

Chapin Hall Issue Brief

Policy research
that benefits
children, families,
and their
communities

May 2012

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago 1313 East 60th Street Chicago, IL 60637 T: 773.753.5900 F: 773.753.5940 www.chapinhall.org

School Engagement Among Parents of Middle School Youth

By Angela Valdovinos D'Angelo, Lauren Rich, and Amelia Kohm

Policy should adjust to the logic of people's lives, instead of requiring people to adjust to policy.

—Sudhir Venkatesh,
New Directions in Youth Policy Forum, 2008

Most researchers, policymakers, and educators believe that children do better in school when their parents are involved in their education. However, there is no gold standard for how to engage parents in their children's schooling. For example, according to the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), parents should be given ample opportunities to become actively involved at the child's school, assist with their child's learning, and become full partners in decision-making or advisory committees. While NCLB enumerates various ways parents should be engaged in their children's schooling, the law does not offer suggestions about how to draw parents into participation. Consequently,

schools often employ a broad range of parent-involvement efforts, with little clear evidence about what works best and for whom.

Most programs focus their engagement efforts on parents of elementary school students, even though middle school students can also benefit from their parents' involvement. Around the middle school years, children often become less focused on school and run the risk of disengaging. Some middle schools involve parents to keep students engaged—often using the same strategies as elementary schools, such as encouraging parents to visit the school or help with homework. However, recent studies suggest that parents might better help their adolescents by simply (and consistently) talking to them about the importance of school, expressing their expectations for achievement, and motivating them to work hard. Such strategies are well-aligned with middle schoolers' growing need for independence and, at the same time, promote positive academic outcomes.

Strategies to involve parents in the academic lives of their children generally fall into three major categories:

- *Home-based involvement* includes approaches such as communicating with the child about school, helping with homework, visiting places that promote academic success (e.g., museums), and making home a learning environment by providing access to books or newspapers.
- *School-based involvement* consists of parents visiting the school for meetings or one-time school events, participating on the school governing board, volunteering for or chaperoning events at school, and communicating with teachers and other staff.

- *Academic socialization* entails parents communicating their expectations about education and how valuable and useful it is, connecting homework to real life events, encouraging educational and job goals, and planning for the future.

The text box reviews key research studies that examine these ideas in greater depth.

This issue brief draws on Chapin Hall’s multiyear evaluation of a full-service schools initiative (Elev8), using the initiative as an illustrative case study to reflect on the efficacy of different parent engagement approaches during the middle school years.¹ Using data collected from extensive interviews with

Research Highlights

Adolescence is characterized by a strong desire for independence, which can cause tension between parents and youth as their roles and relationships change (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004). Yet, few studies have considered whether different forms of parent educational involvement are better at fostering adolescents’ developmental goals (such as autonomy) while also considering the possible positive association with youths’ school achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Furthermore, inconsistent definitions of “involvement” have led to conflicting research findings about the association between parent involvement and academic achievement. Hill and Taylor (2004) found a strong relationship between the two while Bronstein, Ginsburg, and Herrera (2005) indicated there was no association.

In response to these inconsistencies, Hill and Tyson (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of parent involvement studies to determine which types of involvement are associated with achievement among middle school youth. Building on seminal definitions of parent involvement in school (Comer, 1995; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994), Hill and Tyson analyzed 50 studies to evaluate the associations between three types of strategies and adolescent academic success: (1) home-based involvement, (2) school-based involvement, and (3) academic socialization. They found that academic socialization, which includes talking to the youth about academic aspirations and parent expectations, had the

strongest positive association with academic outcomes. The authors indicated that this positive association could be attributed to the way these strategies “scaffold adolescents’ burgeoning autonomy” (p.758). School-based involvement—such as volunteering at the school or attending PTA meetings—and home-based involvement were also positively associated with school success but to a lesser degree than academic socialization. The home-based strategy of homework help showed negative links to academic achievement, but the reason for this association is unclear. Parents who supervise homework might undermine a student’s autonomy and decrease the student’s motivation to succeed. On the other hand, parents of children who are struggling in school might be more likely than other parents to help their children with homework. Therefore, rather than *causing* low achievement, homework help might be the *result* of low achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

It is important to note that Hill and Tyson (2009) were only able to assess what factors are associated with achievement. It remains unclear whether academic socialization and other factors cause achievement and thus whether programs that aim to boost such factors will be successful. However, schools, and others looking for the best available evidence on how to engage parents, may be well advised to spend their limited resources on programs that focus on academic socialization and other factors that are at least associated with achievement.

