

Beyond the Bake Sale: A Community-Based Relational Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools

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Background/Context: *Parent involvement in education is widely recognized as important, yet it remains weak in many communities. One important reason for this weakness is that urban schools have grown increasingly isolated from the families and communities they serve. Many of the same neighborhoods with families who are disconnected from public schools, however, often contain strong community-based organizations (CBOs) with deep roots in the lives of families. Many CBOs are beginning to collaborate with public schools, and these collaborations might potentially offer effective strategies to engage families more broadly and deeply in schools.*

Purpose: *This article presents a community-based relational approach to fostering parent engagement in schools. We investigated the efforts of CBOs to engage parents in schools in low-income urban communities. We argue that when CBOs are authentically rooted in community life, they can bring to schools a better understanding of the culture and assets of families, as well as resources that schools may lack. As go-betweens, they can build relational bridges between educators and parents and act as catalysts for change.*

Research Design: *Using case study methodology, we studied three notable school-community collaborations: the Logan Square Neighborhood Association in Chicago, Illinois; the Camino Nuevo Charter Academy in Los Angeles, California; and the Quitman Street Community School in Newark, New Jersey. Each case represents one of three types of collaboration identified in previous research: community service, community development and community organizing.*

Findings: *Although differences in context mattered, we found three common dimensions of parent engagement work across the cases. The three core elements of this community-based relational approach are (1) an emphasis on relationship building among parents and between parents and educators, (2) a focus on the leadership development of parents, and (3) an effort to bridge the gap in culture and power between parents and educators. We contrast this community-based approach with more traditional, school-centric, and individualistic approaches to parent involvement.*

Conclusions: *There are a number of lessons from this study for educators interested in broadening and deepening parent participation in schools. First, educators can benefit from taking a patient approach, building relationships over time. Second, schools may not be able to do parent engagement work alone; they can profit from the social capital expertise of community-based organizations. Finally, educators would benefit from understanding that communities bring different needs, aspirations, and desires to their children's education. If educators collaborate with community partners and help to develop parent leadership, they can form initiatives that meet the interests, values, and capacities of any particular school community.*

Parent involvement in education is widely recognized as important, yet it remains weak in many communities (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).¹ In this article, we are concerned with schools in low-income urban communities. In these schools, a few brave souls become active and involved; they can be seen running bake sales to raise funds for the school. But most urban schools fail to engage families broadly and deeply around the education of their children. Precious few can claim large numbers of parents participating as powerful actors in the school community.²

Many of the same neighborhoods with families who are disconnected from public schools, however, often contain strong community-based organizations with deep roots in the lives of families. Community-based organizations (CBOs) have long focused on rebuilding the civic infrastructure of low-income communities in a variety of ways: providing a range of health and human services, working to build affordable housing and foster economic development, and organizing low-income families to build power for their communities (Schorr, 1997). Until recently, however, few worked directly on issues of public education. With the rise in importance of education to the economic prospects of the children in the families these organizations serve, however, many CBOs began to turn their attention to the failing schools in their communities (Mediratta, 2004; Warren, 2005). They have sought to collaborate with school-based educators to create partnerships that can foster both school change and community development.

This article draws lessons from research on case studies of the three types of collaborations identified by Warren (2005): service, development, and organizing. In the service model, service-delivery organizations partner with public schools to open community, or full-service, schools that typically provide a range of after-school programs, evening classes, and health services for children and their families (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002). In the development model, community development corporations, which have typically focused on building affordable housing and fostering economic development, team up with educators to open new community-based schools, often as charter schools (Chung, 2002; Khadduri, Turnham, Chase, & Schwartz, 2003). When community organizing groups collaborate with public schools, they take their emphasis on building power for social and political change into the school itself through processes of relationship building, leadership development, and public action (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002; Mediratta, 2004; Shirley, 1997).

In our research on these three types of CBO-school collaborations, we sought to identify features that appeared important in connecting parents to schools in meaningful ways. Despite some differences in emphasis and approach, we find that CBOs across the typology bring a distinctive, relational approach to parent engagement, one that contrasts in important ways to traditional understandings of parent involvement. The three core elements of this shared approach involve (1) an emphasis on relationship building among parents and between parents and educators, (2) a focus on the leadership development of parents, and (3) an effort to bridge the gap in culture and power between parents and educators. We argue that this community-based relational approach offers the promise of broader and deeper participation by families in the education of their children. We employ the term *engagement*, rather than *involvement*, precisely to emphasize a more active and powerful role for parents in schools.³

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We look to social capital theory for a theoretical foundation to help us think about how to forge relationships between families and schools and to build the trust and cooperation necessary for concerted effort on behalf of children. Recent work in social capital theory suggests that building relationships between and among people creates the basis for active participation in community and school life (Noguera, 2001; Putnam, 1995; Shirley, 1997; Warren, Thompson, & Saeger, 2001). For our purposes here, we define social capital as a resource that inheres in

the relationships between people, allowing them to act collectively to achieve agreed-upon ends.⁴ Schools that have higher levels of relational trust among participants have been shown to have a greater capacity to reform themselves and improve their practice (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Other research (e.g., Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) suggests that overcoming the racial and cultural divide between educators and families can strengthen the work of schools by engaging the assets and contributions of families in children's education. Finally, face-to-face relationships between parents and school staff help to foster a more direct form of accountability for school performance (Mediratta & Fruchter, 2003). All these efforts could be expanded and strengthened if parents become more active partners and leaders through the building of collaborative relationships, or social capital.

Social capital theorists attuned to inequality emphasize that groups vary in their access to social capital or to other resources that social connections bring (Bourdieu, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). For our purposes, we argue that authentic collaboration between low-income families and middle-class educators will require an explicit effort to address the inequality in resources and power between the two groups. Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003) showed that parents in middle-class communities can act powerfully in their children's schools because they have relationships with each other centered on the school, and they possess the education and other resources that give them the confidence to relate to teachers as equals. By contrast, they found that working-class parents are not typically connected to other parents at the same school, and these parents often lack the education and status to "stand up" to school authorities as equals.

Two implications follow from this analysis. First, fostering powerful forms of parent engagement may require building relationships among parents as a basis for collaborating with educators. This collective approach stands in marked contrast to traditional parent involvement thinking, which typically focuses on the parent as an individual (Epstein et al., 2002). Some social capital theorists have analyzed this process in terms of bonding and bridging forms of social capital. Bonding ties are those among people like each other, whereas bridging ties are those across important lines of difference (Putnam, 2000). People who lack other resources may need to create bonding social capital among themselves before they can bridge to those of higher status by class and/or race (Warren et al., 2001). In bonding relationships, low-income parents can find support from those who have similar concerns and face similar challenges in order to develop the confidence for collaboration. In other words, if parents build relationships with each other, they have the foun-

dation to act collectively, and potentially more powerfully, as school leaders (see also Delgado-Gaitan, 2001).

Second, relationships among parents are necessary but not sufficient for strong and meaningful forms of parent participation. Although teachers and parents have different roles, authentic collaboration will require efforts to address the imbalance in knowledge and power between teachers and less educated parents. The middle-class parents in Horvat et al.'s (2003) study understood educational issues more readily because of their own higher levels of education, and they brought the confidence that comes with such a sense of efficacy. Efforts to engage low-income parents meaningfully in the life of the school will need to build the capacity of parents to be leaders in a more intentional way, focusing on the development of relevant skills and knowledge and a sense of power and self-efficacy (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Finally, when low-income parents feel excluded from schools, many become critical (Diamond & Gomez, 2004) and sometimes angry. Or, there may well be cases in which parents and educators disagree about what is best for the education of children. Strong leadership and collective action by parents therefore have the potential to lead to conflict with educators (Cutler, 2000). Social capital theorists have not typically addressed issues of power and conflict, but we can offer the framework for a solution if we connect the concept of social capital to understandings of relational power (Loomer, 1976; Warren, 2005). Relational power can be contrasted to unilateral power, which emphasizes "power over" others, the capacity to get others to do one's bidding. Educators who fear parent power are operating out of a unilateral power framework of winners and losers. Relational power emphasizes the "power to" get things done collectively (Kreisberg, 1992). Analysts of district-level change have shown that this more collaborative form of power, what they call a social reproduction model, is critical to creating the civic capacity to build and sustain school reform (Stone, Doherty, Jones, & Ross, 1999). Taking a more relational understanding of power, parents and educators can look to their shared interest in advancing the education and well-being of children to help them work through inevitable differences and conflicts. This course of action can be challenging, and we suggest that parent engagement efforts can benefit from agents like CBOs, which can act as go-betweens to help parents and educators create a truly collaborative process.

Observers have increasingly noted that neighborhood-based schools have the potential to be sites for social capital building (Driscoll, 2001), but one that is largely unrealized. We began this research project because

we understood that CBOs have been expert social capital builders (Saegert, Thompson, & Warren, 2001; Silverman, 2004). Many have significant experience working to reweave the fabric of urban communities by linking residents together and developing their capacity to work with experts to be change agents for their neighborhoods (Briggs & Mueller, 1997). When CBOs are authentically rooted in community life, they can bring to schools a better understanding of the culture and assets of families (Shirley, 1997), as well as resources that schools may lack (M. E. Lopez, Kreider, & Coffman, 2005). As go-betweens, they are well situated to build relational bridges between educators and parents and act as catalysts for change (Fruchter, 2007; Gold et al., 2002; M. E. Lopez et al.; Warren, 2005).

METHODS

Although the field of parent involvement and community-school partnerships has been written about extensively, the work of community-based organizations in parent engagement is a new field of study. Therefore, we sought to conduct a set of exploratory case studies that would produce findings to help us begin to map the terrain of this emerging field. We chose the qualitative approach of case study research because it is recognized as an appropriate methodology to develop new theory in relatively unexplored phenomena (Ragin, Nagel, & White, 2004). Case study methodology enables us to understand a phenomenon in context as an integrated whole, allowing researchers to offer a “holistic description and explanation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 29) of each case. Meanwhile, by using a multiple-case design, we were able to compare across the cases to identify commonalities and differences as a step toward identifying general themes to understand the larger phenomena of school-community engagement (Stake, 2006).

