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Parent-School Relationships as an Educational Resource

Erin Graves and John Brown

Abstract

Elementary schools across the country implement programs intended to encourage parents to take action to facilitate their children's learning. This brief discusses new ways of understanding how parents interact with the school community and the factors that influence those interactions. Most educators and researchers believe that the greatest benefits to a child's education occur when parents proactively engage with school practices. The limited research on Spanish-speaking immigrant communities suggests that they are somewhat isolated and face barriers to full participation in the school system. We offer a multidimensional view of parental participation based on a study of public school parents – many of whom are Spanish speakers – in Lawrence, Massachusetts. We found that parents interacted with the school community along three distinct dimensions: they responded to requests for *school involvement*, proactively pursued *school engagement*, and formed a *sense of community* with other classroom parents. Sense of community is frequently overlooked as a means through which parents support their school-age children. In our study, families for whom Spanish appeared to be the dominant language reported the highest sense of community. These findings not only challenge the idea that these families are isolated, they suggest that the strong sense of community among the Spanish-speaking, immigrant, and migrant communities represents a resource that could be tapped to further improve the effectiveness of the public schools.

Key Findings

- Parents' interaction with the schools in Lawrence takes many forms and is a multidimensional phenomenon.
- Parents' educational levels have little to do with the effort they invest in their child's education. However, other factors such as family economic conditions, the language parents speak, parents' marital status, and the presence of very young children in the home, can influence the form parental efforts take.
- When compared to a national data set, Lawrence parents put in about as much effort as parents of children of similar ages across the nation.
- Lawrence parents seek to help their children by interacting with other parents, to discuss and ensure school success. These parent-to-parent ties are strongest among those with the least experience in American school systems and possibly lowest acculturation to Anglo culture.
- The strong sense of community among the Spanish-speaking, immigrant, and migrant communities represents a potential resource for public schools.

Erin Graves is a policy analyst at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston in Community Development. John C. Brown is a visiting scholar in the Regional and Community Outreach Department of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. He is also a professor of economics at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts and is affiliated with the Mosakowski Institute for Public Enterprise of Clark University. Contact them at erin.m.graves@bos.frb.org and jbrown@clark.edu, respectively.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent policies and positions of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston or the Federal Reserve System.

Introduction

Bordering the Lawrence Town Common, the school now known as the Oliver Partnership School has been educating Lawrence schoolchildren since the 1850s. Both a century ago and today, roughly one half of the parents in the school's neighborhood are immigrants; while many were born in Italy, Ireland, and Russia in the 1900s, most now trace their origins to the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico. In May of 2016, school staff, students and families of the Oliver Partnership School gathered in the school gym for a dinner meeting, plates piled high with homemade pollo guisado and tostones. The parents and children came to school that evening to participate in Community Education Circles (CECs), a novel parental engagement program designed around the idea that parents and teachers can work together to most effectively identify and solve crucial barriers to school success.

The CEC program is one example of thousands of innovative parental engagement initiatives implemented across the country that attempt to encourage parents to take action to facilitate their children's learning. It is almost taken for granted that low-income parents participate less in their children's education, although people disagree whether the cause is a lack of time, interest, or resources.¹

This brief, based on a study of nine Lawrence schools, five of which were field sites for a CEC, discusses new ways of understanding how parents engage with the school community and the factors that influence parent engagement. In this brief, we ask the following questions: First, what opportunities are available to Lawrence parents to interact with the schools their children attend, and to what extent are parents participating? Second, who are the parents most likely to participate in different kinds of interactions? Along with our research partners, we gathered data through a survey of parents in the Oliver Partnership School and eight other schools in the Lawrence Public School (LPS) system. We compared their responses to results from a national survey.² We found that Lawrence parents involve themselves in their children's schools at levels similar to those of other parents nationwide. We then looked more closely at our research questions in the context of Lawrence. We learned that parents' interaction with the schools in Lawrence takes many forms and is a multidimensional phenomenon. As we detail below, our analysis of the data revealed that parents' educational levels have little to do with the effort they

¹ Barton, Angela Calabrese, et al. (2004). Ecologies of parental engagement in urban education. *Educational Researcher*, 33.4, 3-12.

