

Walking the Walk: Portraits in Leadership for Family Engagement in Urban Schools

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Abstract

Family and community engagement are increasingly seen as powerful tools for making schools more equitable, culturally responsive, and collaborative. The commitment of school leaders is vital to school-community connections, yet is poorly documented in the literature and insufficiently addressed in training for administrators. Many school leaders “talk the talk” of school-family partnerships, but how exactly do they “walk the walk,” given the competing pressures they face in a massive urban district like Los Angeles? This qualitative study offers contextualized portraits of four school leaders notable for their proactive, community-oriented approach. Data focus on the administrators’ role in promoting activities, including an annual conference with elected officials, the Parents as Authors Program, community organizing-style “house meetings” in classrooms, and home visits. Findings suggest these leaders actively pursued family engagement as part of a broader moral commitment to social justice and educational equity for disenfranchised Latino families. Inspired by various family engagement models but distrustful of traditional parent involvement structures in the district, they shaped activities to the needs of their particular communities. Implications for leadership preparation programs are discussed, such as the need for more hands-on experience working with parents and apprenticeships with community-oriented school leaders.

Key Words: family engagement, school-family partnerships, parent involvement, empowerment, school leaders, social justice, leadership preparation, administrators, principals, urban schools, cases, portraits, educational equity

Introduction

Family and community engagement are increasingly seen as powerful tools for making schools more equitable, culturally responsive, and collaborative (Fruchter, 2007; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002; Noguera, 2001; Olivos, 2006). School-community partnerships – though typically invoked to increase achievement – are also critical to democratic schooling and civic capacity building (Goldring & Hausman, 2001; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). When urban schools pursue meaningful partnerships, they enhance social capital in struggling communities and expand opportunities for students, their families, and neighborhoods.

The commitment of school leaders is vital to school-community connections (Ferguson, 2005; Sanders & Harvey, 2002), yet is poorly documented in the literature and insufficiently addressed in training for administrators. Interstate Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards for school administrators, including collaborating with families and community members, mobilizing community resources, and responding to diverse community interests, have been adopted by most states and many leadership preparation programs. Yet only 20% of education college deans surveyed considered their administrative graduates well prepared to work with families (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Both the parent involvement literature and the leadership literature call on administrators to set policy, allocate resources, and model practice to promote partnerships (Constantino, 2003; Epstein et al., 2002; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Sanders & Harvey) but offer few studies of this process in action with parents (Auerbach, 2007b; Griffith, 2001). Similarly, the leadership literature is full of exhortations to lead for social justice but offers few empirical reports on what this looks like in practice (Theoharis, 2007). The limited research on leadership and families suggests that though many administrators “talk the talk” of engaging parents as partners in education, they typically manage parent involvement in conventional ways that support the school agenda and contain parent participation, acting as a buffer rather than a bridge to the community (Auerbach, 2007b; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Goldring & Hausman, 2001; Griffith). Thus, we know little about how administrators actually “walk the walk” of leading for family engagement.

What steps do committed administrators take to promote meaningful family engagement in urban schools? This qualitative study explores this question among several critical cases in Los Angeles with two purposes: (1) to illustrate what is possible in this neglected arena of leadership, even among overburdened leaders in underachieving schools, and (2) to inform policy and practice in democratic school reform and leadership preparation.

Conceptual Framework

This work draws on models of role construction, opportunities to lead for school-community connections, and social justice leadership. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) theorize that the strongest predictor of parent involvement is how parents conceptualize and construct their role, that is, what they think and do regarding their responsibility to support education. Role construction may likewise shape how administrators work with families. Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins (1994) describe how “mental processes” – experiences, feelings, beliefs, and preferences – influence educational leaders’ actions. Goldring and Hausman (2001) call for a “new mental model of schooling” in which principals “embrace a more community-oriented perspective [and]...view the development of civic capacity and community building as part of their roles” (pp. 198-199). What mental models or belief systems motivate administrators to lead for family engagement in education?

Honig’s (1998) framework on the “opportunity to lead” for community-school connections is highly generative for this study. She posits that the alignment among four factors creates opportunities for leadership in community partnerships: (1) the principals’ view of leadership and conception of their role; (2) the tasks required in particular partnerships; (3) the individual capacity of the principal; and (4) constraining and enabling conditions in the school, district, or neighborhood. This study examines the interplay of similar factors regarding families. How do administrators seek out, recognize, or create opportunities to lead for family engagement, thereby taking a proactive role?

Education for social justice implies collaboration between schools and families and the active pursuit of school-community partnerships, especially in urban schools where parents have traditionally been marginalized (Auerbach, 2007a; Furman & Shields, 2003; Hoff, Yoder, & Hoff, 2006). Theoharis (2007) uses a qualitative study of seven urban principals’ enactment of social justice to elaborate theory on social justice leadership. In his study, outreach to marginalized families, increasing parent participation, and improving home-school relations were key elements of leaders’ efforts to “strengthen school culture and community.” These and other steps were taken by administrators not only to raise achievement but because they were seen as “the moral or right course of action” (p. 232). Theoharis suggests a “framework of resistance” that guided these leaders, in which they resisted the status quo of marginalization of certain groups at school, faced resistance from within and outside the school due to their social justice agenda, and developed inner resistance or resilience to sustain their social justice work. To what extent is leadership for family engagement in urban schools motivated by and integrated with a broader agenda of social justice leadership?

