



## **Equity by Design:** Supporting Student Success through Authentic Partnerships: Reflection from Parents and Caregivers

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# Supporting Student Success through Authentic Partnerships: Reflection from Parents and Caregivers

*"I see parent involvement as that parents have a voice in everything, that they bring something to the table that I [as principal] need to learn about, and that it's about sharing and co-constructing the school together. And I think that's very, very hard to do, because once they know they have a voice, they have a voice, and you have to listen to it. And it might not be something that you [as principal] agree with. And that's the struggle. But I think that's the promise of public schools."*

-Former elementary principal, Los Angeles  
as cited in (Auerbach, 2010, p. 728)

## Parental Involvement

It has been established that parent and caregiver involvement in their child's education can positively contribute to academic and social

success, but the definition of parental involvement varies widely (Cousins & Mickelson, 2011; Perkins, 2008; Trotman, 2001). For some researchers and educators, parents and caregiver involvement means attending parent-teacher conferences, easily accessible for scheduling conferences by phone or email, helping with homework, and attending PTA and other after-school programs. For others, parent and caregiver involvement is often defined as partnerships between the home, school, and community (Trotman, 2001).

When parents and caregivers were asked to define parent involvement, they shared descriptions that aligned with the definitions above.

*I don't think it should be just left up to a teacher to try to teach my child everything. I think it's a relationship. I think, well, yeah, I think of me and Kim's teacher as you know, in a relationship, partnering together, to get Kim to where she's supposed to be academically. And if she is, or if she isn't, then you know, we work hand to hand with each other to get her to where she's supposed to be (Alicia, 2017).*

For many parents and caregivers, involvement includes school-centered involvement but also extends beyond the school walls. For example, providing a safe environment for their child to work and study, helping with homework, monitoring their child's activities at home and with their friends, using everyday activities to reinforce learning in school, and being involved in religious institutions (Diamond, 1999-2000).

*..... parents supplementing or adding additional supplements to what the children are learning at school. So, you know, school doesn't just happen at school, or learning doesn't just happen at school. So when they come home from school parent involvement, parent engagement, means, you know, adding to that..... So, just, parent engagement means,*

## KEY TERMS AND INFORMATION

**Historically Marginalized** - For this resource guide, data was collected from African American parents and caregivers. The literature used to inform this resource focused primarily on African American and Latino families and low-income families.

**Authentic partnerships** - Respectful alliances among stakeholders that value relationship building and sharing of power.

**Parental Involvement** - This term is often critiqued because it fails to adequately capture the structural barriers as to why parents and caregivers are marginalized from the schooling process. Acknowledging this, in this resource guide, the literature on parental involvement is drawn upon to address structural barriers while providing suggestions for how schools can be better equipped to engage with parents/caregivers towards more equitable schooling outcomes. This means dealing with the power dynamics between schools and the communities they serve.



*you know, stretching and pushing the boundaries of their exposure outside of the classroom, so supplementing, the learning outside of the classroom with real-life experiences and opportunities to do and see more (Rashad, 2017).*



Parents and caregivers from historically marginalized families tend to report more involvement at home and in the community than within the school based contexts (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Since school personnel tends to privilege involvement within the school's walls over home and community involvement, parents and caregivers from historically marginalized families are often stereotyped and viewed from a deficit perspective. From this view, school personnel assume that parents and caregivers do not value, care about, or support their child's education because the parents and caregivers are not physically present at the school (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Vega et al., 2015).

