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A Qualitative Case Study on Parental Involvement in a Midwestern Urban Charter
School District: Perspectives of Parents, Teachers, and Administrators

by

Amanda N. Aldridge

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Education

School of Education

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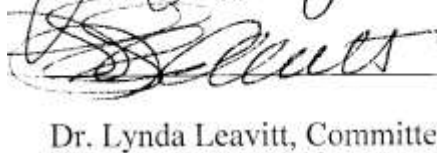
Doctor of Education

at Lindenwood University by the School of Education



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4.17.15
Date



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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

Full Legal Name: Amanda Noel Aldridge

Signature:  Date: 4-17-15

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To my family: Nathan, Colton and Shay, I owe you time and gratitude for your unwavering support during this complicated process. I appreciate your patience during this challenging experience. I love you all and again thank you for your support, understanding, and patience.

Abstract

Research has shown that there can be a positive impact on the child's academic achievement when parents are closely involved with the child's schooling. When parents are involved in the school, they understand what is being taught in the classroom and are usually encouraged to extend the learning at home. When parents value education, students succeed. When parents are invested and show an interest in their child's school, they develop a sense of pride for the school and tend to support the school and teachers in their decisions. This cooperative attitude allows for better, open communication and a team attitude to develop amongst the school community. When children see parents, teachers, and administrators working together, they feel more positive pressure to do well.

When parents are not involved in their child's schooling, miscommunication, misunderstandings and problems arise. Parents do not understand or value what the school is teaching students, and children see the conflict as a barrier. Children typically mirror their parents' beliefs and actions. Therefore, if a parent does not see the value in education, does not know what is being taught, and does not respect the school, administrators, or teachers, the child is likely to mirror those behaviors and attitudes. When this happens, students suffer academically.

The concern about parent involvement is not new. Many schools understand the importance of parental involvement, but struggle to find the time, resources, and activities to involve parents. Oftentimes, urban areas contain families that have unique obstacles that prevent such involvement. Many strategies need to be utilized in order to ensure that parents are not left out of activities or opportunities.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the actions taken by one particular charter school district that led to intense parental involvement participation in an urban, metropolitan area. Understanding the obstacles that parents face when becoming involved was a starting point for the research. Understanding how the school utilized particular strategies to form solid relationships with families was vital to the study. Comparing administrator, teacher, and parent perceptions about the school's parental involvement concluded the research.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
List of Tables.....	viii
List of Figures.....	ix
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Background Summary of the Problem.....	1
Purpose of the Dissertation	3
Rationale	4
Research Questions.....	7
Limitations	7
Definition of Terms.....	8
Conclusion	10
Chapter Two: The Literature Review	11
Overview.....	11
Autonomy and Accountability of Charter Schools.....	15
Parents and Charter Schools: What is the Connection?.....	16
Benefits Reaped From Parental Involvement in Education	17
Engaging Parents of Students Effectively.....	24
Home Visits as a Strategy to Improve Home-School Relations.....	25
Conclusion	26
Chapter Three: Methodology	28

History and Demographics of the Research Site	28
Procedures.....	36
Methodology Framework.....	37
Data Collection and Analysis Procedures.....	38
Conclusion	42
Chapter Four: Results	43
Parent Survey Results	43
Focus Group Interviews.....	61
Administrator Focus Group	62
Awareness of school philosophy or policies.....	62
Events that invite families.....	62
Forming good relationships	62
Home visits	63
Unintended consequences: Transportation	66
Parent teacher conferences.....	66
Flexibility in scheduling and other strategies	67
Obstacles and strategies to overcome them	69
Increasing communication.....	71
Benefits	73
Teacher Focus Group.....	75
Awareness of school philosophy or policies.....	74
Events that invite families.....	75
Home visits and forming good relationships	75

Unintended Consequences: Transportation	79
Parent Teacher Conferences	81
Flexibility in scheduling and other strategies	82
Obstacles and strategies to overcome them	82
Increasing communication	86
Other Outcomes	88
Parent Focus Group Results.....	89
Awareness of school philosophies or policies	88
Increasing communication	89
Events that invite families.....	89
Home visits	90
Unintended consequences: Transportation	90
Parent teacher conferences.....	90
Flexibility in scheduling and other strategies	91
Obstacles and strategies to overcome	92
Increasing communication	93
Benefits	94
Conclusion	94
Chapter Five: Discussion and Reflection.....	97
Summary of Findings.....	98
Findings Based on the Research Questions	99
Recommendations for Future Research	106
Summary.....	107

References 113

Appendix A: Letter to Superintendent of the School District..... 120

Appendix B: Letter to Parents in the Survey 121

Appendix C: Survey for Parents in the District 123

Appendix D: Focus Group Questions: Administrators 125

Appendix E: Focus Group Questions: Teachers 126

Appendix F: Focus Group Questions: Parents 127

Appendix G: Focus Group Consent Form 128

Vitae 130

List of Tables

Table 1. Greenway Science Academy K-12 Enrollment by Year	5
Table 2. Epstein’s Model of School, Family and Community Partnerships.....	20
Table 3. GSA Behaviors Categorized by Epstein’s Types	101

List of Figures

Figure 1. How often do you have a conversation with a staff member (teacher, administrator) at your child's school?.....	45
Figure 2. Who initiated the conversation- you or the school staff?	46
Figure 3. How many parent-teacher conferences do you attend each year?.....	46
Figure 4. Have you ever been offered a home visit by your child's teacher?.....	48
Figure 5. Did you accept?	49
Figure 6. Where did you meet (home or elsewhere)?	49
Figure 7. Have you ever been invited to help in your child's classroom by the teacher?	50
Figure 8. Did you accept that invitation?	51
Figure 9. How often do you speak to your child about their activities at school?	54
Figure 10. Do you feel that communication between teachers and parents is adequate at this school?.....	55
Figure 11. Do you feel that the communication between administrators and parents is adequate?.....	56
Figure 12. Are you or have you been involved as a member or volunteer in any school program or activity at the school?.....	57
Figure 13. Are you aware of the school's philosophy, policies, and practices concerning parent participation?.....	58
Figure 14. Please indicate the building(s) in which your child(ren) attend school.....	61

Chapter One: Introduction

Background Summary of the Problem

Parental involvement in children's education was in the spotlight at the time of this writing. The federal government emphasized the importance of forming school-community relationships, and even dictated through programs such as Title I, Part A, that schools and parents needed to work together to improve effectiveness and student performance (U. S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2004). Student success depends on collaboration all invested parties who surround the child both at home and at school (LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). Decades of research showed significant evidence that parents have an impact on student academic achievement, and that with a well-established school-parent relationship, students succeed at higher levels (USDOE, 2004). According to Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005), children with involved parents performed better academically, had better classroom behavior, and were more likely to succeed outside of K-12 educational settings. Examples of explicit actions of parental involvement may include, but are not limited to, the following actions: establishing specific procedures for completing and checking homework, interacting with the school or teacher around homework assignments, and providing oversight of homework at home (Schnee & Bose, 2010).

Students all have families, yet those families can be very different from one another (Epstein, 2010). One of the most cited reasons for parents not being involved in schooling is work commitments (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Typically in urban areas, low-income levels prevail, which has an impact on both parent and student involvement with the school (Graves-Smith, 2006). Many families with low-income levels are headed by

single parents who have low-paying jobs that may not offer any flexibility in hours or time worked, or might not have many benefits in terms of paid vacation, sick, or personal leave (Manz, 2012). This could prevent parents from participating in their child's education. Children with less involved parents in low-income homes often experience fewer of the benefits than students who come from higher income homes (Graves-Smith, 2006). In particular, teachers in urban schools seem to have more difficulty in developing relationships with their students' families, due to the higher concentration of families in low socioeconomic situations and single parent households (Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & DePedro, 2011). Good communication between schools and parents (or legal guardians) is often troubled in such situations due to lack of technological resources in the home or workplace. Often, parents of low socioeconomic status are consumed by their own daily lives that becoming involved in the school falls by the wayside (Graves-Smith, 2006). Another typicality of urban areas is high concentrations of English Language Learners, whose parents may have difficulty understanding the expectations of the school in terms of parental involvement, especially if parents are also English Language Learners themselves (National Association of School Psychologists, 2012). Charter schools in Missouri only lie within urban areas that contain a high proportion of both low income and single parent homes. Charter schools in Missouri have focused on recognizing common urban problems and providing a plan that meets the needs of students and their families (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015).

Building and maintaining relationships with parents is not always easy for schools or districts to do, particularly if parents do not have the time or the knowledge to

participate on a regular basis (Bartel, 2010). Often, teachers' efforts to involve parents are considered more superficial than actual shared responsibility (Bartel, 2010). For example, a school might invite parents to be a chaperone for a field trip, or a room parent for classroom parties. These are not actual "shared responsibility" types of invitations. School programs and teacher practices that help parents understand the importance of their involvement and encourage connections are considered "equalizers" that help families who may not become involved on their own (Epstein, 2010). If the school adopts a parent empowerment model, the involvement is centered not only on the child, but also encourages parents to be involved in decision-making activities in the school (Christianakis, 2011). Examples of the empowerment models in action might include Parent Teacher Organizations, participation in focus groups established by the school administration for improvement, and membership on the governing board. These examples are elements that were used by the charter school district that was studied. In Missouri, the applicant for any charter school is required to write a section in the application that requires evidence of understanding of the number and types of students that they will serve, and that the proposed mission, curriculum, methods, and services will meet the needs of that population (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015).

Purpose of the Dissertation

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the actions taken by one particular charter school district that led to intense parental involvement participation in an urban, metropolitan area. The researcher examined the perceptions of three groups about parent involvement at one charter school district in the Midwest. The researcher

analyzed the qualitative data from three groups; from these data, themes emerged about the strategies used by the district to engage parents or legal guardians of its students. First, the researcher wanted to identify the characteristics that made up the charter school district's model. Second, the researcher sought to find the strengths and weaknesses in terms of parental involvement within the public charter school district. The researcher sent a survey to all parents, including questions based on the topics mentioned in this section. The researcher invited the three parties (parents, teachers, administrators) to engage in a focus group session. The purpose of the focus group sessions was to gain more detailed information about each group's perception that might not be captured during a survey opportunity. The researcher compared the parent, teacher, and administrator responses and identified major themes that were present in all three focus group sessions in relation to particular strategies, policies, and procedures that the school used to involve urban public charter school parents.

Rationale

Due to their innovative nature and experimental qualities, the researcher believed charter schools served as a unique educational setting in which to study parental involvement and the methods in which educators engaged parents. In addition, little research examined parental involvement in such settings. The founders of the school declared within the school's charter that a key component to each school's success would be its parental buy in. Autonomy was given to the charter school which allowed for the development of specific policies such as longer school day, longer school year, and mandatory Saturday school (Davis & Oakley, 2013). Charter schools, historically and by design, were more quickly able to implement changes such as school uniforms, extended

school days, and required parental time commitments in comparison to other K-12 settings. A study conducted by Chubb and Moe (1991) found the more autonomous a school was from external controls, the more effective it was as an organization. Small, choice school systems provided an intimate setting in which a community culture was created, and, in the researcher's opinion, encouraged and invited outside study.

This particular study examined a medium sized Midwestern charter school district, in an area classified as metropolitan and consisted of two elementary schools and one middle/ high school. The charter school district that was the focus of this study identified by a pseudonym (Greenway Science Academy [GSA]) to protect its identity. The researched charter school district originated in 2010 as a single elementary school, and began with a population of approximately 350 students, grades K-7. Enrollment priority included the surrounding three zip codes that established a more localized, neighborhood school. Since the origination of the first school site as an elementary school, the school district has grown to include two additional buildings, including one elementary school and a middle/high school, serving students in grades K-10. During the 2014-2015 school year, the district's plans included an additional grade 11 with a proposed initial graduation class commencement in 2016.

Table 1.

<i>Greenway Science Academy K-12 Enrollment by Year</i>				
Year	2011	2012	2013	2014
Students	340	459	713	1047

In the researcher's experience, the charter school district in this study had exceptional parental involvement, and had been recognized for this quality within the charter school community. The founders of Greenway Science Academy recognized that the success of students is dependent upon the school's ability to create a culture that fosters meaningful, sustained relationships between teachers, students, and parents, and holds all stakeholders responsible for outcomes (Goth, 2013). The school's parents initiated a variety of large support organizations such as Parent Teacher Association, Athletic Association, and the Men's Club that supported the school and its programs before, during, and after the school day. The school boasted events such as Parent Breakfasts, Parent-Teacher Conferences, and required its teachers to conduct home visits every semester. This study examined and compared the perceptions of teachers, administrators, and parents of these events intended to promote parent involvement and follow research-based practices in that area.

The USDOE (2004) document, *Parental Involvement: Title I Part A* indicated three decades of research with convincing evidence that parents were an important influence in helping their children achieve high academic standards. When teachers collaborated with parents to help their children learn, and when parents participated in school activities and decision-making about their children's education, children achieved at higher levels (USDOE, 2004). Funds provided by the federal government for low-income schools provided resources such as parent education and adult education classes (Bartel, 2010). When parents were involved in education, children did better in school, and the academic quality of the school improved overall (USDOE, 2004). This

dissertation study adds to the literature by combining the research on parental involvement with that of charter schools.

Research Questions

1. What are the characteristics of the district's model for parental involvement?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses in the areas of parental involvement in the district?
3. What strategies allowed the charter school district to engage parents?
4. What strategies brought about the level of parental involvement in the district present at the time of study?
5. How are the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators unique to each specific stakeholder group?

Limitations

Due to the nature of this qualitative study, there were limitations. The environment studied was unique and involved a diverse set of stakeholders, policies, procedures, and perspectives. Due to the qualitative methodology, results could be transferred to similar settings but no generalizations could be made. Another limitation was that the study was conducted only on one district that had a small population of students, teachers and administrators. The district served approximately 1,100 students. Another limitation was that even though focus groups were conducted, not every parent, teacher, or administrator participated. Even though surveys went out electronically to all parents in the district with email addresses multiple times, not all parents responded to the digital survey. Surveys were not distributed to teachers or administrators who worked in the district. The researcher also serves as the sponsoring entity's representative. This

information was shared in the letter to the administration of the school, seeking permission for the study. It was also disclosed during the focus group sessions.

Definition of Terms

There are a variety of terms used throughout this paper that may be unfamiliar to the reader. Below is a list of some of those terms, for reference purposes:

Autonomy- “Independence that is given to educational leaders to release them from bureaucratic constraints with the purpose of making improvements in student performance. In educational accountability, autonomy is linked with accountability for results” (Wong, Nicotera, & Guthrie, 2007, p. 238).

Charter School(s) - “innovative, public schools designed by educators, parents or civic leaders that are open by choice, accountable for results, and free from most rules and regulations governing conventional public schools” (Center for Education Reform, 2012a, para. 3).

Charter School Sponsor/Authorizer- These terms are interchangeably used. The authorizer (or sponsor) is required to approve charter applications and ensure that the school(s) that its sponsors are held accountable for what is stated within the charter (Center for Education Reform, 2012b.). In Missouri, sponsors are approved by the State Board of Education and can be a university, a public school district, or a charter school commission (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). The State Board of Education is considered the “authorizer”.

Education Management Organization (EMO) - An

organization that manages schools that receive public funds, including district schools. A contract details the terms under which executive authority to run one

or more schools is given to an EMO, usually in return for a commitment to produce measurable outcomes within a given time frame (Miron & Urschel, 2010, p. 1). In the context of this dissertation, the EMO is actually a nonprofit organization, and considered specifically a Charter Management Organization (CMO). CMOs often provide back office functions for charter schools to take advantage of economies of scale, but some also provide a wider range of services—including hiring, professional development, data analysis, public relations and advocacy. (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2014, para. 1)

Home Visitation- According to the Education Begins At Home Act (2008), home visitations are defined as “services provided in the permanent or temporary residence, or in a mutually agreed upon location in the community, of the individual receiving such services” (Section 3.3). In the context of this dissertation, a home visit refers to a teacher scheduling an appointment to meet with a student’s parents or guardians at their residence, or other location that is agreed upon.

Parent Involvement- “participation of parents in regular, two-way, meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities” (USDOE, 2004, p. 3). While the term “parent” is used throughout this dissertation, the researcher is using this term broadly to mean the student’s legal guardian or relative with whom he or she is residing.

STEM- Education which “has a curriculum focused on science, technology, education and math” (Center for Education Reform, 2012b, para. 1). In the context of this dissertation, the charter school district being studied has a STEM focus. The purpose of a

STEM focused school is to specifically prepare students for successes in the related fields of technology and engineering.

Conclusion

While much research points to parental involvement as key to student success, this premise has not been studied in a charter school setting. The researched charter school district has a reputation for strong parental involvement, following research-based practices in this area. The researcher engaged in focus group interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators and surveyed these groups to gain their perceptions on parental involvement. Chapter Two includes a literature review that identifies the purpose and definition of charter schools as independent, autonomous choice public schools. Chapter Two also focuses on the research of benefits that students reap when parents are involved, and the importance of home-school relationships. Urban school problems and particular strategies to use for advancement of these important relationships are discussed later in the chapter.

Chapter Two: The Literature Review

Overview

Epstein (2001) noted that educators believed and research revealed that parental involvement contributed to student success and academic achievement. Oftentimes, in urban and underserved areas, parental involvement was lower than suburban areas. Identifying obstacles that urban parents face when becoming involved in their child's schooling was one focus of the literature review. Because charter schools are often touted as a solution to urban problems in education, the introductory portion of the literature explains the charter model to the reader. An important area for research was also to identify what benefits are reaped by students when parents are involved in the child's education. A final area of focus was to identify particular strategies that are successful in increasing parental involvement in urban public school settings.

Charter Schools as a Free, Public Choice for K-12 Education

Charter schools were a "hot" topic in education throughout the past decade (Center for Research of Education Outcomes [CREDO], 2013). Charter school laws and policies have increased across the United States in the past 10 years (Phillips, Hausman, & Larsen, 2012). As charter schools became an alternative to public education for millions of families across the country, criticisms mounted against charter schools as the issue became politicized (CREDO, 2013).

Public charter schools came into the American education landscape in 1991 because of ongoing United States education reform efforts aimed at targeting the poor academic achievement of America's children, in comparison with countries that appeared to be out-competing and out-innovating America (Almond, 2013). Charter schools, by

design, were created to introduce competition and to be a catalyst for improving standards (Saatcioglu, Bajaj, & Schmacher, 2011). Today, charter school students compromise more than 4% of the total public school population in the United States, which was a growing trend each year, and there were an estimated 6,000 charter schools in the 2012-2013 academic year serving over two million students (CREDO, 2013, p. 1).

The first charter schools sprouted in Minnesota in 1991, and since then 42 states in the country have adopted charter school legislation to allow charter schools to be established (CREDO, 2013). School choice had become more prevalent in the United States as more parents were removing their children from the traditional public school system and placing them in private schools or charter schools, or were choosing to homeschool their children (Grady, Bielick, & Aud, 2010).

Choice schools had become popular with parents who were dissatisfied with the traditional public school system available to them as determined by their home location or zip code (Wills, 2008). Typically, public school choice options included both charter schools and voucher school programs (VanderHoff, 2008). Voucher programs included the private school sector and were often seen as a drain on public funds and possibly undermining public values (Brinig, 2011). Voucher schools were choice schools that allow students to use public funds to gain admission, free of charge, to a public or private school of their choice (Grady et al., 2010). Charter schools received less opposition by teachers unions than voucher programs did and, as a result, were more popular in the United States at this time (VanderHoff, 2008). The school choice movement emerged as the latest reform minded practice, and the hope was that by giving parents a choice in where their child attended school for free, the problems in education would be remediated

(Wills, 2008). School choice was intended to liberate the disadvantaged children from being forced to attend underperforming schools (Phillips, Hausman, & Larsen, 2012).

Charter schools marketed themselves as free-market public schools that would be free of traditional public school bureaucracy and would provide for innovative and rigorous curricula, the flexibility of hiring and firing teachers at will, and the opportunity for teachers, parents, and community members to create and manage niche schools designed to serve the students within their community (Almond, 2013, p. 2). The article by VanderHoff (2008) indicated ultimately that parents chose charter schools based on academic effectiveness and their endorsement of specific academic goals. Hamilton and Guin (2005) also found that educational effectiveness was an important factor influencing school choice. Parents in poor neighborhoods noted in the surveys that they had a desire to find a safe school for their child(ren), whereas wealthier parents were concerned with the offerings of honors classes as their biggest concern in choosing a school (VanderHoff, 2008). By allowing educators to experiment and practice innovative philosophies, the charter school movement has emerged with new and ambitious methods for educating students, especially for students faced with academic challenges (Tough, 2009). Charter schools often serve minority, at-risk students (Saatcioglu et al., 2011 p. 430). Therefore, their strategies are sometimes different from strategies used by traditional school districts. For example, some charter schools have an extended school day or school calendar year, to allow the school to have the instructional time because students come to them several grade levels behind.