Methods and Data Sources

How do committed urban school administrators walk the walk toward meaningful family engagement? What leadership beliefs and strategies, as well as contextual factors, facilitate or constrain this process? What can preparation programs for administrators learn from these role models? I explored these questions in a case study of a purposeful subsample of four from a larger study of 35 administrators in the Los Angeles Unified School District (Auerbach, 2007b). The four administrators were selected as “critical cases” (exemplars) and “information-rich” participants due to their more proactive role in family engagement and more explicit community-based orientation when compared to those in the larger study.

Participants in this study were three Latino/a principals and one African American assistant principal, including two males and two females, all middle-aged, each with 10-25 years of administrative experience. Three were administrators at large, year-round, Title I elementary schools of 800-1,900 students, and one was principal of a Title I school of 570 students, in four of the eight local districts within Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).¹ The administrators’ schools had student populations that were each at least 90% Latino, at least 90% eligible for free/reduced lunch, and 60-75% English Learners. All four schools were low-achieving according to the state’s Academic Performance Index (API) accountability system based on standardized tests, with statewide ranks of 3 or below on a 10-point scale.

Data for this study were collected mainly through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with administrators; each interview was one and a half to three hours long and was audiotaped and transcribed. Interview data were triangulated with field notes from observations of administrators, staff, and parents at site-level parent meetings, workshops, and conferences, as well as informal interviews with other school staff and parent leaders. Additional data came from the review of parent-related documents such as school newsletters, web sites, press releases, and program materials.

Data were analyzed with the constant comparative method, first within-case through topical, theoretical, and *en vivo* coding, and then cross-case to determine broader patterns, emerging themes, and discrepancies. Member and colleague checks were done to verify understandings and enhance validity (Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Findings are not meant to be generalized to populations, though they may be suggestive for researchers and educators in similar settings (Merriam).

The Broader Study Context

At the time of data collection, LAUSD had about 700,000 students and a number of structures and positions in place to promote parent involvement. In addition to a parent services branch at the central office, each local district had a parent ombudsperson to handle complaints, as well as parent facilitators to oversee mandated Title I and bilingual parent advisory councils at each school; some also had parent coordinators to organize parent outreach and training. At both the central office and local district level, there were parent newsletters and annual parent conferences with workshops on topics from science standards to No Child Left Behind. Not surprisingly, local districts and schools within this massive district varied widely in the resources, staffing, and support they gave to parent outreach and activities (Auerbach, 2007b). School mission statements posted in offices and web sites typically cited the importance of parent involvement and partnerships. Many schools had parent centers, adult education classes (e.g., English as a Second Language), parent workshops sponsored by nonprofit organizations, and on-site health and social services for families.

The present study is an outgrowth of a larger study on administrators' beliefs about family engagement and home-school relations (Auerbach, 2007b). Administrators in the larger study were selected by snowball sample of fellow administrators as having notable interest and expertise in parent involvement. They believed in the importance of family engagement and took symbolic steps to promote it – thus talking the talk (Auerbach, 2007b). They conceptualized parent involvement mainly as a tool for raising student achievement and positioned themselves in symbolic ways to promote such involvement, such as being highly visible and greeting parents who attended school activities. They tended to delegate the work of planning, organizing, and leading parent activities to support staff, such as parent center directors, and to favor parent training in academic topics. Conspicuously absent from most of their visions of family engagement was leadership to motivate and guide teachers in improving home-school communication or learning at home, as recommended by the parent involvement literature (Epstein et al., 2002; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997).

By contrast, the leaders examined in the present paper had a broader view of family engagement as empowerment and took a more proactive, direct role in promoting it at their schools – thus walking the walk. “If it’s not the principal leading the charge, then it’s not going to happen; we’re just giving it lip service,” as one principal said. These leaders had thought a great deal about families and communities in relation to schools, embedded their view of parent involvement in a community-oriented or social justice perspective on education,

sought out interaction with parents, and stressed relationship-building. They contrasted their approach to what they saw as some administrators' fear of parents and the tendency to distance themselves "at arm's length" or to do only the minimum mandated activities like Open House.

Findings for the four critical cases are presented below in contextualized portraits of administrators in action at their schools, with a focus on their role in and strategies to promote family engagement activities.

Empowering Parents for Community Uplift: Zavala's Parent Colloquium

On a Saturday morning before Caesar Chavez Day, dozens of Latino immigrant parents streamed across a school playground with children in tow to the 6th Annual Parent Colloquium/Conferencia Para Padres with a startling theme for a school-sponsored parent event in LAUSD: "Breaking the Cycle of Poverty and Violence through Education." The parents were heading for a free breakfast of *pan dulce* (sweet rolls) and fruit and for registration tables staffed by friendly, young, Spanish-speaking teachers, where they received tote bags from the local district honoring the event. Parents chose two workshops from a menu of 15 while their children were sent to play supervised sports or computer games. Helping to set up for lunch with tablecloths, fresh flowers, and music was Principal Zavala, who initiated the conference out of his concern with "empowering parents as part of the political system of the city and the school system," particularly disenfranchised immigrant parents.