Using purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003), we chose one representative case of each of the three types of community-school collaborations identified by previous research (Warren, 2005), as noted above. Although each case was chosen to be broadly representative of its type, we chose firmly established and well-developed collaborations that would highlight the potential of the field. These cases were chosen, then, because we believed that they offered the richest opportunities for the creation of new knowledge (Stake, 2006). Cases were chosen through consultation with experts on school-community collaborations; these included researchers, practitioners, and leaders of intermediary organizations and foundations. For the service model, we studied the Quitman Street Community School in Newark, New Jersey; for the development

model, we studied the Camino Nuevo Charter Academy in Los Angeles, California; and for the organizing model, we studied the Logan Square Neighborhood Association in Chicago, Illinois. This selection of cases gave us some reach across regions of the country and across racial/ethnic groups. Although we acknowledge that studying three cases does not enable us to generalize to all cases, we believe that choosing cases based on previous mapping of the community–school engagement field (Warren, 2005) allows us to make some claims to representativeness.

All three case studies used the same combination of data collection methods, including interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Data were collected in two rounds. The first round, conducted in 2004, was designed to identify key features of each model through documenting the development of each case; the results have been published elsewhere (Warren, 2005). The findings in this article build off the data from the first round but come primarily from data collected in a second round of fieldwork conducted in 2005, focused on processes of parent engagement in each case.⁵ Two researchers from a team of four conducted the fieldwork together at each site.

Researchers conducted formal interviews with a total of about 20 participants at each site, including CBO staff, school principals, teachers, and parents.⁶ Through referrals by CBO staff, we selected parents active in the principal activities sponsored by the school and CBO, and teachers involved in some way with these activities. This selection was appropriate because interviews were designed to understand descriptively the role that the CBO played in engaging parents at each site and its effects. However, during our observations of school activities—rallies, meetings, after-school pick-up locations—we were able to conduct brief informal interviews with a wide spectrum of parents. These brief interviews gave us insight into how broad parent engagement was at each site and allowed us to gather the views of parents who were not as actively engaged as those we formally interviewed. In our research, we sought to document how parent engagement changed over time and to identify continuing problems and challenges. Researchers sought to reveal, in detail, the experiences and perspectives of parents, and we sought to determine the views of school personnel and community staff on parent engagement as well.

Researchers also observed committee meetings and public events, a total of about 12 at each site. These were held variously at schools and at venues sponsored by the CBOs. We also observed settings in schools and in CBOs. In these observations, researchers tried to look for the extent of parent participation and its depth. We also observed the nature of interactions between parents and professional staff to help assess the

dynamics of building collaborative relationships.

Finally, researchers collected documentary material, including leaflets, program brochures, and newspaper articles. Here we sought to gain a better understanding of the kinds of activities in which parents participated, as well as the broader context of the work of the school and CBO. To increase the accuracy of our analysis, we triangulated among these data sources; in other words, wherever possible, we checked what people told us against what we observed ourselves and what was stated in published accounts.

Interview material and observational field notes were analyzed using categories derived from our social capital theoretical framework and those that arose inductively from the data. For each case, we constructed analytical profiles in which we identified key elements of each CBO's parent engagement strategy, how this strategy was developed and implemented over time, contextual factors that appeared important, effects of parent engagement on school and community, and continuing problems, weaknesses, and challenges. To strengthen the validity of our findings, we looked intentionally for discrepant data and alternative interpretations for our emerging argument (Maxwell, 1996). We then looked across the case profiles for commonalities and differences, constructing cross-case displays and analytical matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through this process, we were able to identify the three core elements of a commonly shared relational approach to parent engagement and to highlight how this approach varies in some important ways across the cases.

CASES

We now present narratives of the three cases we studied. In each narrative, we set the context for the CBO-school collaboration and sketch its overall character. We then focus on describing the parent engagement strategy of the collaboration, how it developed over time, and what its results have been. Within these narratives, we begin to draw out the elements of the relational approach for parent engagement we found, highlighting issues of relationship building, leadership development, and efforts to close gaps in culture and power between parents and educators. We discuss the approach in detail in the Discussion section, which follows the narratives.

QUITMAN STREET COMMUNITY SCHOOL

The Quitman Street Community School in Newark, New Jersey, has made

important strides in building a foundation for parent engagement in a deeply troubled community.⁷ When the elementary school partnered with the Community Agencies Corporation of New Jersey (CACNJ) to transform itself into a community school in the late 1990s, the collaboration sought to make the school a center to serve families and rebuild community. To do so, the school and CBO have had to work hard to overcome challenges posed by extreme poverty, instability, and rapid neighborhood change.

Deindustrialization and White flight left Newark's central ward, where Quitman is located, very poor and unstable, conditions that continue to this day. In many ways, Quitman's largely African American student body represents the poorest of the poor, with over 90% of its approximately 400 students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. Many parents struggle to find decent-paying jobs and adequate housing. Drugs, alcohol, and gang involvement have become commonplace among young people. The struggle for day-to-day survival has taken its toll on family life; some children at Quitman are raised by grandparents or other relatives, or are in foster care. Newer initiatives that have torn down many public housing projects and older apartments have forced thousands to relocate. Meanwhile, as older African American families have moved out, the neighborhood has seen an influx of a diverse group of new immigrants from Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Consequently, it is not surprising that the principal reports that the school experiences a transitory rate of about 30%–40% as students move in and out of the neighborhood.

Quitman School recognized that it could not adequately serve children without addressing the complex set of needs facing students and their families that came from these conditions. The school could become a center for family- and community building, but it could not do so alone. To address these multiple challenges and create a more welcoming school environment, the Quitman School partnered with CACNJ in 1996 and adopted the model of a full-service community school. CACNJ, an agency with roots in the neighborhood going back over 100 years, was well placed to help the school open a full-service clinic and an after-school program, the two key elements of the community school.

As it has done for more than 7 years now, the clinic at Quitman provides a full array of physical, dental, and mental health services to children and their families. The after-school program offers tutoring and after-school enrichment programs, such as dance classes and field trips to cultural events in the city; the school also offers a summer program. Quitman practices a holistic approach to schooling, recognizing that a combination of factors—environmental, physical, and psychological—

affect a child's ability to learn. Meanwhile, the community school and the access it provides to CACNJ act as a lifeline for many families, providing assistance with jobs and housing, for example.

George Worsley, the social worker at the health clinic, provided an example of how the clinic is a resource to the school. He described a child who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): "The child does poor academically because she can't focus. If the parent got the child diagnosed and got the proper medication to help control the behavior, she can learn better." In the past, many children at Quitman went undiagnosed and were labeled as troublemakers in the classroom. Now, the staff of the clinic with expertise in ADHD provide the support that teachers and parents need to work together to help the child. Quitman did not want the clinic and after-school program simply to be "add-ons," but rather saw the community school initiative as an effort to strengthen and transform the entire school as a learning community. They placed the clinic and after-school program in a central location in the school where parents can easily access their services.

Rebuilding relationships and establishing trust. Quitman staff recognized right away that relationship building would prove critical to the success of the effort. Prior to the advent of the community school, distrust pervaded the Quitman School community. With constant administrative changes and high teacher turnover common in an urban school like Quitman, teachers felt overworked and under pressure. One teacher admitted, "It's not a relaxed atmosphere. . . . Things are dictated to us."

Meanwhile, parents felt alienated from the school district because they saw changes being implemented about which they were not properly informed.⁸ For example, the constant introduction of new curricula to meet the demands of testing and standards left many parents frustrated. Ms. Mundine, the director of the after-school program, described this dynamic:

There's not a lot of communication with what happens at the school level and the district level. Things happen, but parents were not at the table. You never know what's going to happen next year. . . . There are so many dynamics that we don't have any control over. It's an endless cycle of frustration.

Because many parents who grew up in Newark did not have positive experiences with school themselves, this sense of alienation only exacerbated tense relations between parents and schools.

After so many disappointments, some school staff and parents were initially wary of CACNJ; they worried that CACNJ would be just another

group of “outsiders” coming in. It helped that CACNJ had been working in the community for a long time and that some staff members, like Gloria Chisom and Worsley, the social worker at Quitman, were longtime members of the community. Worsley described the feelings of many African American parents in Newark’s central ward when he said, “A lot of the problems that I faced as a child are still here. . . . Parents haven’t felt welcomed and comfortable throughout the city.”

Staff of the clinic and after-school program worked hard to build relationships and trust both with teachers and with parents. They supported the work of teachers in practical ways and forged trust through working together with them in teams. Meanwhile, the staff of the community school emphasized consistency to build trust with parents. Over several years, the community school staff was able to convince parents that they were “here to stay” and could be trusted as partners in helping to better educate their children.

Compared with years of feeling neglected by the city’s public institutions, parents now say they find a smile and someone willing to help when they go to the clinic or to the after-school program. For many parents, the clinic acts as a first point of entry into the school because most families now use the clinic as the primary care provider for their children. This means that a child does not have to travel far to get his or her needs met, and met quickly, which helps to build trust between the school and the parent. Parents said they trust that the school will take care of their child if he or she has a problem. Parents reported that staff of the community school, specifically Mr. Worsley, the social worker, and Ms. Mundine, the director of the after-school program, are people they will go to if there is a problem with their child. And many adult family members now turn to the community school staff for support when they confront issues of abuse, chronic health problems, or death in the family.

Rather than thinking just about how to involve parents on an individual basis, Quitman community school staff have made a concerted effort to build relationships among parents in a welcoming environment. In fact, the clinic and after-school program have helped to create a fabric of relationships that create a welcoming place for parents. Indeed, parents we interviewed consistently described the school as “warm” and as a needed alternative to the environment outside its walls. As a result, the school has become a safe place for parents. School programs are centered in the lives of the families, programs that meet their immediate needs and signal to parents that the school cares. When one walks into the school on any given day, it is not uncommon to see parents dropping off their children, talking to teachers, and hanging around the school office.

