An Examination of Leadership Behavior: Improving Family Engagement in an Urban Latinx School Community

Doctoral Research Project
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Recent research indicates that children whose parents are engaged in their education are more likely to graduate from high school (Lopez and Caspe, 2014). Latinx parents have high expectations for the quality of schools, but often feel marginalized as they face barriers in culturally appropriate ways to engage with American schools (Hill and Torres, 2010). Furthermore, Latinx parents frequently feel misunderstood and uninvited when attempting to interact with teachers or administrators (Hill and Torres, 2010). When schools are welcoming, teachers cordially invite families to participate, and when the building leader provides guidance for families that supports learning, family engagement is increased (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson, 2005). When school leaders leverage their resources and capital in ways that improve parent engagement, barriers are reduced and student outcomes are increased (Lawson and Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Parents that actively partner with schools make long-term investments in the shaping of activities and programs that help themselves and their communities (Breiseth, Robertson, and Lafond, 2011).

This research project was a qualitative case study, focused on the leadership of an urban school principal to understand the behaviors utilized to improve family engagement. Mr. Donal Keogh, the principal at River Rock High School in Bellavon School District, was the subject of this study, the primary focus of data collection, and the Partner in Practice for this research project (to ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for all proper names). School level data for River Rock High School indicates that 86 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, 84 percent of the families identify as Latinx, and 34 percent of the children are English Learners (Colorado Department of Education, 2016). The school barely escaped closure in 2014, and parent participation had been non-existent. When Donal Keogh took over as principal in 2015, a primary area of his professional focus became improving family engagement. In an informal conversation with Mr. Keogh, he defined family engagement as "parents or family members that are involved with the school to the point of understanding resources that are available through school, district, and community to enhance the educational experience of their children. This is beyond simply ‘showing up’ to meetings or events; it is being proactively engaged in such a way as to make an impact for their children" (D. Keogh, personal communication, April 1, 2016).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

School reform efforts throughout the United States are designed to enhance students’ educational experiences and improve academic outcomes. One specific area of urgency seeks to find ways to effectively increase family engagement that reflects authentic partnerships between school leaders and parents. Calls to action by district, state, and federal education leaders present an opportunity to elucidate the complex social and cultural factors that shape
parent engagement in high-poverty schools. School leaders must be able to address the needs of whichever population comes into the school. Due to the rapid growth in population of Latinx children in urban school settings, addressing the needs of this group creates an urgent demographic imperative. The study of an urban school principal’s leadership behaviors as he works to engage Latinx families is relevant because it provides guidance for aspiring leaders as they work to lead change. This research can also help districts identify administrators that have the leadership traits and characteristics that will help them be successful improving schools through increased family engagement.

Framework

**PROBLEM OF PRACTICE**

The problem of practice at River Rock High School (RRHS) centers on the lack of participation by parents and caregivers in their child’s school. Minimal parent involvement, interaction, and engagement has been a persistent problem in this low-performing school that narrowly escaped closure by the state in 2014. The principal, Donal Keogh, has acted to lead change and improve family engagement by implementing a monthly “Parent University.” The program invites parents to the school for monthly, interactive classes designed to build relationships, promote a sense of community, and offer guidance in advocacy for children (D. Keogh, personal communication, April 1, 2016).

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

*What leadership behaviors are impactful in developing and increasing Latinx family engagement in an urban high school?*

**THEORY OF ACTION**

*If an urban school principal utilizes transformative leadership behaviors to implement a program that invites parents to learn and interact with the school, then parent engagement will increase.*

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Transformative leadership is the model of principal effectiveness that provides the best opportunity to meet the social justice and academic needs of the American education system because it aims to bring about change in individuals, the organization, and society (Shields, 2009). This research considered potentially transformative principal activity as it sought to understand what leadership behaviors increase family engagement.

In seeking to increase family engagement at his school, Mr. Keogh engaged a consultant from the Latinx community. A national leader on Latinx family leadership and participation in education, the consultant helped bring clarity to the challenges and barriers faced by the River Rock High School parents. The principal considered many family-oriented programs designed to increase parent participation in schools. Parent University was the program chosen for flexibility of design – each school or district creates their own program based on the needs of the unique community. He designed
the curriculum of River Rock’s Parent University program to provide parents with the knowledge and tools to become better advocates for their children and partners with the school.