Zavala directs a year-round, low-achieving school of about 900 mostly Latino students in a poor, gateway immigrant neighborhood near downtown Los Angeles. The school community was struggling with gangs, drugs, inadequate housing, and mostly emergency credentialed teachers when Zavala arrived as principal in 2001. He was a former K-12 administrator, then working at a university, who was coaxed away from academe with a charge from the local district superintendent to "change the school culture." At the time, Zavala said, "parent involvement was nonexistent;" teachers blamed families for the school's problems in a deficit-model approach, rather than recognizing their assets.

Zavala began meeting with interested parents and teachers about new directions for the school. "Luckily, there were some believers on staff" who appreciated families' strengths, he said; Zavala recruited more who shared his philosophy and sense of urgency, including several National Board certified teachers. As part of its mandated improvement plan for underperforming schools under the state accountability system, the school brought in parent involvement programs from nonprofit providers, such as Families in Schools'

popular Lea Conmigo (Read With Me) program for first-graders and their families. Zavala believed strongly that activities for parents should be geared to their needs, interests, and literacy levels, rather than to what he saw as inflexible district mandates. He recalled a math coach offering a family math workshop without realizing that parents – many of whom had no formal schooling – did not understand the concept of digits. The school began offering workshops like cake decorating and basket making. “I made the choice of meeting parents where they are,” Zavala explained.

A critical move was hosting 16 weeks of training in the American educational system and parent rights by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF). The 30 parent participants did projects that put them in contact with city or school district officials. Zavala credits MALDEF training with developing a core group of well-informed, activist parents, who became the key planners of the school’s Parent Colloquium.

The Parent Colloquium grew from 15 attendees the first year to more than 250 in 2007, with 40 of the school’s 50 teachers participating. From its bold title to its political keynote speaker, from its unusual workshop offerings to the unexpected items on its information tables, such as a flyer for a march for affordable housing, this event had the stamp of parent voices and grassroots community organizing. The bilingual program booklet noted that the conference theme was at parents’ request and that the focus, as in the past, was “the importance of communication between parents and their children, parents and their child’s teacher, and between members of the same community.”

The opening session in the auditorium was emblematic of Zavala’s community-based agenda. It was conducted in Spanish, with the recitation of an inspirational poem in three languages (Spanish, English, and Kanjobal, an indigenous language spoken by about 100 Guatemalan families at the school). Zavala, tall and dignified in a *guayabera* shirt, spoke briefly about Chavez’ legacy and transforming the community. An upbeat Latina school board member told the crowd “to demand services for our youth” to warm applause. The keynote speech by a Latino city councilman honored the sacrifices of immigrant parents, decried the growing “cancer of violence” in the city, and exhorted parents to “demand more low income housing. You can improve the situation by speaking up, knowing how to apply pressure.... This conference is about knowing what questions to ask,” he said. The audience, about 90% female, appeared engaged in the question and answer session with the councilman, which focused on crime, drugs, and police-community relations.

Parent workshop offerings were on academic topics like those seen at many LAUSD schools, such as K-2 reading and learning through games, as well as on health (including obesity and depression), laws and political organizing

(including immigration and housing problems), and 4th-5th grade topics (including sex education and the road to college). Workshops were led by teachers or outside facilitators. In one, mothers brainstormed ideas with a nurse and middle school counselor on how to have good communication with preteens about sex, laughing over a mother-daughter role play done by visiting 8th graders. In another, parents asked pointed questions about teacher quality and parent volunteer obligations to a representative of Parent Union, a group advocating for the Green Dot network of charter schools.

Zavala described the Colloquium as the “culmination of what we do” in terms of raising awareness and addressing community needs as a “bridge” to meeting school goals. He felt this differs from parent events sponsored by the district, which are designed to meet district needs and school agendas. More important than the Colloquium itself, in his view, were the months of collective planning by parents and teachers that go into it. Zavala said that, over time, he has taken less of a directive and more of a support role in the Colloquium and other activities.

Zavala said he understands why some administrators fear parents, acknowledging that they can do “damage” from a principal’s point of view. “Parents are a lot of work,” he noted. “Part of the work is dealing with conflict; you cannot avoid it.” He described parents at his school who positioned themselves as “power players who knew the right people” and “used their power incorrectly” to manipulate people – much like what administrators in the larger study called the “professional parents” who reportedly dominate school advisory councils (Auerbach, 2007b). Instead of seeing parents as a threat, Zavala urged new administrators to see their potential – to notice a group of parents at the school and think “I want to tap into that.” He believed administrators should try to give parents the support they need to help their families and find ways to empower them to participate in the school and the broader community. “Though there will be conflict,” he insisted, “parents are your best allies.”

Making a “Human Connection” with Parents: Perez and the Parents as Authors Program

I first heard of Principal Perez from local district officials, who pointed to her as an outstanding example of principals with commitment to and expertise in working with parents. Perez was known for taking time out every week to meet with parents at her school and work with them on writing, especially in the creation of family books in the Parents as Authors program.

