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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Grade Span</th>
<th>Urbanicity</th>
<th>% Economically Disadvantaged²</th>
<th>% ELL</th>
<th>% Hispanic Latino</th>
<th>% Black/African-American</th>
<th>PPE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freeport</td>
<td>2,229</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>Suburban/Urban</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>$22,314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherburne-Earlville</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$22,507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYS</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>$23,361</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sherburne-Earlville

Community demographics

- Racially homogenous White, rural school

Challenges

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

Parent and family engagement in odds-beating secondary schools

- 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
- Rejection of deficit perspectives

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

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