Once parents began to enter the school to receive services, and once they began to trust school staff, Quitman had the basis to begin to involve parents more actively. This was not an easy process because poverty, family instability, and long work hours can make it difficult for parents to get involved. The clinic engages parents by organizing workshops that staff members believe will be of interest to parents, such as how to help children with asthma or autism. In fact, clinic workshops have addressed a range of issues, helping many families who have suffered grief and loss from the death, separation, or incarceration of a close family member. The clinic has also organized support groups such as the Lean on Me program, which gives parents the opportunity to come together and talk about common issues that concern them. Time and time again, parents report that they find that the community school helps to connect them to a greater network of support in a safe and positive environment. By meeting the needs of parents, the clinic builds relationships with parents and brings them into the life of the school.

From involvement to engagement: fostering parent leadership. Like the clinic, the after-school program also functions as a point of entry for parents to more fully engage in the life of the school.⁹ Parents see the after-school program as supporting them because it provides a place for their children while they are working. Parents who enroll their children in the after-school program are required to sign a volunteer contract and attend a certain number of workshops per year. The school tries to hold workshops at least once a month and designs them to meet the immediate needs of parents. Workshops can focus on issues at the school, such as the new math curriculum, or they can focus on family and community issues such as gang awareness. Attendance at these workshops varies with the topic. Over this past year, for example, one of the most highly attended workshops focused on gang involvement. The school invited a former gang member who had been imprisoned to come and talk to parents about the risks that their children face. Parents find a supportive community in workshops like these and in the Lean on Me program. As one parent, Ms. Smith, noted, "Parenting doesn't come with a rulebook," and the community school is now providing a place for parents to gather and work together to raise their children. CACNJ has also provided over 200 families the opportunity to participate in weekend family conferences at a Y camp in the Catskills. This opportunity to "retreat" together in a safe, positive recreational environment has strengthened relationships and helped to build a sense of caring and community around the school.

Parents at Quitman do not just come to the school to receive services. In the context of growing trust and community, the school has begun to build the capacity of parents to be involved in leadership at Quitman; a

group leader program plays the key role here. The after-school program hires and trains parents as its group leaders. Over the 7-year period that the program has been in operation, the after-school program has trained more than 100 group leaders. Group leaders supervise children in the after-school program and help students with a wide variety of activities—sewing costumes for performances, assisting in classrooms, supervising recess, tutoring and mentoring children, and doing office and data entry. Group leaders are important adult supports for children. Ms. Hay, a group leader, commented on their role: “We try to help the kids be more positive. We tell them there are better ways to solve issues. A lot of these kids don’t have parents at home or they live with a grandparent. We tell them to come to us. They have issues that they can’t talk to in their family.”

To help group leaders do this work, in 1999, the community school enlisted the aid of another partner, Bank Street College, to provide them with training opportunities to learn firsthand about child development. Parents believe that this preparation has helped them in their work as group leaders as well as in their role as parents to their own children. Ms. Hay, for example, admitted that through being a group leader, she has learned how to deal more effectively with her own children. Being a group leader also presents possibilities for professional development. For instance, Ms. Sholanda, a group leader, is now going to pursue further education in early childhood development. In these ways, Quitman is building the capacity of the parents to be leaders in the school and change agents in their own lives.

These group leaders have helped close the gap between parents and teachers at the school as they play the role of relational bridges between school teachers and the larger population of parents. Parents say that they often find it easier to interact first with group leaders than with other school staff because group leaders are parents like themselves. Meanwhile, because group leaders are on site everyday, they interact frequently with the children’s teachers. Teachers commonly relay messages to parents through group leaders. Ms. Foy, a first-grade teacher, observed, “If I reach out to a group leader and talk about needing to talk to a parent, they call me that night.” Because of their positive experience with group leaders, teachers begin to see parents not so much as problems or troublemakers, but as resources for the school. So teachers, in turn, have made themselves more available to parents, often providing parents with their personal cell phone numbers. Teachers are now designing curricula that involve parents at home, such as a family timeline or a family tree. Over time, the group leader program has started to change the culture of the school to bring it closer to family and commu-

nity as its presence has begun to redefine relationships between teachers and parents.

Struggles on the path to engagement. As the community school and its group leaders program create a new avenue for parent engagement, questions have emerged around what form best facilitates parent voice at the school. Some continue to see Quitman's more traditional PTA as the main vehicle for parent voice and power. But group leaders in the after-school program offer a different view, as do some school staff. For example, two members of the school staff, a teacher and Ms. Mundine, the director of the after-school program, expressed concerns that not enough parents sit on the PTA for it to be the voice of the Quitman parents. Although Quitman welcomes parent participation in a variety of forms, it seems that the real engine for the development of parent engagement now comes through the community school and its group leaders program.

The Quitman case demonstrates that a community school can be an important and useful model for engaging parents when services are combined with opportunities for parent leadership, reflecting what Leavitt and Saegert (1990) called "service engagement" (p. 190). Many of Quitman's parents struggle with day-to-day survival, and many previously had a negative attitude toward the school. In this context, meeting the basic needs of parents offers a necessary foundation for participation; meanwhile, the service programs create a more positive and trusting attitude among parents, also a foundation for participation. Going beyond service provision, the after-school program values parents as leaders and places them in position in which they can be meaningfully involved in the life of the school.

We saw examples of continuing tension between service and engagement, though, because a service model does tend to emphasize family needs rather than family assets.¹⁰ Quitman staff are aware of this dynamic. Ms. Mundine, for example, has acknowledged that it is now time to do another survey of parents to develop more creative programs for parents. She admitted, "Maybe we are offending them. Not all parents want to be told how to parent."

The service–engagement tension, however, raises the larger question of the extent to which parents exercise power at the school. Most of the parents interviewed said they felt that the school was doing a good job of engaging parents. And most of the parents interviewed also felt as though they could speak up if need be.¹¹ Meanwhile, several school staff observed that parents do not recognize the power they do have. However, there is not much evidence to suggest that parents play an influential role in schoolwide decisions. They do not, for example, seem to be exerting

influence at a policy level, at least not yet. Nevertheless, parents are highly involved in everyday activities at the school, where they do exert meaningful influence; and it is these everyday activities that are reshaping the culture of the school. Change is percolating from the ground up as CACNJ helps parents build relationships, develop their capacity to lead, and forge stronger collaborative ties to teachers.

For many of the parents interviewed, Quitman is now like a school of choice for them. They want their children to be at Quitman. They are happy with the curriculum and the teachers, and this is quite a change from the widespread mistrust and alienation felt 10 years ago. It's also quite an accomplishment given the challenges posed by concentrated poverty and neighborhood instability. Quitman started by "meeting parents where they are at," making the school a center for family life and community building and thereby creating a foundation for authentic parent engagement.

CAMINO NUEVO CHARTER ACADEMY

When the Camino Nuevo Charter Academy opened its doors in the heart of Los Angeles's MacArthur Park, it came as an answer to the prayers of Latino parents for a neighborhood school of their own.¹² Camino Nuevo was started by the Pueblo Nuevo Development Corporation (PND), a community development corporation in MacArthur Park. PND sought to open a school that would embrace Latino parents who were otherwise alienated from existing schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Since its opening, Camino Nuevo has made strong progress in developing the school as a community-based institution, one in which an engaged parent body and social justice-oriented school staff build community and actively work to foster neighborhood development. In so doing, Camino Nuevo has created a new culture of schooling that supports and engages Latino immigrant families struggling to survive in the harsh reality of LA's economy.

As a new wave of immigrants from Mexico and Central America flocked to LA, many began to settle in MacArthur Park. Lacking skills and sometimes legal papers, many came to work in low-paid blue-collar and service jobs. MacArthur Park became one of the poorest and most transient neighborhoods in LA, with a poverty rate of 35% and an average median income of only \$11,475 (Farbstein, 2003). Its families faced problems of adequate housing, crime, and neighborhood blight. But one of their biggest concerns was education.

MacArthur Park's immigrants came to LA with dreams of a good education for their children but soon expressed strong dissatisfaction with

the schooling they received. A total of 16,000 children were bussed out of MacArthur Park to attend school in other parts of LAUSD, making it difficult for parents to access their children's schools and teachers. In addition, staff at these schools often did not speak Spanish, thereby limiting the interaction between parents and the school. Many parents worried that by high school, their children would drop out of school and have difficulty moving out of poverty.

Phillip Lance, an Episcopal minister and executive director of PND, saw an opportunity to create a new school to address the concerns of MacArthur Park parents. In the early 1990s, Lance and PND had opened a neighborhood thrift store and later helped janitors in the community form a janitorial company. By the late 1990s, PND had developed a reputation for engaging the community in revitalizing the MacArthur Park neighborhood. Taking advantage of the state's charter law, Lance saw opening a charter school as the next step in an effort to build and strengthen the MacArthur Park community. Lance raised financial support from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and the Low Income Investment Fund (LIIF), two community development financial intermediaries, and partnered with Excellent Education Development, Inc., and New Visions Foundation for support with academic programming and financial administration.

Camino Nuevo opened the doors of two elementary school campuses in the fall of 2000. The academy proved immediately popular, filling to capacity and generating a waiting list of over 1,000 students. Within a couple of years, Camino had opened two middle school campuses and, more recently, both a high school and a preschool.¹³ The academy now serves over 1,200 students across its several campuses, 65% of whom are English language learners. Ninety-seven percent of Camino Nuevo's students are on free or reduced-price lunch.