When I first met Perez, a neatly tailored, petite woman with a butterfly pin and a ready smile, she was reading aloud from “The Important Book,”

demonstrating how parents could borrow its poetic form to write about the special qualities of their own families. “We want you to appreciate what children go through when they write, to teach them your own appreciation of literacy,” she told a small group of Latina, African American, and Hawaiian mothers gathered in the staff/parent room. “It’s one of the most powerful things you can do as a parent.” She gave them a template beginning, “The most important thing about X is that it is Y” and shared a tribute she had written to the “family” of staff that worked with her at the school, based on the template. She then led parents in a mapping exercise about the members of their family and adjectives to describe them, prompting easy chatter and laughter from parents as they wrote. “Can I put in my pet rat?” one asked. “I’d compare my daughter to a force of nature,” commented another, and “I can’t think of any adjectives for my husband!” Perez and staff circulated among the parents and helped as needed, in English and Spanish. One mother explained that she had already written four books in the Parents as Authors program, but now her fifth child was demanding one of his own. “It was hard for me to write the books because I don’t have a lot of education,” she said, “but I found it motivates my children. Sometimes I see them reading the books at home.”

Perez has been principal for six years of a small elementary school near the freeway in a working-class neighborhood of Northeast Los Angeles. Every week for several months of the year for the past five years, she has taken an active part in the Parents as Authors program. Her role has ranged from writing presenter to tutor/assistant for individual parents to supervisor of child care to emcee of the culminating event on Día del Niño (Children’s Day), at which parents present the homemade books to their children. Though an enthusiastic young Latina teacher directs the program, Perez planted the seed by having teachers attend a bilingual education conference and encouraging the interested teacher to start the program. She set aside time for it during her Thursday Parent Pláticas/Conversations meetings, using substitutes to cover participating teachers, and later paid teachers out of Title I monies for Saturday sessions. As an extension of the program, she asked all 5th grade teachers to help parents write a letter to their child, if not an entire book, in honor of their 5th grade culmination.

What motivates a busy urban principal to take the time to work directly with a group of parents? For Perez it was one of the most gratifying parts of her week. She saw parents as “the heartbeat of the school” and claimed to truly enjoy their company. “I love working with parents. I share a lot in common with the families.... They’re open, they want to learn.” Like Zavala, she believed that the school has a responsibility not only to children’s learning and development but to the overall improvement of family and community life. “This job is not

always the most positive thing,” she noted. “[Participating in these programs] is the one joy I have....As principal, you have to connect with parents. My job is to support them. This is their school; I need to understand them.” This view is remarkable for its contrast with what many administrators in the larger study reported regarding their fear or suspicion of parents in urban schools (Auerbach, 2007b).

Perez’s interest in Parents as Authors as a vehicle for relating to parents also arose from a vision of parents participating in non-traditional ways:

I want to break the mold of the parent as fundraiser, the PTA [as the focus]. Parents need to be part of the fabric of the school, to understand academics, as in why we are a PI5 school [Program Improvement 5 under NCLB], that we talk about at the Parent Platicas/Conversations. Parents can do a lot of other things.

Perez acknowledged that some parents are difficult to deal with – “you always have that parent who you fear her coming” – but found that her involvement in the program offered an alternative path to reach such people. The principal recalled one “combative” parent whom Perez got to know better through helping the mother with her book in Parents as Authors. Once Perez heard about the challenges the mother had faced coming to the U.S. alone at a young age, she could empathize; “after that we had the best relationship ever,” she reported. “You have to understand where they’re coming from. I hear the parents’ stories [at Parents as Authors] and make a connection at such a human level.” As explained by the young teacher who organized the program, “The parents open up because we [staff] open up.”

Perez believed the program is “very empowering to the parents.” Although she conceded it may not directly affect student achievement, it helps parents with limited education understand the writing process. The school’s intervention coordinator found that parents were especially excited about learning basic computer skills as they published their illustrated books. Parents spoke gratefully of the program, in person and in a video that staff made for Día del Niño: “Here you can express your thoughts and feelings.” “This program shows us that we all have the capacity to do more.” “There is unity between all of us as we work with the computers and print out our books.” Indeed, in coming together to write about their culture, home remedies, or special moments in the life of their family, parents got to know each other more intimately than at more traditional parent activities like family math workshops or Open House.

As was evident at the weekly sessions and the Día del Niño celebration, a key effect of the program was in reinforcing bonds between parent and child, parent and parent, and parent and school staff. As Perez put it, reading from a book she had written for the occasion: “We all spend time sharing our

thoughts, laughter, and sometimes tears. But the most important thing about Parents as Authors is that we come together as one community.” At the celebration, students joined tables of their parents, grandparents, and younger siblings to leaf excitedly through the homemade books; parents exchanged books and bookmaking tips with their peers; staff received thank-you gifts decorated with parents’ reflections; and families took photos of themselves with Perez and other staff while enjoying a potluck meal. This community-building function seemed to provide inherent satisfaction to the participants, seemingly energizing Perez for the more challenging parts of her job.

Perez attributed the program’s success to being organized by teachers, who she felt often have a better relationship with parents; to having a “critical mass” of staff willing to work on Saturdays; and to a legacy of strong home-school relations under a previous principal who believed in “constructing the school together” with parents (Auerbach, 2007b). It may also be significant that Perez’s school is one of a small number in LAUSD that continues to have bilingual classes in the wake of the Proposition 227 ban and takes part in a county-wide biliteracy project. Perhaps a school culture supporting bilingualism sets the stage for better home-school relations when most parents are not fluent in English.