*There have been multiple times where I've been told, "I am just so glad that there is a Black parent present." Or, "I am so appreciative that you are doing this." I feel as though when I have volunteered in the past, and even now, I just, I feel like there's just this over-pouring of appreciation for me and not my counterparts. So, in that sense, yes, I think it [race] plays a part, it's because it's, it's kind of like, well, I mean, this is what I'm supposed to do. You know what I mean? Like I don't feel like I should be praised for participating in my child's education, like, that's not what I'm doing this for. I'm not doing this for recognition or to be the, oh, the*

*Black mom there. I'm doing it because that's - I want to be involved in their education. Again, it kind of goes back to what I said earlier, where I think that there sometimes is a perception that black parents don't want to be involved (Alexis, 2017).*

The emphasis on traditional forms of involvement within schools neglects culturally diverse perspectives and constructs restrictive roles for parents and caregivers to be engaged in their child's education (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Vega et al., 2015). This focus on traditional in school roles also averts attention from school's responsibility to provide sufficient avenues for historically marginalized families involvement (Vega et al., 2015) and away from understanding systemic school barriers that prevent parents and caregivers from participating within the school walls (Moultrie, 2016).

## Barriers

*I have talked to father after father because I was there [the school]. I was sort of disappointed in the way I was being treated. And I talked to some other brothers, and I was like, hey, man, is it just me? And then you know how many brothers told me, no, man, them people don't want us up in there (Kevin, 2017).*

Historically marginalized families face a plethora of barriers to school centered involvement. Some of these obstacles were echoed by interviewed parents and caregivers.

### "A Deficient View"

*I don't like District 1 because to me they treat male parents differently, they seem to have this thing, and I believe that -- it's White America has it. When I walk in the door, they see a criminal, so they treat you like you are violent. They consider us angry and upset.... I went to District 1, and I was going to take my daughter to lunch because I was use to going to lunch with my kids and that year she was about to graduate. This is a now or never thing, the last time. And she looked forward to it. I went to the school, told the women I was there to take my daughter to lunch.*

*They told - these women - Black women - told me that was creepy. They had no problem saying that to my face. Now that told me right there that the people, the teachers, the people in the office have lost their touch with what a father is. They told my daughter she could not leave to have lunch with me. I don't like District 1 at all (Kevin, 2017).*



The deficient lens used to view parents of color, and low-income parents often translate into negative responses to parents and caregivers desires to be engaged in their child's education. Parents and caregivers are left to feel unwelcome, disrespected, devalued and dismissed and their children are devalued as well (Auerbach, 2010; Cousins & Mickelson, 2011). These tenuous relationships hinder the building of authentic partnerships.

This deficit lens also catalyzes low expectations for both parents and caregivers and their children. Negative and deficit perceptions coupled with low expectations ignore the strengths and assets of parents/caregivers and the impact they have on the learning of their children (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Diamond, 1999-2000).

#### **“Impact of Race”**

*During my daughter's third grade year, her teacher at the beginning of that year spoke highly of her, would send letters home, would email me. When she finally met me at parent-*

*teacher conference, she continued to ask my daughter's race. She asked was she mixed? The letters stopped. The emails stopped. I don't know if she just found it hard to believe that an African American young girl could be that intelligent and have, you know, a parent that can articulate well. I did experience it [racist experience] her third-grade year (Gwen, 2017).*

To be involved in schools, historically marginalized families have to contend with hostile racial environments (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Moultrie, 2016) in which they face and fight against racists actions. In Thompson's (2002), over half of the 129 parents interviewed stated that the school's racial climate was the most problematic issue for them. Racism was cited as a consistent problem for 20% of the parents, and nearly 40% shared that adults were the culprits of the racism their child faced at schools (as cited in (Moultrie, 2016).

#### **“Criminal Record”**

*Some of these felonies that we have, that Black people have are felonies not because we were guilty, but they are felonies because we didn't know the law. A lot of us were forced into these situations. Now, I get it. Three years, fresh felony, maybe a child molestation charge or something like that, but a twelve-year-old felony? They need to change their rules and their policies. If someone did something twenty years ago, you telling me he can't come in – he didn't even have that child when he was charged with a felony... This is what's funny. You can get a house, felony so many years old. Let me tell you what they said to me, get your felony expunged. I'm getting it expunged right now. I said, but guess what? I'll still be a felon. So, what is that going to accomplish? I'm still going to be a felon, so what are you telling me now? Even though it's not on paper, your paper that you give me still says on there, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" Now, you want me to be honest and truthful; I'm going to have to say yes. So, what difference does it make if I get it expunged or not (Kevin, 2017)?*



