 2017–2018 school year, as well as the guide and resources that were developed for future implementation of PAS meetings.

CHAPTER THREE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Introduction

The findings of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two clearly show the benefits of family involvement to schools, teachers, families, and, most importantly, students. The purpose of this capstone project is to answer the question: *How can families, students, and school staff come together to engage in authentic partnership through Partnerships for Academic Success (PAS) meetings?* In order to accomplish this, a plan was created for expanding PAS meetings schoolwide and a guide was developed for teachers to use when implementing PAS meetings.

This chapter will explain the intended audience for this project. The goals of PAS meetings will be described, and an overview of how PAS meetings were implemented schoolwide will be provided. This overview will include: who participated in PAS meetings; when and where the meetings took place; what data was collected and shared with parents; and how the meetings were structured. Finally, the final product of this project will be described.

Intended Audience

The final products of this project are a guide and resources for teachers to use when implementing PAS meetings. While the intended audience for this project is

elementary teachers within my district, it could also be used by teachers at any grade level and in any school district.

The intended audience of the PAS meetings themselves was families of students in first through fifth grades at my school. The students were also included as part of the audience, as they were encouraged to attend the meetings, and an additional goal of the meetings was to communicate to students that their families and teachers are working in partnership to support their academic success.

Theories and Frameworks

Malcolm Knowles's (1992) theories of adult learning apply to both intended audiences: the teachers and staff who will use the guide and resources when planning future PAS meetings, and the families who attend these meetings. Knowles presents two guiding principles when planning presentations for adult learners: first, that learners should be active participants rather than passive recipients; and second, that the content should be made relevant to the learners by building on "the backgrounds, needs, interests, problems, and concerns of the participants" (1992, p. 11).

The guide and resources for teachers meet both of Knowles's guidelines for effective presentations for adult learners. Teachers who use the guide and resources for future PAS meetings will be active participants in all aspects of planning for and conducting these meetings. They will use the resources to collect data for students in their class, plan a relevant activity, and customize the presentation materials for the families of their students. The content of all materials are relevant to teachers, as all necessary resources and materials are included. These materials and resources are designed to build on teachers' needs and interests as they plan for their own PAS meetings.

The presentations to families also meet both of Knowles's requirements. One of the defining characteristics of PAS meetings is that families are active participants. Families are involved in every aspect of the meetings, from greeting one another, to analyzing data, to learning and practicing the activity, to setting goals for their students. PAS meetings are also designed to build on families' knowledge, interests, and needs.

PAS meetings for families also address another of Knowles's principles. Knowles contends that the more interaction there is in a meeting, the greater the learning will be. Knowles explains that there are three areas in which increased interaction leads to increased learning: the platform; the audience; and the interaction between the platform and the audience (1992, p. 11).

PAS meetings involve interactions in all of these areas. The platform includes the visual presentation, discussion of the data, presentation of materials, and goal-setting. Families interact with each of these components of the platform, and interactions occur between the platform and the audience throughout the meetings. Interactions also occur amongst the audience, the families themselves. Families greet one another, play an ice-breaker game together, and participate in large or small group discussions. Each of these components is intended to build community and increase engagement. According to Knowles, these components also increase the likelihood that learning will take place.

Goals of PAS Meetings

The ultimate goal of PAS meetings is to increase students' academic achievement. As explored in Chapter Two, if looked at through the lens of Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) continuum model, the goal of these meetings is parental involvement with schooling, empowering families to eventually move toward parental engagement with

student learning. If considered in the context of Epstein's (2010) model of six types of involvement, these meetings primarily address parenting, communicating, and learning at home.

The goals of implementing PAS meetings schoolwide were to build on the success of PAS meetings in fourth and fifth grades over the past two years, and to create a schoolwide culture of partnership between families and school. Ideally, PAS meetings will continue in the future, and will become the norm for how families and school staff come together to discuss students' data and to support one another in promoting student academic achievement.

Overview of PAS Meetings

Throughout this process, I worked closely with our district's Family Engagement Coordinator, school administrators, and a colleague who had been instrumental in advocating for and planning PAS meetings in their first two years at our school.

The first schoolwide PAS meetings took place September 28th, 2017. This date was selected to be late enough that teachers had an opportunity to collect initial data about students, but early enough that it would take place before the first round of family conferences in October.