Nurturing Parent-Teacher Relationships: Franco’s House Meetings

Principal Franco is a portly, jovial man who seems to enjoy being a maverick. Above his office door, a sign reads “Principal Learner;” his office wall has posters featuring the work of psychologist James Comer, including the quote: “Nothing is more important to success in schools than relationships between and among students, staff, and parents.” Franco’s view of family engagement was shaped by his exposure to James Comer’s School Development Program (one of the oldest and most respected parent involvement programs in the U.S.), as well as a local community organizing group and his own “take charge” philosophy of leadership.

For Franco, the essential core of family engagement is furthering the communication and relationship between teachers and parents. While this may seem obvious, especially at the elementary school level, it was rarely even mentioned by administrators in the larger study in interviews about promoting parent involvement (Auerbach, 2007b). When Franco set up monthly parent workshops and later an award-winning annual parent conference at his previous school in San Diego, the workshop leaders were his own teachers and support staff. “Parents may be getting wonderful information” when outside presenters from the county or nonprofit groups come in, he said. “But I got

to build that relationship with the teachers, not with strangers.” The Saturday conference grew in popularity, with teacher-led family math, family science, and computer workshops followed by speeches from the superintendent, mayor, and local ministers. “Lunch time we totaled \$1,000 worth of chicken,” Franco recalled. “People from the neighborhood were coming just to eat the chicken! So that changed to when you go to your sessions, you get a ticket [laughs] and that’s what’s going to get you your chicken.” By the time Franco came to his current, predominantly Latino, year-round elementary school of 1,800 in a small working-class city south of downtown Los Angeles, he had begun to question whether big annual informational meetings promote the kind of teacher-parent relationships he envisioned.

The organization One LA, an affiliate of Ernest Cortez’s Industrial Areas Foundation, introduced Franco to more intimate approaches to relationship building and to the idea of “relational power,” which stresses the power to take action with others rather than over them (Shirley, 1996). Franco was alienated by One LA’s adversarial stance toward the system that he had to work within, and impatient with the group’s focus on organizing parents around issues such as graffiti, traffic, and especially poor cafeteria food – what he termed a “black hole” topic with no resolution. Franco was more worried about making sure students could read and graduate from high school. But he was impressed with One LA’s strategies of getting people to share stories and build common cause through neighborhood walks, small house meetings in people’s homes, parent training in academics, and college planning at Achievement Academies.

Franco borrowed One LA’s house meeting strategy and transferred it from living rooms to classrooms, led by his teachers rather than by outside community organizers. He started with nine interested teachers who experimented with the strategy for two years, then expanded school-wide at the request of parents on the school advisory council. Teachers were given a discussion guide that the school adapted from One LA for the one-hour meetings, covering the purpose (getting to know each other through story sharing), main activity (discussing what education means in parents’ lives and their hopes and expectations for their children’s education), and wrap-up/evaluation. Franco built teacher capacity for the meetings by having two teachers new to the process sit in on a house meeting led by a more experienced teacher, learning by observing and participating as preparation for hosting their own house meeting. Administrators took turns attending the meetings, some serving as translators when needed. The house meetings were voluntary for teachers since Franco did not pay them and could not compel them to stay after school; less than half of the school’s teachers participated during the first year.

Franco described some of the first house meetings on the topic of “why education is important to me:”

Answering some of those things, pretty soon the parents are crying, the teacher's crying, everybody's crying, and I'm sitting there going "holy-moly"...I've seen staff members break down and cry at one meeting and the next meeting they won't, depending on who's in the audience and how vulnerable you allow yourself to be.

The way people talked at those meetings reminded Franco of small towns and "it takes a village" slogans; by contrast, at a large urban school, "we're so fragmented, the people don't even talk to each other. So I'm very hopeful to bring a little bit of that small town concept back because people are actually talking to each other" at the house meetings. Teachers and staff reported finding the meetings helpful because they broke down the barrier that parents – especially low-income parents and parents of color – often feel with educators (cf. Auerbach, 2007a). "Parents told us they felt more comfortable after the meetings approaching teachers with questions," said the school's Bilingual Coordinator. "The parents are very receptive to it," the Title I Coordinator agreed. "They like sharing each other's stories and finding out more. It's not a typical parent-teacher meeting."

A house meeting on a warm summer afternoon in a 3rd grade bilingual classroom had what was considered a high (nearly full) turnout of 17 mothers and 5 fathers, all Latinos/as speaking only in Spanish. The young Latina teacher and Bilingual Coordinator opened the meeting with personal stories about their own education, then asked parents to share their stories, as well as their hopes and expectations for their children. Few parents actually talked about expectations; most discussed the limited opportunities they had in Mexico or Central America and the challenges of trying to help their children, given parents' long work hours and lack of academic skills. For example, one mother said she routinely had to pick up her children at the babysitter's at 1:00 a.m. due to her work schedule; the Bilingual Coordinator pointed to this later as the kind of telling detail that teachers might not otherwise know about their students' home lives. Some parents also used the forum to express gratitude for the school's bilingual program, which supported their family's efforts to "keep our language and our culture and our values," as one mother said. (As at Perez's school, the bilingual program is one of few still in effect in LAUSD since the passage of the Proposition 227 ban on bilingual education in 1998.) The teacher commented after the meeting: "It's nice to hear that parents support their kids, how they are working really hard for them, and they understand the goal is college...I want them to feel comfortable asking me anything." She viewed the house meeting as a step toward better communication at individual parent-teacher conferences and events like Open House, where she planned to invite parents to a six-week family reading workshop that she would be offering again for the second year.