² Please see Brown and Graves, forthcoming, for technical details of the data set and collection procedures.

invest in their child's education. Our analysis also suggests that other factors, like the family's economic conditions, the language parents speak, parents' marital status, and the presence of very young children in the home, can influence the form parental efforts take, but sometimes not in the ways one would predict.

The Community Context: Community Education Circles and the Lawrence Public Schools

Lawrence, a city of 80,000, is in many ways typical of the hundreds of mid-sized American cities that have faced the challenging transformation from a center of manufacturing to a new economic future. Lawrence's population peaked in 1920, when 22,000 residents found employment in nation's most important center of worsted cloth production. As the worsted industry collapsed during the next few decades, the city's population plummeted; by 1980, it had lost one-third of its population. The economy and prosperity had gone elsewhere. The massive brick factories flanking the Merrimac River and the canals that powered them remained, mainly abandoned but so sturdily built that they remain as monuments to another economic era.

According to observers, however, Lawrence is staging a revival.³ Starting in the 1980s, signs of a turnaround began to appear. Businesses, nonprofits, and artists have reclaimed some of the mills. Thousands of Spanish-speaking immigrants and migrants have moved to Lawrence, attracted to the affordable rents, a vibrant Spanish-speaking community, and proximity to the Boston region's labor market. Lawrence's underperforming schools, placed in state receivership just a few years ago, are in the midst of a widely-recognized turnaround. Test scores are rising dramatically, and parents are flocking to, rather than fleeing from, the school system. In fact, we learned from our conversations with school administrators that residents from nearby towns falsely claim a Lawrence address from time to time in order to take advantage of the extended day and enrichment options available at LPS.

³ Schwartz, Nelson D. (2014, January 20.) Boston Fed's Latest Role: Community Organizer. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://nytimes.com>.

Figure 1. Parent Ideas about School Strengths



Photo Credit: Spencer Buchholz

In 2014 and 2015, Lawrence Community Works, a local community-based organization, offered Community Education Circles in five of Lawrence's public schools. Thirty-five classrooms and 399 families participated. The CEC program that the Oliver Partnership School parents attended was one of a series of dinner gatherings intended to build relationships, a collective commitment, and ownership of the educational success of the students. Facilitators trained by Lawrence Community Works convened the meetings at several Lawrence public schools, and the meetings included the classroom teachers and parents of students in those same classrooms. The facilitators first asked the parents to write out the challenges and strengths of the school. Typical challenges mentioned included language issues, school resources, and concerns about harassment and bullying. When asked about the school's strengths, parents praised the teachers, the quality of the education, and the level of community involvement (See Figure 1). Over the course of a month, the facilitators guided parents and teachers in developing action plans, which were based on a shared understanding of some of the barriers to student learning and their solutions. After the conclusion of the meetings, the facilitators remained available to the groups to help implement the plans.

In addition to observing CECs in action, we sent surveys to families of children in kindergarten through third grade who were enrolled in the Lawrence public schools. Some the

schools had CEC programs and some did not. Over 500 parents returned the survey, which asked, among other questions about schooling, about their participation in a variety of school activities (such as parent-teacher conferences or volunteering in the classroom). The survey also included questions about aspects of the classroom community and requested information about the parents' backgrounds and their employment. We analyzed the survey in order to understand parental behaviors and attitudes towards participation in the school community. We also tried to determine what parental characteristics were associated with different responses. For example, did parents' level of education influence the level and kind of effort they made to participate in their child's school community?

Broadening the Understanding of Parental Efforts for School Success

Previously, educators and policymakers have proposed that there is a theoretical continuum of parental participation with their child's school.⁴ At one extreme, effort is limited, with minimal participation in even basic activities directly related to the child, such as attending parent-teacher conferences. At the other extreme, parents actively engage in the child's classroom and even in attempt to influence overall school programs and policies. The belief is that a child's education benefits the most when parents are active on the engagement end of the continuum. The limited research on Spanish-speaking immigrant communities suggests that they are somewhat isolated and face barriers to full participation in the school system.

Our analysis of the survey data implies a multidimensional view of parental participation. Lawrence parents made efforts to help their children with school success in three distinct ways or "dimensions." Some parents placed their efforts towards reactive involvement; they fulfilled the invitations from schools to do things like attend school meetings and parent-teacher conferences. Other parents placed their efforts in proactive "engagement," which meant that they made efforts to influence school practices, such as taking on leadership roles in the school. Finally, a third dimension emerged: the sense of community that parents feel with each other. A "sense of community" develops when members of a group believe they share a common sense of belonging and commitment to the group and to one another. The archetypical community is a

⁴ Goodall, Janet, and Montgomery, Caroline. (2014). Parental involvement to parental engagement: a continuum. *Educational Review*, 66.4, 399-410.

neighborhood, where neighbors share a commitment to look out for one another and help out when they can.