**RESEARCH DESIGN: INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS**

This case study focused on the River Rock High School principal who was observed and interviewed with open-ended questions about his leadership as well as program development and implementation. Stakeholder volunteers also participated in one-on-one interviews that explored their perceptions of Principal Keogh’s leadership.

For focus groups, every parent who attended the Parent University course was invited to participate in a focus group. Parent focus groups were conducted in English and Spanish with the help of a volunteer translator, a bilingual teacher known to the parents from the River Rock High School community. Both interviews and focus groups concentrated on dimensions of principal behavior that parents had observed. Interviews were open-ended and the interview guides were designed to extract the perceptions, attitudes, and opinions of stakeholders and parents about the Parent University program leadership.

**Summary of Data**

**DATA ANALYSIS**

All data analysis procedures were conducted using the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) NVivo 11 Pro. A methodological framework was constructed to provide an outline of the procedures used during the qualitative data analysis phase of this project. The organized framework carefully outlined all analytical procedures and helped the researcher avoid bias as well as manage the process of data analysis.
CATEGORICAL AGGREGATION

The categorical aggregation of broader Parent Nodes and the more specific Child Nodes that emerged within each allowed for development of themes and sub-themes in this study of principal behaviors that improve family engagement. The thematic analysis emphasized examining and recording patterns that surfaced from the data and were associated with the research question.
DATA DISPLAY
A node matrix display ordered data into columns which contain the Parent Nodes (themes) and more specific rows which contain the Child Nodes (sub-themes) leading to further explanation through identification.

![Figure 2: Results of the Matrix Coding Query](image)

PRESENTATION OF THEMES AND SUB-THEMES
The themes and sub-themes that emerged after analysis include Community Building, Family Engagement, Leadership, and Parent University. The broad categories revealed fourteen more specific sub-themes as indicated in the table to the right.

![Figure 3: Themes and Sub-themes](image)
In analyzing results, themes and sub-themes were identified that make sense of the data and reflected a general and common understanding of observed activity. Community Building refers to the ability of the principal to create a sense of belonging among a group of parents within the geographic area of River Rock High School. This broad theme included the following sub-themes:

- **Capacity Building**: the process of developing skills and abilities that enhance parent advocacy for their children
- **Each One Reach One**: the enthusiasm of parents for reaching out to welcome and inform other parents
- **Bonding Platform**: the space and resources provided by the principal for families to gather, meet, build relationships, and create community cultural wealth

The next theme identified in the data is Family Engagement, which is an ongoing, reciprocal partnership between families and schools that is evident by active participation and advocacy for both children and the broader school community. Sub-themes under this theme include:

- **Building Real Relationships**: where the principal knows, acknowledges, understands, interacts with, and serves as a resource for community members
- **Cultural Proficiency**: the range of values and behaviors of the principal that reflect his positive response to and understanding of diversity (Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell, 2009)
- **Family Background**: the shared or common experiences of the participating Latinx families

Leadership is a broad theme that the data showed as important, and refers specifically to the principal’s ability to create a culture of participation, involvement, advocacy, and support through the engagement program he designed and implemented. Many sub-themes were identified in this important category, including:

- **Aspirations**: the principal’s hope for the program
- **Creating More Leaders**: the ability of the principal to nurture and encourage the development of leadership skills among parents
- **Filling the Gaps**: the leader’s ability to identify what is missing in resources for families as well as the relationship between school and parents and then finding solutions that meet the needs of the school community
- **Maverick**: a leader who is bold and willing to advocate for his community to achieve results
- **Personality**: the unique qualities of the principal’s distinctive character
- **Vision**: the goals for and intended results of the engagement program implementation
Parent University is both the program being implemented and the fourth theme that emerged from the data. Sub-themes under Parent University include:

- **Family Programming**: opportunities for families within the community to gather, learn, and connect
- **Program Structure**: the specific design of the monthly learning events