Participants. All teachers in the school were invited to participate in PAS meetings. Teachers were informed of the opportunity to be involved with PAS meetings during our first teacher inservice day in August. Participation was completely voluntary, as the district did not have funds in its planned budget for the year to compensate teachers for their time to plan or conduct PAS meetings. Although the initial goal was to have at least one teacher per grade level participate, I was thrilled that in first through fifth

grades, all teachers with the exception of one elected to participate. Our kindergarten teachers expressed interest in participating in the future, but chose not to participate this year.

At this initial meeting, it was also communicated that if multiple teachers at a grade level volunteered to participate, the teachers had the option of either conducting PAS meetings with only students and families from their classes, or joining with the other teachers from their grade level to conduct a grade-level PAS meeting. Both models had been successful in the past. At every grade level, teachers elected to collaborate and conduct grade-level PAS meetings. At the grade level in which one teacher chose not to participate, the other teachers at that grade level also invited the non-participating teacher's families to attend the grade-level meeting.

Planning and preparation. Once participating teachers were identified, families in their classes were invited to participate. Teachers were identified early enough that a first flyer was distributed at our Open House night prior to the start of school. Families were notified once again during the first week of school. Paper invitations written in both English and Spanish were sent home, and teachers were encouraged to make follow-up phone calls and send emails to ensure that the paper invitations had been received. The date of the PAS meetings was also advertised in our first school newsletter. All students also have planners, and teachers were encouraged to have their students write the date of the PAS meetings in their planners.

The invitation distributed to families included an RSVP to be sent back to school that included the number of family members who would be attending, as well as whether transportation services, interpreters, or childcare were needed. Teachers communicated

these needs as they received responses so our Family Engagement Coordinator could

arrange for any transportation, interpreter, and childcare needs.

A follow-up meeting with interested teachers took place during the second week

of school. At this meeting, teachers were introduced to the components of PAS meetings

and had an opportunity to view PAS materials that had been used by teachers the

previous school year. Time was provided for teachers to meet in teams to decide what

data they planned to collect and to choose an activity to teach families. Teachers were

reassured that activities could be simple, and could even be activities that they already

did in their classrooms. Teachers were given until the end of that week to compile a list

of necessary materials so that an order could be placed in time to receive materials for the

PAS meetings.

At this meeting, teachers were also provided with a template for a Google Slides

presentation that could be shared with families, a template for a Google Sheets data

collection document that could be used to collect data and create graphs to be shared with

families, and a template for a Google Docs goal-setting document that families could use

to record the goals they created for their students during the PAS meetings. Teachers

were instructed in how to assign random numbers for students so that all data would

remain anonymous when presented to families. Time was also provided for teachers to

ask questions and receive support as they planned their PAS meetings.

Time and location. As previously mentioned, the first round of PAS meetings

took place September 28th. This gave teachers several weeks of time to collect their

initial data about students and to prepare to present the data to families. Holding the first

round in September also ensured that families and teachers made this initial contact early

in the year and before the first round of conferences, which took place in early October. While this did not allow for the ideal 60 day period between the meetings and individual conferences, it at least provided an opportunity for families and teachers to meet and interact with one another and have some in-depth conversations about students before conferences took place.

The meetings took place at five o'clock in the evening. This time was selected to be late enough so that parents who work during the day would hopefully be able to attend, but early enough so that we would not need to provide a full meal for families; instead, we provided snacks and bottled water. The meetings were scheduled to last 75 minutes.

Meetings took place in classrooms. As described previously, teachers had the option of conducting meetings only with families of students in their classes, or joining with other teachers at their grade level to have a larger meeting in one of their classrooms. All teachers elected to conduct larger grade-level meetings, and so decided on one teacher's classroom in which to meet. Also, as mentioned previously, the colleagues of the teacher who elected not to participate decided to invite the families of the students in that teacher's class to attend their grade-level meeting, so all families in grades one through five were given the opportunity to participate.

Childcare was provided in the school gymnasium. Volunteers from the high school National Honors Society, middle school WEB leaders, and adult volunteers provided childcare and activities for younger siblings who attended so that families could attend their older children's PAS meetings.

