

Case Study of an Educational Change Model: Parent Engagement Initiative

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Abstract

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A growing number of urban school stakeholders have sought to change failing schools by implementing initiatives to increase parent involvement. Stakeholders have purposed changing the school's culture; the quality of relationships between educators, parents, and students; and students' educational outcomes by effecting systemic change within the school and the surrounding community. The implementation of successful systemic initiatives has resulted in an increase in the quantity and quality of the various forms of parent involvement identified by Epstein (1995), such as parent volunteers in the school, and parents helping their children with homework. Implementing parent involvement initiatives has succeeded in improving student academic achievement and transforming the culture of schools (Lewis, 1997; Murnane & Levy, 1996). The purpose of conducting this case study was to describe the change implementation process of an urban school district and to analyze a parent engagement initiative.

Literature Review

The connection between home environments and school learning are significant and well documented in research literature. Researchers have provided convincing evidence that parents make significant contributions to their children's school outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001). Parents' participation in their child's education has been associated with increased school achievement, increased motivation, reduced dropout rate, and improved social behavior and interactions with peers.

Marschall (2006) surveyed teachers in an urban school districts that served primarily Latino students on effective school organization, parent involvement, and school practices regarding outreach and engagement with parents and communities.

Marschall found that decentralized governing arrangements provided important opportunities and incentives for parent and community involvement in schools. Decentralization fosters the development of a broader and more institutionalized set of resources for parents. Higher levels of minority representation on advisory and decision making committees were associated with greater teacher awareness of cultural and community issues of their students and more school efforts to engage parents and develop stronger parent-school relationships.

Educational researchers have examined why some parents become involved in their children's education while others did not. Much of this research investigated the role of ethnicity in parent involvement. Wong & Hughes (2006) investigated ethnic group differences with parent reported and teacher reported parent involvement in school on different dimensions of involvement. Researchers hypothesized that White parents would

demonstrate a significantly higher level of involvement than Hispanic-English speaking or Hispanic-Spanish speaking parents, especially on teacher reported measures.

Study participants were parents and teachers of first grade children attending ethnically diverse schools. Eligibility was determined by scoring below the median score on a state approved, district administered measure of literacy administered in May of kindergarten or September of first grade. All students were of Black, Hispanic, or White ethnicity.

Results demonstrate that Black parents reported more frequent communication with the school than Hispanic parents. White and Black parents reported more shared responsibility than Hispanic parents. Spanish speaking Hispanic parents reported a significantly lower level of shared responsibility. These findings suggest an important role for educators in connecting with minority parents as one means of narrowing the achievement gap. The authors suggest that school systems should implement a framework of broad based, empirically supported parent involvement practices.

Cultural discontinuity is often a challenge for educators as community and student demographics continue to become more racially and ethnically diverse. Matuszney, Banda, and Coleman (2007) found that parents from diverse cultures are more likely to collaborate with individuals whom they believe are genuinely interested in their children rather than professionals just doing a job. Building collaborative partnerships with parents from culturally diverse backgrounds requires that teachers prevent and break down barriers, and encourage culturally diverse parent participation through support and comfortable involvement.

Matuszney, et al offer a progressive plan to develop such collaborative relationships. The plan focuses on diminishing or removing the barriers that deter culturally diverse families from becoming involved in the education process. The plan is designed to be implemented in four phases, which correspond to parts of the school year and include activities intended to establish and enhance the parent-teacher relationship. The initiation phase of the plan establishes the parent-teacher relationship through informal celebratory events. The next phase is collaborative relationship building through focusing on building trust by inviting family members into the classroom. After establishing the foundation for the collaborative relationship, the relationship is strengthened through trust building and communication. The final phase of the plan is a reflection process conducted by a reflection and review survey. This survey is designed to continue improvement of the parent-school relationship.

Description of Site

Sunnyside Unified School district served 16,889 students, as of the 100th day of the 2005-06 school year. Sunnyside was established in 1921 and is now the third largest district in Pima County. The district serves families with children from birth to 5 years of age as well as preschool-grade 12 students. The percentage of students who are identified as minority is 94.4%. Specifically, the ethnic make-up of the student body is 87.7% Hispanic (14,804), 5.6% Anglo, (952), 4.1% Native American (687), 2.1% (353) African American, and 0.5% (91) Asian American. Sunnyside Unified School District covers 93.6 square miles in the southern part of the City of Tucson and areas adjacent in Pima County, including the northern two miles of the Tohono O'Odham Indian Reservation.