¹ Full-service or community schools provide students and their families with a wide range of supports, including mental and physical health care, extended-day programs, financial supports, and connections to other community institutions and agencies.

parents and other stakeholders, we found that some parents benefited significantly from certain parent involvement activities implemented by the initiative, and as a result it is likely that their children also benefited. On the other hand, many parents, despite their own and the schools' best efforts, struggled to be present at their children's schools, and often found it easier to monitor children's educational progress from home.² We also found that the success of parent engagement activities depended heavily on school staff building strong relationships with parents. Based on our findings, and those from previous studies, we offer the following policy recommendations:

- Parents should be provided with information on how to motivate and communicate expectations to their children in ways that reinforce the developmental goals of adolescence.
- Schools should work to make individual connections and build strong relationships with parents, perhaps by having a staff member dedicated to this activity.
- As part of building relationships, efforts should be undertaken to address language barriers between parents and school staff.
- Schools should limit the number of programs that require parents to be at the school and make the few parent-related events as accessible as possible to working parents by scheduling the events in the evening and providing childcare.
- Parent leaders should be cultivated to take lead roles in parent engagement efforts.

Below we provide a brief description of the Elev8 initiative and the strengths and challenges of its

various parent engagement strategies. We then illustrate the challenges to school involvement reported by parents in our sample. We conclude with further elaboration of our recommendations for future parent engagement work.

The Elev8 Project

Elev8 in Chicago, which is part of a national initiative in four locations, focuses on five schools serving middle school-aged students in neighborhoods suffering from unemployment, crime, safety issues, and few resources for out-of-school time. The students in these schools often face serious challenges as they transition to high school. Elev8 aims to ease the transition through four pillars of activity: (1) extended-day learning and academic enrichment; (2) comprehensive, youth-friendly preventative and primary healthcare services; (3) family, economic, and social supports; and (4) parent and community engagement. Several goals were identified under the parent and community engagement pillar, including increasing parent involvement in the life of the school, building the capacity of parents to become leaders and advocate for their families, and increasing access to services for parents and students to reduce mobility and help students succeed in school. In practice, the primary focus of the parent and community engagement pillar has been the participation of parents in Elev8-sponsored activities. In addition, all of the sites were interested in engaging parents more fully in their children's education. Thus, we focus this brief on the parent engagement efforts designed to draw parents into the school and involve them in the educational lives of their children.

² The data are drawn from extensive interviews with multiple sources. However, the timeframe in which the interviews were conducted was rather short, spanning only three years. Thus, any change, or lack of change, attributed to the initiative should be interpreted cautiously in light of limited data available from the short course of the study.

Strengths and Challenges of the Parental Engagement Effort

The Elev8 initiative did not prescribe particular parent engagement programs. Instead, each site developed its own strategies by assessing its needs and its capacities for building relationships between parents and the school. Below is a brief summary of the strengths and challenges of parental engagement across the sites, drawn from field observations at the schools and interviews with school stakeholders and parents:

- Most sites were successful in drawing large numbers of parents to one time Elev8 events, such as family nights, extended-day showcases, and health fairs. This was an improvement over the historically low numbers of parents who engaged with the schools, thus making more parents feel comfortable and included in the school community.
- Sites were moderately successful in enrolling parents in Elev8 programs focused on adult well-being or self-improvement. These included aerobics, art, gardening, computing, and English classes, as well as workshops on health or financial planning and coffee social hours. These programs typically drew on a much smaller group of parents who wanted to be involved or had the time to devote to courses. However, one site, based in a community where many mothers are not typically employed full-time, succeeded in attracting a larger number of mothers to classes.
- Some sites were also able to attract a small group of parents to time-intensive programs that were directly linked to their children's education, such as those that trained parents to be tutors or teachers' aides. For example, mothers who volunteered for the Parent Mentors program were placed in a classroom at the same grade level as their child, though not in their child's classroom. Parents reported that this program was very successful in helping foster a connection to their children's education and encouraging them

to support their children's learning at home. In particular, parents reported that sitting through the teachers' lessons and helping students in the classroom prepared them to help their own children at home. Though the number involved in this program was small, parents who participated in it appeared to benefit from a deeper and richer experience with their children's teachers and school.