Data. Teachers collected data during the first two weeks of school. All grade levels decided to focus on math fact fluency for the first round of meetings. Over the past two years of fourth and fifth grade teachers conducting PAS meetings, we focused on math data in the fall and reading data in the spring. We found that math data is often more accessible for families, and teachers this year agreed that math would be a simpler place to start.

It was communicated with participating teachers that the data collected and presented should be quantifiable, easy to understand, and relevant and applicable to families. As teachers, there is valuable data that we collect and use to inform our instruction that may not be easy to understand or relevant to families. This is not to say that this data should not be shared with families, but we have found through our past experience with PAS meetings that straightforward, easily quantifiable data lends itself best to these types of meetings and is most accessible for families. Examples from past years included students' computation scores (the number of addition, subtraction, multiplication and/or division questions students are able to answer correctly in a given amount of time) and reading fluency scores (the number of words students are able to read correctly in a given period of time). Each grade level team of teachers was able to decide what data best met these criteria and would be most useful for families. Since all teachers already conduct assessments at the beginning of the year to collect baseline data, collecting this data was not a significant amount of additional work on their part.

After collecting data, all students in a class were assigned a random number so that when the data was compiled, each student remained anonymous. Documents were created for families that included their individual students' data, as well as the compiled

data for the entire class. Teachers were instructed in how to use Google Sheets to create graphs, and were also offered ongoing support, both in person and via email, when compiling data and creating graphs. For some teachers this was something they had done before and with which they felt comfortable, and for other teachers it was a new experience and one with which they needed assistance.

Meeting structure. All meetings, regardless of grade level, followed a similar structure. As mentioned previously, interpreters were arranged in advance of the meetings to ensure that all families were able to fully participate.

Community circle. Meetings began with a community circle, similar to how all teachers in our school begin each day in their classrooms. Families greeted one another, shared something about themselves and their students, and participated in an icebreaker game or activity. The purpose of the community circle was twofold: first, families became familiar with an important ritual and routine in our school and experienced it firsthand; second, the community circle was intended to build familiarity and comfort and set a positive and friendly tone that hopefully encouraged a sense of partnership between families and teachers as they moved into the presentation of data.

Presentation of data. Teachers explained how the data was collected, why that particular data is important and/or useful, and how the data is used by teachers in school. Families were guided through looking at their own students' data, as well as the data that had been compiled for the entire class or grade. Teachers also explained what would be considered grade-level performance for the assessment that was used.

Teachers then facilitated conversations with families about the data during which families were asked what they noticed about the data for the class or grade as a whole. It

was up to the discretion of the teachers whether they had whole-group discussions or broke into smaller groups, depending upon the size of the group.

Presentation of activity. The teachers then taught and modeled an activity that families would be able to do at home with their students to practice the skill or skills that were assessed when the data was collected. All materials for the game or activity were provided. After teachers explained and modeled how to do the activity, families had an opportunity to practice the activity with their students. Teachers observed and gave feedback during this time to ensure that families understood how to do the activity.

Goal setting. Together with their students, families set a specific goal for where they would like their student to be in the next 60 days. The goal was written down and shared with the teacher. The goals were then reviewed at conferences, although the 60 day time period had not yet passed. Despite the fact that students likely had not achieved the goal by conferences, the goal hopefully still provided a point of discussion during conferences, and teachers were able to use conferences as an opportunity to check in on the student's and family's progress toward meeting the goal.

Closing circle. The meeting closed with another community circle to reflect on the evening and to reinforce the importance of families practicing the activity at home with their students. Teachers answered any remaining questions and thanked families for attending.

Final Product and Presentation

The final product of this project is a guide for teachers to use when conducting PAS meetings in the future. This guide includes a description of each component of PAS meetings, tips on how to prepare for meetings, and ideas for possible activities. It also

includes resources and templates for teachers to use during each part of the process:

inviting families; compiling student data; sharing student data with families; creating a

presentation to share with families at the PAS meetings; and assisting families with goal-

setting.

This guide will be made available to all teachers in the district through our district

file-sharing websites. Each school has a Google Site that can only be accessed by

employees of the district, and these sites are used by each school to post and access

shared files. Teachers will also be reminded of these resources leading up to all future

PAS meetings.