Welcoming and engaging parents. PND understood that serving the educational needs of Latino children required creating a school that welcomed and engaged their families. Moreover, coming from a community development perspective, Lance and his partners set out to create a school that would operate as a center for building community and as a social change agent. Opening as a charter school would give them the flexibility they needed to create such a community-oriented school. They hired teachers committed to teaching a social justice curriculum and to getting involved in community development in the neighborhood. These teachers, for example, have organized neighborhood clean-ups and health fairs. But the school does not just "do for" the Latino community. Aware of the highly transient nature of the neighborhood, Camino Nuevo has worked hard to make the school a site for bringing parents

together and engaging them in the education of their children, thereby strengthening the community. Camino Nuevo has tried to create a culture of schooling that values and respects families and integrates them fully into the life of the school.

To engage parents, Camino Nuevo first sought to make the school a place where parents would feel welcome and respected, where they could begin to build relationships with school staff. In their previous experience with LA district schools, parents had regularly complained that they did not feel comfortable entering the schools because there were no Spanish-speaking staff readily at hand. So Camino Nuevo made the Spanish language an integral part of the new school. The school made sure to hire bilingual staff so that at least 50% of the school's teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals could speak Spanish. And it started to offer an after-school program that provides a culturally relevant program with classes on Latino music and dance. As a result, parents began to see that school could be a place that welcomed them and that actively supported their culture. According to one parent, "We are proud that this school is open for us. Doors [are] opened until 6 p.m. They also support the dance, ballet, and guitar arts of the traditional Spanish culture."

With this foundation of cultural respect in place, Camino Nuevo's bilingual staff worked hard to build relationships through systematic contact and dialogue with parents. School administrators make an effort to attend all school workshops to show their commitment and accessibility to parents. When Ana Ponce took over as executive director of the academy in 2001, overseeing all the school campuses, she immediately created a monthly coffee time with parents. This venue, called "café con Ms. Ponce," has proved highly successful. Parents now organize these gatherings, and they provide a regular venue for parents to meet each other, share information and concerns with Ponce, and sometimes raise important issues to be addressed. Ponce also developed an elaborate system of communication using bulletin boards, newsletters and workshops. According to Ponce, the staff "constantly communicate ahead of time," and parents now are "responsive" and "come to expect" the relationships that the staff have established with them. Parents, for their part, report a sense of openness in the school, in strong contrast to the alienation they felt in LA district schools. One parent commented, "Here at this school we can easily talk to the principals and teachers. [The] community is very open and very easy to access."

Once parents felt respected and welcome and had some real relationships with each other and with school staff, Camino Nuevo had a stronger basis on which to get parents to actively participate in the life of the school. To do so, the school requires parents to sign a contract to

volunteer 15 hours over the course of the year. Parents can choose to spend time in the classroom as a classroom aide reading to students, or around school helping with the lunches and patrolling the hallways. For parents with a more restrictive schedule, there is an option of taking a parent packet home, where they prepare materials for the classroom. Attending workshops is another way for parents to fulfill their volunteer hours. Ana Moreno, a parent, described her involvement:

Before Camino Nuevo, when we were at another school, we were not involved in the school. [But here] at this school, there is more parent involvement [through] meetings and activities and workshops. There [are] a lot of projects. I get involved in the neighborhood clean-up. I also get involved in the fairs and what books to read.

As they fulfill their contracts in different ways, parents contribute in a direct way to the functioning of the school. But rather than thinking of parents just as individuals to get involved in the school, Camino Nuevo understands these activities as an opportunity for parents to build relationships with each other and with school staff to create a community around the school.

Building the foundation for parent leadership. As parents began to fill the halls of the school, Camino Nuevo saw the need to help develop the capacity of parents to be strong participants in the education of their children. In 2001, Camino Nuevo hired a full-time parent engagement coordinator, Zulma Suro, the director of Health and Parent Programs, to develop workshops to assist parents to better support their child's learning and growth. Parents reported the value of these opportunities. For example, parent Fatima Mendoza felt that the parent activities allowed her to learn "how to communicate with [her] children." She also learned how "the classroom works" by being in the classroom, sitting in and seeing what students do. Participation has given her a better understanding of the curriculum and how her children are progressing academically. She reported that this knowledge made her more comfortable engaging with the school and its staff.

Camino Nuevo parents also have some input into deciding what support the school will provide. They do not necessarily wait around for Camino Nuevo staff to tell them what they need. Suro, the parent coordinator, talks with parents on a regular basis to gauge what workshops to bring in. She commented, "We try to get input from parents in everything we do." Suro designs surveys to ask the parents "how we are doing." Similarly, parent Ana Moreno noted, "At [this] school, it takes parents

into consideration when they make decisions. Parents are part of making those goals.”

It turns out that parents’ concerns go beyond educational issues per se, as families in MacArthur Park struggle to survive and prosper in their new city. Rather than remaining entirely school focused, Camino Nuevo tries to help parents with other needs, like housing, and they have sponsored workshops on tenant rights, for example. Ponce noted that the workshops that were well attended by parents focused on “things they deal with every day.” She felt that these workshops help build relationships with the parents because they provide “a certain level of services besides the education.”

Like the group leader program at Quitman, Camino Nuevo also offers parents the opportunity to take paid positions that use their growing body of skills and knowledge. Parents are hired as paraprofessionals to work in the cafeteria, in the office, and as classroom aides. These positions not only offer parents employment but also opportunities to see their children in the school context. One parent employee commented, “I am happy with the school, my work, and the teachers. I really like working here because at the same time I am working I can be with my child.” For parents with limited job opportunities, these positions fill an important need, but they also foster parent engagement in the school. Like the group leaders at Quitman, these parents serve as relational bridges between teachers and the broader parent body at the school.

There is evidence that parent participation has increased significantly over the 4 years since the school’s inception. According to Suro,

Before, our workshops had 10 parents; right now, the workshops would have 100 parents. As we give more parents voice, they spread the word. . . . We have recognized that not all parents are the same. We know that some parents do 15 hours and that’s all; other parents do 100 hours.

Parents seem to respond because, as many told us in interviews, they feel that Camino Nuevo staff and teachers care about their children and families and that the school prioritizes this work.

From the beginning, though, Camino Nuevo wanted to go beyond traditional forms of parent involvement to cultivate authentic parent leadership and participation in decision making in the school. But it is taking a while to build the foundation for that. The school-site council, a decision-making body for the school, now has some parent leaders who participate in schoolwide policy making. But Camino Nuevo increasingly understands the necessity and value of building the knowledge and skills

of emerging parent leaders, many of whom lack much formal education, if they are to assert real power at the school level. Meanwhile, as they have become more engaged, parents themselves have begun to ask for opportunities to develop as leaders. For example, parents on the school-site council asked for more training so they could play a more equal role with educators on the council. Suro explained, "Every year we do a little better. This year we're doing more on the site-based council, the whole speeches, election, and training of the new school-site council. This is the best year for the site council. All the prep in the beginning of the year really helped."

Suro, for her part, tries to create the space for parents to assert themselves. She said she now takes the lead from the parents. When asked about her vision for the parents, she said, "I'm going to wait for the parents [to tell me]." In this way, Camino Nuevo has started to establish a systematic way of building parent leadership by meeting parents where they are at, building on their strengths, supporting them in taking the next step forward, and providing a range of opportunities for participation and leadership.

Creating a ladder of opportunities for greater participation plays an important role in Camino Nuevo's parent engagement work, and this has been true since the school's inception. In fact, the staff enlisted the help of parents and the broader community to open the school. Here a parent explained, "I worked at the thrift shop first. [I] got involved with opening the school by helping clean the classrooms. [They then] gave me the opportunity to continue working with the school. It opened [the] doors to work with the community." Parents who so choose have the opportunity to grow and develop their leadership. Others can participate in a way appropriate to their needs and desires at the time.

Creating a new school culture: a social justice lens. An active, engaged parent body is one of the components of the new school culture that Camino Nuevo has established; it also aligns with the community-based social justice orientation of the school. For Camino Nuevo's founders, social justice is not just about fostering critical thinking on the part of students; it is about parents, teachers, and students working together as community activists. Camino Nuevo purposefully hires teachers committed to social justice. These teachers work to foster in students a sense of responsibility for their community. They organize students to conduct community clean-ups and petition to have garbage cans placed on the street corners surrounding the schools. This sense of collective responsibility then flows outside the school block. Parents now actively watch over the neighborhood and tell the principal if they see anything that looks suspicious, like gang or drug activity. Another parent commented, "[Camino Nuevo]

gives a chance not only to the kids but also to parents to act together, to work together. [When] the teachers motivate the students, the parents [get] more involved.”

Camino Nuevo is working hard to create a community of learners and doers, with the school serving as a center for community revitalization. In fact, Camino Nuevo now wants parents not just to become leaders in the school and immediate neighborhood but to have the opportunity to connect with a larger social reform movement as well. Ponce believes that they are moving toward that goal by talking with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) about joining its Los Angeles chapter, One LA. The IAF is a national community organizing network that features a systematic leadership training program and organizes citywide around a multi-issue agenda for low-income communities.¹⁴

When PND realized that access to neighborhood quality education was lacking in MacArthur Park, its solution was to open a school embracing Latino parents who were otherwise alienated from existing LA schools. Since then, Camino Nuevo has made strong progress in developing the school as a community-based institution, one where an engaged parent body and social justice-oriented school staff build community and actively work to foster neighborhood development. In so doing, Camino Nuevo has changed the culture of schooling for Latino families in the MacArthur Park area.

With the help of her staff, Ponce envisions Camino Nuevo parents playing a bigger role in setting school policy, developing their leadership skills, and advocating for their own cause one day. At the heart of this vision lies the recognition that Camino Nuevo parents and students represent the new face and future of California and the United States more broadly. Camino Nuevo and its PND partner have begun to create the kind of institution through which the leadership of this new community can emerge.

LOGAN SQUARE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

Coming from a community organizing tradition, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) makes the most systematic effort to develop parent leadership of any of the collaborations discussed in this article.¹⁵ LSNA works collaboratively with seven elementary and one middle school in the Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago, focusing its efforts on cultivating parent leadership. Its model Parent Mentor program has served as an engine for fostering parent leadership in the schools and in the community. Parent leaders have built a strong sense of community and have worked with educators to launch a series of school-

based programs to bring Logan Square's schools together with the neighborhood's Latino families.