Teachers' unions and the charter movement are viewed as opponents that have been engaged in a long-term standoff. There is actually little academic literature that

studies the relationship between charters and unions (Stulberg, 2010). This is interesting, because the initial concept for establishing charter schools was birthed from the teacher's union leader (Kahlenberg, 2008). However, as charter schooling grew rapidly, Shanker's viewpoint changed (Kahlenberg, 2008). The AFT released a report in 2004 arguing that student achievement in charter schools was not better than that of traditional public schools (Stuhlberg, 2010). Charter schools do not always equate to quality education. While a number of NYC charter schools have met the standard of improving achievement, studies have shown that a majority of charter schools outside the city have failed miserably (Henningfeld, 2008, para. 7). The National Education Association's (NEA, 2015) website referred to charters and identifies conflicts with the belief of the organization and the practices of charters. The NEA stated that they "believe that all public schools must be held accountable to the same high standards of transparency and equity to ensure the success of all students" (para. 1). Described as a turf war, starring the home district versus the charter, charters are oftentimes accused of "cherry picking" the students. Charters are required to have lottery admissions policies. If the school has more applications than seats available, they are required to conduct a lottery to choose students for those seats. This means that only parents with some motivation to seek out educational alternatives for their kids will apply in the first place (Greenman, 2014). Traditional schools are required to serve every child who shows up at the door, regardless of their achievement level (Greenman, 2014). Financial impact on the home district is a major concern for critics of the charter school movement. Charter schools threaten traditional public education, because they remove financial resources from traditional public schools (Henningfeld, 2008). Districts, if not the sponsor or authorizer of the

charter school, incur negative financial impact because the funding follows the student upon enrollment (Henningfeld, 2008).

Autonomy and Accountability of Charter Schools

Charter schools operated locally and their design allowed autonomy from governmental rule (Wills, 2008). They were schools that received public funding but allowed some freedom to make choices at the local school board level, not warranted to other traditional public school districts (Davis & Oakley, 2013). In a study by Wills in 2008, the author found that the more autonomous schools were from external controls, the more likely they were to have effective organizations. Willis supported that this model made for a successful approach to schooling by giving a choice to parents.

Most often, local parents, community members, or other local leadership who wanted a quality education for children developed the charters. Missouri, the state in which the charter school district studied resided, was the 27th state to pass a charter law in May 1998; the other 26 had been written for various reasons such as expanding opportunities for teacher creativity and increasing student achievement (VanderHoff, 2008).

Charter schools in Missouri were required by statute to have a sponsor, or commonly referred to as an ‘authorizer’ in other states, that held them accountable to their established goals and standards, set with mutual agreement upon opening. In this, Missouri institutions of higher education were the dominant authorizers of charter schools, which happened to be an exception to the rule in comparison with most of the other charter school states (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2012). As non-governmental organizations obtained sponsorship, it allowed schools to be free

from the traditional, regulatory control of the state and allowed more creation and implementation of localized decisions. This promised autonomy of the school, in theory, allowed the school to use innovative and exceptional “outside of the box” methods to engage and educate students better than the traditional public alternative option (Wills, 2008). The sponsors of the schools conducted periodic reviews for continuous improvement and accountability purposes as a requirement of the law. Every five years, the State Board of Education reviews the academic performance of the charter school (LEA) and determines whether or not to renew the school’s charter for another five years (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). Ultimately, if the school did not meet its outset academic, financial, and operational goals set out in its charter contract, or it did not attract enough students, it would cease to operate (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2011; VanderHoff, 2008).

Parents and Charter Schools: What is the Connection?

A majority of a charter school’s initial startup work attributed to the parent volunteers in the community. In many charter schools, parents were encouraged to take part in many of the founding duties, including and not limited to, preparing and maintaining the facilities, establishing curriculum, and organizing school programs (Smith et al., 2011). This helped reduce expenses that the school would incur, and helped to build the school culture and community. Charter schools in this particular Midwestern state received less funding (approximately 30-35% less) than the local traditional public school district, which encouraged the school to strive to “do more with less” (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2011). Charters are not able to benefit from the same local taxes in the state’s funding formula that traditional public schools do (Batdorf et al.,

2014; Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). Therefore, relying on parent volunteers to assist with laborious duties normally taken on by paid employees, such as grounds keeping, administrative assisting, or housekeeping seemed to be a viable solution that keeps expenses down for these schools. Charter schools' ideals usually involved strong engagement and commitment by parents in the founding of the school, the organizing of the school, and especially in participating in the educational experiences (Smith et al., 2011). Charter schools have been described as a setting in which traditional barriers with parental involvement occur less often, since charter schools are typically smaller, community-centered schools that tailor their missions to meet the demand of the local population (Smith et al., 2011).

As charters are options for parents, the parents are making a pronounced effort to get their student enrolled in a choice school and also may be required to provide transportation on a daily basis to and from the school. Many charter schools do require contracts with parents that pledge a certain level of commitment and participation. Most of the charters have a heavy emphasis on catering to the customers of the school, which include both parents and students. If charters do not attract sufficient amounts of families, they will not be able to afford to run the program and will cease to exist.

Benefits Reaped From Parental Involvement in Education

Decades of research has pointed to the benefits of parental involvement and academic achievement. However, studies have also proven that certain types of involvement have a positive impact (Smith et al., 2011). Typically, there seemed to be a lack of understanding between staffs of schools and the parents of the students regarding what actually constituted parental involvement (Smith et al., 2011). There was some

confusion and disagreement over the importance of involvement how to obtain high participation from all families involved (Epstein, 2010). A definition of parental involvement should be established when discussing its impacts.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 brought parental involvement into the spotlight. The federal government's Title I program has parental involvement as its centerpiece (USDOE, 2004). It required parent participation as a partner in the child's education. This meant that schools had to move beyond simply talking about it to actively inviting or demanding this involvement (LaRocque et al., 2011).

White, Asian, Hispanic, and Black families each have different experiences in this country and because of this, it is imperative that schools do not take a "one size fits all" approach (Robinson & Harris, 2014). Oftentimes, parents appear to only offer irregular help with their adolescent students. According to new research, helping with homework during the adolescent stage does not seem to be beneficial to the academic achievement in students (Robinson & Harris, 2014). Parental involvement strategies and practices created cooperation amongst the teacher and the parents that engaged the student and allowed the student to practice the skills needed in both the classroom and at home. The opportunities and exercises gave the student extra practice, and thus a higher probability to obtain the students' desired academic achievements. Many educators believed that creating a community of families, students, teachers, and school administrators provided additional support for children's learning in schools and at home. Evidence provided by Booth and Dunn (1996) suggested that academic success may be predicted by the quality of these connections.

There were numerous benefits of school–family partnerships for students, families, and educators. It has been shown through research that students demonstrated more positive attitudes toward school and learning, had higher achievement and test scores, improved behavior, increased homework participation, improved school attendance, and had a reduced need for services related to special education (Graves-Smith, 2006). In the same study by Graves-Smith (2006), educators reported benefits in terms of happiness and more positive interactions with parents due to higher levels of school-parent relations. These outcomes have been reported across families with diverse backgrounds, which provide positive reinforcement for making such partnerships a reality in schools in urban areas, in particular (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Many studies have shown that parental involvement in schools influences students' behaviors in the classroom (Smith et al., 2011). Epstein (2001) has been the educational authority figure on school-community partnership over the past several decades. In her book, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*, she identified six types of involvement, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2.

Epstein's Model of School, Family and Community Partnerships

Type	Description of Type	Example
Type 1	Basic obligations of families	Basic needs are met Ex: health, safety
Type 2	Basic obligations of schools	Communication between school and family Ex: calls, report cards, conferences
Type 3	Involvement at school	Volunteering at the school Ex: events or performances
Type 4	Involvement in learning activities at home	Guidance from teachers Ex: homework help, tips
Type 5	Involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy	Schools train leaders Ex: PTA/PTO, Title I programs
Type 6	Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations	Connections with agencies, businesses and other groups to help with children's education Ex: after school care agency

Note: Adapted from *The School Community Journal*.

Widely regarded, Epstein's theoretical model posited six forms of caregiver involvement, which represented behaviors that occur in educational and home settings, as well as communication between family members and educators.

Epstein's model delineated school-orientation involvement as actions caregivers undertake to assist with learning or recreational events in the school setting as well as the caregiver's participation in decision-making organizations. Beyond this conventional, school-based description of caregiver involvement, Epstein's model articulated salient forms of involvement that occur at home. Her model acknowledged the importance of parenting behavior, such as providing for

children's basic needs, to children's educational success. Epstein's conceptualization also acknowledged caregivers' communication with educators as a form of involvement. (Manz, 2012 p. 232)

The basic goal was to have an established and maintained parent-teacher relationship (LaRocque et al., 2011). When the student was aware that his or her parents knew what was expected by the classroom teacher and put healthy pressure on that student to achieve, that student may be twice as likely to achieve the desired goals as a fellow classmate who did not have parents or guardians involved (Graves-Smith, 2006). A student's desire to please not one audience, but two or three audiences, could be motivating and indeed could produce a plethora of positive results.

There were not only benefits for students with this model, but also for teachers, administrators, and parents. Educators reported greater job satisfaction and more positive relationships with families when parents were involved (NASP, 2012). Parents felt they had better self-efficacy, and a better understanding and communication level with their children (NASP, 2012). Efficacy was a term used to describe the beliefs about whether or not a person could do something, or bring about change to obtain specific goals or objectives. The greater parental involvement, the greater self-efficacy the student had. Many more things were possible, in the teachers' eyes, when they had cooperation with parents. The same belief was true, in reverse, with parents. It was a win-win situation for all parties involved.

Why is there a gap in urban schools? If educators knew parental involvement was good for students, one may ask why there was indeed a gap in parental involvement when it came to urban education settings. Oftentimes parents stated that they did not

understand the expectations of the school in terms of involvement, or did not know exactly how to help establish such relationships as desired and necessary (Bartel, 2010). The study by Graves-Smith in 2006 found that the development of intentional programs that promoted particular strategies did have a positive impact on the actual level of involvement by parents. Sometimes feeling unwelcomed in the school itself was the obstacle, so developing school culture and climate were essential pieces in creating a helpful and welcoming environment in which parents wanted to help was crucial (Bartel, 2010).

Often, middle class teachers in urban areas misunderstood the unique challenges of parents in urban settings. They believed parents were not becoming involved in their children's schooling because they simply did not care for their children or did not want to help (Christianakis, 2011). In order to clarify this misnomer, Christianakis (2011) conducted a study. The first step educated middle class teachers teaching in urban areas about poverty. The teachers engaged in workshops that focused on such work as Ruby Payne's Frameworks of Poverty. In Payne's widely respected work, she focused on the differences in perceptions that students living in poverty, middle class and upper class families display (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008). As a result of teacher training on Payne's work, instead of treating the parents as enemies or outsiders, teachers collaborated and vowed to work more as a team with parents (Graves-Smith, 2006). This attitude and core knowledge was essential towards bridging the gap. In LaRocque et al.'s (2011) study, teachers reported that they did not know how to use parents effectively, besides just asking them to help with menial tasks in the classroom such as making copies.

Often, parents in low-income areas were often unsure of how to involve themselves, and often felt intimidated by the school, administrators, and teachers (Graves-Smith, 2006). In Graves-Smith's (2006) case study, the school was redesigned to include a community center, which offered food, clothing, and social services to those in the community, including the parents. This opened many doors, figuratively and literally. People came to the building for these resources. Once the parents were inside the building they developed a better sense of being welcomed, which opened the door for better communication (Graves-Smith, 2006). This act was intentional and produced the results that were desired (Graves-Smith, 2006). So often, even with the best of intentions, middle-class educators created and implemented practices intended to serve low-income families without an assessment of community needs (Graves-Smith, 2006). The constituents must understand the mindset and needs of the community so that incorrect assumptions did not become the norm.

Many low-income families were headed by one single parent, and if employed, were unable to take off time from work to involve themselves with activities within the school and the regular school day (Manz, 2012). Parents were more likely to participate and become involved if they felt appreciated and invited frequently (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Logistical barriers often served as an obstacle for some parents. For example, some parents may struggle with getting time off from their jobs to participate in the regular school day activities, thus limiting their perceived involvement (LaRoque et al., 2011).

It is imperative that schools and families find a common ground and common set of expectations, to facilitate the quality relationship between the two entities that would

ultimately promote student academic success. As quoted in a Position Statement authored by the National Association of School Psychologists (2012), “Partnerships among families and educators require ongoing planning, development, and evaluation. These also require the allocation of adequate resources (including time) to assist families and educators in fulfilling their partnership roles” (p. 2). Parents need to understand that they matter and that their engagement influences learning (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Evidence from Harris and Goodall’s (2008) work also emphasized that the school has to find a way to balance reaching ‘hard to reach’ parents and also how to keep parents involved over time, especially as students enter secondary grade levels.

Engaging Parents of Students Effectively

How should schools and teachers, in particular, work to increase parental involvement immediately? Some proven strategies focused on teacher-controlled situations, such as being honest and having open communication with parents as they encouraged a way to work as a team with parents, not against the parent (Dominguez, 2003). It was important for all parties to understand the differences in the roles and expectations for each (LaRoque et al., 2011). Teachers could actually give direction to parents, including specific information about how to become involved.

Offering suggestions to parents, such as asking them to provide a quiet and clean space for the child to do homework every night seemed obvious to some, but others may not have considered it as important or a way in which to become involved in a child’s education. Teachers, through Dominquez’s (2003) study felt the importance of building real, personal relationships with parents. In doing this, one might find some connections with the parent about likes such as hobbies or shared interests that would personalize the

relationship and make both the teacher and parent more comfortable talking with one another on a regular basis. Creating a warm environment that welcomed parents to the school was ultimately one of the most important strategies to use for engagement (Dominguez, 2003).

Home Visits as a Strategy to Improve Home-School Relations

A study conducted in a rural, Midwestern school district in 2011 tracked the effects on kindergarteners and their parents in response to home visits completed by teachers (Meyer, Mann, & Becker, 2011). A five year follow up was done by Meyer et al. (2011) on this study, and it was found that teachers believed the outcomes were better relationships amongst the parties involved; teacher understanding and empathy for student lives at home including behavior was established. Extensive research on programs bridging the gap between parents and teachers, such as home visits, over the past 30 years has documented the benefits of parent involvement and how it related to student academic success. For example, the children in these studies were more likely to have a positive attitude about themselves and school, routine homework habits, better school attendance, higher academic achievement, and fewer behavior problems (Fan & Chen, 2001; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Furthermore, President Obama's reform initiative, "Race to the Top," included funding to use Home Visits as part of the initiative, so that students would get a quality education (Meyer et al., 2011). The reasoning behind the required home visits was they were intended to create a less threatening environment that is not focused around conversations when there is a specific problem (Mann & Meyer, 2010). Training teachers on how to conduct appropriate home visits was imperative to the program's success

(Meyer et al., 2011). In addition, teachers must be provided with the supports necessary to assist the family and conduct visits that were successful and viewed as a positive contribution to the classroom activities (Meyer et al., 2011). In a study on home visits published by Lin and Bates in 2010, teacher participants were asked to complete home visits and write in a reflective journal after the visits. The participants indicated a much greater understanding and positively empathetic nature towards the children and their families (Lin & Bates, 2010). Bronfenbrenner's theory, as cited in the Lin and Bates study, implied that in order to completely understand a child, he or she must make valid efforts to understand the relationship and characteristics between the child and his or her caregiver(s) (Lin & Bates, 2010).

Conclusion

In order to affect student academic achievement, school personnel must reach out wisely to parents and find ways in which to involve 100% of its parents. Charter schools begin as community driven schools that tend to address needs of the immediate community. Because of the autonomy and freedom from most traditional public school rules, a charter school may be more innovative and adaptive than other alternatives. A school must first identify the needs in the community and the obstacles that face parents when it comes to involvement so that the problems can be addressed. Investigating the reasons for non-involvement may provide insight that will help teachers and administrators develop strategies that will help overcome the obstacles. Building a positive, welcoming and warm climate is also a necessary component in bridging the parent-school relationship. Overall, research underscored the belief that greater latitude in conceptualizing and understanding parental involvement can potentially lead to more

inclusive school practices and greater engagement on the part of parents which can, in turn, only serve to increase students' school success (Schnee & Bose, 2010).

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter begins with a rich description of the research site, in order to establish the level of parental involvement in the studied charter school district. A presentation of the methodological framework of this qualitative study follows. Since parental involvement is a complex issue, the researcher selected a qualitative design. In this section, the unique qualities and characteristics of the establishment and initial start-up phase of the school are also detailed. The stakeholders of the start-up phase are identified and roles are explained. The basic understanding of the desire for this school, the particular management company's model, and the population affected by this school are vital components in the research, and in their quest for high parental involvement.

History and Demographics of the Research Site

The idea for this particular charter school district began in 2008. Individuals within the community had a desire to develop a charter secondary school that would focus on science and math. Many of these individuals were community members in a variety of professional fields interested in establishing a high school focused on STEM education. This, in theory, would help the students in the city to be prepared for college and establish careers locally in math, science, and engineering fields. Efforts to start a charter school with a STEM focus led the originating group to the city's mayoral office. The city's mayor had been openly concerned about education in the city since his inaugural year, 2001, and began supporting school choice and encouraging quality charter school establishments. The mayor's education deputy introduced the interested group to a non-profit charter school management organization already overseeing a number of charters, science-themed high schools across the Midwest. The charter

management company showed interest in expanding into the state. The business community had concerns that students were not being prepared to work in STEM fields, in particular. This EMO seemed to be the entity with a successful track record that would fulfill this need in the community. Therefore, in 2009, the charter management company and the potential board members wrote a charter school application with the support of the mayor's office and sought the required institutional sponsor. The school presented their proposal for a science-themed charter school to a private institution of higher education approximately 30 minutes away from the intended charter school campus.

The original charter school board and management team examined several potential sites for the school, finally negotiating a five-year lease to take over a closing parochial elementary school at its current location. The school opened in fall 2010 and secured enough parental interest in the school that there was an enrollment waiting list by July. The school leader, along with the city's office of education representatives and the local council member visited and distributed information to surrounding parents about the new school that would be located in the area. Town hall meetings were held to inform potential students and their parents about the mission, vision, and purpose of the school. The school then opened as an elementary school, not a middle and high school as originally planned, with enrollment preference given to several zip codes surrounding the school. The decision to change the grade level served in the school was based on a number of factors, most notably in the desire to "grow your own" students, as well as the availability of a physical facility that was student-ready. This change was approved and documented by both the sponsor and the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Many charters in Missouri chose to start with only a few grade

levels at first, and then expanded by one grade every year. In the school's first year, the school tracked incoming students who had transferred from over 40 different schools.

The first and second year of operation were under the leadership of the founding principal that the management company selected because of his outgoing personality and communication skills; he moved to another assignment after the second year and the management organization then hired a new principal. Approximately 430 students were served at this location.

In 2012-2013, the charter school opened a secondary school with sixth through ninth graders, most of whom matriculated from the original elementary school. This school housed approximately 375 students. In 2013-2014, the school expanded a grade to include grades 6-10. Additionally, largely through the encouragement of the metropolitan area's mayoral office, the charter school's governing board, management company and sponsor agreed to expand and include a second elementary school housing grades K-5 for the 2013-2014 school years. The school was located several miles away from the original site and served a different population mostly consisting of Bosnian immigrants. This school educated approximately 300 students. During the initial year, the school employed approximately 20 full time teachers, one principal, a Dean of Students, and a handful of staff members to manage the 14 classrooms that contained fewer than 25 students each. Plans to expand to serve a larger population were in the district's near future, due to the demand. It was typical for the district to have a waiting list that contained 150-200 student names.

The new location would be located in an area of the city that contained a higher concentration of Bosnian immigrants. The physical structure for the school was

purchased from the local traditional school district by a not for profit entity associated with the not for profit management company. They planned to lease the building until the governing board of the school was ready to purchase it. The school building needed extensive renovations and the preparation period was brief yet intense. Administrators, recently hired teachers and their parents or family members, and GSA parents were very visible during the preparation period and the initial startup phase. They were planting, painting, and moving furniture and books. This activity was much like the initial elementary school's preparation experience. The building was next to the new elementary school was a church, and the two neighbors had quickly become partners. Again, this was also a familiar experience to the original elementary school founders. Before the new school's opening, efforts had begun by the board to seek out additional board members representing that community. One of the first hires for the administrative assistant position was a Bosnian immigrant that was able to assist with translation tasks. Soon after the opening, the school became motivated to design their own PTO organization, Men's Club, and Athletic Association, which were all parent led. They were given guidance from the original campus parent leaders, but then left to design their own programs.

The educational management organization hired by the charter school's board of directors reassigned a superintendent to oversee the charter school's three locations in the particular Midwestern urban location studied in 2013. This superintendent's office was housed within the second elementary school, which was also established in 2013. In addition to this administrator, each building at each level employed a principal as well as a vice principal. The management company's central office provided additional administrative support in curriculum and staff development, although this office was

physically located in an adjacent state. The sponsoring entity, a private teaching university located within 30 miles of the charter schools, also assisted in these areas when requested by the charter school administration or the school's educational management organization. Professional development, special education compliance processes and procedures, monetary donations for fundraising activities through parent-run organizations. The sponsor was also responsible for holding the school's governing board accountable to the charter under which it was established (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2011).

