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Parents and Schools as Partners in Education:
Strategies for Parent Engagement at Our Lady of Sorrows,
Jubilee Model School in Frayser, Tennessee

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Parents are often recognized as the first teachers in their children's lives, although in many cases the roles of parents are polarized between the home and school settings. From the beginning parents are influential and involved in their child's education and it is undisputable that parents continue to play a vital role throughout their children's schooling. Today parent involvement has been identified as a key and pressing issue at the heart of educational reform, because parents have been identified as essential actors in the education structure. There has been a great deal of research on the relationships between parents and schools by academics, activists, and sociologists; which has expanded the study of what current parent involvement looks like and introduced broader definitions of what parent involvement could grow to encompass.

In my investigation of parent involvement, I examined varying standards of parent participation in schools and tried to discern which models are most effective for urban contexts, looking for what might be most appropriate in Memphis. Research in contemporary literature revealed a sharp critique of the traditional methods of parent involvement often utilized today. In response to traditional models, there has been a growing body of literature on what actually qualifies as parent involvement, the value of parents' involvement, the distinction between involvement and engagement, and

proposals of alternative models of engagement that see parents as partners in education. The most pressing question in this inquiry was defining parent involvement and why it matters.

Defining parent involvement is complicated when moving past the rather limited understanding of traditional involvement and beginning to explore the developing models of parent engagement that reframe what is possible for parents. After sifting through a variety of research, it would be a foolish to claim a singular, all-encompassing definition of parent involvement. In fact, when parents, teachers, administrators, and others discuss parent involvement, it is very possible each party has entirely different understandings and expectations for family-school relationships. For some, it may completely be oriented around disciplinary actions, and others it can be centered on room mothers or fundraising. Today there are many progressive models of parent engagement that focus on policy-based involvement or even invite parents as secondary teachers into the classroom.

With swelling expectations in the education system, everyone is tinkering to improve the quality of education and parent involvement is beginning to be recognized as part of the educational equation. Each community must face specific challenges and approach parent engagement in a nuanced method that reaches out to the families in their school. While research and social theory about parent involvement are valuable components of developing healthy parent-school partnerships, it is absolutely essential to incorporate the context of the local community. In essence, this investigation of parent involvement, while it is rooted in

academic studies, it is firmly rooted in the context of a small catholic school located in the Memphis neighborhood, Frayser.

Context of Study

Tracey Russell is the current principal of a small Jubilee Model School called Our Lady of Sorrows (OLS). Russell was put in contact with Dr. Elizabeth Thomas, an Associate Professor of Psychology and the Director and Plough Chair of Urban Studies at Rhodes College, about potentially helping with parent involvement at her school in Frayser. With nearly 120 students ranging from preschool to 8th grade from the Frayser community, Russell had interest in expanding parent involvement in the school and invited Dr. Thomas and myself to OLS to discuss particular needs and begin exploring methods that could be utilized to foster stronger relationships with the parents of OLS. Later in my investigation I met with Principal Russell to clarify specific goals she had in mind and investigate her vision of parent involvement.

Principal Russell was seeking to uncover methods to invite parents into the extracurricular realms of the school. Currently, there is no parent-teacher organization structure in place, nor many opportunities for parents to engage in enriching the students' learning. Ideally, parents would be proactive in "planning activities for the kids outside of the school hours". She expressed an ardent desire to create a stronger school community in OLS, expanding the opportunities for parents in tandem with relieving further responsibilities from teachers. Overall, she wanted to explore how a parent run parent teacher organization could be formed at OLS and learn how to empower leadership and ownership for the parents of OLS through

such an organization. This organization could support students' growth outside the classroom and build stronger parent relationships with the faculty of OLS. Currently, there are certain activities that are supported by parents like Eagle Fest, Drive-In night and three groups of parent leaders for different age groups. However, Russell commented on a need for a structure to uphold and foster these parents' leadership in the school community.