Founded in 1962, LSNA is one of Chicago's oldest community organizations. It has worked for years to foster community development in the Logan Square neighborhood, located in the northwest part of the city. LSNA organized residents in efforts to stabilize affordable housing in the neighborhood and to address a range of issues like public safety, health services, senior citizen programs, and community arts. By the 1990s, however, Latinos from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Central America had largely replaced the European immigrants who were living in the neighborhood. Most public schools in the neighborhood became over 95% low income and 90% Latino and had quickly become overcrowded.

The new Latino parents with whom LSNA was beginning to work cared deeply about their children's education and voiced concern about overcrowded conditions in the neighborhood schools. As a result, the organization decided to launch a new campaign to build more school facilities, eventually succeeding in getting the city to open two new schools and several school annexes in Logan Square. Meanwhile, the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act established elected and powerful local school councils at every school, creating opportunities for more meaningful forms of parent and community participation in neighborhood schools (Fung, 2001; see also Nakagawa, 2003).

The collaborative relationships that LSNA built with school principals during this campaign created the possibility for LSNA to launch a novel organizing strategy as part of its 1994 holistic plan. LSNA saw the potential for schools to become institutional sites around which to organize parents and develop their capacity to be leaders in their children's education and in the broader community. Compared with MacArthur Park, Logan Square's Latino community, although largely composed of low-income families, was much less transient and contained a mix of homeowners and renters, which helped to create a more stable base of potential parent leaders. School overcrowding was also a pressing concern to most of the affected Logan Square school principals. By focusing on a common interest of parents and administrators, as well as the leadership development of parents, LSNA moved explicitly away from a more traditional model of involvement, in which parents support school needs, to a model of engagement. In the LSNA-school approach, parents and school staff, along with the support of LSNA organizers, work collaboratively on a project of shared interest.

In 1995, Funston School principal Sally Acker proposed a parent program that would build parent participation in the school, and LSNA moved quickly to put it together. The new Parent Mentor program

proved popular with parents at other schools and, with the agreement of principals, spread to seven other neighborhood schools. LSNA's Parent Mentor program has served as the starting point and engine for leadership development over the past 10 years. LSNA raises funds to hire parent mentors, who are almost all Latina mothers, to work 2 hours a day in classrooms supporting the work of teachers. Parent mentors attend weekly workshops on a range of educational and social issues designed to enhance their ability to be school *and* community leaders. The training is coordinated and facilitated by LSNA organizers and parents with the support of classroom teachers. More than 100 Latina mothers work as parent mentors each year across eight neighborhood elementary and middle schools. Over 1,000 parents have participated in the program to date.

Moving from individual involvement to collective engagement. One key to the success of the program is the supportive community that LSNA creates among parent mentors. As parents tackle their personal goals and take on new and often challenging roles as mentors and tutors in the classroom, they find support from other parents in the program. In a school environment that may feel foreign, unfamiliar, or intimidating to the largely immigrant group of Latino parents, relationships with other parents become a critical source of support that encourages involvement in the school. Silvia Gonzalez, a parent tutor at Monroe Elementary School whose son has received special education services from the public schools, uses her network of parent tutors to talk about her son's educational needs. No longer feeling as if she must manage these needs in isolation, she said, "[the parent tutors] serve as a support group. We support one another, sometimes for school issues, sometimes for personal issues. I've found a lot of people I can trust and talk to."

When parents build meaningful relationships with other parents around the school, this can result in a greater sense of a collective community. As parents work with students as classroom tutors or as they meet other families through school events or house meetings, they create a community in which involved parents look out for the interests of each other's children—indeed, of all children at the school. When Sylvia Gonzalez first volunteered in her son's school prior to the Parent Mentor program, she did not know or meet other parents. Each day she signed in, went to the same workroom, and left without any interaction with other parents: "Before, it was just on my own, and it really revolved around my son's needs." But her experience with LSNA's Parent Mentor program was different:

Having more people involved, you support one another. In the

mornings when we sign in, we meet, check up on each other, talk about the different things going on in the classroom and our kids' lives. That's the difference in being involved . . . you have other people to share the experience with.

Now, Gonzalez feels that she is involved with the school as part of a community. "With the parent mentor program, we're like a little family. We do things together, and I guess that's what really helps you and motivates you." Whereas Gonzalez's earlier experience as an individual parent volunteering in support of her own child reflects a common model of parent involvement in which parents often work in isolation from one another, LSNA explicitly designed a model of parent engagement that promotes a sense of collective community and shared participation.

Gonzalez is not alone in this perception, and as parents make connections across schools in Logan Square, the sense of community expands. In our observations of LSNA meetings that bring parent leaders from the eight schools together, we observed a strong feeling of camaraderie. As the meeting rooms fill with parents, women greet each other warmly and start lively conversations. The informal chatter reflects a sense that these women are connected—sharing concerns, nurturing friendships, and supporting each other in their work as parent organizers. In fact, parents repeatedly refer to the network of parents as "a family."

As a result of this collective experience, Gonzalez believes that many parents move from understanding their involvement in individual terms to a more collective one. Knowing that many parents work long hours and cannot support their children's education in ways that she can, Gonzalez said, "[I want to] make a difference in a child's life—not just my own but in someone else's child. Just boosting their self-esteem and letting them know they can do it. That's what parent involvement is—helping other children, not just your own."

When parents view themselves as a collective group and their families as a community bounded by similar interests and desires, a foundation to act collectively and to become more powerful agents in the school emerges. Relationships are at the core of bringing this power to parents. But to gain the necessary power to become active participants in the school, parents must also develop their individual capacity to be leaders within this community.

Developing parents as leaders. The second key to the success of the Parent Mentor program is precisely its focus on leadership development. LSNA envisions leadership development broadly, paying attention in a more holistic way to the personal development of each parent as a leader within the group setting. The first thing parents do when they start as

mentors is set personal goals. The goal must be personal, concrete, realizable in 6–12 months, and carry real significance for the parent. Behind this goal setting is the belief that for parents to help children succeed, they must themselves have a sense of achievement and success. Maria Alviso, coordinator of LSNA's Parent Mentor program at Monroe School explained,

In the training that I give them, the first thing and during the whole week that I train them, what I try to do is raise their self-esteem, to help them to reach goals. So this way what I tell them is that if you have a good self-esteem, and you have goals, then you will help children to do the same thing. So, in one way when they are in the classroom, they are all ears for those children who need it, and always they are helping children. Sometimes, you know, children cannot talk to their parents because the parents maybe are working the whole day, something like that. Sometimes these children have confidence to approach this parent in the school, to tell them things that are happening in the home, or things that are happening to them personally, so this is what I'm saying, the parents help them.

Many of the parent mentors choose an educational goal—obtaining a GED, attending college, pursuing a professional degree—that not only serves as a model to children but also builds their own confidence and skills as individuals.

The Parent Mentor program also builds leadership capacity by focusing many of the training workshops on increasing knowledge of educational practices and issues. LSNA organizers believe that parents must first have information and knowledge about school and community issues if they are to become meaningful leaders. The Parent Mentor training curriculum therefore includes sessions on such topics as the qualities of a leader, building one-on-one relationships, improving communication with teachers, and building children's self-esteem. Leticia Barrera, an LSNA organizer, explained, "The most important thing for an organizer is to educate our people. I need people to know what they are doing and why. It's not just to show the numbers of people." According to Barrera, many parents do not understand the power they have to make decisions in the school, and LSNA's role is to support their development as leaders who are committed to the community.

The combination of personal development and knowledge building proves powerful for many Latina mothers who have few opportunities for participation in public life outside of home-based activities. In this space,

parents set new personal goals, meet other parents, and gain a sense of confidence in their school involvement. Many then go on to further involvement and leadership in school and community life. LSNA staff member Lisette Moreno-Kuri explained,

When parents start in the Parent Mentor program and go on to the Literacy Ambassadors [program], they have these goals now. Thinking, I can really do this. They never thought they could teach a class or read to kids. Then they realize they really need their GED, and that's how we encourage them to attend in the evening to do their GED. After the Parent Mentor program, parents often become more involved through the numerous opportunities to further develop their skills as leaders and organizers. As parents become more involved and active, they may take on leadership positions, gain the skills to take on a job as a classroom assistant, or move into other education-related opportunities at LSNA.

In fact, as parents emerged as leaders, they began to work with LSNA organizers and collaborate with school staff to launch a series of important initiatives meant to address school and community needs. Parent mentors at the Funston School developed a plan to open a community learning center at their school. Other parent mentors liked the idea and spread the model to their schools as well. LSNA now raises funds and runs centers at six neighborhood schools, offering a range of classes in the evening to children and adults. Some classes are more academic, including English as a second language, citizenship, and GED programs, whereas others involve cultural enrichment, like folkloric dancing, quilting, and cooking. Latino participants see the cultural classes as important to maintaining their heritage. Meanwhile, some parent mentors took the opportunity to become teachers in the centers, whereas others worked in child care or as security guards; a former parent mentor directs one of the centers. LSNA's community learning centers were some of the first established in the city and have been cited as a model by Chicago Public Schools' CEO Arne Duncan to encourage more schools to adopt such centers.