Summary

This chapter has explained the details of my capstone project, which is intended to

answer the question: *How can families, students, and school staff come together to*

engage in authentic partnership through Partnerships for Academic Success (PAS)

meetings? This chapter explained the intended audience of the project and the goals of

PAS meetings. This chapter also provided an overview of PAS meetings, including who

participated, when and where the meetings took place, how data was collected and shared

with parents, and how the meetings were structured. The final presentation of this project

was also described.

In Chapter Four, I will present my conclusions. I will share what I have learned

throughout the capstone process, revisit and reflect on my literature review, and explore

possible implications of my project.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this capstone project is to answer the question: *How can families, students, and school staff come together to engage in authentic partnership through Partnerships for Academic Success (PAS) meetings?* Chapter One introduced my interest in this topic and my own history with family engagement. In Chapter Two, I explored the literature related to my topic. Chapter Three explained the details of my capstone project, including the intended audience, goals of the project, and a description of the final product.

In Chapter Four I will review the major learnings I gained from this project, revisit the literature related to this project, discuss implications and limitations of this project, provide recommendations for future projects and research, and explain how this project is a benefit to the profession.

Major Learnings

The process of researching and writing this capstone paper, and of preparing for and conducting my capstone project, resulted in multiple levels of learning and growth: as a teacher, as a learner, and as an individual.

As a teacher, I learned to challenge my assumptions about my students and their families. I learned to redefine what family involvement is and how it can look, and also

learned that my school community still has far to go in our family engagement work. As a colleague, I was pleasantly surprised to learn how many of my fellow teachers were excited about this project and willing to engage with families in a new way. It is my hope that this enthusiasm for PAS meetings will continue in the future and that we can continue to expand this program and build stronger partnerships with all of our families.

As a learner, I learned that I actually enjoy research when the topic is something of my choosing and something about which I feel passionate. Although I have completed research projects in the past, the topics were usually assigned and the work often felt tedious and overwhelming. While completing the research for this project was stressful at times, it never felt uninteresting. I was also reminded of how much I enjoy the process of writing. It has been several years since I have been immersed in a large writing project, and it was a gratifying challenge to engage in this type of work again.

On a personal level, I learned quite a bit about myself during this project. As they often do, life events interfered with my work. Some of these events were joyful, as when my husband and I learned that we were expecting our second child. Others were sad, as when we discovered that our beloved dog had an aggressive tumor and made the difficult decision to say goodbye to her. Still other events were a combination of exciting and stressful, as when we decided to sell our house and purchase another home. I learned, however, that life outside of learning will always be there. For too long, I postponed completing my master's degree because life got in the way: I moved across the country; I started a new job, and then another; I got married; I had a child. Completing this project has taught me that it is possible to be many things at once: a wife, a mother, a daughter, a friend, a teacher, and also a student. It has encouraged me to continue my education

beyond my master's degree in the future, confident in the knowledge that, with support, it is possible.

Revisiting the Literature Review

This project was inspired by the idea that schools can and need to do more to foster family involvement. Much of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two reinforced or attached new language to beliefs I held before beginning this project. Although I did not yet have the language to describe it as such before beginning this project, I knew that my school was primarily at point one on Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) continuum of involvement, parental involvement in school. With the exception of our home visits program and past PAS meetings in fourth and fifth grades, most involvement opportunities were controlled and directed by the school. Although there were plenty of family nights and school events, families were involved, not truly engaged.

Epstein's (2010) six types of involvement were also influential, as was her point about schools labeling parents as "good" or "bad" based on whether they initiate involvement. Despite my conviction that schools need to do more to engage families, I have been guilty, consciously and unconsciously, of making assumptions about families based on the limited picture of what I see at school.

Both Goodall and Montgomery (2014) and Epstein (2010) present a more complex picture of family involvement than I had previously understood. Neither schools nor families are all good or all bad; rather, both have good intentions and are likely doing many things right, and both can do more to create partnerships that better support student success. Because schools, as the institution, have more power in the relationship, the onus is on them to initiate more productive partnerships.