Method of Research

Following this conversation with Principal Russell, I continued my investigation of parent involvement to seek out strategies that would best benefit Our Lady of Sorrows' parents, those the parents already involved and those who are 'hard to reach'. However, I had to reevaluate and deconstruct the meaning of parent involvement. Essentially, my findings have refined my understanding of how healthy and empowering models of parent participation operate. This investigation also shifted my skeptical perspective of parental engagement as impossibility for many parents, to a viable tool and essential component for parents to advocate as partners in the educational processes. Also after pouring through literature and research, parent engagement has emerged as with distinction from parent involvement.

When discussing parent-school relationships there are tensions between the terms 'involvement' and 'engagement'. There is a fundamental difference between having parents volunteering in schools and incorporating them in decisions that directly impact their children's education. One researcher wrote that engagement is focused on developing a "sense of mutuality" where parents are incorporated as partners rather than a mild volunteers and fundraisers (Hong 93). Inviting parents

to be *involved* in schools as volunteers, performing rudimentary or organizational tasks rather than as key participants in children's education and does not capitalize on the benefits that can grow from a partnership. Parent *involvement* can signify that parents may be physically present in a school, but are not incorporated into the culture of the school. The term *engagement* on the other hand can signify a community process that is rooted in relational experiences, where parents play a vital role in the school climate and participate in decision-making. Hong defines parent engagement as "a process that *evolves* over the course of a parent's participation in schools—as parents become more acclimated to schools, find opportunities to become involved, develop a sense of place and belonging in schools, and discover the different roles they can play" (Hong 181). Engagement is the process of inviting parents to the table, which constructs sustainable relationships for parent interactions and partnerships in schools.

If schools operate in the mindset of engagement over involvement, success in the classroom and in the community could develop into reciprocal, nurturing relationships. Overall, there is great potential for schools to operate as community anchors and nodes of community activism for parents. Because "schools are embedded within the broader contours of the community and society... [they are] central sites for community organizing" (Hong 147). Evolving from a mindset of parent participation into parent partnerships is critical for OLS to frame the possibilities for the invaluable roles parents can play in education. Research has demonstrated that parents have a significant effect on their child's education, and

OLS should shape their efforts to connect with parents, within the context of developing parent leadership and overcoming challenges in the Frayser community.

Why is Parent Involvement Relevant?

As the culture of both schools and society shift, parent involvement has become a prominent focus of school culture. In one body of research about the intersection of school, family and community, Joyce Epstein outlined four key factors that have refocused the dynamics between families and schools: there are more mothers with college education and bachelor's degrees, more baby and child care, federal regulation and funding for parent involvement, and changing family structures (Epstein 29-30). These structural and cultural transitions have encouraged the hype to emphasize parent involvement in education. A great deal of research has found student success is significantly enhanced by parent participation, students' academic achievement can benefit from the ways parents participate in their academic lives. One study concluded that "[i]n order for children to succeed in school there needs to be a synergy of many factors and a collaboration of all the people and systems involved in a child's education" (Patrikakou 6). Parents are central to a child's worldview, despite rhetoric of outstanding teachers being the key to advance children, and students cannot compartmentalize learning to one section of their lives. By connecting and collaborating between homes and classrooms, children have more avenues and resources to be successful. Essentially, when parents are engaged, their children will be more apt to develop into successful members of their communities, but that requires a partnership between parents and teachers. The focus then shifts on how to encourage parents' engagement in

partnerships with the school in order to foster the best possible learning environments for children. It is vital to invest in developing “[a] positive, welcoming school climate and consistent invitations to parents with ways to become involved in their children’s education at home and school positively predispose parents about the school’s efforts. Parents’ positive perception highly influences their children’s perception of school, which, in turn, positively contributes to students’ academic, social, and emotional learning” (Patrikakou 183). OLS should always keep in mind that when families are present and welcome in the school, children have an encouragement and reinforcement that what is happening in the classroom is worthwhile.

Outcomes of Parent involvement

Children have a lot to gain from their parents being present in their school life. When parents are present in the school setting there are multiple implications for a child’s future and their perception of their ability to achieve. One study concluded, “parent school involvement improves school outcomes in part because it signals to youth that school success is a self-relevant and [an] attainable possible self” (Oysterman 480). By association, students who see their parents in the school view it as a place where they are supported by teachers and parents. When parents are involved in schools through various activities, they are more likely “to connect with children’s belief that school is an important context to engage” (Oysterman 481). However, while students gain affirmation when parents are present, it is important to note that not every parents may be comfortable with being present at their child’s school for a variety of reasons.