Parents with a felon on their record are often restricted from engaging in school-centered events. Racial disparities in the criminal justice system lead to a disproportionate number charges and convictions against people of color. For example, “38% of prison and jail inmates are African American, compared to their 13% percent share of the overall population and Latinos constitute 19% of the prison and jail population” ( [www.sentencingproject.org](http://www.sentencingproject.org) ). This systemic issue speaks to the broader impact of the school to prison pipeline and the mass incarceration of African Americans.

## Redressing Power

To increase school-centered parent involvement and build beneficial authentic partnerships with historically marginalized families, school personnel must take the time to understand how and why historically marginalized families are involved in their children's learning and know that this involvement extends beyond the boundaries of the school. Since parents and caregivers are more involved when they feel welcome, and their traditions and contributions are respected (Auerbach, 2010; Cousins & Mickelson, 2011), school personnel must actively address barriers which devalue, dismiss, and disrespect parents/caregivers. They must create a school climate based on the belief that families are equal partners in their child's learning.



The themes and recommendations below emerged from conversations with parents/

caregivers.

## Shifts in climate and thinking

### "Front office barriers and beyond."

*That day I went to have lunch with Keisha, the lady in the front office said you can't because you are a felon. That embarrassed me! I was embarrassed, and women and other people in the office now think that I might be a child molester-- Kevin, 2017*

Kevin's account explicitly speaks to the barriers faced by parents who have criminal records. Kevin is extremely engaged in his child's learning both in and outside of the classroom. For multiple years at a different school in the district, Kevin volunteered, visited his daughter's classroom, joined her for lunch, chaperoned field trips and volunteered as a DJ at school dances, but on this day he was just a felon. After sending a letter of complaint to the School Board, Superintendent and building principal, Kevin received an apology from the building principal. While he appreciated the apology, his overall experience in the district was so negative that he decided to remove his daughter. When asked what administrators could do to prevent other parents from experiencing the hostility he encountered, he shared the following.

*You know what I believe they should do? As I went to that school, I filled out three criminal background checks. I filled out three. I believe, just like a student gets an ID, I believe that if the parent consents to a background check, and it comes back that felonies are older than five years, three years, whatever they decide, I believe a parent should have an ID card [that allows them to enter the school] as well. There shouldn't be any four or five background check, one per field trip, one for the dance team, stuff like that. There shouldn't be any four or five. Schools are running men away. A lot of them [dads], told me, they shy away from the office. They don't like a lot of the strings that they get put through with the criminal background thing. They think, you know, maybe they need to communicate a little better with the fathers on what it takes to come into the school.*

It is imperative that all parents/caregivers are welcomed when they walk through the school doors and into the classrooms. When asked what administrators should do to address school personnel's racist actions, Gwen shared the following.

*I mean, because it does happen and it probably happens more often than reported, just like with any organization where you have those meetings regarding ethics, you know, what is good workplace behavior, what is, not - those should be ongoing conversations in training. There are still going to be those that go against it, but those are isolated, you know, issues should be addressed but that's not something that should just write in the handbook, and then everyone goes about their day. There should be ongoing education on that (Gwen, 2017).*

Gwen's words speak to the need to offer professional development to address the racial climate of the school and have teachers and staff interrogate their racial bias and the impact they have on students and parents and caregivers. It is imperative that the role of race and racism are taken into account.