An educational management organization (EMO) that was not-for-profit ran the day-to-day operations of the stated charter school district. This EMO had experience operating approximately 30 schools throughout the Midwest focusing on math, science, and technology education. The school's charter clearly recognized the importance of parental involvement as essential to upholding the school's mission. The founders of the school declared within the school's charter that a key component to each school's success would be its parental buy in. The belief was that involving parents more often and more productively required changing the major location of parent involvement from the school to the home, changing the major emphasis from general policies to specific skills, and changing the major target from the general population of students to the individual child at home. Therefore, several components of the school required heavy parent commitment, and the charter school's founding board structured their school around the emphasis on parental involvement. Many states emphasized the role of parents in the establishment and creation of charter schools and serving in leadership roles in those schools (Smith et al., 2011).

Parents were the deciding factor when it came to this particular charter school. As it was a school of choice, parents chose to remove their student from another school system to attend this school. Parents accepted the standards presented to them by the school, but also had the choice to leave the school and remove the student if they did not agree or did not like its operations. This is one of the defining characteristics of charter schools, and wait lists at the studied charter school demonstrate the parents who were willing to take on the commitment required.

Parents were required to sign a policy statement upon enrollment that committed the parent to helping the student achieve and to adhere to school rules and policies. As was stated in school documents, failure to adhere to the commitments as stated in the parent contract, could cause the student to lose various school privileges, experience disciplinary action, and could lead to returning to his/her home school. The document required signature of one or both parents/guardians. No known expulsions related to this policy have been documented.

A lounge area designated as an area for parents was set up in the school for discussion; parents must sign in with the front desk secretary if they had intentions to help or visit a classroom, but were encouraged to do so at any given time. A specific procedure was outlined in the school student/parent handbook for observations of classrooms for parents. Transportation was not provided by the school district. It was a school practice that kindergarteners were picked up by a parent in the actual classroom each day. Other grade level students were dismissed out of the building and were picked up by parents in the parking lot of the school.

Each of the schools had a robust Parent Teacher Organization, Athletic Association, and Men's Club. These organizations were all parent-originated and parent-led. Parents were also teachers, board members, administrators, and staff members of the charter school. Parents ran the before- and after-school care programs as volunteers at the charter school. In later years, the school was able to hire part time employees to replace the parent volunteers. In addition, there were many annual events and traditions at the school that specifically targeted and honored parents and guardians such as Parent Appreciation Night, Parent Breakfasts, and Grandparent Appreciation Breakfasts.

The leadership in the EMO required quarterly home visits to be conducted by the teachers. This meant that every teacher in the school selected several of their advisory students to invite for participation in the home visit program. All parents received information about the home visit program and were asked to provide written consent if they agreed to participate, if they were invited. Parents had to consent for the teacher to visit them at the student's home. In some cases, a neutral location not identified as the student's home, such as a local coffeehouse, was agreed upon as the preferred meeting place. The visits typically included a brief discussion about academics, but the visits were actually designed so that the teacher and parent could connect and find common ground in which to form a relationship as its focus. Teachers were prepared for these visits with training and venture out to appointments with a grade-level team member or another teacher or administrator. They were directed to never go on appointments alone for safety reasons. Teachers were required to log in the electronic system any contact with parents during the course of the year. Reports were generated quarterly to determine the overall

level of parent involvement. Every year, the schools report their participation rates and in 2013-2014, GSA was the top ranked school in all of the EMO's 27 schools.

The researcher also believed that the high percentage of parental engagement at the school was due to several factors. First, the culture of the school and the charter model was based on a supply and demand model. Second, the parents desired their child to attend a school of choice. Third, the administration had a willingness to take feedback from parents and adjust practices to a certain degree. If parents did not like the school, they had the freedom to walk away and enroll the student elsewhere for no cost and at low risk.

The school leadership required a variety of outreach meetings and events that were designed to invite, include, and inform parents and community members of the school's progress and level of success. Some of these meetings included grandparent and parent breakfasts, annual "State of the School" meetings, and Parent Appreciation Nights. The school also had the freedom to develop and implement any ideas beyond the management company's required model of events. Board members, administrators, and teachers had the opportunity to request additional events to be added to the proposed calendar of events provided by the school administration.

Particular strategies embedded in the management company's model have nonetheless affected the culture of the school and the neighborhood, possibly then increasing the interest and opportunities for parents to become involved in the activities of the school community. Particular strategies, policies, procedures, and processes were established by the management company and the governing board of the charter district who hoped to engage and involve urban parents at a higher level.

No research had been conducted in relation to parental involvement on this particular EMO's charter model or this particular district in years prior to this research study. This had been confirmed in writing to the researcher by the EMO's Vice President.

The university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed the intended questions and the research plan. The superintendent of the district also had a chance to review and approve the questions prior to sending the survey to parents and prior to the focus group interview sessions. Changes were made to reflect feedback given from both groups, and these carefully created questions were used to guide the semi-structured focus group interviews. All focus group participants signed an IRB-approved consent form.

Procedures

The interviews were held at the school district campus buildings. The district consisted of three buildings: two elementary schools and a middle/high school. The district was situated in a metropolitan area that allowed for charter school establishment by statute. The particular district was established in a geographical area that gave preference to three particular zip codes, also according to statute. This was done to create more of a "neighborhood school" feeling, which also was encouraging to parents in the immediate community. The district served approximately 800 families, overall.

The location chosen for the administration and the teacher focus groups was a classroom inside of the middle/high school location. This school sat in a mostly residential area of the metropolitan area, in the center of the district's geographical boundaries. The location was established due to the centrality of its location, so that it would be easy for all parties to attend the interviews during one of the school's planned

professional development days. Since the middle and high school building served the two feeder elementary schools, which were at opposite ends of the geographic boundary, it seemed to be the most logical choice for location. The focus group interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for both the hosting school personnel and the researcher. A room was chosen that provided a comfortable atmosphere for the participants, and included some light refreshments. The researcher held the first two focus group interviews at the same location to avoid location bias.

The researcher indicated the desire to conduct two of the three focus group interviews on the school's professional development day. This move was requested because it was a chance to acquire a focus group that would best represent each school all in one location at the same time. Four administrators and nine teachers volunteered to engage in the study and the focus group. The teacher group even was willing to participate in lieu of their lunch break. Before each focus group session, the researcher explained the purpose of the focus group and asked the participants to sign the permission forms if they agreed to participate in the study. The researcher was appreciative of this sacrifice and the time to spend with the group. Overall, even though the teachers varied in grade level that they taught (K to 11) they were all in agreement with the majority of information shared throughout the session, in response to the researcher's questions (see Appendix E).

Methodology Framework

The reason for the qualitative methodology was to allow parents, teachers, and administrators to discuss in a casual setting the obstacles parents faced with engaging in their child's school activities and the strategies the school used to invite and engage

parents. Maxwell (2013) stated qualitative studies were the best method when seeking to gather “the participant’s perspectives and how they view their reality as a result of circumstances and conditions” (p. 22). Because this study wanted to capture a deep understanding of the attitudes of all three parties, a qualitative method was appropriate. Parental involvement can be measured quantitatively by hours, but it is much more than that.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The district’s superintendent gave written permission to complete the study and collect the data. Upon requesting this study, a formal letter was submitted to the superintendent. Approval was granted by the superintendent on behalf of the charter school and the management organization, and also granted by the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The survey (see Appendix B), as stated earlier, was created by the researcher and submitted to the superintendent of the district for approval (see Appendix A). The superintendent then requested that the building principals distribute the survey electronically to families. Nothing was changed in the questionnaire after the superintendent’s initial review of the survey. The building principals sent out the survey as a web link to all parent email addresses within the district, which included an explanation as to why the survey was being used. This link was distributed within four weeks, and during this time, the researcher obtained 142 responses to the survey.

From there, the researcher worked with the superintendent to distribute an email to all potential participants, in order to recruit for focus group interviews. The questions

for the interviews were approved by the IRB, as well as by the superintendent of the charter district, prior to the interviews.

A survey could perhaps capture a portion of this information, but the focus groups were the preferred method so the most accurate information could be recorded and considered as part of the equation. The researcher believed a focus group interview would elicit more information and more detail than a pencil and paper or computerized survey. Also, focus group sessions allow for the researcher to answer clarification questions that the individuals might have when responding. In a focus group situation, the participants are seated together and get to hear one another's responses to the questions (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012)

The focus group interviews were held in the district's facilities. The administrator and teacher focus groups were held separately, inside a classroom used to teach foreign language at the middle/high building. The seating was situated as large tables with chairs surrounding those tables. Participants had the opportunity to choose seating and come and go if they pleased from the classroom. No observers were allowed in the rooms during the focus group sessions. During the parent focus group sessions, parents were able to also choose their seating in an open gathering place around tables at the elementary school building. No outside observers such as teachers or administrators were allowed in the room during the session.

Upon greeting the participants prior to the focus group interviews, the researcher distributed a one-sheet synopsis of the intent of the study to each participant. The participant was asked to sign the statement, which included disclosure about audio recording and transcription, the ability to leave the study at any time, and the participant

anonymity of the study. Participants were informed that the data would be destroyed at the end of the study, and that there may be a follow up interview requested within the following few months. No children were interviewed in this study and no ethical concerns were present due to consent of adults as participants.

Originally, the researcher had obtained a list of nine participants willing to participate in a group interview. However, after multiple attempts to find a convenient time for the interview in which at least half of the volunteers could come, efforts ceased. Instead, a convenience sample was used. The school invited the researcher to a parent breakfast event, and willing participants stayed to talk to the researcher afterwards.

While interviewing the different focus groups, the researcher used the set of prepared and approved questions, but used flexibility in implementation. It is best to have a path for action, but the ability to use the information gleaned from the conversation to lead into other purposeful questions that may not have been on the formal interview question list prior to the actual interview is also effective. The focus group questions were crafted based upon strategies identified in the school's charter claims, as well as strategies identified by Epstein's work and other documents from the literature review. These questions reflected similar questions asked in the parent survey. The researcher had obtained approval of the questions by the chair and the International Review Board (IRB) prior to implementation. As noted in the disclaimer, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher coded and analyzed the results of the interviews. The researcher then conducted additional follow up interviews with a handful of willing participants, to gain further clarity on particular points of interest. Again, the researcher believed that a survey, although well responded

to, would not have captured the same information from parents, teachers, or administrators as the set of focus group sessions. Acquiring perceptions and attitudes was not always possible from just survey responses. In order to get a deeper sense of understanding, the focus groups were utilized.

Because the institution granting permission was also the sponsoring entity of the school, the researcher worked to develop a mutual agreement in terms of study limitations and confidentiality that would not cause future conflict between the two parties. In short, interviewees were asked to describe the types of interactions they have had with administrators or staff members at the school over the course of their time with the school. They were asked to: recall types of invitations they have received to become involved or to visit the school, provide a reflection of the policies that were implemented by the school in relation to parental involvement, describe their previous experiences with partnership with a school, and to provide the number of times in which they have made contact over the past year with the teachers or the administrator. Complete lists of interview questions are provided as documents in the appendix.

Participants

The researcher served as the liaison between the charter school district and its sponsored entity. The superintendent of the school district approved and distributed the anonymous survey link to the principals of each of the schools. From there, the principals distributed the link to the survey in an email that went out to all families with email addresses on file. The content of the survey questions was very similar to the content and structure of the focus group questions. Parents could opt to volunteer for further participation in the study. The participants were asked to sign a statement assuring

protection of their identity when focus group interviews were conducted. Adhering to federal guidelines, all information collected for this project will be destroyed by the researcher upon its completion.

Conclusion

The research site was a public charter school district identified as a school with high parental involvement, despite its location in an urban setting. Investigating the history of the school was an integral part of understanding the methods used by the Educational Management Organization and the founders of the school to set the tone for strong parent-school relationships. Founders identified the needs of the neighborhood families they would serve, put policies and practices into place, and grew the small school eventually into three larger, yet still small in size schools. The same base model was used in each of the individual schools, with different parents, administrators, and teachers in each building. The innovative charter model restructured typical, traditional expectations and practices that other public schools used.

Chapter Four: Results

The researcher reviewed the policy manuals of the school, and interviewed administrators, teachers, and parents to determine perceptions and practices of the school in relation to parental involvement. The superintendent of the school district distributed a parent survey, approved in advance by the IRB, to gather information from parents about initial perceptions of parental involvement within the schools. Interview questions had been carefully designed for the focus group interviews, but were altered during the process in order to allow comfortable conversation in the focus group interviews. The researcher recorded the interviews with an audio recording device and then later transcribed the recordings. After each focus group session, notes were taken by the researcher to capture information that was not apparent from the audio recording. The researcher followed a coding process that identified commonalities in answers from the various interest groups. The survey was structured to include a variety of constructed response, true/false and multiple-choice types of questions. This coding the researcher utilized categorized the responses into Epstein's (2010) types of involvement. Epstein compiled a framework for six distinct types of involvement that a school can have that helps create programs to strengthen school-parent-community relations. Identifying the needs of the parents and community help the school to understand which of Epstein's types they may need to focus on.

In addition to acquiring information for the study in questionnaire form, the researcher also chose to conduct a focus group interview of parents to gain different types of responses. The researcher also chose to conduct focus group conversations with additional perspectives: administrators and another focus group of teachers. This allowed

the researcher to obtain a variety of perspectives of stakeholders in the district about the same topics. The researcher used similar questions amongst the focus groups and aligned the questions to the survey distributed. By using a variety of methods (survey and focus groups), with a variety of groups, triangulation was present. Often a survey can gather needed and useful information, however, in some cases focus groups can offer a level of detail that could not be reached by exclusively utilizing a survey.

Parent Survey Results

The researcher first surveyed parents, reaching across all of the schools in the charter school district, and received 143 responses. The total number of families at each school were 336 and 241 families at each of the elementary buildings, and 329 families at the middle and high school building, for a total of approximately 800 families served, and student population totaling 1,160. Families could overlap by having a child at both the elementary school and the middle/high school. Each school was represented fairly equally in proportion to each school's population in the participation of the survey, as seen in the following figure.

Question 1 a. How often do you have a conversation with a staff member (teacher, administrator) at your child's school?

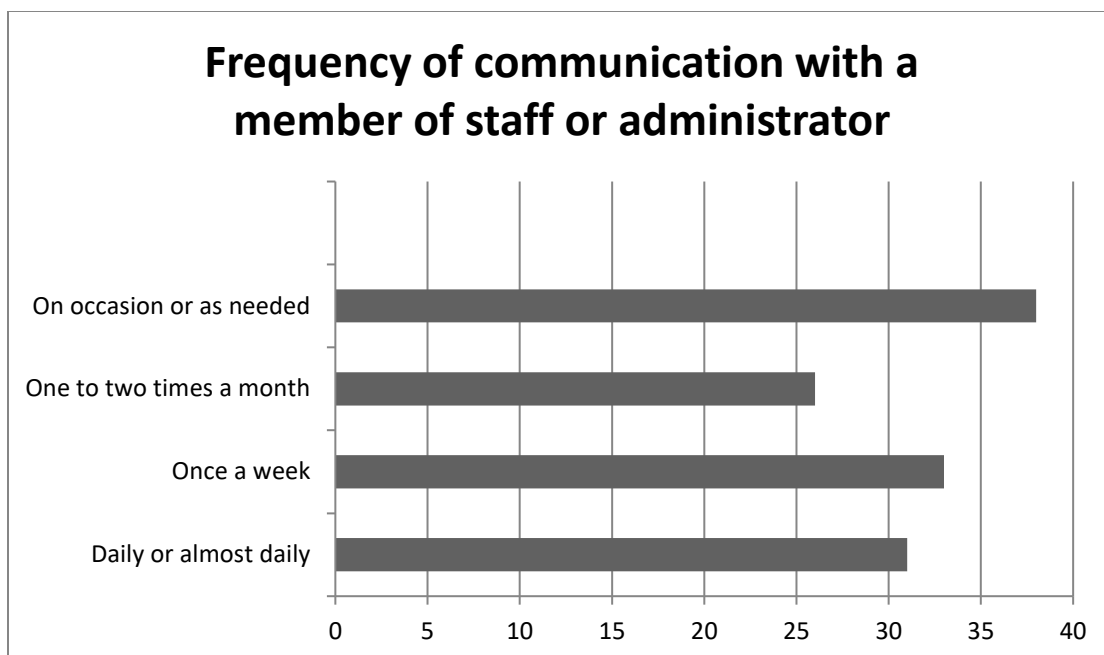


Figure 1. Question: How often do you have a conversation with a staff member (teacher, administrator) at your child's school?

Question 1b. If ever, what kind of conversation was it? (homework help, disciplinary, concern)? In response to this particular question, parents indicated that some type of a casual conversation about attendance, a question, or small talk. One parent stated in a written response that, "I should have more conversations with my child's teacher but it is all about having the time." This is where Epstein's types were coded in the response. Only two out of the 143 responses related to Epstein's Type 5 and two more related to Type 3; Volunteering and Decision Making. Six of the responses related to Type 6: Collaboration with the Community. Twelve were related to Parenting Type 1, and 38 related to Type 4: Learning at Home. Finally, the most referenced of Epstein's Types in this particular question was Type 2 with an overwhelming number of 65 responses, which equated to 45% of the responses.

Question 1c. Who initiated the conversation- you or the school staff?

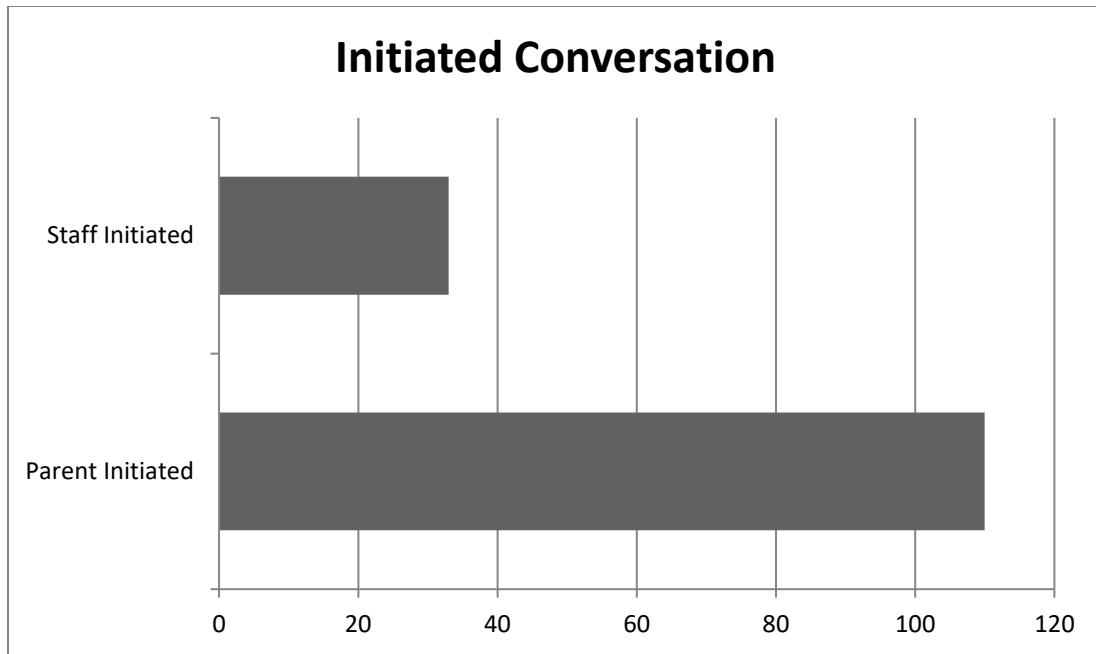


Figure 2. Question: Who initiated the conversation- you or the school staff?

Question 2a. How many parent-teacher conferences do you attend each school year?

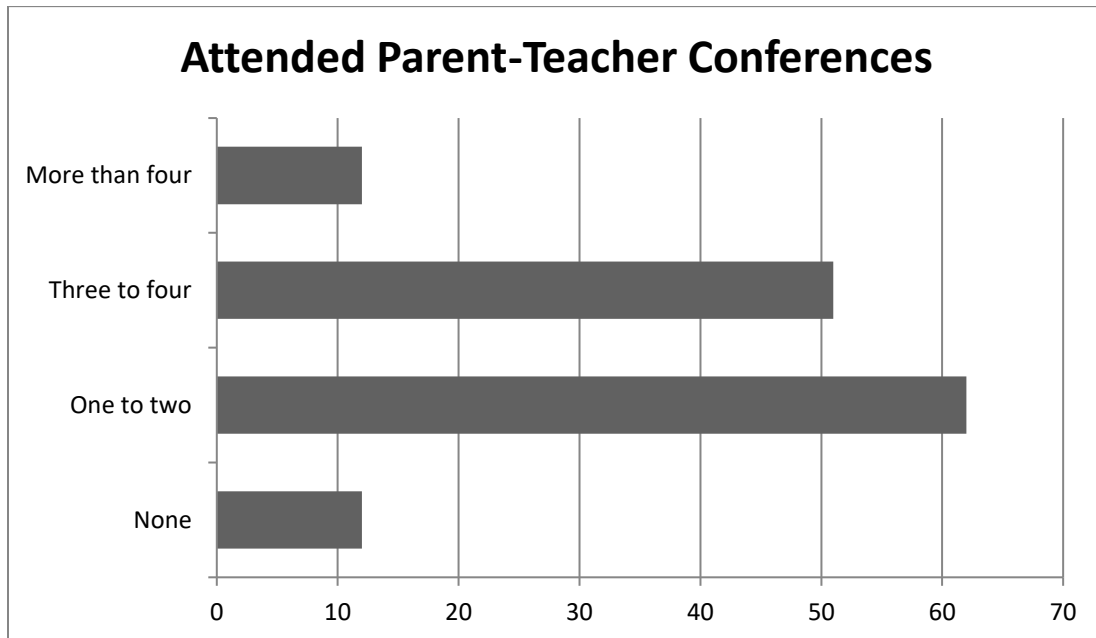


Figure 3 Question: How many parent-teacher conferences do you attend each school year?