## Findings

Revisiting the Research Question: *What leadership behaviors are impactful in developing and increasing Latinx family engagement in an urban high school?* This research studied the leadership behavior that improved family engagement in a low-income, urban, Latinx community. Based on analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts, field observations, and literature, leadership traits that improve family engagement and the behaviors that are exhibited within these traits emerged from the data. Specifically, four leadership traits of Mr. Keogh emerged:

1. **Cultural Proficiency**
2. **Building Authentic Relationships**
3. **Filling the Gaps**
4. **Building Capacity**

**Cultural Proficiency.** Evidence from the findings identify specific leader behaviors that demonstrated the trait of cultural proficiency: valuing diversity, respecting the community, and responding effectively. Being culturally proficient enables a leader to understand needs so that focus on social justice and equity develop a school climate that identifies shared visions, fosters consensus, builds a positive school culture, and cultivates participation in school decisions, therefore increasing engagement.

Notable quotes on Culturally Proficient behaviors:

- “...it’s about first making sure the parents can be in our school building and feel safe.”
- “He respects us and our language, and that makes us want to open up to him.”
• “...and the principal really seems to enjoy learning about those that are culturally different - he likes the diverse group of parents.”

• “He is really good at working with the parents; he respects them and his interactions are appreciated. He pays attention. They told me that they admire that he takes the time to understand our culture and our family situations, and that makes everyone want to work with him.”

• “Mr. K. came to our house, and we saw him at church. He tries to make things better for us at home and at the school for our kids. One day he fixed a broken window at our house. We would do anything to help him.”

• “... language is no longer a barrier.”

Building Authentic Relationships. Mr. Keogh placed himself at the same level of parents by constantly creating relationships. This approach developed channels of communication that parents had previously not enjoyed, opening the door for them to embrace relationship building with the principal, his staff, and other parents. The principal behaviors most noted in building authentic relationships include: being welcoming, listening, and establishing democracy. Parent feedback indicated that they had a strong response to the principal’s genuine invitation to participate by being warmly welcomed when they arrived at each Parent University session. Mr. Keogh was present at the door as parents came in, he remembered names of parents and students, and reached out to hold babies. He recalled and referred to previous conversations, and parents reacted with smiles, laughter, and conversation. He asked questions to determine needs, and listened with intent, promising and then delivering with follow-up. He takes a democratic and participative approach to his leadership, respecting the ideas of parents. In a community that is often maligned, Mr. Keogh has created a healthy environment where ideas are entertained and considered, which encouraged an increasing flow of ideas as the Parent University sessions progressed.

Notable quotes on behaviors for Building Authentic Relationships:

• “...it was completely different when I got here. I felt welcomed by him. I think he’s the one who creates that atmosphere. He’s the light in the room.”

• “This principal listens, and tells us positive things, and he supports us, and our kids. He accompanies us; he’s so friendly and nice, and he wants to help everyone.”

• “…and because of him, we will be open and we will participate, because he wants to hear our voices.”
Filling the Gaps. Another identified leadership trait is filling the gaps where Mr. Keogh notices a void in resources provided for or utilized by the community, contributing to the lack of family engagement. The descriptive behaviors displayed while filling gaps include identifying needs, finding resources, and advocating for parents. This principal goes into the community, making home visits to meet families and understand their needs. He talks to them about their goals and dreams for their children and finds ways to direct them to helpful resources or offers to personally help with their needs. He advocates for parents and students throughout the school as well as within the district and the greater community. Nine months into the Parent University program, he received community school status for River Rock High School to provide more comprehensive services for students, family members, and community members that will result in improved educational outcomes for children. At River Rock, initial services include activities that improve access to and use of social service programs, adult education programs focused on instruction in English as a second language, and family engagement programs like Parent University which promote family literacy, parent education, and parent leadership.

Notable quotes on Filling the Gaps behaviors:

- “He is really good at opening options for all parents to navigate different ways to interact with the school that maybe even aren’t district-prescribed.”
- “The parents give me feedback on what’s not going well, and I’m able to teach them the vital parts of the school system so that their knowledge of the school and why we do things increases each time we meet.”
- “…and he makes sure that everything we need is in Spanish. We have interpreters at every meeting, the phone calls come in Spanish now, and all the letters home are in Spanish and English.”
- “For me the title of the program attracted my attention. I want to learn how to be a better mom to my children.”