Franco was hopeful that the hybrid form of house meetings he started would do more for parent involvement at the school than traditional activities like those of parent centers and parent advisory councils. He scoffed at the tendency of many administrators to merely “tolerate” parents at required activities like Open House, unless told by the district to do otherwise. The challenge, he said, was how to “make it systematic” so that an activity like house meetings would become a hallmark of school culture.

Advocating for Parents as Advocates: Young’s Home Visits

When Assistant Principal Young interviewed for her current job, she was asked how she would increase parent involvement; her experience and commitment in this arena got her the job at a low-achieving school in a low-income pocket of a relatively affluent local district of LAUSD. Young’s approach to leadership for family engagement has been honed over 25 years as an educator, especially in the quasi-administrative position of school coordinator overseeing Title I and bilingual categorical programs at another predominantly Latino elementary school. As school coordinator, she saw herself as a bridge between teachers and parents, and between parents and administration, building relationships with all stakeholders. She was convinced that it is those in bridging roles, rather than top administrators, who leverage action for family engagement in urban schools. Her experience shows the potential for distributed forms of leadership for parent involvement in large urban schools (Auerbach, 2007b) and the ways in which administrators, support staff, and faculty together may contribute to effective outreach. This potential is significant in a district like LAUSD, where out-of-classroom, quasi-administrative positions like school coordinator or literacy coach are often a stepping stone to assistant principal positions, providing valuable, direct experience with parents.

Young had the most outspoken advocacy orientation toward parent involvement of any of the administrators in the larger study:

I’ve always believed that somebody has to be an advocate for the child. Someone. And if the teacher isn’t, then the parents have to be...And they have to be in there finding out what’s going on in the classroom. They can’t totally turn their child over to a teacher and say “you fix my child.” Because educating a child takes a whole – you know, I’m a believer that it takes a village...I’m a product of the 1960s. So that’s always been my philosophy.

Young’s 11 years of teaching at a Catholic school in East Los Angeles, “where it was a natural thing to go to the families,” helped reinforce this philosophy, as

did her experience as the child of a single mother and then a single mother herself, seeing the need for families to connect to the school. Her sense of urgency about parent advocacy relates to a tradition in many communities of color, in which a legacy of discrimination and mistrust leads some parents to try to protect their children from an indifferent, inadequate, or racist school system (Auerbach, 2007a; Lareau & Horvat 1999.)

Young's advocacy convictions suggest that her true sympathies lie with concerned parents rather than educators or the system per se. She claimed that bad teaching is allowed to go on due to parent ignorance of "what should be happening in the classroom....The more that parents are educated...the more savvy they are, the more they can start speaking up and challenging some of these things. I believe that some of these people [bad teachers] need to be challenged." At her former school, Young advised both teachers and parents on how to handle such situations.

When Young first arrived as a teacher in LAUSD in the 1990s at her former school, parents were not welcome in the classroom – except in her classroom. As she got to know parents, they expressed a wish to understand more about the curriculum and school operations, prompting her to organize the school's first parent workshops. She continued to take her cue from parents, responding to their suggestion that teachers make home visits as a way to reach out to parents who did not feel comfortable at school. She organized a home visit program that involved many of the school's teachers in visiting 300 families over four months on a voluntary basis (including those in a homeless shelter), bringing school supplies and literacy materials. Like Cobbs and Ginsberg (2006), Young felt the program's clearest effect was on teachers:

Sometimes teachers, because they're coming from another community, they really don't understand why certain things aren't taking place in the home. So when you go to a home and you see one room where everyone's staying...and they're sleeping in the living room, then you start understanding, "OK, this is why they can't get their homework done. This is why...they're not at school on time." So it helped to open up the teachers' eyes. And again, the ones that got involved, they became much more compassionate.

According to Young, the home visits had a "snowball effect" for participants, like teachers who then became active volunteers in the Homework Club, another program spurred by parent concerns. The home visits were one element of their parent involvement programs that led to the school receiving an award from the National Network of Partnership Schools. Young regretted that the momentum she created around parent involvement was not sustained in the

following years at the school, due to staff changes and lack of “capacity building.” Other administrators, active in the same cluster of schools at the time, give similar accounts of a golden age of parent involvement in the 1990s that has since faded away considerably (Auerbach, 2007b).

Young insisted that leadership for family engagement begins with a belief, what she called “a natural feeling,” for the role of parents in education and a sense of collective responsibility for children. The administrator has to believe that family engagement can happen in what she termed a “ghetto school” like hers and understand that low-income, immigrant parents are “devoted parents, hard working, trusting, compassionate, and very open. Very open to change.” She believed the parents were “looking for a way to actually start being more involved in the school” and that it was up to the school to take a first step like a parent workshop: “they’re just waiting for you to offer it.” Without such commitment by the site leader, parent outreach efforts will “fall by the wayside,” Young predicted, because they are difficult, low priority, and not the reason people become administrators.