Question 2b. Please describe your experiences. When pressed for a description of the experience in an open ended section, parents used the following words: Informative, helpful, enjoyable, pleased, rushed, positive, happy, basic, organized, informal, and useful. Many parents indicated that it was a good opportunity to set goals with students and get resources to help their child succeed. One parent remarked that the “teacher gave us information about how my kid did in the classroom. Teacher also shared test results.”

Another parent called the conferences “Very informative. All staff are friendly and willing to help or listen to my concerns.”

Some parents mentioned their experiences at previous schools, “Parent teacher conferences at my child’s old school were informative as well as confrontational for some parents. Some took that time to express all of their frustration instead of looking for a solution. We were also informed of concerns and upcoming events/projects.” Several mentioned that meetings were constructive, useful, meaningful and energetic. One particular parent indicated that, “Some of the best school activity ideas come out of these meetings”. Other comments made favored student led conversations at parent-teacher conferences and the desire to access teachers during pre-determined office hours. Other parents mentioned that the teachers were helpful to the students and expressed concerns over troubling subjects and gave kids tools to use for studying. Having parent-teacher conferences during the evening and weekend hours was mentioned multiple times as something that was favored by parents. Furthermore, one parent mentioned attending only one or two conferences per year, and felt comfortable enough to reach out to the teacher at any time if there were concerns.

Question 3a. Have you been offered a home visit by your child’s teacher?

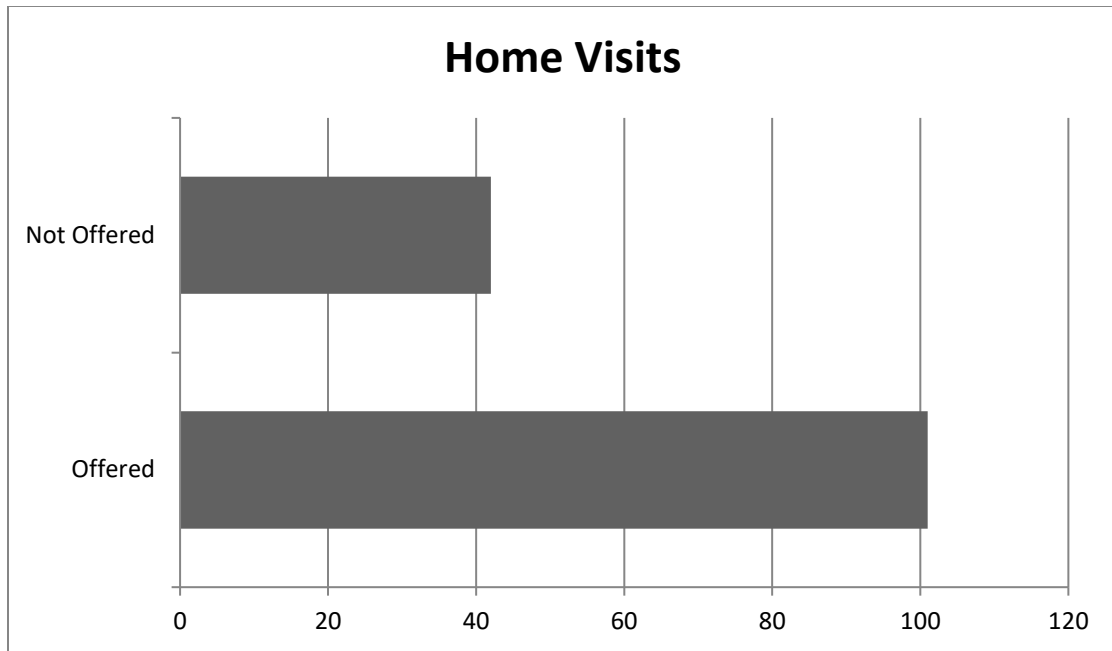


Figure 4. Question: Have you been offered a home visit by your child’s teacher?

Survey results indicated that GSA indeed had offered a Home Visit to 101 out of the 142 participants.

Question 3b. Did you accept?

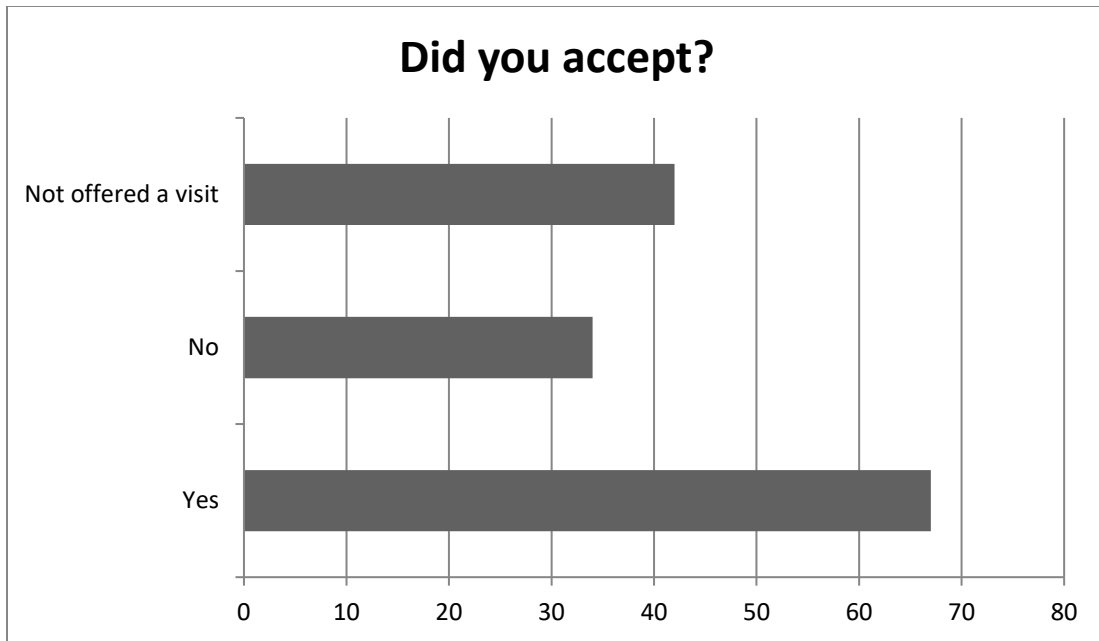


Figure 5. Question: Did you accept?

Question 3c. Where did you meet? (home or elsewhere)

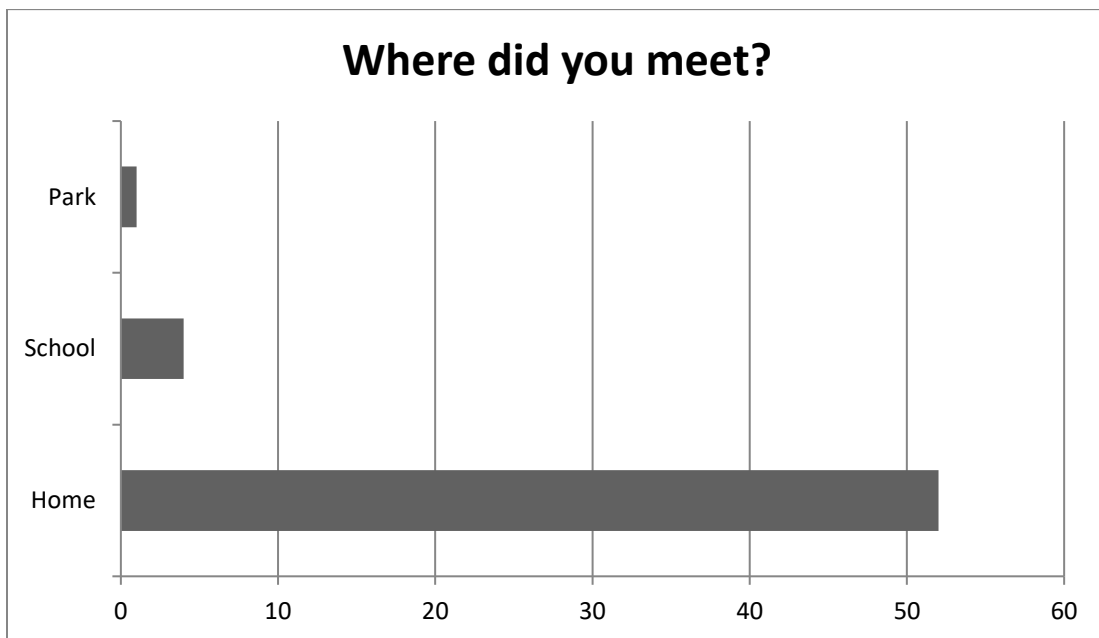


Figure 6. Question: Where did you meet (home or elsewhere)?

When asked to confirm the meeting place agreed upon, over 50 of the parents indicated that the home was used for the visit, while some others indicated the school or sometimes a nearby park was used as the agreed meeting place. As discovered by the researcher in the teacher focus group, if the parents do not wish to have the teacher visit in the home, they are allowed to choose another location, within reason, that would be the meeting place for the Home Visit. As described in the graphic below, almost all of the parents that had participated in a Home Visit agreed to host the visit in their own home. A handful of responses indicated that the school or a park was used as the location for the home visit. One person surveyed stated he/she did not agree with the (home visit) program in an open comment section.

Question 4a. Have you ever been invited to help in your child’s classroom by the teacher?

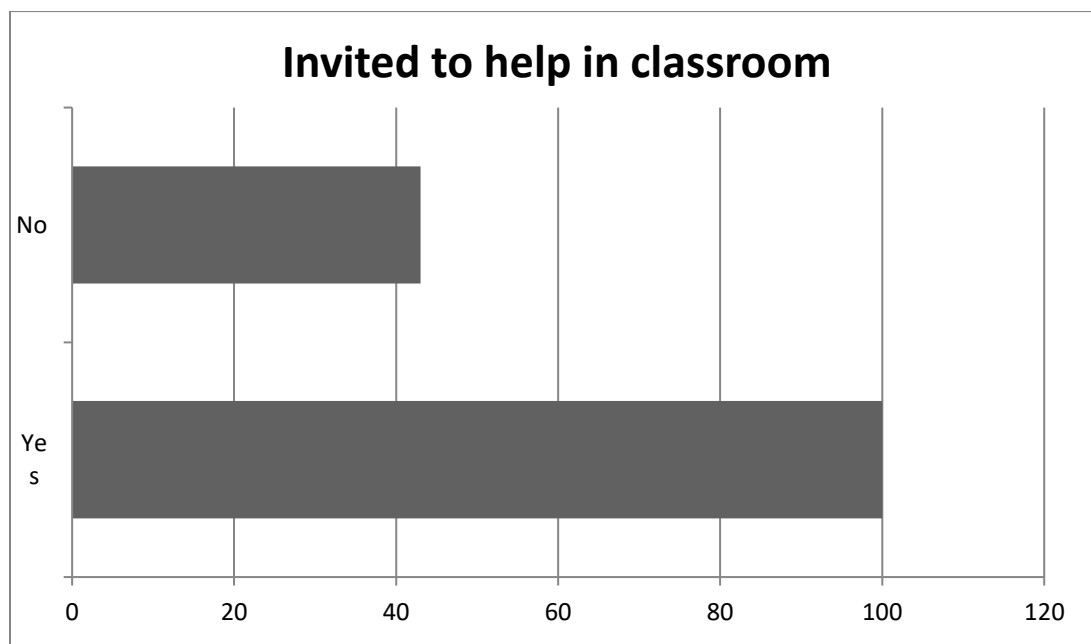


Figure 7. Question: Have you ever been invited to help in your child’s classroom by the teacher?

Question 4b. How were you invited? (newsletter, in person, etc.)

Furthermore, in the parent survey, 100 parent respondents indicated that they had been invited to help in the classroom at some point; most often the invitation had been in written correspondence form. Some of the responses included more than one method of invitation. When asked if the parent had accepted such invitation, 111 responded. Approximately 70% of parents said that yes, they had accepted the invitation. It was assumed by the structure of the previous question that parents had recalled multiple occurrences in which they had been invited, and that at one point or another, they had indeed agreed to attend.

Question 4c. Did you accept that invitation?

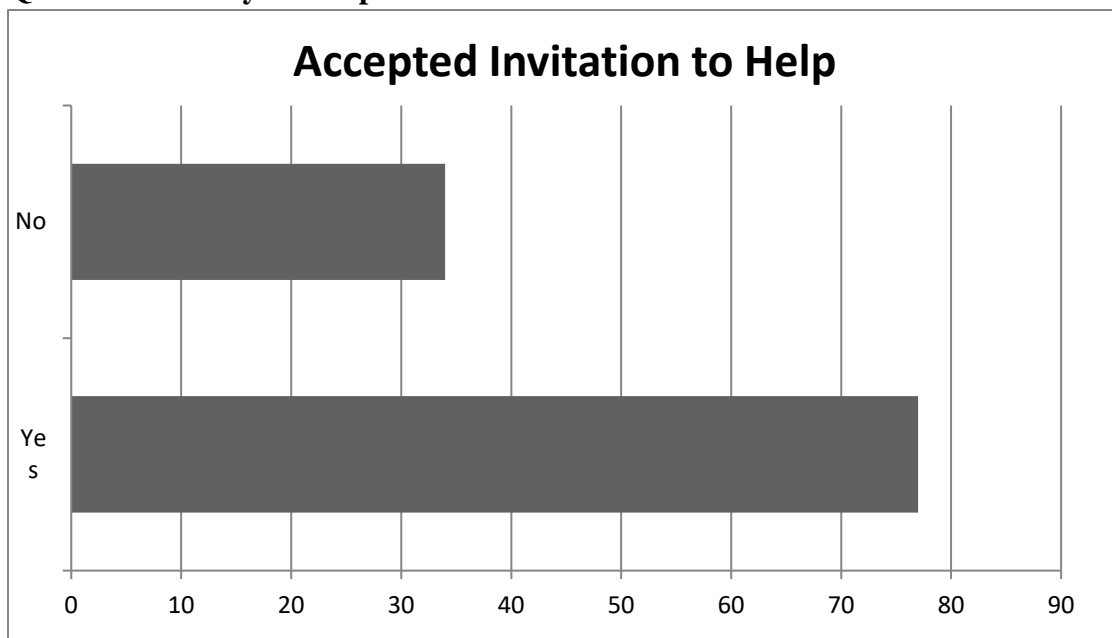


Figure 8. Question: Did you accept that invitation?

Question 4d. If the answer to 4c is “no”, please explain why you declined the invitation at the time.

The reason that the vast majority of parents (25 written responses) to decline the invitation was due to work obligations. Other responses included the following: was not invited; I do not have time; I am a full time student; my son was doing fine in school; and lack of childcare.

Question 5. How often do you help your child with homework? Seventy seven parents responded that they help their child(ren) with homework “every day” while the others mentioned they helped their students as needed, or only as the child requested it. Two parents indicated that they do not help students with homework, and one of those two indicated that the child did not have homework yet.

One parent chose to elaborate on the method she had used in the past:

Last year I trusted my son, who was in seventh grade, to be responsible for his school work both home and at school. I asked if he did his work and studied. I was told that he did in fact do his studying and tests. However this was a bad plan and backfired. He wasn't keeping up and wasn't studying. This year I am 100% involved and not trusting his word. I am logging into the school's website for school work information and discussing, checking and going over all the information. In the past when he was younger learning basics of reading and math, I used to work with him each night. I thought he had grown and matured to do this on his own at 13, but he had not. I again have vowed to do the same thing as this is a sure path to success. Young people in middle school still need a high degree of help and guidance in my opinion.

The school used consumable textbooks, and the curriculum this year has changed to reflect the Common Core standards. Materials designed for use in schools were

scrutinized by parents because it promoted different ways to learn math, which was not totally understood by parents that were educated in a different era. This was a common problem identified across the state. Some parents indicated the belief that teachers should teach the material at school, not at home, “Homework should be review work from class and if too much assistance is needed from me, then my child is not paying attention or needs additional assistance or reviewing.”

Several parents indicated in the survey responses that their children did not need or did not want assistance from parents with the homework. Examples included: “He usually does not require my help with homework - very rarely does he need my assistance in doing the work. But I do help him to stay organized and on top of his assignments”; “Rarely, as my child is self-motivated and is able to complete on their own”; “I make sure he has a good location (desk) and supplies to complete his homework, but it is up to him to get it done. If he asks for advice, I give it”; “A few days a week. I want to do daily but I usually cannot”; “I tried my best. However, most of the time kids did not want to get help.” A parent further commented:

Very seldom. She is very strict with her work; she comes home from school, gets herself a snack and sits down and completes all of her homework before anyone else is home. If she has questions, we provide help, but we have found that she is not as challenged as perhaps she should be and does not require outside assistance.

Other parents stated, “I help often when the aftercare program didn't have a chance” and

“Not very often because my student completes his homework at aftercare. I do look over the homework to make sure it was completed correctly. We read together every night before bed.”

In the survey, an overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that communication between teachers and parents was also adequate.

Question 6. How often do you speak to your child about their activities at school?

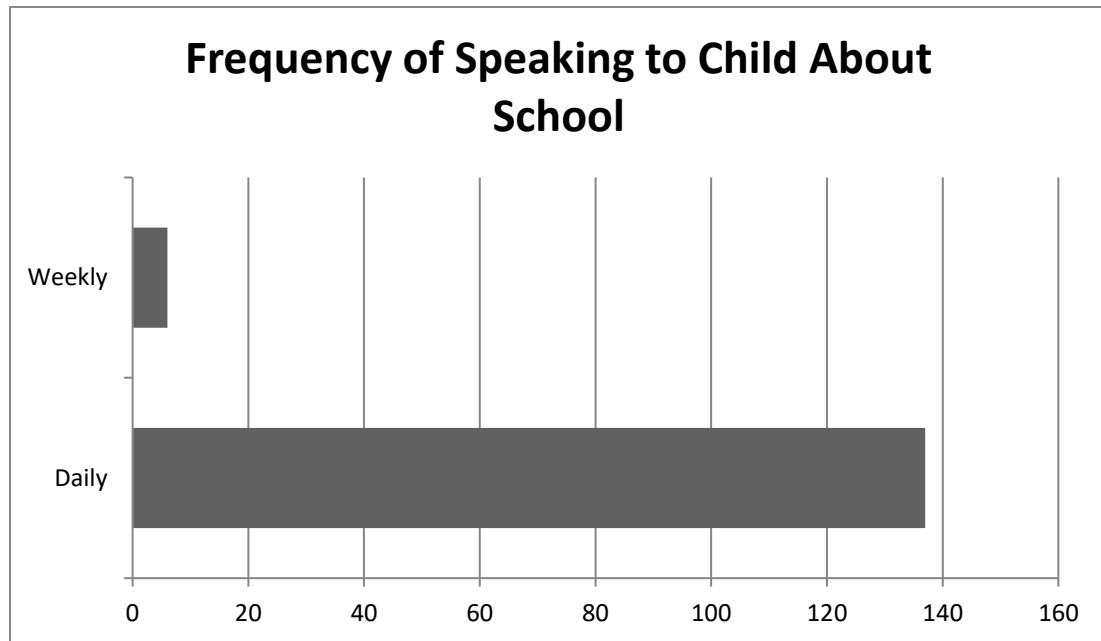


Figure 9. Question: How often do you speak to your child about their activities at school?

Question 7. Do you feel that communication between teachers and parents at this school is adequate?