Also highly influential were Lareau's (1987 and 2011) theories of cultural capital and family involvement. As a teacher, and now as a parent, my background is that of a middle-class, white woman. While I grew up in a low-income household with a single working mother, my mother was raised in a relatively wealthy family and approached parenting and involvement in schooling from a concerted cultivation standpoint. Like all of us, my own cultural capital and my views on parenting are shaped by my experiences. Lareau's work challenged me to examine my assumptions about the families of my students and the judgements I have made in the past, and continue to make, about families based on parenting styles, especially when those styles are different from my own.

It continues to be a challenge for me to not view the natural growth model of parenting from a deficit perspective. Lareau's writing, however, continuously reminded me that neither parenting style is inherently better. Rather, concerted cultivation is more aligned with what is valued in dominant social institutions, including schools. One paragraph of Lareau's work, in particular, was highly influential as I pursued this project:

> It is important to stress that if the schools were to promote a different type of family-school relationship, the class culture of middle-class parents might not yield a social profit. The data do not reveal that the social relations of middle-class culture are intrinsically better than the social relations of working-class culture. Nor can it be said that the family-school relationships in the middle class are objectively better for children than those in the working class. Instead, the social profitability of middle-class arrangements is tied to the schools' definition of the proper family-school relationship. (1987, p. 82)

I came back to this paragraph repeatedly in planning for this project and in challenging my own ideas about family involvement. Schools have it within their power to redefine what "proper" family-school relationships look like. This will not happen quickly, even in a single school— just as I need to continue to challenge my assumptions and biases, so too do my colleagues. However, PAS meetings are, I believe, one way to begin to accomplish this goal.

One portion of the literature review that contradicted the experience we had with PAS meetings this fall was the section about barriers to involvement for Latino families. The literature repeatedly mentioned that although Latino families often describe themselves as valuing education and academic achievement, they participate in their children's education more at home than at school, and do not regularly attend school functions (Lopez, 2001; Camacho-Thompson, Gillen-O'Neel, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2016; Inoa, 2017). However, all but one of the families who attended the PAS meeting for my grade this fall were Latino, and the anecdotal evidence I received from other teachers was that the majority of families who attended the PAS meetings at other grade levels were Latino. Possible reasons for this contradiction with the literature will be explored in a later section.

Implications

Based on my findings, there are specific recommendations that I would make for my own district and any other districts that may be interested in starting similar meetings. The first of these recommendations would be to include funding for PAS meetings in the budget. While my school was fortunate that teachers were willing to volunteer their time, this cannot be expected, especially if PAS meetings are to become the norm for how we

meet and communicate with families. There are other options for how this could happen. As part of our contract, teachers in my district are required to work at three school events per year, outside of our contracted school day. Each of these events has a limited number of spots for teachers to sign up to have it count for one of their three events. We were able to reserve only a few of these spots for PAS meetings, so a handful of teachers were able to have the PAS night count as one of their three events. In the future, all interested teachers could have PAS meetings count as one of their three required events. Another option would be for future contract negotiations teams to advocate for PAS nights to be written into our contract so that teachers are guaranteed compensation for their time.

Another practical recommendation would be to have either separate nights or separate blocks of time for different grade levels so that families are able to attend PAS meetings for more than one child. Asking families to come to school multiple nights may deter some families from coming, so my recommendation would be to have one block of time for lower grades and another for upper grades. While this would not solve the problem for all families, as some families have more than one child in the lower or upper grades, it would make it more likely that families could attend meetings for multiple children.

A third recommendation would be to do more to advertise PAS meetings in various ways in an effort to make all families aware of the opportunity to attend. This year, most advertising for the PAS night was in writing: flyers were sent home, and students were encouraged to write the date of the PAS night in their planners. Teachers were encouraged, but not required, to make follow-up phone calls. In the future, it would be beneficial to market the night in various ways in order to reach all families. An

informational table, perhaps run by families who have participated in PAS meetings in the past, could be set up at Open House night and during drop-off and pick-up times for the first week of school. The principal sends a monthly recorded phone message to families with news and announcements in English and in Spanish, and a similar call could be made leading up to PAS nights. A phone bank of volunteer teachers or families could make reminder calls to families so that each individual teacher does not need to call every family.