Surprisingly, the level of a parent's formal education did not influence the kinds of efforts he or she made within the first two dimensions. Rather, parents who were involved – those who participated in activities initiated by school staff -- tended to be economically better off. For example, the forty percent of Lawrence parents who were most economically disadvantaged were about one-third less likely to attend parent-teacher conferences than their better-off counterparts. Unemployed parents also tended to score higher in the involvement dimension. At the same time, English language abilities for the most part did not influence levels of participation. Of parents whose primary language was Spanish, only the one-sixth or so whose children had recently come to the U.S. were less likely to be involved. Respondents who were stay-at-home mothers were also much less likely to be involved.

However, different characteristics mattered in the second dimension, engagement, which included activities that require more parental interaction with the schools. In contrast to the higher-involvement parents of the first dimension, who tended to be married, parents who were widowed or separated were more likely to score higher in the engagement dimension. Parents with very young children or children in upper grades were less likely to score high. Perhaps most significantly, recent immigrants from the Dominican Republic and families for whom Spanish appeared to be the dominant language for both parents and children expressed the closest sense of community among the survey respondents. The parents who expressed the strongest sense of community with other parents were also those without a formal degree (associate's degree or above) and those who were less likely to have very young children at home. Otherwise, economic circumstances were not predictive of a sense of community.

Figure 2. Factors that Influence Parental Efforts

| What parental factors influence involvement, engagement and community? | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| <i>Does Influence</i> | <i>Does Not Influence</i> |
| Involvement Increase: Married (+50%) Decrease: Economically Disadvantaged (-60%) | Involvement Education |
| Engagement Increase: Widowed, separated (+150%) Decrease: Number of very young children (-60%) | Engagement Education |
| Community Increase: Spanish is dominant language Decrease: Number of very young children (-40%) | Community Education |

Source: Author's calculation

These findings suggest a few important lessons going forward. Limited family incomes, rather than language skills *per se*, appear to constitute the most important barrier to basic forms of involvement for immigrants and first-generation immigrants. Both the presence of a second adult in the house to share in childrearing and the ages of the children themselves seem to affect these kinds of activities. Surprisingly, single parents were the most likely to engage in the more time-intensive activities at the schools. Finally, it appears that more often than others, the three-quarters of parents who come from Hispanic cultures embrace the third form of engagement: interacting with other parents.

Concluding thoughts

When the month-long CECs had ended at the Oliver School, the group of participating parents put forth a recommendation to extend recess from 15 to 30 minutes. One father cited his own memories of long, twice-daily recesses in his home country as a reason he was advocating for more recreational time for his son. This kind of collaboration at the CECs is a prime example of the engagement dimension, where parents interact with the schools in order to shape them in accordance with their own values and knowledge.

The survey data we collected tells us additionally that some parents put their efforts into engagement activities like the CECs, while others take action along the involvement dimension. When compared to a national data set, Lawrence parents put in about as much effort as parents of children of similar ages across the nation. Moreover, we found that Lawrence parents seek to help their children by interacting with other parents, to discuss and ensure school success. These

parent-to-parent ties are strongest among those with the least experience in American school systems and possibly lowest acculturation to Anglo culture. While the survey data doesn't tell us why this is the case, other research tells us that this might be because cultural differences between the school and the parents dissuade parents from interacting with the school through the other two more traditional forms of effort.⁵ Parents then compensate by building networks with other parents in order to find and discuss ways to help their children succeed in school; why and how they do so might be interesting questions for practitioners on the ground to explore further. These findings not only challenge the idea that these families are isolated, they suggest that the strong sense of community among the Spanish-speaking, immigrant, and migrant communities represent a resource that could be tapped to further improve the effectiveness of the public schools.

⁵ Durand, Tina M., and Perez, Nicole A. (2013). Continuity and variability in the parental involvement and advocacy beliefs of Latino families of young children: Finding the potential for a collective voice. *School Community Journal*, 23.1, 49.