At the practical level, Young thought administrators should get to know families by leading informal discussions, as in open forums where parents aired concerns about safety, homework, and the cafeteria. Principals should hire a dedicated person to work with parents, such as a parent center director, and a staff person to work with them, like a school coordinator; without this bridging between hands-on staff and administrators, good intentions can flounder. Principals also need to set aside funds, like the principal at her former school who gave teachers release time for parent involvement-related Action Planning Team meetings. Finally, though principals and assistant principals may be too busy to organize parent activities themselves, they should “keep an open ear” for needs and suggestions that might lead to new programs, services, or policies to help families.

Young was equally clear on impediments to leadership for family engagement. Just as one barrier was administrators who do not welcome parents, another was teachers who do not welcome parents to their classroom; however, she found that positive word of mouth from colleagues could erode teacher resistance over time. Another obstacle was pressure for space in overcrowded, year-round schools, where the parent center could be closed to be used as a classroom. Clannishness among parents who frequented the parent center, as if it belonged only to them, could likewise be a barrier.

Significantly, Young was less directly involved in promoting family engagement as an assistant principal than she was as a school coordinator. She brought parent workshop ideas to the parent center director and the literacy coach but considered her current school to be at the “beginning stages” of effective

outreach. While family engagement was still her passion, it was unclear to what extent she could pursue it in an official administrative role, especially given high stakes accountability pressures on low-achieving schools in the district.

Discussion: Paving the Way to Walking the Walk

As we have seen, these school leaders took a deliberate, proactive approach to walking the walk of promoting family engagement through parent activities that they initiated or led. Significantly, the activities were not grounded in purely academic school-based agendas but rather in broader community-based agendas that empowered families. In this, the leaders took a stand on what they felt mattered in family engagement, in line with their concerns about social justice and educational equity. Cross-case analysis suggested several themes regarding the beliefs, leadership strategies, and contextual factors that paved the way to these administrators walking the walk.

Believing It Is Possible and It Is Their Job to Make It Happen

The leaders in this study had given a great deal of thought to the importance of family engagement, either as an end in itself or as a means to a broader end such as community empowerment, especially at urban schools like theirs. They were convinced that meaningful family engagement was not only desirable, but possible in their schools, and that it was up to them to take proactive steps to achieve it. Thus, as in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) work, the role construction of these administrators was crucial in motivating their actions; as in Scheurich and Skrla's (2003) work regarding leadership for equity, the leaders "believed that the dream is possible" (p. 9) and acted accordingly.

Proactive Roles

As a measure of their commitment and leadership style, these leaders were more likely to be directly involved in initiating, planning, and implementing substantive activities with families, rather than appearing at events as figureheads and delegating the organization of activities to parent center staff, as most administrators in the larger study did (Auerbach, 2007b). These four leaders were dissatisfied with traditional approaches, such as PTA fundraisers or district-mandated advisory councils, and resolved to create alternative channels for family engagement at their schools, often in response to parent interest or demand. Perhaps these leaders sensed that without their personal involvement, less familiar forms of community outreach would be less effective. Over time, Zavala and Franco delegated the day-to-day organizing of parent activities, such as the Parent Colloquium or house meetings, to support staff. Perez,

however, was energized for her other tasks by having a hands-on role in Parents as Authors. Her response suggests that for some administrators with a community orientation, taking a proactive role in working with parents may be what Theoharis (2007) calls a “coping strategy” for dealing with the intense stress of the job.

Doing the Right Thing: A Social Justice Orientation

Like the social justice principals described by Theoharis (2007), these leaders were motivated by an ethical commitment. They believed that reaching out to parents was the right thing for schools to do, not simply a trend or a mandate. For three of the four, a strong interest in family engagement appeared to be part of a broader moral commitment to serving disenfranchised Latino immigrant families and to social justice goals of educational equity. All four leaders promoted authentic dialogue between families and educators that encouraged parents to articulate their dreams and goals for their children. Beyond the benefits for student achievement, the administrators saw the value of parent involvement for family health, lifelong learning, and greater access to life opportunities in underserved communities. Zavala, for example, was passionate about empowering parents to have a voice in neighborhood and community political issues, using the school as a vehicle for community education; Young saw promoting parent advocacy as the embodiment of her 1960's convictions that “it takes a village” to educate a child. These beliefs about the democratic purpose of schooling and the need for community empowerment for social uplift had a motivating force in spurring leaders to promote family engagement as a means to a larger end. This helped ensure that family engagement would be given a place of prominence in both the school culture and in the leader's view of his or her role. As in the Theoharis study, these social justice-oriented leaders persevered in spite of resistance by uninvolved parents and by some school staff, like the teachers who did not welcome parents as classroom volunteers at Young's school. Though none of the leaders reported direct opposition from other administrators, they implied that by failing to authentically engage the parents in their community, the central office and many fellow administrators were resistant to a social justice approach.