As we continue to conduct PAS meetings in the future, they will hopefully become an expected part of how families and teachers work together. As families learn about the meetings, have opportunities to participate in the meetings, and communicate with one another about their experiences, attendance will likely continue to grow.

I would encourage other districts to explore the possibility of investing in Academic Parent-Teacher Teams or a model similar to Partnerships for Academic Success meetings. Regardless of the demographics of a district, all students and families would benefit from similar meetings.

Limitations

Multiple limitations were faced when planning for and conducting this project. One of the primary limitations is likely to be faced in many other schools and districts: lack of funding. My district had not included funding for PAS nights in the budget for this year, and additional funds were not available. Because of this, teachers who participated in PAS nights did so on a completely voluntary basis and were not compensated for any of their time preparing for the PAS meetings or for the PAS night itself. Fortunately, most teachers recognized the benefits to students and families and

volunteered their time, but this may not be the case in every school, or even in my school in the future.

Luckily, funds were available for materials for activities, snacks for families, transportation, and interpreters. Funds for materials, snacks, and transportation came from Title I funding. Without these funds, the PAS night would likely not have been possible. This is an important consideration for other schools and districts who plan to conduct a similar night.

As mentioned previously, another limitation was that the fall PAS meetings occurred for all grade levels on the same night and at the same time. This meant that families of children in multiple grade levels had to either choose which grade level meeting to attend, or split up if more than one family member was in attendance. In the case of my class, it meant that one student attended by himself while his mother attended the meeting in his younger sibling's classroom.

A final limitation, and a significant one, was that the families in attendance at the PAS night were not representative of the school population as a whole. While I did not collect demographic information of families who attended (a limitation in itself, perhaps), the anecdotal information I received was that the majority of the families in attendance were Latino. This was true in the case of my grade, where all but one family in attendance was Latino. For context, approximately 45% of our school population identifies as Hispanic/Latino, 33% identifies as Black, 17% identifies as White, 4% identifies as Asian, and less than 1% identifies as Native American.

As mentioned previously, this contradicted the literature examined in Chapter Two, which described barriers to involvement faced by Latino families and suggested

that these barriers often prevent families from attending school functions. Many of the Latino families in my district certainly face the barriers described in the literature, including stressful life events, financial stress, demanding work schedules, limited English proficiency, and unfamiliarity with the American educational system (Camacho-Thompson, Gillen-O'Neel, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2016; Inoa, 2017).

However, my district has done quite a bit of work to address these barriers. All school communications are made in both English and Spanish. Each school has Spanish-speaking staff members who reach out to families and are also available when families have questions or concerns. Interpreters and transportation are provided for conferences and other school events. As a school district with a large population of English Language Learners, we have collaborating English Language (EL) teachers who work with every grade level. We also host a well-attended EL family night each fall.

Additionally, a six-week program for families, REACH (Realizing Educational Achievement at Columbia Heights), aims to educate families about the Columbia Heights school system, as well as how parents can help their children achieve college and career readiness. While the REACH program is available to all families, it has been especially well-attended by Latino families in the district.

When discussing this with Jane Riordan, the Family Engagement Coordinator for the district and Content Reviewer for this project, she made the point that for many of our Latino families, as well as families who are immigrants from other areas, REACH and similar programs are "an easier sell." Many of these families are unfamiliar with the American school system, and so a program whose goal is to educate them about that system is appealing. It becomes more challenging to make the same "sell" to families

who are already familiar with the school system, and have had their own (sometimes negative) experiences with our schools. In fact, the same information presented to a different audience can be perceived as condescending and even offensive.

Clearly, my district, and many others, need to do a better job of identifying and addressing barriers to involvement faced by other populations of families. While we have achieved some success in addressing barriers faced by our Latino families, the same cannot yet be said for other populations, and in particular for our Black families.

Recommendations for Future Research

This project did not measure the impact of PAS meetings on student learning. Although similar research exists for Academic Parent-Teacher Teams, I would be interested in performing a longitudinal study of the academic gains made by students whose families participated in PAS meetings compared to students whose families did not participate.