- To address the difficulty of drawing parents to the school, one site trained teachers to visit students' homes. Although the effort was limited, teachers who volunteered to participate in the program reported significant improvement in students' behavior and academic effort.
- Overall, Elev8 programs brought new parents into the schools and strengthened ties with parents who were already involved. Parents appeared more likely to become involved when they had a personal relationship with an Elev8 and school staff member. The Elev8 site that enrolled the most parents in classes had a long-time school-home coordinator with deep ties to the community and to individual families. These relationships appear to have provided a strong foundation on which to build Elev8 programs for parents. Parents knew and trusted the school-home coordinator and, by extension, Elev8. The coordinator also had a good sense of what types of programs would be of interest to parents.
- However, even popular parent engagement programs did not necessarily increase the level of parent involvement in students' education. Some parents who actively participated in these activities still did not appear to have basic information about the classes in which their children were enrolled or what their grades were.

Barriers to Parental Involvement

As outlined in the box on page 2, there are important distinctions among the three primary parental

involvement strategies. In our interviews, parents talked about barriers that made it difficult for them to engage in all three types of strategies, although barriers to school-based strategies were the most prevalent.

With respect to school-based strategies, such as attending school events or meetings, parents most often mentioned that the demands of work on top of household responsibilities hindered their participation. As Margarita, a married mother of four, put it:

I really do not go to the school because...I work six days [a week], 12 hours [a day]. I'm usually always sleeping, I do chores, cook, and I don't even do house chores every day, really. So I'm always in a hurry...

This mother's description of the stresses imposed by her daily schedule was not atypical. Not surprisingly, single mothers most frequently expressed such sentiments. As Christina, a 45-year-old mother of three, explained:

I used to be very involved in the school. Now I work...longer hours. I work for the government and I have a busy schedule. My husband passed away, so it's only me now. So I don't have time to get involved as much as—even if I would like to, I just—I'm the only provider right now.

In addition, mothers in several households were the sole providers of the family because their husbands and adult children were unable to find work. Even mothers who were not overwhelmed with work and household responsibilities often found it difficult to attend school programs or events due to their work schedules. Thus, several parents suggested that schools hold programs on weekends.

In addition to challenging work hours, mothers also spoke of the difficulties of attending school-related meetings or functions when they had very young children or when their children were enrolled in

different schools. As Sofia, a married mother of three, said:

I have the three [kids] and I have one here, here, and here. When there's a meeting I go here or here and sometimes all of them overlap and I can't go.

Some parents also described the stresses of caring for children with behavioral or physical health problems that demanded a great deal of time and attention from parents who were already stretched to their maximum. In some cases, primary caregivers' (particularly grandparents') own health problems prevented them from attending events or participating in programs at the school. As Pat, an elderly grandmother with custody of two of her grandchildren, explained:

Yeah, I feel like any parent should be trying to see about their child or be involved. Like I say, I had a hip replacement, and I don't have a car, and I can't do no walking no long way, no three or four blocks. I can't do that.

Finally, some parents faced multiple stressors that included many of the aforementioned challenges and others. For example, Bonita, a single mother of four, had a job that required her to leave the house at 6:30 a.m., before her children left for school, and did not return home until 6:30 p.m., well after the school day had ended. In addition, she also spoke of her struggles with an older child who has severe behavioral problems, her own health problems, the death of a child who was only eight months old, and the incarceration of her son's father. This mother, perhaps due to the major stresses in her life, was unaware until after the end of the school year that her son had been retained in grade. Although she represents an extreme case, persistent poverty is often associated with such stressors and with facing multiple stressors at the same time.

