Breaking Down Barriers to Engage Families: Lessons from Odds-Beating Secondary Schools

Aaron Leo

Kristen Wilcox

NYKids

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY State University of New York

Introduction

Importance of Parent & Family Engagement
- Positive academic outcomes correlated with parent-family engagement (Epstein et al. 2018; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002)
- Increasing policy emphasis on relationship between families and schools from NCLB to ESSA

Numerous barriers can hamper engagement effort

Need more examples of schools which successfully engage parents and family members

Parent and Family Engagement

Barriers to parent and family engagement
- Moving beyond static, school-centric models (Ishimaru, 2014)
- Engaging families across lines of class, race, and immigrant status (Lareau & Horvat, 1999)

From clients to partners
- Culturally-responsive and community-based strategies (Warren et al., 2009)
- Establishing trust and sharing power (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014)
- Engagement beyond means to raise test scores (Lightfoot, 2004)
- Acknowledge varied forms of participation; rejection of deficit language (Auerbach, 2010)

Methodology

- Regression analysis of 30 graduation indicators for student subgroups (i.e. black/African, Hispanic, economically-disadvantaged, English language learners).

- Selection of 7 odds-beating and 3 typically performing schools geographically distributed across New York state (except New York City)

- Qualitative case study: two-day site visits (interviews/focus groups with district & school leaders, teachers, & student support professionals; document reviews; school culture survey).

Methodology

Two schools chosen out of sample

- Both schools notable for their success in overcoming barriers to engage parents and families
- Illustrate utility of culturally-responsive and community-based strategies in two dissimilar contexts

High School	Enrollment	Grade Span	Urbanicity	% Economically Disadvantaged[2]	% ELL	% Hispanic Latino	% Black/ African-American	PPE
Freeport	2,229	9-12	Suburban/Urban	66	16	64	29	$22,314
Sherburne-Earlville	374	9-12	Rural	51	0	1	1	$22,507
NYS	N/A	N/A	N/A	55	9	26	17	$23,361

Sherburne-Earlville

Community demographics
- Racially homogenous White, rural school

Challenges
- Beset by poverty, unemployment, transience and growing mental health & substance abuse issues

Sherburne-Earlville

- Recognition of social and economic barriers to engagement

- Collaborating to engage parents and family members

- Community-based and culturally responsive forms of parent and family engagement

"You can't make [parents] feel less than... you have to make them feel valued, that they're important, too – that what they're saying is meaningful." - *school leader*
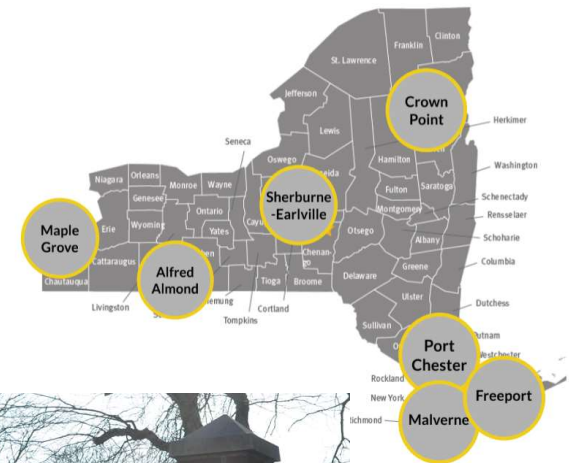
Freeport High School

Community Demographics

◦ Suburban locale, sandwiched between wealthier districts; majority Hispanic/Latino population

Challenges:

◦ Large number of economically disadvantaged families; growing newcomer population from Latin America requiring EL services,
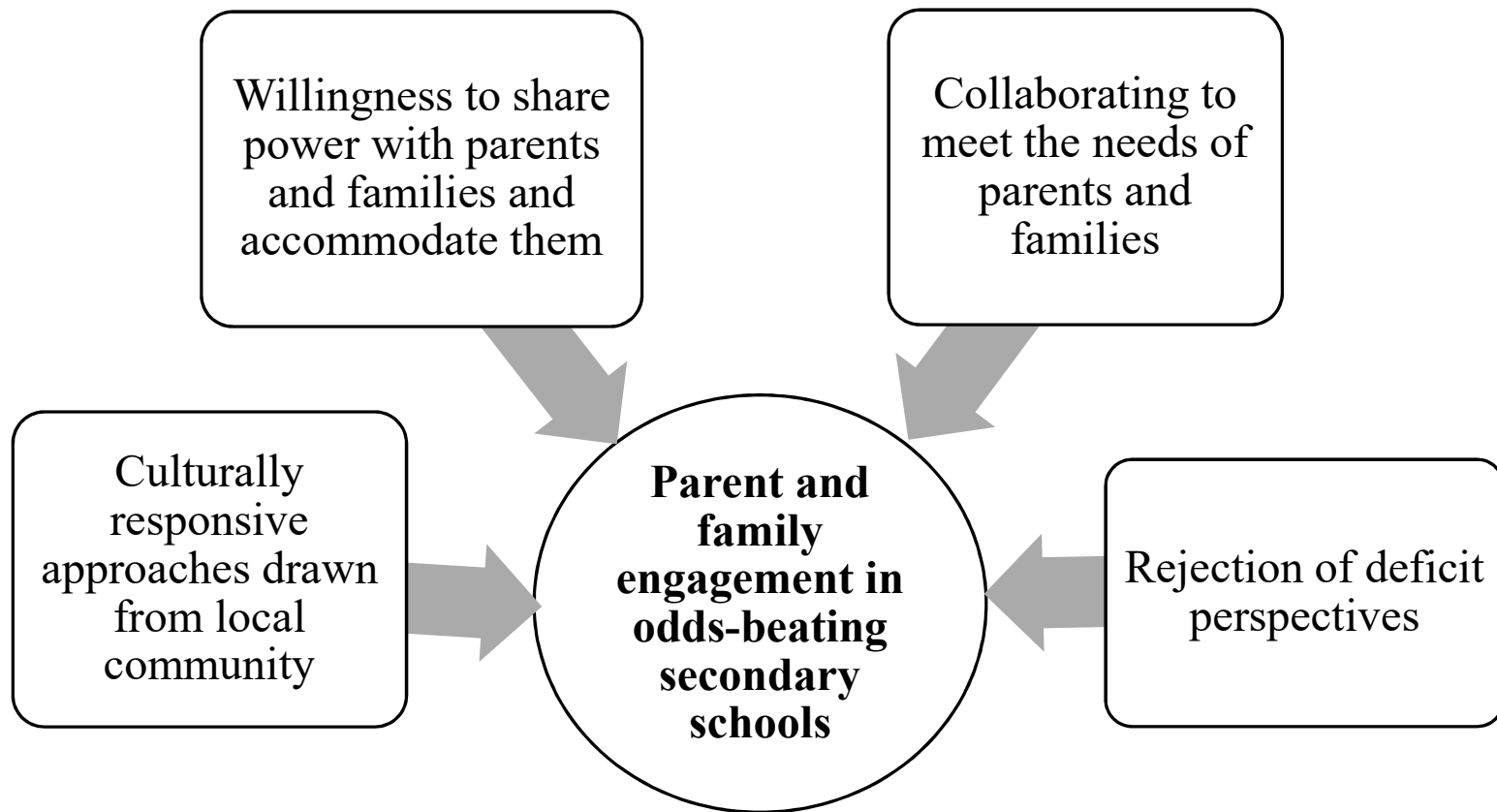
Freeport High School

- Empowering Latinx students and their parents through robust bilingual program, highly-trained staff

- Drawing from community ties to engage parents and families

- Abandoning narrow definitions of involvement and eschewing deficit perspectives

"When they learn that they're able to call someone in the building who speaks their language… you can feel the relief in them. Like, "'Oh you're going to meet with my child?'" – *support staff*

Discussion

Willingness to share power with parents and families and accommodate them

Collaborating to meet the needs of parents and families

Culturally responsive approaches drawn from local community

Parent and family engagement in odds-beating secondary schools

Rejection of deficit perspectives

Conclusion

- General consensus on the positive impact of parent and family engagement

- Lack of data on schools which are successful in developing authentic partnerships with families

- Need to engage families goes beyond means to improve academic achievement

- Case studies illustrate that barriers to family engagement are formidable, but not insurmountable

Visit ny-kids.org
Subscribe to the NYKids Newsletter

References

Auerbach, S. (2010). Beyond coffee with the principal: Toward leadership for authentic school family partnerships. *Journal of School Leadership, 20*, 728-757.

Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Sheldon, S. B., Simon, B. S., Salinas, K. C., Jansorn, N. R. ... & Williams, K. J. (2018). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Fan, X., & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A meta analysis. *Educational Psychology Review, 13*(1)*,* 1-22.

Goodall, J. & Montgomery, C. (2014). Parental involvement to parental engagement: A continuum. *Educational Review, 66,* 399-410.

Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Ishimaru, A. (2014). Rewriting the rules of engagement: Elaborating a model of district community collaboration. *Harvard Educational Review, 84*, 188-216.

Lareau, A. & Horvat, E. M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion: Race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education, 72,* 37-53.

Lightfoot, D. (2004). "Some parents just don't care": Decoding the meanings of parental involvement in urban schools. *Urban Education, 39,* 91-107.

Warren, M. R., Hong, S., Rubin, C. L., & Uy, P. S. (2009). Beyond the bake sale: A community based relational approach to parent engagement in schools. *Teachers College Record, 111,* 2209-2254.