Community-Based Orientation and Relationship Building

These leaders knew their communities well and had both insight into and compassion for the families they served, each sharing some aspect of the parents' personal background like ethnicity, language, or single parent status. Like Murrell's (2001) “community teachers” in urban schools, community-oriented administrators often came from lower SES families of color like their students

or were fluent Spanish speakers who had taught for many years in predominantly poor, Latino neighborhoods (Auerbach, 2007b). Many administrators in the larger study named “relationship building” as part of their vision of parent involvement but few could be observed actually engaging in it with parents like the exemplary cases in this study. Their life experience and community orientation, combined with a passion for social justice, shaped their tendency to pursue more open relationships with parents as a hallmark of their leadership style.

Maintaining Bilingual Education Options and Reaching Out to Non-English-Speaking Parents

Though it was not intentional in the study design, three of the four leaders’ schools were distinctive for being among the small number of LAUSD schools that have maintained bilingual programs through waivers since the state ban on bilingual education in 1998. Given that these are predominantly Latino schools with majorities of English Learner students and immigrant parents, having a school culture focused on bilingual and bicultural literacy may create conditions conducive to the positive, two-way home-school communication envisioned in parent involvement models (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Epstein, 1990). This goes beyond a principal speaking Spanish or ensuring that parents’ home languages are accommodated by the school. By taking a stand on children’s language learning that goes against the mainstream, these schools appear more community-oriented than most – perhaps a feature of a social justice orientation toward education and leadership that persists despite resistance to its agenda in the broader society.

Strategies Shaped by Models of Parent and Community Involvement

These leaders did not operate in isolation in their efforts with parents. Rather, they took the time to learn about and profit from models of parent involvement or school-community relations, such as Comer’s School Development Program, Epstein’s parent involvement typology (Epstein et al., 2002), and the community organizing approach of the Industrial Areas Foundation. Perez was similarly inspired by the emphasis on parent empowerment in the bilingual education initiative, Project MORE. Leaders’ views were informed by these models, and they borrowed or adapted them for their schools as they saw fit. Leaders’ schools also benefited from the availability of grants, awards, training, and technical support from national organizations, such as MALDEF and the National Network of Partnership Schools.

Constraining Factors

The emphasis here has been on facilitating factors that paved the way for school leaders to walk the walk. This reflects their can-do attitude in discussing their efforts, in contrast to administrators in the larger study who pointed more readily to constraining factors (Auerbach, 2007b). All four schools in this study were ranked in the lower third of California schools on the Academic Performance Index (API), well below state targets for academic achievement. Administrators there were under the same high-stakes accountability pressures as their peers in other underperforming urban schools, with the same limited resources characteristic of California schools generally when compared to other states. Yet the only one to point to such conditions as constraints on family engagement was Franco. He explained that he could not have initiated house meetings with parents until he had already been at the school for several years, after establishing improved instruction as his first priority; he also claimed he could not pay teachers to lead parent activities, while other principals used Title I funds for this. The most common constraint noted by these leaders seemed to be dealing with “combative” parents who administrators felt misused their power as parents. Yet as the data in the larger study reveal, some leaders used their initiatives to galvanize parent opinion on the advisory councils or to get to know and repair relations with parents who challenged the school. As a principal participating in the larger study commented, once administrators reach out and show their interest in and commitment to helping families, “parents can be your greatest allies” (Auerbach, 2007b).

Clearly, further research is needed to place this data in a more holistic context of administrators’ overall approach to family/community outreach and to daily home-school interactions. To what extent were the activities profiled here an integral part of the school culture, with strong parent and staff participation? How did parents and staff view leaders’ support for family engagement and its collaborative nature? How did leaders walk the walk of their professed beliefs in one-on-one interactions with parents, particularly those involving complaints or conflict?

Implications for Leadership Preparation Programs

How can leadership programs produce leaders who not only espouse a belief in family engagement but actively walk the walk to promote it in urban schools? Future administrators need more field experience working with parents and exposure to community-oriented leaders. Aspiring principals could benefit from learning about, or ideally meeting, administrators who walk the walk of

family engagement in innovative ways. Such leaders could serve as role models to those who are unsure how to proceed with parents or how to integrate family engagement into their leadership role. At minimum, this could be done in leadership preparation programs through guest speakers, shadowing, and site visits, as well as classes in school-community relations taught or team-taught by such individuals. Even more worthwhile would be project-based internships or apprenticeships with community-oriented principals. Future administrators could thereby get hands-on experience organizing parent activities and meeting parents face to face in school climates geared to family engagement and social justice. Another option would be research projects in which teams of aspiring administrators do home visits to investigate and learn from families' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

By examining critical cases of community-oriented school leaders who took proactive roles in working with parents, this study addresses gaps in both the parent involvement and the leadership literature. The better we understand how committed administrators both talk the talk and walk the walk of leading for family engagement, the better we can prepare future administrators for the skills of collaboration needed to lead urban schools as part of equitable, democratic communities.

Endnote

¹Assistant Principal Young discussed both her previous school and her current school, both in LAUSD. Summary information here on school demographics and test performance refers to her previous school, which was the focus of her portrait. Her current school had a lower percentage of students eligible for free/reduced lunch (32%) and a higher Academic Performance Index (5) than the other schools.

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