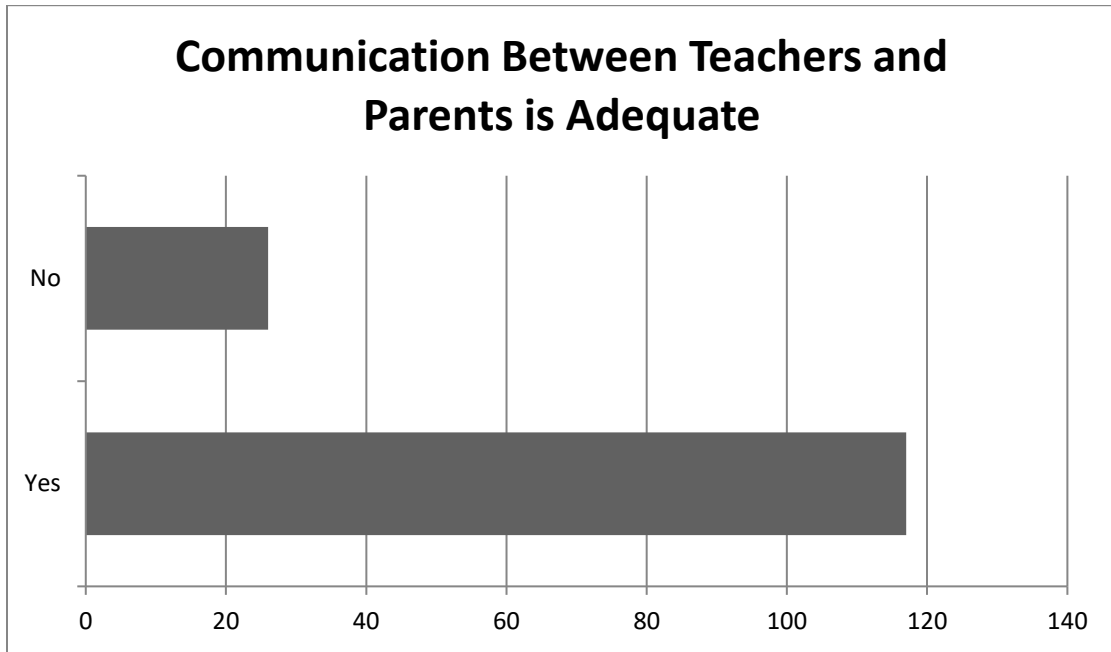


Figure 10. Question: Do you feel that communication between teachers and parents is adequate at this school?

Question 8. Do you feel that the communication between administration and parents is adequate?

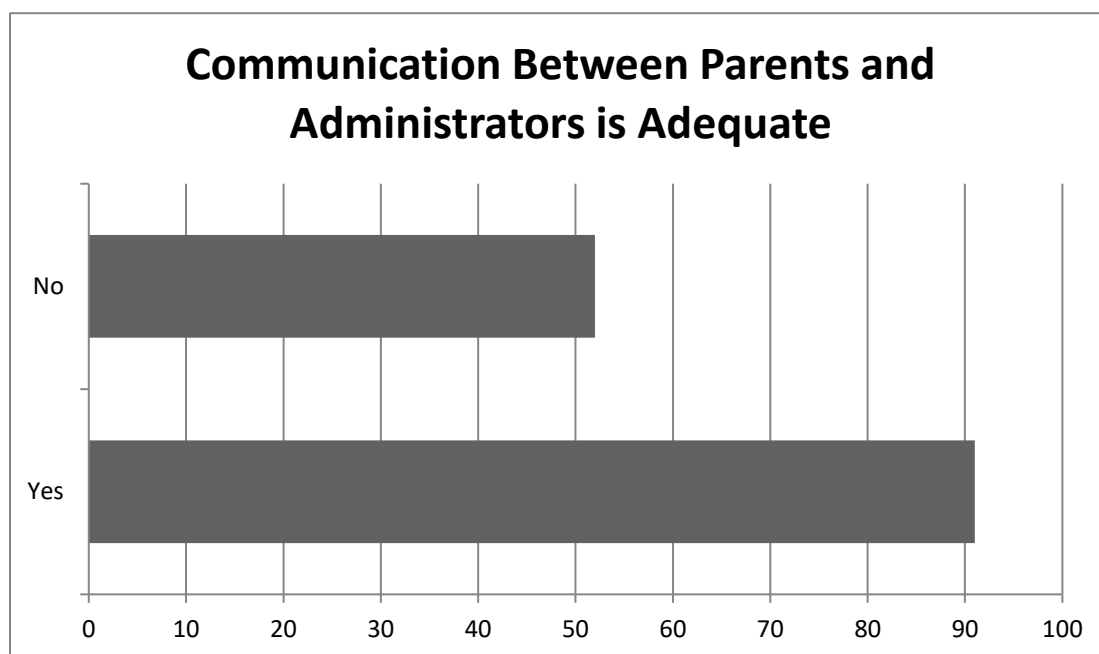


Figure 11. Question: Do you feel that the communication between administrators and parents is adequate?

It was noted within several places in the survey that dismissal time was a good time in which parents were able to communicate with both teachers and administrators, and that this occurs either on a daily or almost daily basis. Pick up and drop off events at the school were a daily routine for families.

Many parents indicated through survey responses that the conferences were extremely beneficial. One parent stated, "They are valuable and informative. I feel like my child's teachers care for my child and their well-being and development." Another parent said, "They are helpful in knowing what my child is doing in class, and if they are meeting or exceeding expectations." An additional parent added, "I go to every parent-teacher meeting they offer. I like to know how my son is doing. If there is an issue we can work out a plan with the teach so we are on the same page."

Question 9. Are you or have you been involved as a member or volunteer in any school program or activity at the school?

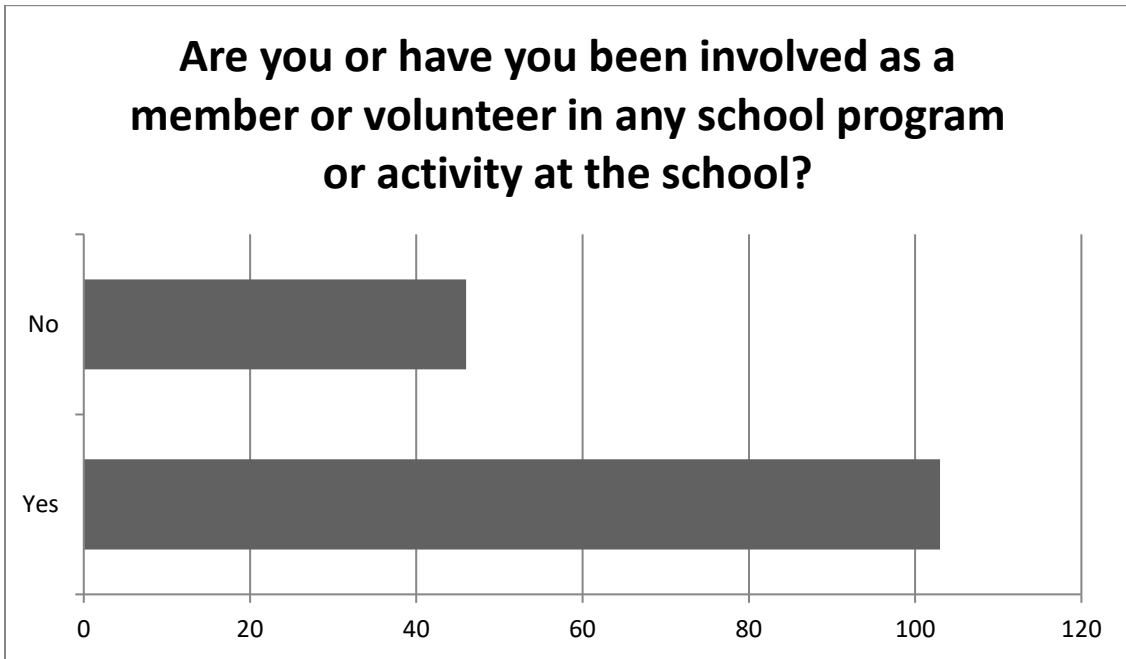


Figure 12. Question: Are you or have you been involved as a member or volunteer in any school program or activity at the school?

Question 9b. If so, which one? In the survey, parents included a vast variety of events and organizations they had been involved in: field trips, classroom parties, school projects, staff luncheons, book fairs, PTO, Grandparents Day, Holiday Bazaar, Teacher Appreciation Week, decorating the school, coaching school sports, parents meetings, awards banquets, fundraisers, band functions, Men’s Club, volunteer to administration, Girls on the Run program, Celebrity Reader, supervising recess, supervision in the classroom, Eighth Grade Graduation, Student Council, Robotics Club, playground duty, movie night, auction, athletics department assistant, COCA (drama), cafeteria duty, Families in Need Committee, Lego Club, Honor Roll Dinner, Box Tops for Education, Art/Craft Fair, Girl Scouts, painting walls, and Homecoming.

Question 10. Are you aware of the school’s philosophy, policies and practices concerning parent participation?

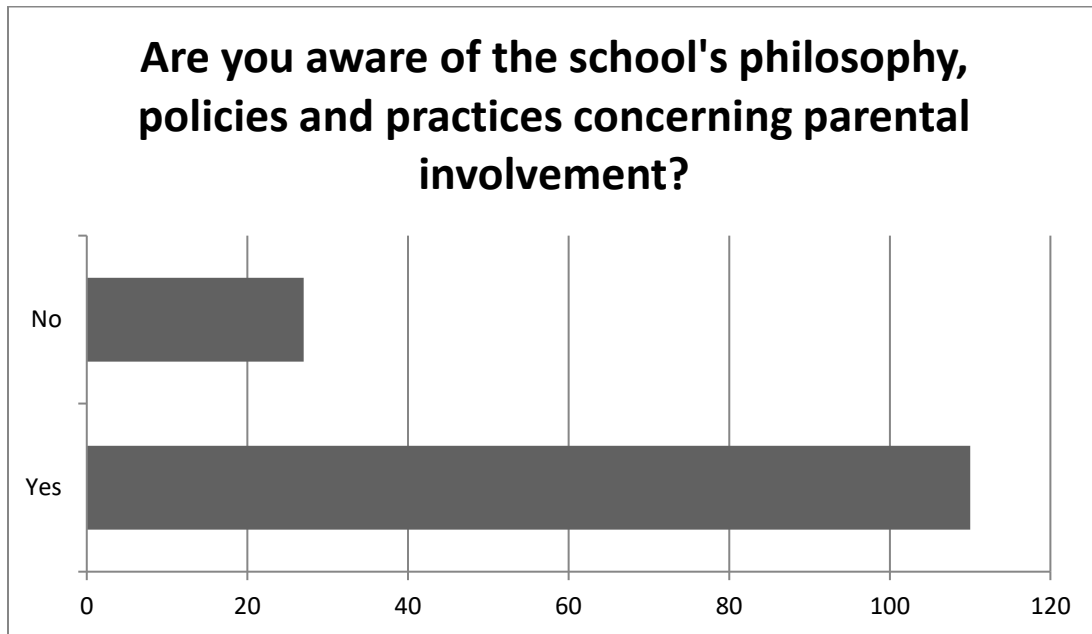


Figure 13. Question: Are you aware of the school’s philosophy, policies, and practices concerning parent participation?

In the survey, respondents had a wide variety of answers in relation to the question asked about frequency of communication. The reports were based on actual numbers of respondents. Interestingly, when surveyed, over 100 of the 143 parents indicated that indeed, they had been aware of the school’s philosophy and policies of parental involvement. This conflicted with the general knowledge of the focus groups on such policies and procedures.

Question 11. What recommendations might you make to the school or the school’s teachers to increase communication and engagement between the school and its parents?

A large portion of parents indicated that little or no change was needed in terms of increasing communication, “The teachers are always available. We have email addresses. If anyone feels there is a lack of communication, they are not trying.” Approximately 57 out of 143 parents said “no change” or nothing. Some other popular suggestions were: less administration turnover so that traditions can be developed; better communication from school to parents in middle/high levels;

Better communication when student grades are slipping; more advanced notice/communication for events at the school; and less paper communication; and more online or email communication

One parent summarized the growth the school has made in recent years,

GSA has come far in attempting to increase their communication with parents.

Forms are regularly sent home (although not always in a timely manner), they have established Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, and utilize School Reach phone program.

Another parent noted,

The communication has improved since the school first opened. The grade school is doing a pretty good job with communication. The middle school still has issues, mostly because that age student is not always reliable to relay information.

Question 12. What benefits do you believe are reaped by students when parents are involved in their children’s schooling?

Parents gave a variety of answers for this particular question, but generally believed that it keeps kids focused, set an example for importance of schooling,

behavioral and learning problems go away, betters education, gives sense of responsibility and ownership, better results, behavioral and academic benefits.

One parent responded “none” to this question.

Some specific responses reiterated the main ideas listed in the first paragraph, above:

“Parents and children feel more invested when they are involved. It also establishes a certain ownership and pride concerning your school.” Another parent mentioned that, “They see education as a priority when we make it a priority.” Other parents indicated the responsibility for being their child’s advocate and to teach the child to also take responsibility for his or her actions as the child advances in grade levels. It is the parents job to teach their children to respect the rules, teachers, administration and other students.” Praise came from parents/legal guardians on the school itself. The atmosphere of the school was regarded as positive and that the school provides opportunities that most other schools would be able to.

Many emphasized that the parents must play a role in ensuring the positive attitude and enthusiasm about school, so that students continue with the same type of attitude. One parent elaborated, “Involved parents are the most important resource partner to the school and its administrators. When students know their parents place a high value on educational attainment, they are inspired and encouraged by their support. Schools also benefit greatly from the skills, community resources, and insights parents can contribute to the school community.”

Question 13. Please indicate the building(s) in which your child(ren) attend school.

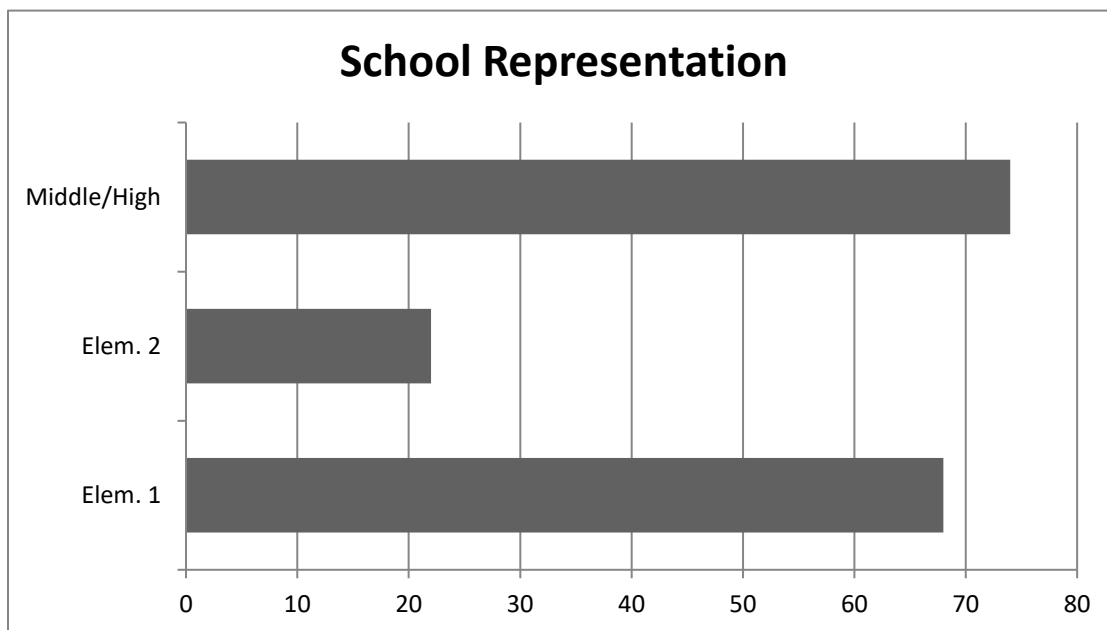


Figure 14. Question: Please indicate the building(s) in which your child(ren) attend school.

The results of the information gathered by the researcher led to the development of the questions used in the focus group sessions. As a result of the responses, the emergence of several major themes is discussed in the next chapter. The discovery of the themes did confirm that the research questions asked at the beginning of the study were relevant.

Focus Group Interviews

Most of the members of the group were engaged in the group discussion during this period. Often, as one person spoke others would be nodding in agreement silently or making other nonverbal gestures in agreement. They seemed comfortable with one another even though they may not have ever worked together in the same building.

During the administrator focus group, the participants seemed comfortable in the session and with the questions asked (see Appendix D). They politely waited for the

colleague to finish a statement and added to the comment when it was appropriate. Often, the administrator's verbal responses were quite long and detailed. Many examples were provided by the administrators, and the conversation was positive.

The parent focus group session was held in one of the elementary school buildings after another morning school event. Again, the group attitude was positive, overall. Several parents opted to stay after the event, and spent a half of hour of their time to participate in the group session. They were mostly positive and often seemed comfortable adding on to one another's comments and examples, although there was no indication that they had worked together previously. The researcher's questions for the parent focus group are identified in Appendix F of this document.

Administrator Focus Group

Awareness of school philosophy or policies. The researcher began the focus group with an inquiry about the philosophy or policies of the school in relation to parental involvement. Interestingly, similar to the teacher and parent group, no one was able to immediately identify a particular policy or written statement that gave any indication of requirements or explicit expectations in regards to parental involvement. The first administrator that responded to the inquiry indicated no known philosophy statement behind parent involvement for the school, but indicated instead that it was just generally accepted and encouraged practices. She also indicated, "It's just kind of what happens...we want the parents involved." The administrator went on to describe how they welcomed parents in the school by indicating, "We have an open door type policy where parents can come in and see what's happening in the classrooms and help in any way that they can, or be present even if they're not helping."

Events that invite families. Administrators quickly moved to describe the wide variety and frequency in which they host events at the school that encourage and invite parents, grandparents, and other family members into the building to experience a sense of belonging and community. One stated in particular:

We have many, many events throughout the year that lend itself for that opportunity for parental involvement. So...it's not a philosophy or its anything written, but it is definitely one of the key points our school is to engage parents as well as students.

Some of the events mentioned by the administrators were Family Breakfasts, Curriculum Nights, and Parent-Teacher Conferences. Epstein (2010) considered the types of events as Type 2, and help to increase parent feelings of being welcomed by the school and for fostering positive family-school relationships.

Forming good relationships. Administrators valued time with parents because they believed it gave them a chance to build an attitude of collaboration and teamwork that would help educate the student and keep them on track behaviorally both at home and at school. Sometimes, reaching parents and emphasizing the importance of working as a team could be a challenge for the administrators. One of the administrators mentioned, for example, that there are particular parents that refuse to see disciplinary action as a team action. Some parents, as indicated in an annual survey distributed by the EMO, believe that students have not been disciplined fairly at the school. This may also cause a negative attitude when administrators attempt to communicate and collaborate with particular families. However, they felt that it was the only way for the child to benefit. Getting the parent in the building was a way to initiate the relationship. Once this

relationship was established, parents could give administrators valuable information about the student that may have helped them understand behavior or general needs of the student. One administrator claimed it is a way to get information essential for motivation, “Sometimes our parents are our best resources to connect to students and student engagement/involvement will result in student success and sometimes parents give us the best insight on how to get them engaged; how to [sic] get them involved.”

Home visits. A unique strategy that has been encouraged and rewarded through the model created by the EMO is the home visit. Administrators identified the home visit as another way to initiate that very important relationship between the school and the parent that was essential. One administrator claimed:

It’s just bridging the home and school and making the parents more comfortable with things because if we’re on their turf, it makes them a little more comfortable to initially to then come and talk to us and see that it’s not just ours.

Another administrator added:

I did home visits as a teacher and now as part of administration and depending on which family you go to, you know, you set up your time and you might say, okay I’m gonna allow 15 minutes for this home visit and it’s just a quick in, how are things going this is what we have, and I’ve been in homes where they have a meal prepared for you and you’re not there for 15 minutes. You’re there for much longer. . .the kids, it’s their home, they want at the elementary level, they want to show you the entire house. This is where we keep this; this is where we keep that. And what I have found, even if it’s a family that who is not real involved at the

school, once you've been there, you know they pick up their child and then they see you and then they start waving because you've made a different connection.

She continued to discuss how it impacted the teacher's acceptance for diversity with different cultures of students:

With having some of our different families of different cultures you know you go into their home and you see the setup of how that culture operates or is run or how exists- whatever you want to call it. And it has given me a deeper appreciation, but I think it also stirs up a sense of pride for that family that you know I went to a Bosnian family's home and they had traditional Bosnian treats and Bosnian coffee and they were very excited to be able to share that with us. So, they go very, very smoothly. My initial fear, I guess, as a teacher, is I want to go into a home and have a conference which I think would be the worst thing for us to do is go in and use that as a conference time because we are on their territory. See. I've just gone in and said we're here to just to kind of bridge, show each other who we are, and then I let the parents run with it and they just do a lot of talking.

Home Visits offered other types of information to the teacher or administrator, as identified by one administrator in the interview:

If you go into a home and you know the bed is in the living room, it gives you a whole different clearer picture of okay why this child may come to school tired. Because the TV's there and everybody else is sitting around and the child goes to bed there.

Some teachers and administrators go on visits during the school year, but one administrator encouraged the idea of going on the Home Visits prior to the start of the

school year. She indicated that for her, it was beneficial because, she then found “the parents were very comfortable” once the school year started and the parents and teacher had already formed a relationship. In Epstein’s (2010) work, Home Visits would increase the communication between home and school, as well as build relationships amongst parents and school personnel. Therefore, Home Visits would fall under Type 2. Because Home Visits often result in communications about homework expectations and providing a particular setting for the child to complete homework every night, this strategy could fall under Type 4- Learning at Home.