Building Capacity. The final leadership trait identified in this study is building capacity, where the principal works to develop leadership skills in parents. The behaviors he has demonstrated include: modeling professional leadership, providing training, and building a platform for parents to interact and establish a stronger sense of community. Mr. Keogh made the effort to understand the needs of his families, developed a program that he felt would increase participation, and planned and delivered the Parent University sessions. Stakeholders noted that the
leadership he modeled is appreciated by parents. When he greets parents at the door, he is warm and welcoming in a professional manner.

In addition to the regular professional development he provides for his staff, he has expanded professional development to include parents. He has taken several parents to overnight family leadership conferences, providing an opportunity for learning, training, and collaborating with educators that they have not experienced prior. The parents that have gone to training workshops have come back excited to step into leadership roles and eager to interact with other parents. A stakeholder observed that the training “…taught them how to look at data, and to understand what school business is, and what is involved with district business, and now Donal is teaching them how to advocate for themselves.” The principal is clear about his training vision and intended results, stating that, “…the goal is to develop leaders that will eventually plan and facilitate the Parent University program.” Another stakeholder commented that “…by teaching them leadership, it helps parents understand what they need to put in themselves in order to accomplish the community goals in their greater community.” This demonstrated a clear understanding of the principal’s activity to build capacity and create more leaders. Parents have acknowledged their own growth because of participating in the new program: “I’ve been more involved in the school because of the classes. I can focus better on my kids and make sure they have a good future, like checking in with their teachers and grades, keeping them working hard. I also now go to the SAC meetings, and now I understand the reports they talk about and why they are important to the school.”

Parent University has become a platform for community organization where families with students of all ages get to know one another, find common ground, determine needs, participate in decisions for the school, and bond together as advocates for their children. It was the principal who, through this program, built the platform for these families. Since program inception, there was a significant change in participation of the Latinx families. When the parents started coming to the first few sessions of Parent University, they were shy, quiet, and timid about walking into the class. As they became repeat attendees, the parents appeared to be more comfortable and confident walking into the cafeteria, more interactive with other parents and staff, and more social. The energy in the room increased with each subsequent Parent University meeting. Mothers brought other mothers and introduced them around, and fathers started coming to the sessions with their wives. In response to the opportunity to gather with other community parents
interested in learning, building relationships with both the school and other parents, and advocating for their children, momentum grew. Families were building formal and informal social networks.

The first evening of Parent University had an attendance of 12 parents. That number grew dramatically during the year, and one year later there were 61 parents for the Tuesday night session, which represents an increase in program participation of over 400%. As Parent University programming moved into the second school year, the back-to-school community night attracted almost a thousand family members, parents responded to the call for volunteers for the School Accountability Committee (SAC), and numbers increased by 60% at the fall Parent-Teacher Conferences. Parents were observed interacting more with school staff, and teachers reported to Mr. Keogh that they saw a noticeable change in parent interest and participation. Throughout the Bellavon School District’s articulation area, at the district office, and even in the greater community, awareness of Parent University grew as more teachers, district professionals, and community members showed up to Parent University sessions. Stakeholders beyond the parents showed up to the monthly sessions, participated in class activities and then often providing positive verbal feedback to Mr. Keogh and his peer principals. Parents, in their new-found confidence, started stepping up to meet and welcome visitors, demonstrating their own increased capacity for leadership within the school community.

Notable quotes on Building Capacity behaviors:

- “In the first summer, he sent three families to the leadership training, then four more over winter break. They come back ready to serve, they become disrupters in a positive way. More families are signed up to go, they do not mind the long drive three states away and they come back charged up to be involved with the school.”

- “As they build their own capacity and power, they have joined the SAC and become engaged in other areas. They are creating a ripple effect that empowers other parents and is benefiting the students.”

- “When we learn how to be leaders here, we understand better how to accomplish goals at the school and even in the community.”
The following table provides a summary of the primary behaviors exhibited through the principal’s leadership traits.