The District operates 14 elementary schools (grades preschool-5), five middle schools (grades 6-8), and three high schools (grades 9-12), including one alternative education school. During the 2006-2007 school year 14,434 students (83.62%) qualified for free or reduced-price meals. Of the district's 8,642 elementary students, 32% are classified as English language learners (ELL). Recent reclassification affected an additional 28% of elementary students who were previously classified as ELL students.

During the 2003-04 school year, the district's graduation rate was 69% and the dropout rate for students in grades 9 – 12 was 9.1%. Approximately 14% of the district's student population receives Special Education services. The District operates on an annual budget of over \$106 million. Approximately \$82.7 million of the total budget is for Maintenance and Operations, \$5.8 million is for capital needs, and \$18 million for federal programs.

Description of change

The Sunnyside Unified School District Parent Engagement Initiative was adopted three years ago as one response to corrective action taken by the state due to failure to meet the requirements of adequate annual student progress. As a result of corrective action, the district has mandated that all schools must meet parent engagement requirements for Local Education Agencies Corrective Action Plan, and that all schools align parent engagement efforts within the district.

The initiative is based on six standards of parent involvement. These standards consist of communication, parenting, student learning, volunteering, school decision making and advocacy, and collaborating with community. The goals of the initiative

include the creating a steering committee to implement a strategic plan to increase parent engagement; aligning and identifying district and parent community resource; creating a forum for parent engagement; and establishing uniformity of parent engagement services and programs delivered by the district. The initiative components are; the establishment of a Parent Academy, implementing a minimum of 5 district parent council meetings, eight to twelve yearly sessions of a Parent Training Institute, parent communication, data collection to evaluate initiative efforts, and methods to assess levels of engagement (see Logic Model).

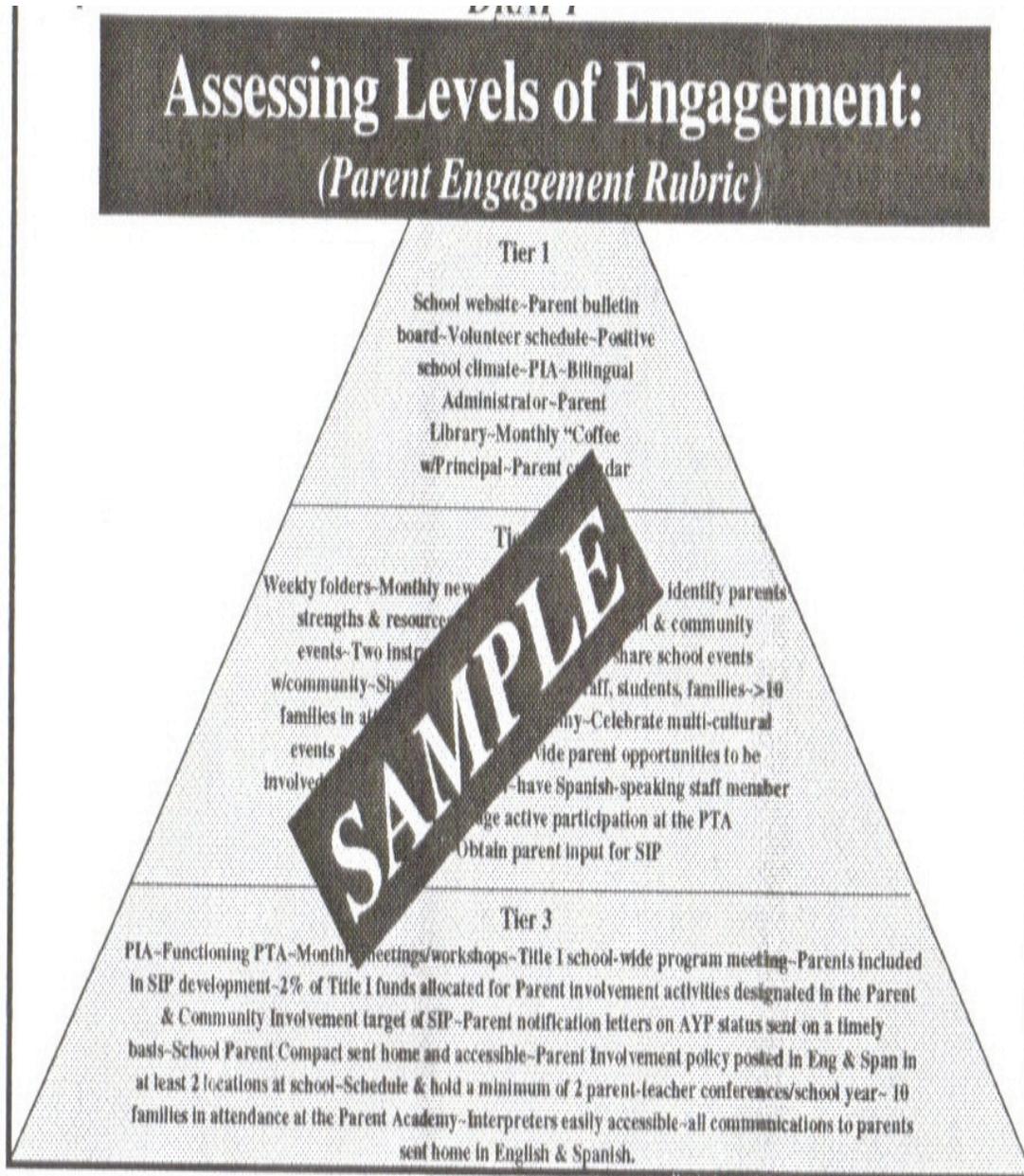
The steering committee meets monthly to decide agenda items for district parent council meetings, to plan and implement initiative strategies, to assess parent involvement data, and to evaluate the effectiveness of programs and initiative components. The steering committee members include the district superintendent, the director of federal programs, the director of student services, the public relations liaison, the director of elementary curriculum, the direction of secondary curriculum, a high school, middle school, and elementary school principal, the director of Parents as Teachers, a member of the Family Resource & Wellness Centers, and a representative of UA Office of Early Academic Outreach.