Many parents faced barriers to being involved in activities requiring them to be present at the school. However, they were able to use parent-teacher communication to remain involved with their

children's education. They checked in with their children's teachers, a school-based strategy that they could do by phone, e-mail, or letters sent home with the child. One Elev8 school helped parents stay connected by encouraging school staff to regularly communicate with parents about their children's academic and behavioral performance. Parents struggled with home-based strategies, such as helping with homework. A number of mothers reported success in monitoring youth to make sure homework was completed, but they also stressed that they had difficulties providing homework help because they had limited knowledge about the subject.

Academic socialization was an important theme in the parent interviews. Parents often stressed that they wanted to their children to understand the importance of doing well in school, but that they were unsure how best to motivate them. For example, Anna, a single mother of four said,

My greatest challenge is probably keeping them on track. . . just staying on 'em and just reminding them how important it is to finish school and also set goals after that.

Parents clearly cared about the education of their children and seemed able and willing to be involved if they could overcome the barriers that they faced. Academic socialization showed the strongest positive association to academic outcomes in the literature, and, interestingly, it is likely the easiest strategy for many busy parents since they can do it from home. Moreover, motivating students and helping them set goals is a strategy that addresses adolescents' growing need for independence while also reinforcing parental support.

However, challenges to involvement exist that cannot easily be addressed by emphasizing one strategy over another. A significant number of Latino parents reported difficulties in helping children with homework and/or communicating with teachers due

to language barriers. As Rosita, a married mother of one, explained:

Well, here, it is difficult for me, well, the fact that all of his classes are in English and I don't speak English. That is like a barrier that I have because I have noticed that his grades, when he started regular classes, um, went down a lot. A whole lot. . . . Because I can't participate well with his teacher, we can't have a conversation. Um, and they are, are barriers that one has because of the language. But, well, it is my fault for not learning English.

Similarly, Maria, a married mother of three, talked about the challenges she had understanding what her son's teacher was saying about him not completing his homework:

He does his homework, he does everything, and, no, no, I don't understand her. She tells me that he doesn't bring her his homework. I can't explain myself to her when I go there for his report card [...] And I ask her why is Carlos getting F's, then sometimes I'm going around looking for the things he needs to do his homework. This or that. And she says that he didn't bring it. And I tell her, I don't understand because you say that he doesn't bring it when I sit down and do it with him. So, I don't understand.

Recommendations/Future Work

Our case study of Elev8 suggests that, in schools serving high-poverty neighborhoods, there is a group of parents who can participate in and benefit from programs based at their children's schools. Especially promising were programs that brought parents into the classroom. However, there is likely to be a larger group of parents, particularly those struggling with the stresses of poverty, who may be unable to spend significant amounts of time at their children's schools. Based on our findings, along with existing research

on parent involvement strategies, we recommend that many schools reconsider their efforts to connect with parents. In particular, research suggests that *in comparison to school-based involvement, a better investment of parents' time might be "academic socialization,"* or speaking effectively with their children about the importance of education and helping them think about their futures. Indeed, middle school students, who are both seeking independence and at risk of disengaging from school, might be in particular need of academic socialization. Parents can help their children to think about what education means to them, to set their own goals for schooling, and to decide how best to reach them.

Our experience documenting Elev8 also suggests the *importance of schools building relationships with parents as the first step to engaging them* in other ways. Indeed, it appears that investments of resources in parent classes or support services have limited payoff without a prior relationship-building effort.

An example of such an effort is the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) program, which is in schools throughout California and in several other states. We reviewed evaluations of several parent engagement programs, and PIQE stood out in its ability to connect hard-to-reach parents to their children's schools. The program helps parents become educational advocates for their students through a free 9-week curriculum. A typical school in Los Angeles was able to draw over 100 parents to these classes (Gonzalez & Chrispeels, 2008). A formative evaluation found that "PIQE is particularly effective in recruiting and retaining parents who have previously felt unwelcome or insecure in their children's schools because of education, language, cultural, or economic concerns . . . Its success in these areas is in large part due to the ability of its recruiters and instructors to form personal connections with parents" (Golan & Petersen, 2002). A primary concern among parents interviewed for Elev8 was how to motivate their children to do well in school. PIQE's curriculum

focuses on this concern. Parents who participate learn to create a home study location and time of day for homework as well as how to talk to their children about academic successes and challenges and their expectations for the future.