Unintended consequences: Transportation. Since the school did not provide transportation for its students, parents or other guardians were required to drop off and pick up students at the school site. An unintended consequence of this requirement was that parents or guardians had the opportunity to interact every day with the teachers and/or administrators at the school. One administrator explained the process of picking up children at the school:

At the elementary level, parents pick up, and so there is daily communication with the parents. At (our) campus, which is the only one I can speak of, our parents are there 20-30 minutes before dismissal, talking to the people who are around.

A parent indicated, “Upon dismissal time, the principal is outside every day and I believe that at [GSA Elementary 2] as well. So they’re greeting people, getting kids out of the car saying hello.”

Another administrator emphasized the benefits of having that pickup time to address issues immediately, before they had the chance to develop into something much bigger, stating:

We're getting people in and out of the cars but if someone has a burning question say hey, pull on over and let's try to address it because I think we're in a society that, I hate to say it, but people want answers right then and there. They don't have time to wait.

The administrator continued in her description of her experiences and the success she has felt with this philosophy:

I even pride myself [sic] is, if a parent emails me, within that day, at the end of the day you've got an answer for what it was you asked because I understand it. It's like you make them wait and they get frustrated and it changes then that dialogue becomes something different.

Parent teacher conferences. Another strategy that the administration believed was successful in strengthening the relationship between parent and teacher were parent-teacher conferences. The school required two to four parent-teacher conferences annually, and most parents participated, according to both the parent survey conducted by the researcher and a separate set of surveys distributed by the administration of each school building. One of the drawbacks of the parent-teacher conferences, stated in the administrator interviews, was that they were scheduled to have only brief periods of time to communicate, and for many students, parents, and teachers, this was not nearly enough time to completely accomplish the objective desired.

However, the numbers were reported as typically high in terms of participation, "We do a count of how many parents came and I think we were in the high 80s uh for the first conference, uh last year. And that's, that's a pretty nice percentage of parent attendance," said one administrator. One administrator gave an account of what was

typically covered in those brief meetings. She indicated that they had communicated in these meetings about concerns, goals for the students, and just generally had taken the opportunity to share information about that child. She mentioned that with this method for exchanging information and relationship building between teacher-parent, the connection remained stronger and was helpful to the child's growth and progress. Parent-Teacher conferences increased the level of communication amongst the parties involved, but, according to conversation with the teachers, it could have resulted in recruiting parent volunteers. Therefore, Parent-Teacher conferences would be considered Type 2 and Type 3. It could also contribute to more guided learning at home, which is considered Type 4.

Flexibility in scheduling and other strategies. Even though the school had scheduled the parent-teacher conference days on the weekends and evenings, they also recognized that not all parents may have been able to make it to the school during those time frames. In order to increase participation and reach these parents, the school administrators said that sometimes they had to adjust:

When we have a set times that we have on our academic calendar for conferences, [sic] I and teachers have done it in the past last year is sometimes those schedules don't work for parents and many teacher that asks, if they can't come here, Ms. . . . Can I go meet them?

Other strategies used varied by building, grade level and of course, by teacher.

One administrator provided some examples:

At open house, most of our teachers have sign- up sheets that are out and are very specific in what they need. You know you can sign up to come and laminate, to

come in and copy, and to read to the students, to help with field trips, to take things home and cut them out. So our teachers have it set up right at the beginning of the year. We have room parents who help with the classroom parties, often go on the field trips for chaperoning, and things like that.

At the middle and high school level, an administrator indicated how parents are still involved but are involved in a little bit different way than at the elementary level due to building location and size:

We utilize parents quite a bit here. Lunch and recess assistance. We actually have parents helping with traffic. We are very landlocked here. We have a lot of students who walk. We now have some student drivers and we have no parking lot. So we have a lot of students and a lot of traffic on (school's street) and we are actually having parents help out with traffic, crossing guard duties and things like that. Lunch and recess, sitting in the classroom observing, and other ways as well.

Parents are visible in the middle/high school building, but not as much as at the elementary levels. The school does reach out and also obtains offers from parents to help in the day to day operations. They provide additional services that the school needs in order to function properly and smoothly. For example, some local neighbors were extremely dissatisfied with the increased amount of traffic that was building up upon the school's initial start-up year. The GSA school was established in a location near a neighborhood and adjacent to another charter school. Therefore, the neighbors claimed, that the traffic had increasingly multiplied and caused precious street parking spots to vanish. Parents in the community offered to talk to those particular neighbors about the

problem, watch the patterns of traffic, and develop a system for drop off and pick up that worked well. This type of work is invaluable to the administrators at the school, and goes unpaid. Epstein's (2010) Type 3 (Volunteering), Type 5 (Decision Making) and Type 6 (Collaboration with Community) were all represented within this conversation.

Obstacles and strategies to overcome them. Administrators acknowledged that there were obstacles in the way that actually discourage parental involvement. The main obstacle identified by all three groups (parents, teachers, and administrators) in this study was a work schedule that would not allow for participation during the normal school day hours. Administrators commented that they have worked to find ways to identify parent talents, offered options outside of the normal schedule, or invited parents to participate in ways that do fit their schedules.

One described her building's challenges:

In our building, due to the economical differences in our building, they want to be involved, but life doesn't allow them to because of work, so it's a very small number of the PTA that are very much engaged in the building, but you know in time, they'll burn out. To me, I feel the challenge is us coming up with a way to be creative-that little small things that how parents can be engaged without having to feel guilty that I can't be here for that or I can't be here for that, but you could probably help to do that. that maybe in our school environment creates a way where involvement doesn't have to be that you are physically in the building. but that's just as into our second year, you have a lot of parents that have awesome talents but they don't fit into the time frame that's been created but can do things different times, you know, different whatever. Like I had one

parent came and she says I work, she says but I would love to, if you need me to help, to do something in the office on such and such day, this day, I, I just want to be here. I just want to do something. And I was like, oh, okay. Um, I come in here on some Saturdays. You want to come up here?

She continued on to describe how they worked with parents so that they felt they could contribute in some way that was significant:

So it's figuring out because they want to, but sometimes they don't have the timetables we have created is not the time table but they so want to be engaged, so I think that it's just figuring out your population and your customers. How can we not get caught up in our little schedule? How do we find ways in which parents can still play a big part of their kids' education without the normally scheduled kind of things and sometimes it's the little small things that makes a huge impact for us doing stuff.

In addition to working with parents to connect outside of the normal school day schedule, the administrators mentioned the fact that they make an effort, as a school, to identify ways in which to use parent unique talents or skills to assist in the classroom:

You know maybe you're doing an economy lesson and you've got somebody who works at a bank you know, and they can come in and do something financial with the kids. Well that wasn't on your sign-up sheet. You know, so finding out what the parents have to offer us.

One administrator mentioned that the participation rate increased with some type of incentive provided for parents or their students. Citing an example, "We had a PTO

meeting last week and I put it on Facebook, I put it on the flyer, any parent who came, their child got a free dress slip. We had more parents than we have ever had.”

Another strategy that the administrators found helpful in the past was to piggyback meetings on top of another:

The eighth grade decided to have their eighth grade meeting directly following (the PTO meeting). So parents were supposed to come to the eighth grade meeting and they were invited to PTO, well they just stayed. You know, so that I think, doing a two-for and offering something often engages them.

Parents are busy, and again often have inflexible work schedules that prevent them from participating. Time off is valuable, and they must choose whether an event is worth taking the time off. Giving parents options to attend events and meetings at a variety of times during the weekdays and evenings, and condensing a lot of information into a small amount of time seems to be a good solution for most families. Also, providing some type of incentive for families when they attend events (such as a small gift or free food) seems to increase participation. Epstein’s Types 2 (Communicating), Type 3 (Volunteering) and Type 5 are represented.

Increasing communication. Administrators claimed that they consciously had given advance notices to parents more often in the 2014-2015 academic year than in the past. When asked about the communication between administrators and parents, one administrator immediately stated that there was probably room for improvement, but that overall communication has been a focus for the school as a whole recently. An administrator who led an elementary school which served a more diverse population, infused with many English Language Learners indicated:

We recognize that after we had did the parent survey about how many actually went online and actually did that survey, we saw that although a 70 percentile [sic] or even 80 percent, there's still a small population of our families that either may not have that level of technology and so when we say I'm sending things out and it's on the website, it's in School Reach, and they've got the phones, we still have a small population that we see that come in and they'll say, they'll ask those questions and so we make weekly, monthly little bullet of dates of things that are happening and then we also have it written in their language because we have a very huge Bosnian population in our building. And then we're posting it on the front door so it's like a little reminder.

She stated that the school had also learned with a particular portion of that English as a Second Language population that the parents might not actually be able to read in the home language, but can speak the home language. This made the task of communicating effectively even more challenging for the school staff. One way to that the school has overcome this obstacle is to hire a few teachers who speak the native language. Those teachers immediately made connections with the ELL families and actually made one on one calls to those particular families on a regular basis to connect with them and share any school news or events of which they might need to be aware. The school took extra steps to ensure good communication was happening, and that all of the parents were getting the important messages and opportunities to engage in their child's education and school activities.

An administrator mentioned:

Having been with us (the school) since Day 1, we've made huge strides in communication. And I think the biggest thing we've done is advanced warning. You know, letting people know in ample time. We could have sent it out 20 different ways, but if you send it out the day of, or the day before, that doesn't work. So that's where our biggest change has come. Many other administrators in the session readily agreed with the statement as it was being spoken by using nonverbal communication. . . . Something that I heard parents talking about is we did get our school calendar out earlier this year. Which was good. And the parents were happy to see and it has those dates already marked. So I think that's gonna [sic] help with the participation as well.

Administrators admitted that they realized that families were very busy and that giving them advance notice would help with planning. They indicated that planning in advance would allow parents to be able to attend as many events that the school organized as possible. Even though multiple forms of communication were used to reach families, sometimes the messages were not relayed from family member to family member. Administrators and teachers also saw this as part of the problem when discussing effective communications between the school and the family. Epstein's (2010) Type 2 (Communicating) was emphasized here.

Benefits. By encouraging parent involvement, both the students and school benefited. Having parents at the school during these events and the regular school day provided a public relations opportunity for the school that was extremely valuable. If parents were in the school day in and day out, they saw the wonderful things happening and it provided an opportunity for first hand testimony about the quality option that was

being provided for students by the school, administrators and, teachers. Another theme heard clearly was that parent involvement implied that the parent valued education and the school itself. It was believed that if parents were invested in education, this belief filtered down to the child and caused the child to be more invested in the school.

Teacher Focus Group

Awareness of school philosophy or policies. The teachers indicated no real knowledge of the school's policies or philosophy on parental involvement, but they did mention that it was a part of the annual teacher evaluation process. Teachers indicated they were held accountable for their logs on parental involvement and that these logs were reviewed with the teacher on an annual basis. Most teachers agreed with the statement that parental involvement and communication with parents was just a best practice used that was a part of the school's culture.

For example, one teacher said, "There is an aura of what we should do but it's not written down anywhere. . .It's not formally established." Another teacher explained further by stating, "Well there's a few requirements, like part of our evaluations are like to look at the log book and see how many emails you've made." Another teacher mentioned that administration expected four home visits each semester, as it had been stated verbally.

Another teacher coupled the thoughts by stating, "There's no guideline that I know of, that is like you have to talk to a parent five times or something." A different teacher indicated that the practice was more peer taught. An additional educator mentioned that the practice was something that is just frankly expected of teachers. Yet, another educator mentioned:

I think you're gonna see a difference in schools as well. And who our administration is, our vice principal, who is very, very communicative, and she is always telling us this is how I would do this with this, or you know we come to her for questions for some of us.

Events that invite families. An elementary level teacher indicated that the teachers were, "Asked to hold curriculum nights, which a lot of us are having now, we're inviting the parents to come in." This was the only event mentioned in the teacher focus group, besides parent-teacher conferences. No other school wide events were mentioned in the conversations.

Home visits and forming good relationships. When asked about the Home Visit program, most teachers jumped in to the conversation with enthusiasm. All of the teachers in the focus group had experienced a Home Visit. Teachers recalled their visits with positive enthusiasm:

I went on one yesterday, actually. I am at least well received everywhere, everywhere I've been. I think the more I go, it seems like the more they enjoy it almost. You know, I guess it's known that we do that, so um, at least in our school community and um, it's some of them they roll out the red carpet for you to come over to their house.

Another teacher added in with her personal experiences:

I had a parent this week that their child told her that I love Flaming Hot Cheetos and I like Twix. And so she had like two glass dishes on her table; one was Flaming Hot Cheetos and one was Twix Bites.

After laughter from the group, the teacher continued on:

And he had his homework sitting out, and I give [sic] all my students my picture this year, because we were given like 40 of our little wallets, and she had a candle in the middle of the table with Ms. X sitting on it. So I watched over [him] and I thought it was hilarious.

Another teacher joined in to add more enthusiastic reflections about the Home Visit program:

But they do, they seem to really like it and, and you know the kids love it. It sounds weird but you're not alone and they love it when you come see their toys and their room and you know they just – it's taking away the teaching aspect and it's just creating a relationship and the kids really like it regardless of if you really like to do the home visits- the kids love it.

Engaging in the home visits offered an opportunity for teachers to see students in a setting that was comfortable to them, and allowed them to see the child in a different light:

I've been on a home visit with like a couple of kids that are sometimes like a little patience trying, sometimes, and to see them like, as a kid, in like their room, like look at my new jewelry look at my...it's like, they are a kid, I need to have some patience with them. It's like it's a good eye-opening experience.

Many other teachers in the room nodded in agreement and verbalized their agreement with such statement.

It pulls away a curtain in a sense because kind of going off what you two are saying, like, you know, you get a really good sense of how the parent truly is away from the school atmosphere. It kind of takes away the whole like, for them,

the proper, like I have to be proper because I am at school, so you can kind of understand now why your student is acting the way he is. I get a much bigger respect for that student when I go to their house because the next day I have more patience with them. So for me, it like kind of gives me a chance to sit back and say...there is a kid there.

Teachers indicated that the kids loved the attention that they got during and after a Home Visit. It bonded the two more, teachers stated. Teachers said they were then more likely to converse with the individual student and to find a connection after using the Home Visit strategy.

Teachers also indicated that for students, they had been able to see the teacher in a different light:

Some of the kindergarten students think that teachers live at school, so seeing them outside of the school setting is interesting to them. It in a way gives more of a personality to the teacher and makes students see that they are human beings too.

Another teacher mentioned the Home Visit as a great time to have one-on-one attention with the parents to discuss particular issues as related to the child, in a more private setting. Parents, the teacher said, were more likely to open up when they had been visited in the home:

It gives the parents a chance to ask more questions where sometimes it's where they feel like you're so busy we can't really ask you stuff but, it gives them a chance, you know, to ask how's he doing in class, it gives you that one on one. Kind of a conference outside of school.

Teachers indicated that the home visits also had provided them with the opportunity to see and appreciate other cultures and the way they lived, “ If you go to a Turkish or Bosnian family versus a kids come from this area, the, the way you know when you show up, it’s completely different.”

Other teachers agreed:

It also helps me know about their traditions their ethnicity, like, it kind of brings me into their world depending on, like you said, when you do have Turkish students or any other ethnicity student, really it kind of makes you part of their world. It’s really nice.

In relation to English Language Learner students, some teachers mentioned that Home Visits or communicating with parents was a way to get more valuable information, particularly if the child was not yet well versed in the English language:

They just don’t have that language to share that with me and I mean obviously we want to get to that point where we can, and plus sometimes I just need mom and dad to say, here’s what my kid’s about. You know and now I know a little more about them. So sometimes I need mom and dad to tell me this is what’s going on.

Teachers value the opportunity to learn more about the student, particularly if they are from an immigrant family and do not communicate well. In some situations, children who have parents that speak another language than English do not understand how to make the home-school connection when there are two different styles of communication present. Epstein’s Types 2 and 4 were referenced in this particular conversation.

Unintended Consequences: Transportation

The school does not provide transportation to and from school for any of its students. The drop off and dismissal processes are orchestrated so that all parents and students are connected quickly and efficiently upon pick up and that drop off traffic runs smoothly. Although some parents might see this as an inconvenience, the teachers see this as an additional opportunity to connect with parents and communicate more often. One kindergarten teacher indicated:

The majority of them are picked up so I talk to them every day and um if they have questions or I have some people I email I do remind them with 101 the text app and then I have a blog where I put their pictures and stuff, things that we're learning so they can look on there too.

Furthermore, elementary and secondary teacher responses sometimes differed on this topic:

Middle school is a little different because we don't even really see the parents unless there is an issue and they come in. or for conferences but email is a very frequent way of communicating for us and I'd say multiple times a week, or a day, really. There are emails going back and forth between admin and their parents about something. But it really is a focus for those handful and the rest it's like; I might see you once a month.

Another middle/high school building teacher indicated that, "high school is even less. Some high school students' [parents] I've taught three years and I've never met their parents." Another teacher echoed the sentiments of the other elementary level teachers by stating ". Especially I mean, with our school with no busses, they kind of at some point, they have to show their face."

Another teacher implied that there was a direct correlation between transportation and parent involvement,

I think that's as a whole, what's so great about our school. It's that since we don't bus, you do have such a great parent involvement community, but like you were saying there's those that you really need to talk to and they slip through the cracks.

One teacher made implications that the level of commitment by parents was measured by the selection of a school that does not provide transportation for students, "I mean, you have to have a parent that has to drop them off on time, that has to pick them up on time because there's not a bus that is going to do it for you." Another teacher indicated that not providing transportation for students was something that actually "weeded out" the uninvolved parents.

Parent Teacher Conferences

The charter school district required four Parent-Teacher Conference events to be held in the school each academic year (Epstein's Type 2). These conferences were held in the late afternoons and evenings on a Friday and during the mornings and afternoons on a Saturday. This scheduling allowed most working parents to come to the conferences without requesting time off. Teachers are required to attend these conferences and parents make appointments ahead of time to meet with the child's teacher, in 15-30 minute increments. When asked about Parent-Teacher conferences in the focus group discussion, teachers indicated that core subjects get the most attention when it comes to parents, communication, and involvement, especially when it comes to Parent-Teacher conferences:

I teach art, so like I'm there but nobody, I put out, like set up conference if you want, and whatever, but nobody ever has and sometimes you like have people come in and one day we were there for like a whole Saturday and two people came in and one of them just wanted to like, chat about art.

Another fellow non-core subject elementary teacher added:

I have PE; it's like the same way. I, I mean obviously I understand like elementary PE isn't super high up on the priority list when you're coming to a conference but sometimes the only people that come in are just the parents that happen to be there and saw me and felt like maybe they should.

Although the non-core teachers seemed discouraged when discussing parental involvement, a fellow core subject area teacher pointed out the importance of the non-core teachers by stating:

When I was a classroom teacher I utilized the resource of the specials teachers. Somebody else that sees little Johnny or whoever your student is, outside of the classroom, so I know like I've used our computer teacher before and I've also used our reading specialist before to pull in on a conference so that it was not just me saying this is what's going on. I was able to have a few other teachers say this is what we see, so that is something else we try to do with specials teachers.

Flexibility in scheduling and other strategies. One teacher said she felt differently about parental involvement at the middle and high school, "I think it's very different in middle school and high school. There's not really as much of a need." The teachers at this level went on to say that, parents were more involved in field trips and

non-academic events, such as sporting events. However, at the elementary level, many strategies used were identified in the same conversation:

In kindergarten we do celebrity readers. So every Friday parents have the option to sign up and we give them the schedule so they come in to just read to our kids for like 20 or 25 minutes, and they can bring books that they brought from home or the library, or, we have a book already for them. And the kids really like that because to them, they are celebrities. Their parents. It's nice to have them come in and do that.

A fellow teacher added that at the elementary level, they have recruited parents to come and put up bulletin boards and do craft types of activities with students (Epstein's Type 3).

Obstacles and strategies to overcome them. Some teachers made the assumption that the longer the parent leaves the child at school (before and after school care), the less they care about their child's education. One teacher claimed:

One thing I've noticed though is that I thought that it would work for me this year. So the ones that I really need to talk to are also the ones that want to leave their kids at school as long as they can. And so they go to after care.

This teacher continued on to say that she then started to stay late at school sometimes so that she could catch the parents that she needed to speak with. They were surprised to see her at work so late, but she felt that it was worth it to stay.

Another teacher described particular strategies she used in her classroom. She mentioned creating a weekly newsletter that contained tips for parents to use with their children at home. She recommended a nightly routine with completion of homework, and

she felt that these types of things were beneficial to her students and their families. She also mentioned the positive aspects of assigning interactive homework at least once a week (Epstein's Type 4). Another teacher added:

One thing that we do is make the kids' parents sign the top of the homework so we know that they have looked at it, checked it over and helped them as well. We do these science posters in class and I don't usually make it mandatory and I did it right at the beginning of the year so it made me kind of nervous but I only had two students not bring it in by the due date. So again, that doesn't necessarily mean it's a reflection on me but it's a reflection on GSA and the fact that wow this is awesome. You can tell the parents helped out on the posters, but it goes to show that parent involvement ...taking the time and they do care about education.