The district has established a Parent Council, which includes each principal, a parent involvement assistant, at least two parents. The focus of the Parent Council is to review student graduation rates, student attendance, and literacy within each school site. The meetings are also a venue to highlight new resources for parents and to provide a forum for parent feedback.

As a part of the Parent Engagement Initiative, the district has implemented a Parent Training Institute with a focus on two goals: Strength-based Parenting and College Preparation. The district offers workshops consisting of eight to twelve consecutive sessions based on the Parent Institute for Quality Education. The College Academy for Parents is available to families of all fourteen elementary schools with an emphasis on 4th and 5th graders.

Levels of parent engagement are assessed using a Parent Engagement Rubric. Figure 1 below indicates the levels of parent engagement. Success of the Parent Engagement Initiative is measured by attendance rates of the Steering Committee meetings, Parent Council meetings, and the College Academy for Parents. The district will also assess utilization of the online Parent Link, Parents as Teachers data, Family Literacy participation data, and school climate surveys.

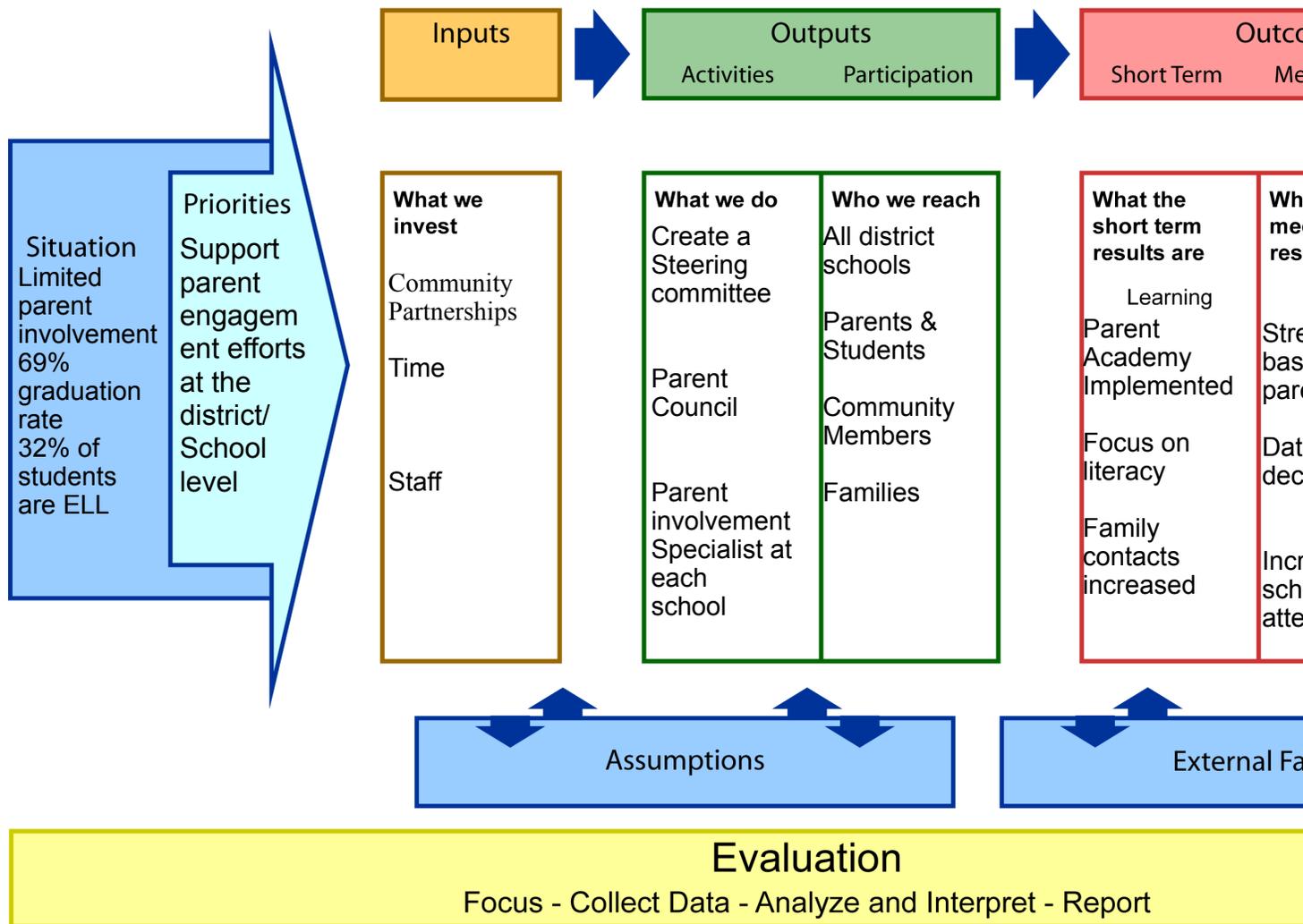
Figure 1



SUNNYSIDE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Parent Engagement Initiative

Program Action - Logic Model



Methodology

This case study examines the district -level implementation of a Parent Engagement Initiative in a low-socioeconomic school district.

Participants