We also recommend that programs like Elev8, which seek to improve parents' engagement with their children's school, *make a significant initial investment in reaching out to parents through home visits and telephone conversations.* Because most schools have very limited resources for parent engagement, emphasis should be on high quality (rather than high quantity) interactions with all parents, giving priority to parents of students struggling in school. School staff who know the child should contact the parents, listen to their concerns, and make clear their personal concern for the child's interests. Ideally, an initial contact should be followed later in the school year by a report on the child's progress and discussion about how the school and parent can continue to foster the child's achievement. In addition, as indicated above, many Latino parents experience difficulty communicating with teachers about their children's progress. Furthermore, mothers like Rosita or Maria are becoming more common as the Latino population rapidly expands. More work is needed to *help parents like these gain the language skills to engage in their child's schooling* or make the school context more amenable to them.

If resources allow, we recommend a *smaller investment in a limited number of programs offered at school* for those who are able to attend. The focus, again, should be on parenting issues and motivating children academically. Programs should be scheduled during evenings and weekends and offer childcare whenever possible. Finally, we suggest that, after initial investment in building relationships with parents and offering programs, *schools identify potential parent leaders* who can recruit other parents to school programs and events.

Conclusion

Elev8 provides a useful case study of the various strategies that schools use to forge deeper connections to parents. Often these efforts flounder, possibly because they fail to address the changing developmental needs of middle school students and overlook the many struggles that a significant number of parents face. We recommend that schools focus on developing a solid connection to parents, meeting them where they are in their lives (both physically and psychologically) and identifying the best ways to help them promote their adolescent's academic socialization.

References

- Bronstein, P., Ginsburg, G., & Herrera, I. (2005). Parental predictors of motivational orientation in early adolescence: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *34*(6), 559-575.
- Comer, J. P. (1995). *School power: Implications of an intervention project*. New York: Free Press.
- Dearing, E., Kreider, H., Simpkins, S., & Weiss, H. B. (2006). Family involvement in school and low-income children's literacy: Longitudinal associations between and within families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *98*(4), 653-664.
- Fan, X., & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, *13*(1), 1-22.
- Golan, S., & Petersen, D. (2002). *Promoting involvement of recent immigrant families in their children's education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.
- Gonzalez, M., & Chrispeels, J. (2008). *Mapping family-school partnership program evaluation: The PIQE and MALDEF logic models*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, New York.
- Grolnick, W. S., & Slowiaczek, M. L. (1994). Parents' involvement in children's schooling: A multidimensional conceptualization and motivational model. *Child Development*, *65*(1), 237-252.
- Hill, N. E., & Taylor, L. C. (2004). Parental school involvement and children's academic achievement. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *13*(4), 161-164.
- Hill, N. E., & Tyson, D. F. (2009). Parental involvement in middle school: A meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, *45*(3), 740-763.
- Lerner, R. M., & Steinberg, L. D. (Eds.). (2004). *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (2nd ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Seginer, R. (2006). Parents' educational involvement: A developmental ecology perspective. *Parenting: Science & Practice*, *6*(1), 1-48.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2003). *No child left behind: A parents' guide*. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Education.

ChapinHall at the University of Chicago

Established in 1985, Chapin Hall is an independent policy research center whose mission is to build knowledge that improves policies and programs for children and youth, families, and their communities.

Chapin Hall's areas of research include child maltreatment prevention, child welfare systems and foster care, youth justice, schools and their connections with social services and community organizations, early childhood initiatives, community change initiatives, workforce development, out-of-school time initiatives, economic supports for families, and child well-being indicators.

Recommended Citation

Valdovinos D'Angelo, A., Rich, L., & Kohm, A. (2012). *School Engagement Among Parents of Middle School Youth*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

Related Publications

Walker L. & Smithgall, C. (2009). *Underperforming Schools and the Education of Vulnerable Children and Youth*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

For a complete list of Chapin Hall projects and to download publications, please visit our website.

Contact

**Chapin Hall
at the University of
Chicago**
1313 East 60th Street
Chicago, IL 60637
T: 773.753.5900
F: 773.753.5940
www.chapinhall.org