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<tr>
<th>LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS THAT IMPROVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT</th>
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<td>Valuing Diversity</td>
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<td>Respecting</td>
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<th>LEADERSHIP TRAITS</th>
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<td>Cultural Proficiency</td>
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**Discussion**

Review of the evidence and data in this case study suggest that the behaviors of a principal can positively impact family engagement. Because Mr. Keogh was successful in increasing family engagement at his school, his actions and behavior are notable. In his thoughtful critique of the school culture and community, he deepened his understanding of power and privilege, and took a careful look at how the system and the individuals within perpetuated oppressive practices. As the principal of River Rock High School, Mr. Keogh sought an equity-oriented solution to the lack of family engagement. His Parent University program is an intervention that has proved successful in bringing parents to the school, with ongoing monthly increases in attendance. As parents became more comfortable in the building, they got to know the principal and other school leaders, learned about parenting and advocacy, became familiar with the school system, and started to engage with the school in other ways.

One of the principal’s leadership traits is cultural proficiency. To demonstrate cultural proficiency, the principal made a genuine effort to understand his unique community by getting to know students, welcoming and interacting with their families, joining the local economic development council, and reaching out to religious leaders. He noted the lack of civic events and places that could provide opportunities for families to gather, celebrate, enjoy, and get to know
one another beyond what was offered in small local churches. Meanwhile, he heard from parents that they were
interested in meeting other parents so they could work together for the good of the school.

Deeping their understanding of social, economic, cultural, and political contexts helps school leaders improve
the educational experiences of historically underserved communities (Theoharis, 2010). The leadership behaviors that
emerged from the data as important under the trait of cultural proficiency are valuing diversity, respecting the
community, and responding effectively. In his demonstration of valuing diversity, Mr. Keogh shows the community
through a variety of words and actions that he recognizes, admires, and loves the differences that are represented
within his school community. Beyond differences, however, he shows respect for the community by acknowledging the
difficult situations faced by many in this low-income Latinx population. Some parents express significant fear because,
while their children were born in the United States, their immigration status may be unclear. One of the most important
and foundational issues Mr. Keogh faced as a school principal during this study was the local and personal fallout from
the national political climate regarding immigration reform and persons living in the United States without legal
documentation. Latinx families nationwide express concern, anxiety, and distress regarding the possibility of federal
immigration agents accessing schools, and Mr. Keogh made it very clear to the parents after the 2016 presidential
election that his school would always be a safe zone that is inclusive for all families. He understands their concerns and
responds effectively by promising to advocate for his community while establishing a place where parents can build a
community of advocacy with and for each other. He assures families that the school and district are not collecting
information on the legal status of student's families, that students will be sheltered at school, and that communication
will always be translated and delivered to families in their first language.

His attention to what matters most in the lives of families in his community helps Mr. Keogh build authentic
relationships with parents and their children. When he first launched Parent University, he found ways to warmly invite
parent participation. He spent hours greeting parents at the curb when they dropped off their children, he set up a
Facebook page in Spanish that promoted Parent University, he brought in a dynamic speaker that is a national Spanish-
speaking expert on family engagement and leadership in the Latinx community. With every parent interaction, Mr.
Keogh was warm and welcoming. To engage his staff, he provided an incentive that rewarded each teacher who invited
and sat with a parent to the Parent University kick-off event, and the lively bilingual event attracted hundreds of
teachers, parents, and students to an overflowing gymnasium. At the Parent University sessions, each family member is enthusiastically greeted by the principal, who makes an effort to remember names of parents and students while keeping the tone sociable and light. Many parents, especially for the first few times, are intimidated when they come into a school building. An effective principal, however, can create an atmosphere where families are acknowledged with a friendly greeting and feel accepted as members of the community when they walk into school.

Once parents feel comfortable in the school environment and see that Mr. Keogh is genuine in his interest in parents and students, they become more communicative and the principal is offered the opportunity to listen. With the Parent University curriculum that Mr. Keogh planned, parents share their hopes, goals, and dreams for their children in small groups. They report out to the larger group, find common ground with others, and express concerns. Parents became comfortable approaching Mr. Keogh in pairs or one-on-one to discuss school or community matters, especially those who attended leadership training. They comment to each other, to the family liaison specialists, to teachers, and to the researcher that Mr. Keogh really listens to them.