Another area for potential future research would be to examine how attitudes and outlooks of teacher and families are impacted by participation in PAS meetings. For example, what are families' attitudes about the school and their role in it before and after PAS meetings? How comfortable and how welcomed do families feel in school before and after participating in PAS meetings? How confident do families feel assisting their students at home before and after participating in PAS meetings? Do PAS meetings impact the assumptions teachers may hold about the families of their students? How do PAS meetings influence the relationships between teachers, students, and families? Many possible subtopics of study can be imagined.

Another possible area of future research would be to examine the best ways of engaging various demographic groups. I would be interested in examining why families who attended PAS meetings came, and why families who did not attend did not come. Perhaps the answer is as simple as changing the time of the meetings to be more convenient for some families, or perhaps, as I suspect, it is more complex. What other barriers exist for families who did not attend, and how can we continue to address these barriers and engage as many families as possible?

Communicating Results

The results of this project will be communicated in multiple ways. This capstone project will be made available online in Hamline's Digital Commons, where I hope it will serve as an inspiration to other teachers, schools, and districts. I am always willing to share materials and resources with others who want to organize PAS nights or similar meetings with families.

Additionally, all components of this project will be made available to teachers and staff throughout my district through our internal school websites. Each school has a Google Site that can be accessed by all staff. I plan to present to teachers at my school to remind them of these resources leading up to our next round of PAS meetings, and will also offer to present at any other schools in the district that are interested in implementing PAS meetings.

Benefits to the Profession

All teachers want their students to succeed, and we all face challenges in meeting this goal. For those of us who teach in schools with large populations of low-income students, these challenges can be especially daunting. PAS meetings provide a specific

strategy for increasing the likelihood that students will be successful. PAS meetings offer one possible answer to the question, "How can I support my students?"

PAS meetings do not require that teachers change anything they are currently doing. Teachers are likely already collecting data about their students, and PAS meetings offer an opportunity to do something with this data beyond entering it into a gradebook, using it to create groups, or simply reporting it to families at conferences.

PAS meetings also offer a specific strategy for increasing family involvement. I have heard teachers complain on numerous occasions that students are not doing homework, or that they are not making sufficient progress because they are not practicing skills at home, or that families must not be helping at home. In addition to creating an opportunity to challenge teachers' assumptions about family involvement at home, PAS meetings empower teachers and families with specific strategies to increase the likelihood that families will help their students practice specific skills at home.

PAS meetings also create opportunities for building partnerships and community between teachers and families, and amongst families. PAS meetings tend to be more relaxed and informal than traditional conferences, and do not have the same time constraints as traditional conferences. Teachers who have participated in PAS meetings at my school have commented afterwards that they were surprised by how enjoyable the evenings were for all involved. In my own experience, I also found that my interactions throughout the year with families who attended PAS meetings were more friendly, more comfortable, and ultimately more productive.

For a relatively small investment in terms of money, time, and energy, PAS meetings offer large returns.

Summary

The purpose of this capstone project has been to answer the question: *How can families, students, and school staff come together to engage in authentic partnership through Partnerships for Academic Success (PAS) meetings?* In this chapter, I reviewed the major learnings I gained from this project as a teacher, as a learner, and as an individual. I revisited the literature related to this project and discussed literature that was especially influential, as well as literature that contradicted my findings. I discussed the limitations and implications of this project, and also provided recommendations for future projects and research. Finally, I explained how this project is a benefit to the profession.

Completing this project has been extremely rewarding. Bringing something from an idea and a conversation to a reality is immensely gratifying. However, the completion of this project feels like a beginning rather than a conclusion. It is my hope that my school will continue PAS nights for many years and that we will engage more teachers and more families in these meetings. Through this project, though, I have realized that PAS meetings are not enough. An open door and an invitation are a start, but they alone are not sufficient to build authentic partnership. I believe that PAS meetings are one way for families, students, and school staff to engage in authentic partnership, but we need to continue to build school-family partnerships in many ways. For families who attended the PAS meetings, we need to find ways to foster an ongoing partnership. For families who did not attend, we need to discover what other barriers exist for them and find ways to address these barriers. We, as a school staff, also need to continue to challenge our own assumptions about families and about what engagement in school can look like.

I have come a long way from the inexperienced and intimidated young teacher who once dreaded opening my classroom door to families. Family engagement, now, is something much more than a project to me. Authentic partnerships with families are something toward which I will continue to strive for the rest of my teaching career.

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