#### **"Lines of communication."**

*...But there's also an open relationship. I have talked to Abby's school counselor before, a couple of times, via email and in person, and giving my input. And it's taken into consideration, and I think part of it is because I've been a face for her (Alexis, 2017).*

*And the teachers are just really good at communicating. We've had websites, classroom websites, classroom blogs, on Twitter, things like that...you can tell they're trying to engage with parents. So I would say they do a good job (Saretta, 2017).*

Open, honest, consistent and clear communication are valued by parents and caregivers. Parents and caregivers report feeling more connected to the school when they are kept abreast of their child's performance and what supports are needed to maximize their child's learning. When their children are not performing well, parents and caregivers prefer to know this information in advance when

there is time for them to provide their child with additional supports. Finding out that a child has failed a course at the end of the school year is not helpful. Parents and caregivers also valued knowing what was going on in the schools to best support the efforts of school personnel. A common thread for parents who had less tenuous relationships with school personnel was a consistent and continual cycle of communication.



This cycle of communication should also include opportunities for parents to learn more about the various standardized tests, how they are scored and the impact the test will have on their children. School personnel should also incorporate strategies to keep parents abreast of changes in the law (i.e., Every Student Succeed Act) and how the schools are addressing those changes. In the area of communication, it is also vital that school personnel seek information from parents to inform what occurs in the school (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

#### **"Decision-making power."**

*We can talk to them, but I don't know if that'll make much change....I think it would be nice if we could have, if I would know a better way of, you know, impacting some of the ways that they're learning and being able to make a change if I, you know, at least letting my voice be heard and actually heeded, too ~ Saretta, 2017*

When it comes to having input in their child's learning regarding curricular decisions (i.e., textbook adoption) and course placement, the sentiments of Saretta was echoed by other parents and caregivers.

Another area of significant disparity is the involvement of historically marginalized parents and caregivers in decision-making bodies within the school or school district. The governing bodies of the school should reflect the diversity within the student population. The majority of interviewed parents/caregivers children attended schools that were economically and racially diverse, but the PTO and PTA was predominantly white. To build strong partnerships with parents/caregivers, it is important that historically marginalized parents and caregivers are empowered with decision making power within the schools; this could come through the PTO or other decision-making bodies. Having a diverse PTO may also help increase parent involvement as shared by Alexis.

*..... it's also helpful when those [African American] parents, when they can come to back to school night or come to those things, and they see my face on the other side as a PTO parent, or as a whatever, it had helped in the past when I volunteered, because those parents became a little bit more involved. Those parents had someone to talk to. Like, if they have a question about something at the school that they may not want to ask the front desk lady because they don't feel comfortable. They know that they can, mostly like can come to me and I'm going to get that answer for them. ~Alexis, 2007.*

## Concluding Thoughts

As school personnel considers the ways in which to access the assets of parent/caregivers rather than deemed them as incapable of connecting and engaging with schools, I believe in addition to many others; the following thoughts must be considered.

- Exploring and addressing the impact of race, class, gender, culture, and language on

building partnerships and increasing school-based involvement cannot be ignored (Auerbach, 2010; Baquedano-López et al., 2013).

- The school must have an inclusive and inviting school environment where administration, teachers, and staff:
  - a. Have positive and asset-based views of parents and caregivers and their children regardless of race, economic, or language diversity.
  - b. Recognize and value the multiple ways parents are involved in their child's education and not label parents/caregivers who are not active within the school's walls as a deficit.
  - c. Engage and empower parents and caregivers as equals.
  - d. Take the initiative to reach out and connect with parents and caregivers to seek input about the general functioning of the school and specifically the teaching and learning of their child. This input should be valued and implemented.
  - e. Tear down barriers to parent and caregiver involvement.
  - f. Provide parents and caregivers an opportunity to learn about how the school works and they ways in which they can be involved (Lopez, 2013).

A realization of the opening quote hinges on school personnel's desire and commitment to shifting the power dynamic within their schools. "What if instead of seeking to constrain, train, or manage parents in line with school agendas, schools sought out and attended to parent voices? (Auerbach, 2010).

\*I would like to thank the parents and caregivers who shared their voices for this resource guide.

\*\*Pseudonyms used for names



## **About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center**

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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