His democratic behavior also helps Mr. Keogh build authentic relationships. As a participative leader, he encourages involvement and engagement because he is right there alongside the families. Through establishing democracy, the principal brings out the best in the parents that have opted into participation with Parent University, capitalizing on their interest in their children by letting them share their views rather than simply expecting them to conform. The behaviors Mr. Keogh exhibits as he builds authentic relationships open the lines of communication, focus the discussion on the school community and student advocacy, and solicit the ideas of all participants. As he builds relationships through offering this family engagement program, parents understand that their ideas are now being respected and considered. This is a vast improvement for a population of parents that previously felt unwelcome, left out, and silenced.

To fill the gaps for families that were uninvolved with the school, Mr. Keogh took action to identify needs by purposely seeking to ascertain the broken lines of communication and resources between the school and the parent community. He also acted to find resources. To meet the needs of this underserved community, he set out to find an engagement program that would work in his unique school community, one that could be customized to the needs of the families and enhanced as the program grew. It was through this process that Mr. Keogh determined that the
flexibility of the Parent University program represented an opportunity to plan and implement an intervention that could also serve as an engagement strategy.

As a teacher, and then an assistant principal, Mr. Keogh had the opportunity to observe how low-income Latinx families were not involved with the school system. As a principal, it became one of his professional missions to address this problem of practice by finding a way to fill the gaps. Because he also displays the characteristics of cultural proficiency and the ability to build authentic relationships, this principal has set himself up to advocate for parents. He is able to fill gaps because he understands the needs of the community, is able to identify ways to provide meaningful solutions to problems, and support parents as they are finding their voice within the school building and into the greater community.

Stakeholders, parents, and researcher noted the principal’s leadership trait of building capacity, which manifested in behaviors that encouraged and improved engagement. By understanding the needs of his school community, researching best practices for increasing Latinx parent participation, creating and communicating a strategic vision for improving engagement, implementing the Parent University program, and collaborating regularly with parents, Mr. Keogh modeled professional leadership. He understands that it is important for students that their parents are involved in their education, so he provided training for parents so that they could learn and develop the skills needed to step into leadership roles and feel more confident in collaborating regularly with other parents, staff, and administrators. Mr. Keogh built a platform for families to become comfortable with the school, where they could get to know other families with similar shared experiences. This space, within the school building, became a safe zone where parents could set aside their anxiety and concerns regarding immigration status or documentation and participate in the educational journey of their children.

Those that lead for change in low-income urban school environments must first understand the lived experiences of those that are marginalized and have the willingness and commitment to improve lives within the community (Lindsay et al., 2009). Accepting and welcoming a school community of English Learners and their families reflects a deeper understanding of historically underserved populations. As a leader’s awareness increases, so does his leadership identity and sense of self, creating space to question how the school system he administers works to perpetuate practices that create barriers for a marginalized community (Terrell & Lindsay, 2008). Research points out
the need for more school leaders that courageously engage in dialogue and action to confront the realities of injustices spread within schools (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010; Shields, 2013).

There is an urgency for leaders that seek change to promote critical reflection within their schools and districts as public school leaders address increasing demands to eliminate achievement gaps between mainstream populations and students that have been historically underserved. Because demands on school leaders are so great, they often distance themselves from holistic approaches to education which would include understanding the lived experiences of students and their families through conversations and building authentic relationships, especially with those that have been disenfranchised due to race, class, language, and immigration status (Boske & McEnery, 2012). It is time for school leaders to commit to strengthening their school communities, especially for those that bear the social burdens of our present political and cultural climate.

When school leaders are asked to focus on standardized testing, assessments, and annual yearly progress, time constraints often limit them from identifying strategies that build meaningful relationships throughout the school community. Managing school systems is the focus of leadership preparation programs, leaving principals to discover for themselves how to establish connections within their school communities. Mr. Keogh's work through the implementation of Parent University made a difference in the school community within the first year, therefore the leadership traits and behaviors he exhibited can inform other principals that face similar problems in practice.