Participants included the district director of federal programs, who oversees all of the federal programs, including parent engagement programs, the parent engagement coordinator, and a school principal. All participants are members of the Steering Committee, or District Parent Council.

Interview Protocol

An interview was conducted with study participants to the following questions:

1. Tell me about the Parent Engagement Initiative? (What was the foundation?)
2. Describe the decision making process?
3. Who was involved in the planning process?
4. What was the role of school leadership, teachers, parents, and the community in developing this initiative? (What strategies did you use to generate buy in?)
5. What was the timeline from knowledge to implementation of the initiative?
6. What did you learn from your experience?
7. What went right with the initiative?
8. What challenges did you face?

9. If another school district implemented this initiative, how would you advise them to proceed?

10. What final points would you like to make concerning this initiative?

Data Collection Process

The data collection process involved interviewing participants regarding the Parent Engagement Initiative utilizing the interview questions outlined in the interview protocol and recording the data. One interview was conducted by telephone due to the participant being on a district leave of absence.

Data Analysis

Information obtained from the interviews was analyzed by transcribing and reviewing recorded interview data. The data was classified according to commonalities in participant responses.

Findings

The Sunnyside Parent Engagement Initiative is a comprehensive plan to align the various parent involvement programs and efforts across the entire district. The goal is to not only increase parent involvement, but to take it a step further to get parents engaged.