Parent leaders have also initiated several other programs at Logan Square schools. The Nueva Generación program, a "grow your own teacher" initiative, enrolls Logan Square parents in a tuition-free college program leading to certification as bilingual teachers. The classes are held at the school-based community learning centers with the expectation that parent graduates will teach in Logan Square schools. LSNA's

Literacy Ambassador program pairs parents and school teachers to visit the homes of other parents to help them support their children's education. The program gets parent leaders and teachers working together collaboratively, and it builds closer ties between the school and community as teachers spend an evening in the homes of their children's families. LSNA's newest program is a parent tutor program in which parents are trained to be tutors in school classrooms. And parent mentors have also helped initiate community campaigns around housing and health issues.¹⁶

By now, LSNA and the parent mentors have created an integrated web of programs and, like Camino Nuevo, a ladder of opportunities for parent participation and leadership at a variety of levels. By designing complementary programs, LSNA provides opportunities for parents to stay involved, develop the skills they need to become active participants in the schools, and make a long-term commitment to their child's education. According to Moreno, parents view these as "seamless" programs that have become "stepping stones in their lives." By understanding what parents need (e.g., opportunities for adult education, school knowledge, leadership opportunities) and providing long-term solutions for parental involvement, LSNA provides a program structure and content that fosters parent capacity to participate and lead at a variety of levels. Contrary to traditional conceptions of parent involvement in which schools often determine the structure and content of parent activities, these parents play an active role in determining and leading programmatic initiatives.

Parent mentors serve as the relational bridges between teachers and the broader parent body that we found at Quitman and Camino Nuevo as well. As parents become more active participants in the school, they become more visible to students and staff, and they begin to change the school culture. Part of the anonymity and misunderstanding that existed between parents and teachers is replaced with a better understanding of the culture of families and the local community. With greater opportunities to meet and work with teachers, parents feel more welcomed by the school and more comfortable in what was previously an unfamiliar environment. Teachers also have opportunities to get to know parents, many of whom have a different language, culture, and background than themselves.

Unlocking power in relationships. It took patient relationship-building work on the part of some school staff to overcome the mistrust of parent participation. Even though principals have been strong supporters of LSNA programs, teachers were initially suspicious, as Maria Alviso explained: "Before, teachers thought the PMs [parent mentors] or any parents were spies and were afraid to let them in. Now, teachers ask for

parents, and I don't have enough." Sonia Acevedo, a teacher at the Monroe Elementary School, also attested to the change in school culture over time: "At the beginning, the teachers, they were not so happy to share their classroom with other teachers at night, with the community center at night, probably about people touching things. But now they take care of things."

New relationships among parents and newly developed leadership capacities have brought about changes in the collective sense of power and agency among parents. At least some parents now exert their wishes and authority with more power as leaders and decision makers at the school level. For example, Monroe Elementary School parents came together to protest a school change initiated by the Chicago school district in 2005. Because of overpopulation at Monroe, the Chicago Board of Education decided to bus the school's seventh- and eighth-grade students to a nearby school. When the board announced the plan, an uproar arose immediately from parents whose children would be uprooted from a familiar environment and learning community. As employees of the district, school staff largely stayed in the background as parents organized a campaign to stop the district's decision. Monroe parents serving on the Local School Council (LSC), a governing body of parents, community members, teachers, and the school principal, mobilized parents and made appeals to city aldermen to help stop the district's proposed plan. Parent tutor and LSC member Silvia Gonzalez, who personally phoned Illinois State Senator Miguel del Valle, recalled, "I spent all of that Friday distributing flyers and making phone calls to parents. Teachers told us we were fighting a big giant—the Board of Ed—but the community just came out—in the first LSC meeting, we had about 200 parents come to talk about the issue." Because of mounting opposition, the board backed down and withdrew its proposal as parents celebrated their victory. Monroe parents now speak excitedly about their success in winning their demands from the district because it symbolizes the power they have achieved to support their children's education.

It is hard to imagine that parents would have been able to act so quickly and with such confidence and organization if relationships had not been built and parents did not see schools as places to exercise their leadership. LSNA has provided the training and support opportunities for parents that have created the possibility for them to emerge as independent leaders. Ofelia Sanchez, a Monroe parent tutor and LSC member, explained,

This is an example of how much the school means to the families in the neighborhood ... LSNA wasn't directly involved. In a

way, they were involved because all of the parents in the school were with the Parent Mentor program. They [parent mentors] are the ones who know how the school works, the environment. They were the ones that were fighting for this.

Many Monroe teachers and administrators were also celebrating the parents' victory, and this fact points to an important facet of LSNA's approach. LSNA is careful to do its parent work in close collaboration with educators at its eight schools. The organization works hard to develop programs that reflect the shared interests of parents and educators and to help educators see the value of strong parent leadership at the schools. Both educators and parents have had to grow and develop, to learn from each other, to make collaboration work.

Through a model of community organizing, LSNA encourages parents to become leaders, to challenge school policies when necessary, and to become an assertive force within the school. This is a significant change from the situation at many schools, in which teachers and administrators typically set the boundaries and guidelines for parent involvement. Because a school's culture often reflects the inequalities of power among stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and administrators, changing a school's culture often requires that a culture of power (Delpit, 1988) be challenged and transformed as well. In this case, parents who were connected within a larger community, who felt a sense of collective interest in the school community, and who had developed their talents as school leaders are beginning to reshape a school culture into one that supports active engagement.

By developing a core group of parent leaders, the Parent Mentor program is the foundation that drives LSNA's work with parents. LSNA lead education organizer Joanna Brown sees the Parent Mentor program as a model for leadership development for immigrant women:

Over and over again, the women themselves speak about being transformed by the experience. Many were isolated in their homes by language, culture, and small children. For many, it is their first step out into the public sphere. This works in part because the school is the safest public institution, filled with women and children.

IMPACT ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

There is some evidence that the collaborations and parent engagement efforts we studied have led to gains in student learning in these three

cases. Between 1999 and 2005, the percentage scoring at or above the national norm for the Iowa reading test rose at all LSNA-affiliated schools, from an average of 29.5% to an average of 38.9%. For math, the average percentage rose from 32.2% to 44.3%. The percentage of students in the lowest quartile dropped substantially as well.¹⁷ Camino Nuevo elementary school's California API score rose from 485 in 2002 to 651, a significant increase. The elementary school still ranks 2 (low) in comparison with all schools in California, but it now ranks 4 (out of 10) for similar schools. Both the elementary school and middle school have exceeded their growth targets, and the middle school now ranks 9 (with 10 the highest) in comparison with similar schools.¹⁸ At Quitman, the percentage of fourth graders scoring at the "proficient" level on the language arts literacy test of the state's Elementary School Proficiency Assessment rose rapidly, from 24.2% in 1999 to 61.8% in 2002, and thereafter has increased more slowly, to 66.7% in 2004. This puts the school just under the state standard of 68% proficient but above the district average. Math scores rose significantly over the previous year, but at only 37% proficient, they lag behind district averages.¹⁹

These gains in student learning suggest that community-based forms of parent engagement can contribute to student learning. Of course, these schools and their districts have undergone other changes during this period, so it is difficult to disentangle the causes for student improvement. Nevertheless, the schools are aware of the importance of demonstrating gains in standardized tests and continue to work to strengthen their core mission in teaching and learning.

Moreover, it is now widely accepted that parent engagement has an important impact on student achievement in a variety of ways (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). We cannot directly compare the impact of a relational approach to parent engagement on student achievement with the impact of more traditional parent involvement efforts. However, some studies are beginning to suggest that successful collaborations of the kind discussed here—that is, between and among parents, teachers, principals, and community organizations—can have an important impact on student learning. A recent study of the 144 inner city public elementary schools in Chicago identified as low achieving in 1990 that substantially increased their reading test scores, typically to the national average for the Iowa reading test, found that "the most consistent feature of these schools is that all adults work as a team to improve education, including the teachers, parents, Local School Council, principal and community agencies" (Designs for Change, 2005, p. ii).

DISCUSSION

We now turn to a discussion of the key findings from our analysis of these case narratives. In our view, the collaborations between CBOs and schools discussed previously share key features. Despite their differences, which will be addressed, the cases offer a distinct, relational approach to parent engagement that has led to important gains in the breadth and strength of parent participation in schools. This community-based approach (1) highlights relationship building, (2) develops the capacity of parents to be leaders, and (3) works to close the gaps in culture and power between educators and parents. The three aspects are related. Strong relationships among parents create mutual support and a sense of community out of which parents can develop as leaders, and the assertion of their leadership can produce change in power relationships and the culture of schooling. We will discuss each of the three elements of a relational approach to parent engagement in turn and contrast this approach to more traditional forms of parent involvement.

RELATIONSHIPS

In different ways and to various extents, LSNA, Quitman, and Camino Nuevo all prioritize efforts to build relationships among parents and between parents and educators at the school. The LSNA organizing approach is perhaps the clearest in building relationships *among* parents as a foundation from which parents can participate as equals in the school. Parents find mutual support and encouragement from other parents who are in similar circumstances and come from a similar culture. In terms of the preceding social capital discussion, these efforts build bonding forms of social ties as a basis to enter broader “bridging” efforts at collaboration with educators. In the context of mutual support, the more experienced leaders, like Maria Alviso at LSNA and Fatima Mendoza at Camino Nuevo, go on to mentor newer parents and can play a particularly powerful role in inspiring them to develop as leaders.

By contrast to this relational approach, we would argue that parent involvement is typically viewed as individualistic: It’s about a parent’s support of her own child at home or about the connection between one parent and her child’s teacher. In the approach discussed here, parent engagement becomes a shared responsibility. Individual actions, of course, still matter, but they are set in a collective context. When parents view themselves as a collective group and their families as a community bounded by similar interests and desires, a potential foundation to act collectively for the benefit of all children can emerge. Parents can enter

schools not as isolated individuals standing alone on the school's turf, but as powerful actors.

We suggested in the Theoretical Framework section that bonding relationships might need to precede bridging ones; that is, parents might need mutual support first to be able to collaborate as equals with educators. But our cases suggest a more complex relationship. At Quitman and Camino, school and CBO staffers begin to build bridging relationships with parents if not prior to, at least coterminous with, building relationships among parents. Nevertheless, whatever the exact order, all these schools pay attention to bringing parents together so that bonding social capital is generated.

Relationships create a sense of community and shared responsibility for children. This finding suggests the potential for schools to serve as institutional sites for social capital building. But to serve that role, they can benefit from CBO partners. For example, George Worsley and Gloria Chisom used the reputation they had built over the years through their work in CACNJ to help begin to overcome the distrust that parents had in Quitman School; they knew the community well and could help build relationships at the school. In all our cases, CBOs play a key role as catalysts for social capital building, both bridging and bonding.