Limitations in Traditional Involvement

Unfortunately, there are many instances where parent involvement is only measured by participation in bake-sales, a clique-like PTO, and parent-teacher conferences. Not only do “traditional” measurements of parent involvement fail to recognize the grander role that parents can and do play in the educational process, but they also exclude varying demographics. Although parent involvement has been “a major tool identified to reduce inequalities in achievement [it] may have limited ability to do so because of inequalities in the opportunities for and benefits of parent involvement across demographic groups” (Lee, J.-S., and N. K. Bowen 194). When certain types of parent involvement have been established as a benchmark for all parents, it often only benefits a certain socioeconomic class and can exclude those who do not fit in this traditional template. Parents outside this expectation may not possess the confidence or be available to volunteer at the school, whether that is due to limited educational experience, available transportation, or time to contribute in the traditional roles of parent involvement. Sociological research has suggested “cultural capital is the advantage gained by middle-class, educated European American parents from knowing, preferring, and experiencing a lifestyle congruent with the culture that is dominant in most American schools...Advantage also accrues from having family and work situations that permit involvement at the school at the times and in the ways most valued by the school” (Lee, J.-S., and N. K. Bowen 198). Just as there are many different types of learners and teachers, parents have multiple ways to be engaged in the school environment that cannot be ignored as invalid. When categorizing parents who are present in schools, it is important to

dissect the structures that allow certain demographics to participate with more ease, and thereafter determine if the school and organizations within the school are accessible and welcoming for all parent.

Accessibility of Schools

In Soo Hong's book *A Cord of Three Strands*, she remarks, "although [her] school community was racially and socioeconomically diverse, the active group of parents was not" (Hong 18). Hong observed that for white or middle-class parents the traditional strategies of engagement "seemed familiar and natural" implying that parent involvement has become an institutionalized concept which has the potential to restrict parent involvement in such a way that benefits only certain cultural backgrounds, namely white and middle-class (Hong 18). Unfortunately, this understanding of parent involvement leads to assumptions about parents who are not participating, who are then labeled as "hard to reach" parents that are interested in being active participants in their child's education. There is grave danger when schools begin treating parents who cannot participate in the traditional roles of parent engagement as less involved. When in reality, there are many contributions that may go unnoticed or unrecognized because of limited understanding of parent's roles in education. To clarify, my definition of the traditional model of parent involvement focuses on bake sales, parents as fundraisers, and chaperones on field trips. Schools should clarify and begin "recognizing the common values of parents and schools and modifying the ways in which opportunities and resources for parent involvement at school and at home are made available to all parents" (Lee, J.-S., and N. K. Bowen 215). In the context of OLS, where twenty-eight percent of

students are African American, forty-six percent Hispanic, and forty-six percent Caucasian, from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, respecting and acknowledging ethnic and cultural diversity is essential when discussing how to gauge parent involvement. Additionally, it is important to recognize that many parents must overcome personal obstacles and negative experiences to engage within the school.

Connotations of Parent Teacher interaction.

After reflecting on how parents approach schools, the reverse approach should also be considered, how do schools approach families? Often the only dialogue or experience parents have with their children's education is surrounding disciplinary actions, poor academic performance, or mandatory fundraising and service. Although the parent may support the teacher's actions, the parent is put in a defensive and vulnerable position. Limited interactions between parents and the schools can also be harmful for family-educator relationship. While interviewing about parent involvement, some teachers only referenced parents in the context of reinforcing discipline or needing to hold their kids accountable. While respectful behavior is a valuable component in the education process, schools must outgrow being a place that issues detailed critiques of children's performance and behavior without any affirmation or encouragement. Research has shown that "it is not unusual for outreach to be initiated by schools only when a student is experiencing academic or behavioral problems" (Patrikakou 187). Parents cannot feel welcomed in a community where they only receive negative news from the classroom, and the school is forging a paternalistic relationship rather than a partnership. If confrontational conversations are the *only* form of outreach, it undermines potential

relationships and sinks potential parent involvement. It is vital for schools to reach out to parents outside these moments with “good news to share, establishing a positive climate in schools for parents, teachers, and students (Patrikakou 187). From interviews with the staff, it seems that teachers are doing a good job of communicating in positive circumstances as well, which is a valuable method to reach out to parents and should be continued.