The results of this case study point to the importance of principal behavior in leading programs that improve parent engagement. Behaviors that support cultural proficiency, building authentic relationships, filling the gaps faced by underserved populations, and developing capacity among parents are key to creating equity. Family engagement is critical if parents are to understand and have the confidence to navigate complex educational systems. An increased level of comfort in advocating for their children can be fostered by leadership behavior that reflects valuing diversity, identification of needs, and establishing a culture of democracy. Thoughtful school leaders that strive to improve parent engagement can create their own successful programs by listening to their community, identifying needs, finding appropriate resources, and responding effectively.
When parents are warmly welcomed in a manner they perceive to be genuine, when they get the opportunity to observe professional leadership behaviors being modeled by the school principal, and when a platform is provided for them to interact with other parents that have the same goals and dreams for their children, they will respond to invitations for training that will increase their capacity, and they will become more engaged in the community. School leaders are in a position to lay the foundation for creating parent leaders who will enhance and improve the school community for years to come. Principal leadership behavior can be a game-changer in family engagement, breaking down hidden disparities and resulting in more participative experiences that link parents to opportunities and resources for their children and create new parent leaders whose voices are heard throughout the school community.

Recommendations

1. Leadership Training. Educational leadership preparation programs should provide training in community outreach and engagement strategies, and more research needs to be done in studying different leadership characteristics that increase family engagement. Principal preparation programs will become stronger when they incorporate units of study, project work, and field practice in community outreach, advocacy, and parent engagement and do so in such a way that a genuine commitment is made to socially just and equitable leadership. Exemplars of effective principal preparation programming include Duquesne University in Pittsburg and University of California at San Bernardino, but we need many more forward-thinking preparation programs across the nation if we are to address the current needs of our changing society.

2. Accountability. Because the new Every Child Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) mandates that districts receiving Title I funds are held accountable for family engagement programs, leaders need to know how to offer programs and activities that deliver meaningful and relevant parent and family involvement opportunities. Administrators must actively pursue family engagement as part of a broader moral commitment to educational equity for disenfranchised populations.

3. Cultural Proficiency. Principals in historically underserved communities must be culturally proficient and understand the challenges faced by low-income and historically marginalized groups that contribute to their lack of engagement. Districts should provide collaborative professional development opportunities for administrators who
are already in place but did not have preparatory training that developed skills and understanding of outreach, engagement, and cultural proficiency.


5. Identify Best Practices. Seek out and learn from others by identifying best practices in districts that have been effective in increasing parent participation. Find successful programs in school communities with similar demographics, visit them, and build a relationship with the leaders. Share ideas for increasing family engagement.

6. Support policies. Support local, state, and national policies that provide resources for leaders to encourage family engagement.

7. Hire the right leaders. In the interview process, focus on the behaviors a principal candidate reports. Hire principals with a heart for equity and inclusion and that convey sincere interest in engaging marginalized families. Ask situational questions that encourage candidates to share how they have effectively worked with underserved populations. Invite them to discuss their ideas for improving family engagement, and seek leaders that can demonstrate thoughtful reflection regarding understanding and working with low-income communities. Display leadership behaviors that work. This study identified the following 12 leadership behaviors that were shown to be effective in improving family engagement:

   a. value diversity
   b. respect the community
   c. respond effectively
   d. be welcoming
   e. listen
   f. establish democracy
   g. identify needs
   h. find resources
   i. advocate for parents
   j. model professional leadership
   k. provide training
   l. build a platform for community participation
8. Encourage greatness. Districts should recognize the individual innovation and success of effective principals that increase family engagement. Provide extra monetary district support and stipends to principals that successfully address the challenges of Title I schools. And make sure those leaders are developing succession plans.

9. Provide culturally relevant training. Effective principals do not act in a vacuum. The entire school staff must understand the needs of the community and support family engagement initiatives. Diversity training that addresses the surface aspects of culture, such as customs, traditions, foods, and contributions, is a good start but inadequate to address complicated underlying problems. To become culturally proficient in communities that are different from their own lived experiences, educators need diversity training that helps them understand how their own and the school’s cultural identity are embedded in all aspects of schooling. This depth of understanding does not occur after one or two packaged professional development sessions. Becoming culturally proficient requires a transformative journey that takes educators beyond cultural awareness and knowledge to a safe space where deficit beliefs and practices can be explored, challenged, and changed.

References