One middle/high level teacher observed, "I think the parents that I see that don't help are the parents that are struggling with the topics themselves."

Another continued to add in the conversation by stating,

"Which is why I think you see I would think, in the high school level, less and less parent involvement. They probably don't understand the material." Teachers have personal experience with this, as well.

"I have some English barriers too," another teacher added.

"The parents don't speak English. So the kids come to school and are like, 'My parents can't read these letters', so they can't do homework with them."

None of the teachers explained anything that they might have done to make a connection with parents or tried to translate material for non-English speaking or reading

parents. When prompted about items they saw as obstacles for parents to become involved in their child's schooling, one teacher indicated:

Not being able to contact us if they want to have a face-to-face meeting because they can't because of their work schedule. Maybe they work from six to six, or they work nights so they are sleeping while we are awake. . . My biggest problem is that they don't understand the content. So it is kind of a barrier. Or like you said the language.

Communication within families themselves seemed also to be another identified problem with the teachers. Another teacher explained:

I think in both of my classes, there's more parents whom are separated then they are together, so it's hard to like, I have that problem all the time, where it's like you told the mom but the kid's with the dad.

A different, frustrated teacher indicated:

Yeah, yeah, and now I don't know what's going on, and so it's like as a teacher it's hard to decide like who do I contact and do I need to contact everybody and so I think that's a pattern.

An educator mentioned that some parents might not have had access to a computer because of their socioeconomic situation, "Some of them are living out of cars, so...I mean, there were two kids in our school last year that I know of that were living in cars."

Another teacher thought that if the parents did not have passion for education that it would have proven to be an obstacle for families and for students to benefit. When discussing the idea of working as a team to get students to complete work and be successful in their academic careers, one secondary level teacher offered:

I have advisories with grade students, so I don't do homework myself, but when I see hey, you're failing five classes, like we have missing work, we need to do homework so I'm calling mom saying, what can we do? How can we work together?

Attendance is a reflection sometimes of the parent's commitment to education, in the eyes of the teachers. Teachers indicated frustration when one child is sick, the entire family does not make it to school that day. Also, other teachers mentioned familiarity with particular families having repetitive tardy issues and the frustrations that go with that. Another teacher inserted her comments into the conversation:

When I send home my daily emails, I also attach every single assignment that I'm giving for that night because I used to have parents say like well they lost their copy on their way home so I couldn't work with them on it, so I'm like well, I kind of post it on the email so now you have to print it. Every Sunday I look through my missing assignments on SIS and well your child is missing these four assignments. Guess what? I will reattach them. You don't have to go back and look through my emails and find them. Here they are again. (Epstein's Type 4)

Several teachers indicated frustrations with incorrect contact information in the school information system as an obstacle to parent involvement. Most of the teachers agreed that they hoped parents would update their contact information with the school's main office more consistently. Having the wrong contact information for parents caused teachers to make calls that went unanswered and wasted teachers' limited time.

Increasing communication. Many teachers expressed cohesiveness when discussing the fact that some parents are not available, nor do not reciprocate when

communication is extended via emails, phone calls, or other such communicative methods. “The kids that you really want to talk to their parents, you never get to talk to those parents. They are not the communicating type. Which is probably why you want to talk to them.”

Most teachers agreed by nonverbal communication that, using the school’s technology, they were able to send out multiple communications per week to parents, whether or not particular parents responded to the outreach. Teachers agreed that it was easy and better to send out the information and to make it available, rather than not offer it at all. One mentioned the ease of email communication and/or newsletter communication was simpler because it does not involve real time conversation. It was not time consuming, she stated, and could always be done in between classes with ease.

One teacher stated:

It’s real easy to just send them an email and hit send. Then wait it out until they check their email or want to email me back. The fact that some of them will. I mean, my number’s there. I mean I am not hiding from them. And, they’ll call me on my cell phone if they feel like they need, really need to talk to me.

Another teacher emphasized how surprised she was in learning how few parents are available when they are needed:

it’s very few of those students that you need to talk to that you don’t see very often. I thought the number would be like a lot higher but every year, this is my fifth year now, and it’s very few. A handful of students that are in that category. And the majority are you see them on a regular basis, you have communication with on a regular basis.

Another teacher agreed with the high level of parent concern, noting that she had seven parents contact her over the course of the professional development day when the focus group occurred.

When the researcher asked the teachers to evaluate if the communication between parents and administrators was adequate or not, the response was strong from the teachers. They indicated that there had been significant improvements over the past couple of years in this area for concern. It was mentioned that advanced notice for both teachers and parents has been vastly improved, which promoted a better school environment.

Other Outcomes

Some teachers mentioned that parents had surprisingly indicated a desire for less communication. The solution for the abundance of communication to parents on a daily basis was that the school should, "Choose what to send and how so that it's not too much." One teacher offered an example:

A parent complained to me that I was sending too many emails and then at first I took offense about it because, but you know what, though? I was sending an email in the morning – my daily email- and then I would- as the day went on- the office would say, send this home and make sure they know it's coming home so this year, I was like, you know what, there's some truth with what this parent said. Now I don't send my daily email out until the end of the day because everything's already brought to my room and I can say, look out for this in their mailbox this, you know...and that seemed to help because I've had several parents say that there is just too much coming home.

What is interesting about this school is that they had, at one point, a parent survey that indicated a need for better communication between the school, its teachers, and the families. However, a year or so later, it seems that there also was a problem with over communication. There was a need for the teachers and the school to work out their communication patterns so that it was not overwhelming and ineffective.

Parent Focus Group Results

Awareness of school philosophy or policies. When the initial question to the parent group first came about, the group of women immediately became silent. The researcher restated the question and emphasized that the policy or philosophy may not necessarily be written or posted, but is perhaps somehow evident. This redirection refocused the group on the concept, and to understand that there was not a “right” or “wrong” answer to this question. The first parent offered up an opinion rather quickly soon thereafter, “Yes there’s a very open policy/philosophy of parents being involved in this school as much as possible. Connecting the home life to the school life to the community, overall” (Epstein’s Type 6).

Increasing communication. When asked about the frequency of communication experienced at the school, one parent offered, “We get daily emails. I mean I get multiple daily emails, which, I did not have any idea at the last school what was going on. So with this I know exactly what’s going on” (Epstein’s Type 2).

All indicated, at one point or another during this segment, that they had daily communication with the school in some form or another. When asked to elaborate, one parent said, “Yes, we are kept very informed. Things are constantly sort of being updated or even reminders to make sure you can participate or be involved in something you want

to participate in.” Parents mentioned that within the events themselves, school administrators use that time to communicate with parents the upcoming events and opportunities to participate (Epstein’s Type 3).

Another parent commented:

They are available as often as I need them. I see my first grader's teacher daily and she will usually stop me and chat if there is a need or let me stop her. My eighth grader has several teachers and I usually see them at least quarterly. In the grade school the teachers initiate the conversations. In the middle school, I feel it is more my responsibility to approach the teachers.

Events that invite families. When the parent group was asked about events that they had volunteered to help with, a few of them mentioned working at a recent Art Fair event. All parents at the focus group had arrived at the school for a Parent Breakfast opportunity. Many of them discussed participating and volunteering in a wide variety of events hosted by the school over the course of the years past (Epstein’s Type 6).

Parents indicated that these school events were well thought out and really helped connect students and their schoolwork to their families and communities. One parent indicated that the Art Fair event made the child feel that the work they have done is important to the family and the school community, enough to be displayed.

Home visits. When the researcher asked the focus group if the participants had ever been offered Home Visits, all of the participants indicated that they indeed had been offered a visit. In addition, when I asked if they had participated in the program offering, they all responded “no.” Some cited scheduling issues as the primary reason for rejection.

But the group did, as a whole, indicate that they enjoyed the offer to participate in the Home Visit program (Epstein's Type 2 and Type 4).

Unintended consequences: Transportation. Parents did indicate in the focus group session and in the survey that dismissal time was a good time in which they were able to communicate with both teachers and administrators, and that this occurs either on a daily or almost daily basis. Pick up and drop off events at the school were a daily routine for families.

Parent teacher conferences. When asked about parent teacher conferences, one parent described her experiences with the parent teacher meetings and Curriculum Night events, but also offered comment on the flexibility that the school offered to her because of scheduling conflicts. She commented:

Generally for me, I think it's three usually, because you kind of have your first one to find out, what the plan is, it's kind of connected with curriculum night.

They outline everything of what they're going to do with the year as the team of teachers and um so for me I didn't know or make that this year, so I had to have a separate parent-teacher conference to try to get caught up on what was discussed at Curriculum Night.

The timing of the conferences (evenings and weekends) was mentioned as being a positive. The first parent response was, "They are great. They plan them in evening time so parents can attend." A second parent stated, "The teachers were very helpful in ways to help my student. They also talked with my student to express concerns over his troubling subjects and gave him tools to use to study." The third parent said, "My son was told by us and staff they he is responsible for his actions. We cannot do the work, but

he needs to be prepared and study. If there are issues, a follow up date should be set.” A final parent commented, “They are pleasant and informative. Myself and my husband ask a lot of questions and are presented with examples of work and strategies to support our child” (Epstein’s Type 2).

Flexibility in scheduling and other strategies. When asked if the parents had ever been invited to help in the child’s classroom, two parents dominated the conversation at that time. Both said that they had initiated the conversation and had told the teacher they would be willing to help if the teacher needed anything. Others indicated that they had received an email inviting them to help. When questioned about the adequacy of the communication between the parents and teachers, as well as the parents and administrators, all indicated a “yes” vote by either voice or by nonverbal communication. When asked about the frequency of helping children complete homework for school, the answers were similar amongst the members of the entire focus group.

One parent responded that the family makes a nightly ritual to help all of their children with their homework. They begin working with the youngest child first and work their way up to the oldest child. She indicated that the oldest child is much more independent, and they allow for that independence, but let the child know that they are there to assist, if it is requested. When asked about how often the parents speak to their own children about their activities at school, every parent in the focus session indicated the same answer, “every day.” Consistencies resided also within the parent survey for this question.

Obstacles and strategies to overcome. The responses that parents gave for reasons why parents may not be able to attend school events or opportunities were overwhelmingly work related. However, they also provided a few other reasons for what could be perceived as non-involvement that may not have been considered by the teacher group or the administrator group.

One parent gave a personal example to explain the hardships associated with an employer that is less than flexible, and how it impacted her involvement. She said that a previous employment position, she was unable to attend events that another school would have hosted because of inflexible work hours and the timing of the events. However, with her employment position now, she is able to attend almost all of the events that her child's school invites her to attend. Many parents echoed this parent's explanation in terms of the obstacle involving his/her vocation in the survey. Another parent offered a different reason for parents that are not as involved:

I think parents sometimes being selfish sometimes too. I don't think all parents are selfless enough to give their time or their day or their afternoon to school stuff. And I think some might have trouble like with people. You know? Being in social situations and that might prohibit them.

Increasing communication. When the group was asked to provide recommendations for improvement in the area of communication at the school, one parent quickly indicated, "I don't have a recommendation because I see a huge improvement for me, from the teachers and the administration last year." All parents agreed that they did not have any recommendations for the school as a whole because they have witnessed satisfactory growth and change over the course of the last few years

of the school's existence in the area of communication. The parents were asked, as a follow up question, to give any example that they desired that would compare another neighborhood school to the current GSA school, in terms of communication and involvement. Quickly a parent offered to discuss her experience coming from a different school, compared to the experience she had with the new GSA school. Her comments identified GSA as having teachers that were exceptional and that the system was organized, positive, and provided a safe environment for her children. This was a difference from the educational experience that the family had previously encountered at another charter school. In conclusion, the parent focus group member mentioned:

I don't know if there's anything. I think communication is definitely better but I think still some parents that aren't receiving information and certain times that can't you know. Or overlook things, and aren't able to come to certain meetings or events.

Another parent chimed in, as she could relate to the previous comment, "Yeah like having double things too. You're like uh, PTO meeting on the night there's also a soccer practice. You know?" Two other parents in the group readily agreed with this statement by nodding their heads vigorously.

Benefits. When asked about the benefits that students reap when parents are involved in the student's education, many parents were compelled to respond.

One parent responded, "Well then also, like when their friends see, like I've got a daughter up here but all of her friends when they see me up here they... just think that it's neat that you can be involved." She continued,

Anyway, this is one of the first field trips I can't go on, and so she's just really bummed out about it. Just because we've always been there. And that makes a difference when you're always . . . then you're always there.

Another parent added, "I think it helps them feel supported and heard and make you feel, makes them feel like you are a part of every aspect of their life instead of just being connected at home." Only one parent indicated in the survey response that there were no benefits to children when parents are involved. None of the parents in the focus group mentioned anything negative about parental involvement and benefits to the child.

Conclusion

The researcher used a variety of methods to gather data. The researcher reviewed the school's policies by reviewing school handbooks and policy books. Parent surveys and teacher, administrator and parent focus group sessions revealed a set of themes that were frequently referred to throughout. Overall, positive attitudes were expressed by all three groups about the satisfaction in terms of parent-school relationships. The researcher identified examples of all six types of Epstein's (2010) School-Family-Community frameworks in the school district's practices. Although the school district's model did have a strong set of policies and procedures that require special emphasis on home-school relationships, all three of the groups focused in on the actual culture of the school as the sole reason for the cooperative collaboration. When asked to identify obstacles for home-school relationships, all three groups overwhelmingly identified parent work schedules as the primary obstacle.

The initial exposure to the requirements of the commitment of parental involvement is to be acknowledged in this study. From the initial application to the

admission process and beyond, parents were repeatedly requested to review and agree to particular terms and conditions regarding parental participation and involvement in the child's education. Staff members, as part of their required duties, as listed in the staff handbook and in the staff evaluation, included a variety of initiatives that a staff member must implement annually to solicit buy-in and participation from parents.

Administrators encouraged parental buy in from the start, when they began advertising the school's existence, in combination with the city's Mayor's Office. Through a welcoming attitude, they had engaged interest and welcomed feedback from parents. This attitude contributed to an open system of communication in which parents felt as if their voices were heard and that they would be responded to. Efforts to remediate situations in a start-up skeletal system had quickly been attended to by the parents themselves. From this humble beginning, the word and the culture spread drastically throughout the immediate community.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Reflection

The intent of this qualitative study identified a charter school's strategies and policies used to demand parental involvement, particularly in urban and minority areas, and to discover the similarities and differences in perceptions of groups of stakeholders (parents, administrators, and teachers) about these particular policies and practices. The researcher identified obstacles that prevented urban parents from participating in school events. The researcher believed that particular policies, procedures, and practices that a charter school has established in its model might be the key to involving more parents, leading to student academic and behavioral success. Perhaps particular strategies that the teachers used may also have immediate impacts on involvement of the parents.

Understanding that parental involvement is imperative in the academic success of the student, the hope for the study was to gain information about what worked for one school district and what was lacking, based on perceptions of a variety of stakeholders in that district. If there is a system that has worked, it would be advantageous for other schools to adopt similar policies and practices. The experimental nature of charter schools is an area in which such foci (heavy parent involvement expectations) could be selected and marketed.

Choice schools, such as charter schools, may experiment to find out what practices will improve schools and student educational experiences. They attempt to create policies and practices that aim to narrow gaps and improve the educational experiences for its constituents. Epstein's (2001, 2010) work on the importance of home-school-community relationships and parent involvement was referenced throughout this study.

This framework was used to code the data from this qualitative study. However, there has been a lack of literature on specific strategies, policies, and procedures that are used by an urban public charter district that encouraged and demanded parent engagement.

The guiding research questions served as the basis of this study, and answers were sought for the following: 1. Does the district have a strong model for parental involvement? If so, what are its characteristics? 2: What are the strengths and weaknesses in the areas of parental involvement in the district? 3: What strategies allowed the charter school district to engage parents? 4: What strategies brought about the level of parental involvement in the district present at the time of study? 5: How are the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators related to parental involvement opportunities in the charter school district?

Summary of Findings

Because one of the key points in Epstein's (2010) work was about educating teachers and administrators to use particular strategies for involvement, the researcher recommends to urban schools that a needs assessment be conducted in every community, and a wide variety of strategies be used to involve parents more in K-12 education. Educational leaders and administrators need to be keenly aware of the population that encompasses the school and surrounding community. Leaders should work to find out the needs of the community, including the families that are served by the school through the use of surveys, town hall meetings, and personal conversations. Educational leaders, particularly in areas that contain large portions of those in low socioeconomic situations can design ways that help service the community by contacting local businesses and

organizations and expressing those needs. For instance, the charter school district invites local financial organizations and other non-profits that provide social services to the parent-teacher events. Those organizations are available for questions and to reach out to provide help when needed. Another recommendation would to consider non English speaking parents and their needs. Does a translator need to be hired? What forms need to be translated into the home language so that communication can be better? Are there parents struggling to make it to the school events due to lack of transportation or lack of child care? How can the school work to provide opportunities for those parents to attend some events? Can they provide some carpooling situations or perhaps babysitting services?

Not only did the initial startup school develop and maintain a high level of involvement, but the behavior has also spread to two other buildings, including a middle/high school, as well as another elementary school, which resided in an entirely different community. As a result, it was hoped that this intense involvement will continue and would lead to better academic and behavioral outcomes for the children in this particular charter school district, benefitting all.

Findings Based on the Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of the district's model for parental involvement?

Based on the findings from the survey and focus group sessions, the parents, staff, and administrators of the charter school district do believe that the district has a strong model for involving parents. Hosting a plethora of events that invite parents frequently into the school buildings and engaging in outreach situations such as home visits are the

basis of the model. Home visits have allowed the teachers and administrators to understand families of different cultures and how those families live. The teachers indicated that they have gained a deeper appreciation of the students' culture after the visit.

Because parents have a choice of whether to apply to the school or not, understanding that part of the school's values include a strong community that includes and encouraged parent involvement seems to have worked in the school's favor. The market model of school choice assumes that choice forces schools to compete to attract students (Phillips et al., 2012).

Teachers engaged in particular strategies, especially at the elementary level, to include parents and to suggest ways in which to become involved with the child and his or her learning while at home. The school used a sufficient amount of activities as outlined in Epstein's (2010) Six Areas (Table 3).

First and foremost, they believed that positive school-family relationships were essential. These are fostered by creating a welcoming environment and engaging in frequent and ongoing communication. Sometimes feeling unwelcome in the school itself is the obstacle, so developing school culture and climate are essential pieces in creating a helpful and welcoming environment in which parents want to help was crucial (Bartel, 2010).

Table 3.

GSA Behaviors Categorized by Epstein's Types

Epstein's Type	Description of Type	GSA Charter school program
Type 1	Basic obligations of families	Families In Need After Care School Counseling
Type 2	Basic obligations of schools	Home Visits Phone Calls Parent-Teacher Conferences Drop off and Pick up Report Cards Online grading system Facebook Text Messages/Emails Teacher/School Webpages
Type 3	Involvement at school	Grandparent Appreciation Breakfast Parent Breakfasts Parent Appreciation Night Teacher Appreciation Week Holiday Bazaar Coaching Sports Supervision at lunch/recess/drop off Art Fair Celebrity Reader Eighth Grade Graduation Student Clubs and Organizations Movie Night Auctions Honor Roll Dinners Box Tops for Education Art/Craft Fair Homecoming
Type 4	Involvement in learning activities at home	Homework Tips Curriculum Nights Home Visits Newsletters College Preparation

continued

Table 3 continued.

GSA Behaviors Categorized by Epstein's Types

Type 5	Involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy	Parent Teacher Organization Athletic Association Board Men's Club GSA Governing Board State of the School Meetings
Type 6	Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations	After School Care Ronald McDonald House Neighborhood Churches Science Center Museum University Partnerships Families in Need Neighborhood Communications/PR Community Luncheons Special Political Guests

The school leaders took great care to reach out to families in the community interested in the school and explain to them the purpose of the school, the importance of their partnership with the school, and the details of care that the school would provide their students in the building. Providing an emphasis on building good, friendly relationships with parents and students from the start and extending a variety of invitations to be a valued and respected guest in the building for daily activities and special events is also seen as the reason for the strong levels of involvement. Parents feel comfortable and welcome in the GSA schools. They feel that they are a vital part of their community and a key player in the school's success.

Parents are more likely to participate and become involved if they feel appreciated and are invited frequently to the school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Using technology to reach parents has also been mostly successful in this school district. The school has proven to utilize all six areas of Epstein's (2001) model in their approach. However,

certain areas, as noted throughout Chapter 4 and in Table 3, have stronger representation than others.

Research Question 2: What are the strengths and weaknesses in the areas of parental involvement in the district?

One of the strengths of the district in regards to parental involvement is certainly the elementary buildings and the consistency but diversity of the strategies used to communicate and encourage interaction at the classroom level. Teachers used a variety of ways to involve parents in homework and projects several times per week. Teachers and school leaders worked to find a variety of ways in which they can connect with parents, invite them in, and use their talents to make parents feel welcome and needed. Communication through the use of technology is favored and utilized frequently by the district, which pleased parents and teachers.