Meanwhile, bridging relationships between parents and teachers and other school staff provides a basis for more meaningful collaboration (and mutual accountability) so that the school and home work together for the benefit of children. We found a particularly important role for parent leaders—like Quitman's group leaders and LSNA's parent mentors—to play as relational bridges between school educators and the broader population of parents. As teachers get to know parent leaders, they can develop a better understanding of family culture and a concrete sense of how parents can be assets to, not problems for, the school. Meanwhile, parents can use parent leaders, with whom they feel comfortable in their common identity as lay people, as go-betweens to facilitate relationships with professionally oriented teachers.

Building collaborative relationships between parents and educators is challenging, however, because the starting point is one of unequal knowledge and power. By nature of the profession, teachers are college educated, middle class, and experts in the work of schools (Lortie, 1975). In low-income urban areas, many parents have limited education (Lareau, 1989) and, if they are immigrants, often limited English proficiency (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). They may have expert knowledge about their own children, and they may have sound understandings about many schooling issues, but they often lack sophisticated expertise in curriculum and pedagogy (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Consequently,

working-class parents typically bow to teacher professionalism (Horvat et al., 2003). Bonding social capital—that is, mutual support—helps build parent confidence, but it is not enough. The other essential piece offered by our community-based cases is leadership development.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

All three collaborations that we studied try to foster the development of individual parents—personally, professionally, and as school and community leaders. They meet parents where they are at, helping to solve the problems that families face in low-income communities. But fundamentally, they do not focus on “deficits” (Valenzuela & Black, 2002) but rather recognize parents as “assets” to schools. Consequently, they set out to build the capacity of parents to be leaders. Two aspects of the approach to leadership development appear important. The CBOs we studied provide support and mentoring to parents, understanding leadership development in a holistic, personal way. And they sponsor structured training around issues in education and community life so that parents develop the skills and knowledge necessary to be participants and leaders with a greater voice and decision-making role in the school and community.

Our cases also offer a variety of types and levels of involvement that parents may choose—a ladder of engagement. This is important because all parents are unlikely to become key school leaders. It may be better to think about parent engagement as a pyramid, with large numbers of parents participating in smaller ways at the bottom (supporting their children in the home or in classroom activity), a sizeable group active in larger projects in the middle (e.g., in schoolwide activities), and then a relatively small group the most active at the top (e.g., in school policy making). Having strong relationships throughout the pyramid ensures that parent leaders really represent the larger parent body. Meanwhile, having multiple leadership development opportunities gives parents the option to move up the ladder of engagement, depending on interests and available time.

In contrast to our cases, most public schools in low-income and urban communities do not typically think about parents as leaders (Noguera, 2001). Although teachers are now recognized as potential leaders in schools and much attention is paid to how they can develop their leadership capacity (e.g., Task Force on Teacher Leadership, 2001), families often remain out of the picture. Rarely recognized as potential school leaders, parents are more typically viewed as uninterested and even as unsupportive of school efforts. Although a few parents may step forward to lead PTAs or serve on school-site councils and parent advisory coun-

cils, these formal structures often only include a small group of parents who participate based on whatever skill and experience they bring. As a result, most observers agree that parents rarely attain a real measure of power in school decision making (Cutler, 2000; Fine, 1993; Sarason, 1995).

Although we know that a parent's sense of self-efficacy matters greatly for her involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), there are few avenues in many schools through which larger numbers of parents can develop the capacity to lead. When schools do think about increasing parent knowledge and capacity, they typically hold workshops on pedagogical issues—for example, on a new math curriculum (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2007). This kind of workshop is, of course, important, and the cases that we document also offer them. But the collaborations we studied work to embed this kind of knowledge building within a more holistic approach to parent capacity development and personal growth; moreover, they work to build a group of parents who can exert influence together.

When parents emerge as leaders, their roles change. Rather than sit at workshops as passive recipients of knowledge and communication from the school, they can begin to help set the agenda for educational change and program development. Rooted themselves in more extended parent and community networks, parent leaders can help shape initiatives that authentically reflect the values, concerns, and needs of students and their families, as we have seen in the cases we discuss.

Just as CBOs can help build relationships with parents in and around schools, they can also offer a venue for parent leadership development that schools themselves may not be well suited to offer for several reasons. Typically, schools have little expertise in this area (M. E. Lopez et al., 2005); they may want to remain focused on student learning; and they may remain apprehensive about parent power (Fine, 1993). The best arrangement for generating meaningful parent leadership, albeit one not easy to achieve, may well be the kinds of school–CBO collaborations discussed in this article.

SHIFTS IN CULTURE AND POWER

The CBOs discussed here all make intentional efforts to change the culture of public education to create schools that incorporate the culture, values, and interests of the communities they serve. This has not been an easy task. But the three cases have all made some important strides and have done so through a process that involves meaningful engagement between parents and educators, mediated by the CBO. Parents at all

schools reported a welcoming and respectful attitude. Each school has developed programs, like Latino cultural arts, that reflect community culture. All have parents actively engaged in the school working alongside school staff and, in many cases, designing new initiatives with educators. Parents at Camino Nuevo played important roles in the design of the academy's new high school and its preschool center. Parent mentors in LSNA sponsored the Literacy Ambassador program that pairs parents and teachers in doing home visits together.

More traditional school-based parent involvement efforts in which schools set the agenda and work to include parents on an individual basis have long been criticized for reflecting what we have called a "power over" approach to parents. These involvement programs typically fail to give parents any real measure of power in schools (Fine, 1993). Scholars (Carreon et al., 2005; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Soyoungh, 2005) have noted that parents of color often have different values for education or different ideas about their participation, but these are not recognized in traditional top-down approaches.

As an alternative some have looked to efforts to organize parents outside of schools so that they can pressure schools to take their concerns seriously (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedelecsleaux, 1999; Mediratta & Karp, 2003; Soto, 1997). As we have found in our study, when parents organize collectively, they can create a sense of community and become a more powerful force vis-à-vis schools. Yet, however important and necessary these more "outside" efforts may be, they can remain limited by their own attempt to generate a degree of community "power over" schools.

The relational approach to power, reflected in the work of the CBOs studied here, helps us get out of a dichotomy in our current understanding of parent engagement, participating either passively inside or combatively outside schools. This relational approach recognizes the reality of potential conflict between parents, community leaders, and educators but invites them into a collaborative process that fosters the "power to" create solutions together. In fact, dealing with conflict rather than avoiding it can often lead to stronger collaboration (Heckman, Scull, & Conley, 1996). Increasing parent power through collaboration does not require that teachers lose their authority as experts in education. But it does require that teachers enter authentic processes of relationship building and engagement with parents and community leaders. Rather than approaching parents with the agenda of teaching them how to be better parents or to simply support the school's agenda, the relational approach engages parents around their own interests and values and respects their contributions. In this process, both educators and parents

grow and change, potentially forming a learning community together.

A key lesson of our study is the role that CBOs can play as intermediaries to help create conditions for authentic collaboration between educators and parents. Our model attempts to offer an alternative “power with” approach, in which CBOs help parents build bonding social capital and empower themselves while also creating bridging ties and collaboration with educators. Rather than ignoring or suppressing conflict, tension is seen as sometimes necessary, something to work through to get to collaboration. However, this kind of strategy may not work everywhere. School officials may fear bringing conflict out in the open (Nyberg, 1981; Shirley, 1997) and historically have resisted sharing power with parents (Cutler, 2000). But our cases suggest that there may be a new generation of school leaders who see the need for a different approach. A collaborative approach requires openness on the part of school officials to change and to confront the difficult challenges of learning to share power (Crow, 1998). And it requires parents to work to overcome mistrust or perceptions of institutional racism to seek collaborative orientations.

TRADITIONAL PARENT INVOLVEMENT

To better understand the distinctiveness of the relational approach to parent engagement, it may be helpful to contrast it with the more traditional approach to parent involvement implemented in urban public schools in low-income communities. These more traditional programs are certainly important. For example, the National Network of Partnership Schools, following Epstein et al.’s (2002) six-part framework of parent involvement, has shown the possibilities of engaging parents in a variety of school settings. Studies of efforts like these have established the connections between parent involvement and positive school outcomes such as student academic achievement (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). But we would characterize these more traditional parent involvement programs as individualistic, school centered, and activity based. In other words, schools often attempt to involve parents as individuals in activities determined mainly by educators (Epstein et al.).²⁰ The rhetoric of the newer term *family-school partnership* suggests a greater degree of mutuality between educators and parents; many authors now stress the importance of two-way communication between parents and teachers (see, e.g., Chrispeels, 1996; Henderson et al., 2007). But in practice, these partnerships seldom break with the traditional school-centric and activity-based model of parent involvement.

Rather than thinking about involving the individual parent, the relational approach tries to build relationships among parents as a basis for

their collective participation. Rather than starting with an activity—for example, getting parents to attend a math night—this approach starts with relationships that create conversations to give parents an opportunity to articulate their own concerns. Rather than having the school set the agenda or the activities, we have highlighted the value of providing parents with opportunities to take leadership in setting a joint agenda. Rather than top-down communication from educator to parent, a relational approach creates opportunity for meaningful conversation and mutual learning across the lines that divide our urban schools from the communities they serve.

Table 1 highlights contrasting elements between the two models. For heuristic purposes, it emphasizes the differences in these approaches. In practice, of course, any particular school that takes a more traditional approach may try to bring parents together as a group, or it may create greater opportunities for parent participation in decision making. Nevertheless, we think that the two approaches are quite distinct.