A Parent Engagement Steering Committee was created to help create, give input and feedback on the PE Initiative and its components. The Parent Engagement Steering Committee consists of approximately 30 stakeholders who represent not only the district but the community. Members include Principals, Parent Involvement Assistants, University of Arizona, Pima, Family Literacy, Native American Education Program, the

Superintendent to name just a few. The committee discussed the importance of adding parents to the group and plans to do so for future meetings.

This initiative is comprehensive and requires great commitment. Therefore, it was felt that it is extremely important that it be created in collaboration among those who would be directly impacted from it. The Parent Engagement Steering Committee created the opportunity for this collaboration because it had input from various groups. A draft of the initiative was also shared with the rest of the principals during a Principals Meeting as well as with parents and the community during the District Parent Council Meeting. A PowerPoint presentation was created to help outline the various components and goals of the initiative. Principals were asked to share this with their staff. The presentation is currently available for all employees via the SOL website.

The timeline for implementation varied depending on the component. For instance, the creation of the Parent Engagement Steering Committee and District Parent Council portions were implemented immediately during the fall of 2006. The Parent Training Institute will be fully implemented by October 2008. An important component of this initiative is data collection. Last year's data will be used to create a baseline so that these efforts can be evaluated for their effectiveness.

This experience has validated the importance of collaboration when trying to create something so ambitious. Although having such a large group is not without its challenges; a large group can help create some great ideas, however assigning who is responsible for what is often tricky. Nevertheless, the Parent Engagement Initiative was

created with the input of many who all have the same goal: to do what is best for the parents and community of Sunnyside.

Some of the challenges that were faced are sharing the workload. The Initiative has many components and they are all very comprehensive and time-consuming. Sometimes people are quick to offer suggestions, but not put in the work or take the lead on a project. Another challenge is actually implementing some of the components. The Parent Engagement Steering Committee meets monthly and tries to tackle various topics; however addressing all the issues within the ninety minutes allocated has been very difficult.

Advice for future implementation would be to first create a Parent Engagement Steering Committee because the collaboration portion has been so critical to helping ensure that all stakeholders are represented. That alone has helped in the acceptance of this initiative. Also, when creating an initiative, ensure that data collection built into each step of the process.

Initiative participants are very proud of this Initiative. Sunnyside Unified School District has many wonderful things in place for parent involvement; we just needed a way to bring them all together. This Initiative is a great step in that direction.

Discussion

Rogers theoretical framework for innovative conceptualizes the five main steps in the innovation-decision progress as knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and commitment. Knowledge is gained when one learns of the innovation and gains understanding of its function. Knowledge of the initiative was initiated by the districts

inadequate student progress. District Administrators were persuaded that parent involvement was an important factor in improving student achievement in school districts requiring improvement. This was a top-down decision, which required school principals and personnel to implement the initiative as a part of the school culture. As a part of the decision making process, a Parent Engagement Steering Committee was created to help create, give input and feedback on the Parent Engagement Initiative and its components. Challenges to implementation include allocating job responsibilities and utilizing collected assessment data. The district continues to establish school level commitment to the initiative as school leaders disseminate information concerning initiative components.

It is noted that the Parent Engagement Initiative offers limited opportunities for parent participation during the decision making process and implementation process of the initiative. Parent involvement begins at the District Parent Council meeting with an established agenda. The decision making process does not consider how differences in education, income, social networks, and positions of power can affect their ability or willingness to participate. The result is that parents from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to become involved in school-related activities. Parents are viewed as consumers of education rather than empowered stakeholders of the educational process.

Conclusion

Henderson and Mapp (2002) draw convincing conclusions as to the qualities that successful school's efforts to engage families might include. These qualities (such as building a foundation of trust and respect, connecting parent-engagement strategies to learning objectives, and reaching out to engage parents beyond the school) are found in

schools where parent involvement is measurably high, in specific programs that demonstrate effects on learning outcomes, and in schools that exhibit high levels of achievement. Henderson and Mapp conclude that effective parent engagement must be comprehensive in nature, with the school consistently interacting with parents at many points, in many venues, over the course of the school years.

The Parent Engagement Initiative attempts to create a culture of collaboration within the community by creating a centralized system to foster relationships among parents, educators, and community members. Such relationships develop increased involvement, and create resources that are essential to improving student academic success.

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