One of the weaknesses of the school district was parent participation at the middle/high school level. Classroom teachers might not encourage such involvement in the secondary grades as the elementary levels tend to. Parents believe that teachers and administrators trust middle and high school students to communicate with parents, but in fact, the students have not. Therefore parents actually desire more direct communication from the school in order to stay informed about school events, important due dates, and curriculum. Parents appreciated when the school gave advance notice, as much as possible, for events, speakers and activities hosted at the school.

Another area that seemed to qualify as a weakness would be a lack of training for how to most successfully conduct home visits, parental involvement strategies, and providing assistance with language barriers. Perhaps these opportunities had been

available, but the information about training and the option for these resources had not been communicated clearly to the classroom teachers.

Research Question 3: What strategies allowed the charter school district to engage parents?

Advertising the school's mission and areas for focus (parent involvement, Home Visits, and many events and clubs for both parents and students) perhaps helped to attract those who believe these things are good for the child, and good for the families that apply and attend. Charter schools are a choice that families make that comes with a certain level of commitment and expectation. By advertising and word of mouth, the school has seemingly developed a reputation that only those desiring such commitment apply.

A variety of events were planned that invited parents to collaborate and become involved with the school on a very regular, almost weekly, basis. Besides individual classroom teacher invitations and strategies, as a whole the school hosted many events that get the parents in the buildings. By getting parents in the buildings frequently, the school saw the opportunity to develop better relationships with families. One unintended strategy for involving parents and maintaining good communication was that the school did not provide transportation for its students. Therefore, parents or guardians were required to pick up students and drop them off on a daily basis. This provided a great opportunity for parents to connect with teachers verbally, in person, if it was needed.

In a few instances, some teachers indicated frustration with parents that were not involved. The researcher believes that further education of these teachers in terms of parent involvement, parent involvement obstacles, and overcoming challenges in urban

education could be a focus for further improvement. Some teachers believed parents were not becoming involved in their child's schooling because they simply do not care for their children, or do not want to help (Christianakis, 2011). However, this may not be true.

Research Question 4: What strategies brought about the level of parental involvement in the district present at the time of study?

The model and policies of the EMO were set in place when the school opened in 2010. However, the initial groups of parents at the original school site were the trailblazers and initiated many parent group opportunities immediately as the school opened. This strengthened the EMO's structured model. As the growth continued within the district, it seemed that the expectations for parental involvement remained and spread throughout the other buildings and other communities. Parental involvement seemed to taper off in the middle and high school building, but it is to be expected. According to recent research done by Robinson and Harris (2014), involvement becomes different at the middle and high school level, and benefits students more than some activities that might be wildly successful in the elementary levels. These activities do not fit the traditional perception of parental involvement. They are not always direct parent-child interactions. Parents having conversations with students such as post-secondary plans, and setting educational expectations are certainly influential and do count towards parental involvement figures (Robinson & Harris, 2014).

Research Question 5: How are the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators related to parental involvement opportunities in the charter school district?

Parents, teachers, and administrators in the district seemed to have very similar perceptions about the parental involvement opportunities and expectations in the charter

school district. Most of the differentiated answers came out of the reasons why some parents may not become involved in the child's schooling. Each group brought to the table a variety of rational reasons that could possibly prohibit a parent from participating on a regular basis. However, "work" was the most common reason stated.

In person, parents tended to blame themselves and feel guilty for not participating as much as they should, and came up with a few reasons for non-involvement that the teacher's group did not. In surveys, parents showed a mix of opinions; some blamed themselves and others blamed the teachers for not doing their jobs. Teachers blamed parents. Administrators took responsibility as a school to provide that link between school and home.

It is imperative that schools and families find a common ground and a common set of expectations, to facilitate the quality relationship between the two entities that will ultimately promote student academic success. As quoted in a Position Statement authored by the National Association of School Psychologists (2012), "Partnerships among families and educators require ongoing planning, development, and evaluation. These also require the allocation of adequate resources (including time) to assist families and educators in fulfilling their partnership roles" (p. 2). The school is committed to spending the time, efforts, and funding to facilitate these relationships. The school district realizes the importance of these strong relationships and the impact that it has on student academic achievement.

Recommendations for Future Research

In the future, the researcher is interested in conducting a study of other schools within the EMO's Network to find the effectiveness of the other campuses in terms of

parental involvement, possibly in comparison with neighborhood public school parent participation rates. The researcher would also consider conducting research that indicates which particular strategies, at different levels (elementary, middle, and high school) produce the most positive effects academically for students. One unintended theme that emerged included a difference in the levels of participation and use of strategies between the elementary level and the middle/high school level. Other emerging themes were differences between core subject area teachers and the non-core subject area (art, music, physical education, etc.) teachers. Another possible future research avenue would be to complete a follow up study in five to 10 years on the same charter school district to see if the perceptions had changed over time. Another possible future area for research could be connecting the academic achievement at various grade levels and the strategies used by teachers and school leaders. Perhaps looking into other urban schools that use the same strategies as this particular charter school, and the participation levels could be another area of interest.

Summary

The school district spent a great deal of time, effort, and energy planning and inviting parents, grandparents, and community members into the school. Inviting these stakeholders in to see what is happening at the school and to initiate conversations builds a great community and fosters good communication and partnerships amongst all. The transparency, welcoming climate, and efforts to maintain teamwork are evident. When parents feel welcome and are frequently invited in to celebrate and collaborate, students benefit. Inviting the whole family into the school for a variety of positive activities

encourages a sense of community and belonging. It also allows parents and other family members an opportunity to engage at different times of the day and week.

Home visits were one of the required pieces of the puzzle. Positive remarks surrounded this particular and unique program. Teachers claimed that the visits brought a sense of understanding and empathy for each other, and a connectedness that was appreciated by all parties involved. Teachers also felt that those opportunities for connection gave them an advantage in terms of managing the classroom and the child better, because they knew more about them and were able to give them more attention. Educators also felt that it gave a better opportunity to address questions or concerns that the parents may have, when they had one on one time together, on the family's territory.

The intention of the visit was for teachers and administrators to make a home-school connection that was a human connection. Parents and families were on "their turf" and felt most comfortable. Teachers saw the home life of the child and what was important to that family upon those visits. They experienced a good feel for what that particular family is dealing with inside their own family structure. Building these relationships, whether at school, home, or at other events, proved to be one of the key factors in the school's success with engaging parents.

As with most schools, parent-teacher conferences were a required and expected event that brought the teachers and parents together, in the school, during typical after school hours to engage in brief conversation about the child's behavior and academic progress. These sessions were well received by all parties, but parents did note that it was often a short period in which to discuss with the teacher all of the events and progress

that the child has made. However, it was an opportunity to sit down with the child's teacher or teachers and to address any issues, concerns, or progress notes.

Success required knowing expectations in advance, setting certain standards for parents and staff, which included the startup policies and expectations developed by the EMO. However, keeping the culture and traditions of the schools over the years sets a tone for newcomers. They saw how the parents, teachers, and administrators worked so closely together and continue to foster a welcoming and warm environment for collaboration. The expectations were set and by word of mouth, regular communication, and encouragement through staff and administration, parents understand the requirements to be part of the GSA family. This attitude and practice helped the loving environment continued to grow and spread. The school should, going forward, continue to strongly emphasize to its parents, students and general community the value of education and the benefits of school-parent communications in helping students achieve.

The researcher recommends more emphasis and opportunities (outside of athletics) for the middle and high level and to focus on ways for teachers, especially non-core teachers, to embed more interactive work and better communication with parents. The school should also continue communicating and building relationships with English Language Learner populations. Providing parents direction and content help when encouraging interactive homework is another area for continued improvement. Perhaps the school could work towards providing a variety of workshops for parents that provide English Language help and content specific help, particularly in middle and high school core content areas

Seeing that there were many noted improvements but also encouraging recommendations given by the different focus groups, the researcher would emphasize the fact that as children get older, unfortunately parent involvement in academic components of the child's education typically decreases. This is evident from the conversations with the teachers and with parent feedback. The researcher would strongly recommend some professional development and follow up for the teachers of the middle/high school in terms of getting parents involved more. Perhaps this means also that the school conducts workshops for parents in how to stay involved, particularly for those sixth grade parents as they transition into a new building.

Providing parents suggestions for running "school like" homes (Epstein, 2001, p. 958) might also be successful. Some parents may lack the knowledge and resources to assist their child with academic success (Trotman, 2001). Setting the child up with structured study and homework time daily could lead the individual student to continue this behavior post-graduation, in college. Providing structured and detailed information for parents about how to help students is essential, particularly in urban areas.

The school has created a "family like" school setting. GSA contained smaller schools that provide vast opportunities for the teachers and parents to get to know one another. Keeping the overall school population small, and perhaps breaking the secondary school into two separate schools, one middle and one high, might be beneficial. It would keep individual building populations small. Keeping the school small, as a whole, in the researcher's opinion, could be beneficial for many of the above stated reasons. According to Goldkind and Farmer's (2013) study, the structure and

overall quality of the school environment does have an important role in providing opportunities for parents and students to be highly involved.

Giving students and families individualized attention makes a positive impact on all involved. There was evidence of a relentless type of approach by school administrators, teachers, and parents to continue to engage other parents in the school and to build a family like community. Transportation, events, communicative technology, and flexible scheduling of a plethora of events, and parent organization volunteer groups allowed and encouraged all families to partake in one way or another that fit the family schedule. Home visits seemed to be an essential piece that contributed to better family-teacher relationships. Overall, the school has successfully fostered and continues to grow a phenomenal community, which may support the growing waiting list for this charter school of choice.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the actions taken by one particular charter school district that led to intense parental involvement participation in an urban, metropolitan area. Not only did the initial startup school develop and maintain that level of involvement, but the behavior has also spread to two other buildings, including a middle/high school, as well as another elementary school, which resided in an entirely different community. As a result, it was hoped that this intense involvement will continue and would lead to better academic and behavioral outcomes for the children in this particular charter school district, benefitting all. A focus on family-school relationships shows us that establishing very intentional relationships that involve all parties in shared decision-making, problem-solving and maintaining open communication is imperative. What was discovered was that the strategies that were required by the

school and by the teachers to invite and engage were believed to have a very positive impact on the parental involvement rate of the school.

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Appendix A Letter to Superintendent of the School District

Memo to Greenway Science Academy Board of Directors and XX Schools NFP
Greetings,

My name is Amanda Aldridge, and I am conducting research as a dissertation requirement for XX University's Doctor of Education in Higher Education Administration program. This letter is to seek written permission from your organization(s) to conduct research on site at Greenway Science Academy. As you may know, I also serve as one of the liaisons to Greenway Science Academy from XX University. In the recent past, I have also worked in the capacity of sponsor liaison for other charter schools in this area. I have been fortunate enough to see Greenway Science Academy flourish since its beginnings in 2010 and am very interested in learning about what makes its parents become so involved in these particular schools. To my knowledge, no studies have been completed in regards to GSA or any other XX School.

By allowing me to conduct this study, I hope to gather insight on what makes GSA tick in terms of its involvement with the parents of the schoolchildren, and share this information with other educators. It is within my hopes that something that is learned from this study will be shared with another charter school community that helps its students thrive and grow. I also hope that this study influences universities with teacher and administrator preparation programs to spend more instructional time related to benefits and strategies for parental involvement in schools.

Initially, I will be conducting focus group interviews with voluntary participants including GSA teachers, parents and administrators. I will then work to analyze the information given and compare the perspectives of each group to one another. Once I have completed the initial focus group interviews, I may ask for a follow up interview from any or all individuals. This is voluntary, but will help me as I gather information that I may want more clarification on with a quick follow up interview.

I will also be audio recording our sessions so that I can accurately capture our conversations and transcribe them, using a professional service. I will share with each individual their comments so that they can double check for accuracy and ensure validity. Once the project is complete, I will be destroying the recordings and the notes I have taken as a measure of caution and to protect confidentiality of all participants. Please be assured that neither the school's identity nor individual identities of participants in the study will be used anywhere within my work that will become public. Pseudonyms will be used in place of your name for identity purposes.

None of the work completed here will be used to sanction the school or individual participants in any way. If you have any concerns, please let me know. I thank you in advance for your permission to study Greenway Science Academy charter schools.

Sincerely,

Amanda N. Aldridge, M.Ed.
Lindenwood University Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B Letter to Parents in the Survey

Lindenwood University
School of Education
209 S. Kingshighway
St. Charles, Missouri 63301

You are invited to participate in a research study completed by doctoral candidate, Amanda Aldridge, under the guidance of Dr. John Long of Lindenwood University. The purpose of this research is to identify the challenges with parental involvement strategies used by a particular charter school district to increase parental involvement.

When submitting this survey, you will remain anonymous. Your confidentiality is very important to us. Once this study has been completed, all of the data will be destroyed. Please take about 15 minutes to fill out this survey. Thank you for your participation.

If you have questions about this study, you may contact Amanda Aldridge at 636-627-2559 or Dr. John Long at 636-949-4937.

1. a. How often do you have a conversation with a staff member (teacher, administrator) at your child's school?
b. If ever: What kind of conversation was it? (homework help, disciplinary, concern)?
c. Who initiated the conversation – you or the school staff?
2. a. How many parent-teacher conferences do you attend each school year?
b. Please describe your experiences.
3. a. Have you been offered a home visit by your child's teacher?
b. Did you accept?
c. Where did you meet? (home or elsewhere)
4. a. Have you ever been invited to help in your child's classroom by the teacher?
b. How were you invited (newsletter, in person, etc.)?
c. Did you accept that invitation?
d. If the answer to 4c is "no", please explain why you declined the invitation at the time.
5. How often do you help your child with homework?

6. How often do you speak to your child about their activities at school?
7. Do you feel that the communication between teachers and parents at this school is adequate?
8. Do you feel that the communication between administrators and parents is adequate?
9. A. Are you or have you been involved as a member or volunteer in any school program or activity at the school?
 - b. If so, which one(s)?
10. Are you aware of the school's philosophy, policies and practices concerning parent participation?
11. What recommendations might you make to the school or the school's teachers in order to increase communication and engagement between the school and its parents?
12. What benefits do you believe are reaped by students when parents are involved in their children's schooling?
13. If you would be interested in participating in a small group discussion about this topic, please contact Amanda Aldridge at aaldridge@lindenwood.edu The group discussion would take no more than an hour of your time.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Appendix C Survey for Parents in the District

Lindenwood University
School of Education
209 S. Kingshighway
St. Charles, Missouri 63301

You are invited to participate in a research study completed by doctoral candidate, Amanda Aldridge, under the guidance of Dr. John Long of Lindenwood University. The purpose of this research is to identify the challenges with parental involvement strategies used by a particular charter school district to increase parental involvement.

When submitting this survey, you will remain anonymous. Your confidentiality is very important to us. Once this study has been completed, all of the data will be destroyed. Please take about 15 minutes to fill out this survey. Thank you for your participation.

If you have questions about this study, you may contact Amanda Aldridge at 636-627-2559 or Dr. John Long at 636-949-4937.

1. a. How often do you have a conversation with a staff member (teacher, administrator) at your child's school?
b. If ever: What kind of conversation was it? (homework help, disciplinary, concern)?
c. Who initiated the conversation – you or the school staff?
2. a. How many parent-teacher conferences do you attend each school year?
c. Please describe your experiences.
3. a. Have you been offered a home visit by your child's teacher?
d. Did you accept?
e. Where did you meet? (home or elsewhere)
4. a. Have you ever been invited to help in your child's classroom by the teacher?
b. How were you invited (newsletter, in person, etc.)?
c. Did you accept that invitation?
d. If the answer to 4c is "no", please explain why you declined the invitation at the time.
5. How often do you help your child with homework?

6. How often do you speak to your child about their activities at school?
7. Do you feel that the communication between teachers and parents at this school is adequate?
8. Do you feel that the communication between administrators and parents is adequate?
9. A. Are you or have you been involved as a member or volunteer in any school program or activity at the school?
 - c. If so, which one(s)?
10. Are you aware of the school's philosophy, policies and practices concerning parent participation?
11. What recommendations might you make to the school or the school's teachers in order to increase communication and engagement between the school and its parents?
12. What benefits do you believe are reaped by students when parents are involved in their children's schooling?
13. If you would be interested in participating in a small group discussion about this topic, please contact Amanda Aldridge at aaldridge@lindenwood.edu The group discussion would take no more than an hour of your time.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Appendix D Focus Group Questions: Administrators

Interview Questions for Administrators

1. What is the school's philosophy on parent involvement/parent engagement?
2. How often do you have a conversation with parents of your students?
3. How many parent-teacher conferences does the school host each school year?
Please describe your experiences.
4. Have you conducted home visits with parents of this school? Please describe your experiences.
5. Have you invited parents or guardians to help in your school? Please describe the specific strategies your school uses to engage parents.
6. Do you feel that the communication between teachers and parents is adequate?
7. Do you feel that the communication between administrators and parents is adequate?
8. What recommendations might you make to the parents and/or teachers in order to increase communication and engagement between the parties involved?
9. What do you feel are the major obstacles for parents with becoming/staying involved with the school?
10. What obstacles do you believe prevent parents from engaging and becoming involved in their child's education?
11. What benefits do you believe are reaped by students when their parents are involved with their schooling?

Appendix E Focus Group Questions: Teachers

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. How often do you have a conversation with parents of your students?
2. How many parent-teacher conferences do you host each school year? Please describe your experiences.
3. Have you conducted home visits with this school? Please describe your experiences.
4. Have you invited parents or guardians to help in your classroom?
5. Do you feel that the communication between teachers and parents is adequate?
6. Do you feel that the communication between administrators and parents is adequate?
7. How often do you ask parents to help their children with their homework?
8. What strategies have you used to encourage parent engagement or involvement in your school or in the classroom?
9. Are you aware of the school's philosophy, policies and practices concerning parent participation?
10. What recommendations might you make to the school, administrators, or parents in order to increase communication and engagement between the parties involved?
11. What obstacles do you believe prevent parents from engaging and becoming involved in their child's education?
12. What benefits do you believe are reaped by students when their parents are involved with their schooling?

Appendix F Focus Group Questions: Parents

1. How often do you have a conversation with a staff member (teacher, administrator) at your child's school?
2. How many parent-teacher conferences do you attend each school year? Please describe your experiences.
3. Have you been offered a home visit by your child's teacher? Did you accept? Where did you meet? (home or elsewhere)
4. Have you been invited to help in your child's classroom by the teacher? How so? Did you engage in that invitation? Why or why not?
5. Do you feel that the communication between teachers and parents is adequate?
6. Do you feel that the communication between administrators and parents is adequate?
7. How often do you help your child with homework?
8. How often do you speak to them about their activities at school?
9. Are you or have you been involved as a member or volunteer in any school program or activity at the school? If so, which one(s)?
10. Are you aware of the school's philosophy, policies and practices concerning parent participation?
11. What recommendations might you make to the school or the school's teachers in order to increase communication and engagement between the school and its parents?
12. What benefits do you believe are reaped by students when parents are involved in their children's schooling?

Appendix G Focus Group Consent Form

Lindenwood University
 School of Education
 209 S. Kingshighway
 St. Charles, Missouri 63301

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

“A Qualitative Case Study on Parental Involvement in a Midwestern Urban Charter School District: Perspectives of Parents, Teachers, and Administrators”

Principal Investigator Amanda N. Aldridge Telephone: 636-627-2559 E-mail: aaldridge@lindenwood.edu

Participant _____ Contact info _____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Amanda Aldridge under the guidance of Dr. John Long. The purpose of this research is to identify the challenges with parental involvement strategies used by a particular charter school district to increase parental involvement.
2. a) Your participation will involve
 - Completing a simple survey about the school’s efforts to involve you.
 - Attending a 1 hour group session to discuss the involvement and the school’s strategies to involve parents.
 - Possibly participating in a follow up phone conversation of no longer than 30 minutes.

b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be no more than 2 hours. Approximately 30 individuals will be involved in this research.
3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.
4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge about charter schools and particular strategies that are successful in engaging parents in the educational experiences of their children.
5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any

questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study and the information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location.

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Amanda Aldridge at 636-627-2559 or the Supervising Faculty, Dr. John Long at 636-949-4937. You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs at 636-949-4846.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

Participant's Signature Date

Participant's Printed Name

Signature of Principal Investigator Date

Investigator Printed Name

Vitae

Amanda Aldridge serves as an Instructor for Lindenwood University's School of Education, Department of Teacher Education, and serves as the Coordinator of Secondary Student Teaching. Other experiences include Coordinator of Charter School Sponsorship at Lindenwood University and Saint Louis University, Adjunct Instructor at Lindenwood University and Chaminade University-Honolulu, and Field Services and Licensure Director at Chaminade University-Honolulu.

She holds a B.S. Ed. in Secondary Social Studies Education from the University of Missouri-Columbia, a M.Ed. from the University of Missouri-Saint Louis, and is a doctoral candidate for the Ed. D in Higher Education Administration program at Lindenwood University. She holds career teacher certifications in both Secondary Social Studies Education and Special Education.