Table 1. A comparison of school-centered and community-based models

Traditional School-Centered Model	Community-Based Model
Activity based	Relationship based
Parents as individuals	Parents as members of community/collective
Parents follow school agenda	Parents as leaders and collaborators in setting agenda
Workshops that provide information	Training for leadership development and personal growth
School to parent communication	Mutual exchange of relational power

We have developed our relational model from a study of three cases, so further research will be necessary to see whether it broadly reflects the work of community-based organizations and whether it leads to similar results in increasing the breadth and depth of parent engagement in schools across a variety of settings.²¹ Nevertheless, there is some evidence that elements of the community-based approach to parent engagement we’ve sketched here are gaining wider currency as a broader range of community-based and civic organizations have sought to influence public education. For example, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, a statewide advocacy group in Kentucky, has worked for years to improve schools in part through fostering parent leadership in its Commonwealth Institute, and it has published a series of reports advocating the need for parent leadership (e.g., Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss, & Raimondo, 2004). Meanwhile, some scholars and analysts have stressed the importance of relationships for building a foundation for authentic and powerful parent participation in schools (Mapp, 2003), or they have stressed the importance of relational trust for school

improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). And a variety of analysts of parent participation in culturally diverse communities have stressed the importance of bridging the gap in culture and power between schools and the communities they serve and have searched for collaborative models (Comer, 1996; Moll et al., 1992). In this article, we have worked to show how these three elements are interrelated and can be combined into a new paradigm for parental engagement.

Although parent engagement represents a key piece of the puzzle of school change and student improvement, it should not be considered a magic bullet. In the context of demands for a quick fix to the problems of urban schools, a strategy for parent engagement is one of long-term investment. Our concern is to foster extensive and meaningful engagement by parents in children's learning and the life of the school, and, beyond that, for parents to become active agents in the transformation of their schools and communities.

CONTEXT AND COLLABORATION

Despite our emphasis on commonalities across the three cases we studied, we did find some important variation in parent engagement. Quitman School in Newark places the most central emphasis on meeting the service needs of children and families, making the school a center for the support of families and community. Although Quitman has made important gains in developing parent leadership, LSNA is virtually a leadership generating machine, cultivating a large number of strong parent leaders who have initiated an impressive array of programs. Like Quitman, Camino Nuevo has made the school a center for community, but one more oriented to community development and social justice. And Camino has been able to establish a consistently strong culture throughout its schools that is closely aligned with the community.

Contextual factors appear to help explain this variation and therefore have important implications for how parent engagement can develop. Where communities are the most troubled and families struggle to survive on a daily basis, as in Newark's central ward, parent engagement may have to start by meeting people's basic needs. Perhaps services have to precede an emphasis on stronger forms of parent engagement.²² Camino Nuevo also serves a highly transient community in which it is not unusual for parents to lack legal documents, and it has also worked hard to meet family needs. Compared with Newark's central ward and even Camino Nuevo's MacArthur Park, the Logan Square neighborhood is more mixed in income and more stable, with higher rates of home ownership,

perhaps providing a stronger foundation for moving directly to a focus on leadership development.

Race may also matter. Quitman's parent body is largely African American, whereas Latinos predominate at both Camino Nuevo and at seven of eight LSNA schools. There is some evidence that low-income African American parents have more conflictual relationships with schools (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). We did find evidence of a higher level of mistrust surrounding relationships at largely Black Quitman compared with the other schools, and this may suggest that building parent leadership in collaboration with educators may be more difficult to achieve. Given the higher level of need at Quitman and the greater initial mistrust, the community school's accomplishments in building a foundation for parent engagement are perhaps all the more impressive. But more study of CBO-school collaborations across different racial groups would help clarify if and how the approach varies.

Variation in the mission, purpose, and orientation that the CBO brings to collaboration with schools can also help explain differences across our cases. Service organizations like CACNJ at Quitman are, of course, likely to specialize in service delivery rather than leadership development *per se*. Organizing groups like LSNA are experts in leadership development; after all, that is their express purpose. Nevertheless, service and organizing strategies that work to transform existing schools have to work hard to change school culture so that schools can become more closely tied to families' cultural traditions and be more open to sharing power.

Meanwhile, community development organizations like PND who decide to start a new school can establish from the beginning a culture that values the traditions of families and their community and that welcomes their participation on more equal terms. PND's Camino Nuevo was able to hire staff at the new school who held its community development and social justice values from the beginning. So it is perhaps not surprising that Camino Nuevo has done the most to organize the school around the culture of its community and to make the school work directly to foster community development.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

We did not set out to construct a replicable model of parent engagement to implement directly in other schools. However, we do think that there are a number of lessons from this study for educators interested in broadening and deepening parent participation in public schools in low-income urban communities. First, educators can benefit from taking a patient approach, building relationships over time. School leaders often

“rush” to hold workshops that they think are important to school reform goals, but few parents attend. This should not be surprising because a large body of scholarship consistently shows that people come to participate in social action events of all sorts most often when someone they know asks them to go (Diani & McAdam, 2003). In other words, relationships matter to participation. Investment in parent engagement, then, should be about creating the relationships that provide a foundation for long-term and sustainable change in schools, not a quick fix to any school’s problems.

Second, educators can look for opportunities to collaborate with community partners who have strong roots among the families whom the school serves. Schools may not be able to do parent and community engagement work alone (Schutz, 2006); they can profit from the social capital expertise of CBOs that have long worked with families and communities. Moreover, we have seen some benefits to having independent CBOs serve as relational bridges between schools and families and as catalysts for change (see also M. E. Lopez et al., 2005; Warren, 2005).

Finally, educators can benefit from understanding that communities bring different needs, aspirations, and desires to their children’s education. We have not tried to detail a particular program that can be scaled up to work across all schools. LSNA’s Parent Mentor program, for example, strikes us as a model initiative from which others can learn. But we do not offer it as universally applicable to all communities. Too often, model programs have disappointing results when imposed on school communities rather than when they emerge from a deeply rooted process of engagement (Coburn, 2003). We urge educators to seek an authentic process of meaningful conversation with families and community partners. If educators collaborate with community partners and help to develop parent leadership, they can form collaborative initiatives that meet the interests, values, and capacities of any particular school community.

In a way, our relational paradigm encompasses traditional parent involvement activities. But we have tried to suggest the possibility to go beyond involvement to offer an alternative framework for thinking about more powerful forms of parent engagement in schools. An expanded role for parent leadership lays the basis for developing meaningful collaborations to shift the culture of schools and for bringing schools into better alignment with the families they serve.

More broadly, these cases challenge us to think about new relationships between public schools and low-income urban communities. They ask us to go beyond the “within the four walls” mentality in which the school floats like a ship in a sea of community change. Instead, they suggest an

approach in which schools and communities can learn from each other and can combine their efforts to link school improvement to community revitalization.

Notes

1 We use the term *parent* in this article, but we recognize that many children are cared for by extended family or other adults.

2 Weak and ineffective parent participation may be the reality in many kinds of schools, but the focus of this article is on schools in urban low-income communities of color. Any comparisons across race and class need to be made carefully. For example, there is evidence that African American and Latino/Latina parents show higher rates of involvement in school when compared with White and Asian American parents of similar socioeconomic status (Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993), although some of this involvement may be around problems their children are having with the school.

3 Others (e.g., Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005) have also employed the term *engagement*. For a more extensive discussion of the contrast between parent involvement and parent engagement, see Shirley (1997).

4 Social capital can also serve as a resource for individuals, including children in schools, but we are concerned with collective action in this article; for a further discussion, see Coleman (1988), Putnam (1993, 2000) and Lin (2001).

5 The second round of data collection also served as a validity check for the study. We were able to replicate the findings published from the first round in the interviews and observations conducted a year later in the second round.

6 We quote almost all subjects by their real names. In a few cases in which subjects requested anonymity, we refer to subjects by their position (e.g., parent volunteer).

7 For additional information on the development of the Quitman Community School, see Warren (2005) and Dryfoos (2003). The school's Web site can be found at http://www.nps.k12.nj.us/quitman_st/index.htm.

8 Although there has been improvement in this regard, parents continue to report this as a problem.

9 Family involvement in after-school programs more generally has been shown to contribute to family involvement in schooling (Harris & Wilmer, 2004).

10 Some critics of the service model argue that it reinforces an asymmetrical power relationship between those serving and those being served and is ultimately disempowering to parents (Keith, 1996; Merz & Furman, 1997; Smrekar & Mawhinney, 1999), but we argue that Quitman's model of "service engagement" represents a more balanced approach to the situation at the school.

11 Some parents, however, admitted that they felt hesitant to speak up for fear that their children would lose their placement in the school.

12 For further information on the development of the Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, see Warren (2005) and Farbstein (2003). The academy's Web site can be found at <http://www.caminonuevo.org>.

13 Data for this case discussion come from fieldwork at the two elementary schools and one middle school campus.

14 The IAF's Web site can be found at <http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/>.

15 Further information on the development of the education work of LSNA can be found in Warren (2005) and Blanc, Brown, Nevarez-La Torre, and Brown (2002). LSNA's Web site can be found at <http://www.lsna.net>.

16 More details about the Nueva Generacion and Literacy Ambassador programs can be found in Warren (2005) and Gold et al. (2002).

17 The percentage in the bottom quartile in reading dropped from an average of 41.1% in 1997 (except Ames School, which is 1999) to 24.5% in 2005; the percentage in the bottom quartile in math dropped from 40% to 22.5%. Data were derived from Chicago Public Schools Web site (<http://www.cps.k12.il.us>).

18 The middle school API scores rose from 590 in 2002 to 654 in 2005, with a ranking of 3 compared with all schools. Data were drawn from California Department of Education Web site (<http://www.cde.ca.gov>).

19 Data were drawn from New Jersey Department of Education Web site (<http://www.state.nj.us/education>).

20 PTA-type volunteerism occasionally offers a venue for collective action, but one that is typically limited to fund-raising and other activities in support of a school-defined agenda.

21 None of our cases included high schools in a central way either, or schools that were not primarily neighborhood based. How the model would apply in those cases requires study as well.

22 In a study of migrant communities, Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha (2001) also found that a serious and sustained commitment to meeting the needs of families led to strong connections between parents and schools.

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