When parents are involved in activities outside of discipline in the school, there is more ownership for the parent and affirmative results for the kid’s experience of school and relationships between parents and teachers. Research has shown that “parent-child relationships [are] strongly associated with the school performance of youth, it is important for teachers and other school personnel to find ways of assisting parents in developing supportive school-related expectations for their children” (Murray 399). Investing in multi-dimensional relationships between parents and schools is an effective strategy that benefits the students, as well as essential in generating a community partnership in the educational process. The expansion of parent’s involvement is not a one sided effort; it requires the intentionality and dedication of school staff, but as a result of this hard work and collaboration there can be lasting results. “Strong school–family partnerships that involve coordinated efforts between teachers and parents must expand their framework to encompass social and emotional learning, and therefore help children develop and apply the necessary skills to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally at school and in life” (Patrikakou 6). At the end of the school day, parents and teachers are responsible for working together to enable success for all

their students and children. However, there are often obstacles that disable or discourage parents to engage in the school environment.

Obstacles in Frayser at OLS

Factors that prevent parents from being physically present at the school are often complex, and when thinking about schools in Memphis, there are even more urban social factors at work. Memphis is the seventh most dangerous metro area for pedestrians in the nation (Ernst 9). Additionally, the Frayser community has even received a grant to improve the walkability of this rural neighborhood, but the funds have yet to be spent. Currently, Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA) is consolidating their bus routes in the already underserved neighborhood, all of which continues to put this particular area at a disadvantage and tempt the fate of pedestrian fatalities. Aside from being physically limited in mobility, there is a question of access to a car. Additionally, how can parents who may be working a few jobs be able to participate during the school day with limited time capital?

Strategies from Working Parents

Some households within the OLS community only have one parent, which can drastically complicate the availability for that parent to be involved. In effort to look for opportunities for these single parents, I uncovered a body of research focused on working mothers and their involvement in their children's education. They identified four strategies to be used by single moms: "promoting a support network, using the workplace as a home base, garnering resources through work, and conquering time and space challenges" (Weiss 889). Many of these strategies required flexibility on part of teachers and administrators. Teachers might meet

these mothers at their workplace and other family members might take responsibilities for kids after school. This study focused on mothers who were transitioning from welfare to low-income jobs and in the same study it was found that “mothers who were employed part time or in school part time were also more involved than mothers who were not employed or in school at all, and that there were no differences in the involvement levels of mothers who were employed or in school full time and those who were not employed or in school” (Weiss et al. 896). While I did not compare levels of involvement within the OLS community, the effort to be involved at school functions is a carefully orchestrated balancing-act where mothers need the network and support of the other parents and teachers is applicable. Practical tips included having teachers meet with these mothers at their convenience, as well as the school reaching out and thoughtfully working through “factors such as flexibility in scheduling family involvement opportunities, resources such as fax machines and classroom telephones, and willingness to engage in work-directed communications may facilitate work-family involvement strategies” (Weiss et al. 896).

In a community like Frayser, many people must commute to work; there are continually many factors that limit the availability of parents and accessibility of transportation for parents. While this may not be the same at OLS, some PTO meetings in Memphis City Schools (now Shelby County Schools) are scheduled at impossible times that are not accessible for working parents. OLS must be very cognizant of the factors that contribute to parent involvement and inquire what

strategies could make meetings, office hours, and teachers easily accessible for parents of varying backgrounds and work schedules.

..Finally, when arriving at the school, granted there is time and means to arrive safely, parents gage the school climate. A school climate describes the environment and experience of being in the school, ultimately defining how comfortable parents feel in the school building and community. School climate is determined through the lens of parents' previous experiences of school culture. A vast amount of research cites parent involvement as beneficial for academic performance and a child's confidence in their ability to succeed in the classroom. However, parents who have not had a good experience in schools to begin with may not feel comfortable asserting their leadership or do not feel qualified to help with their child's schoolwork. Parent involvement efforts are effective when they allow parents the right to participate in the area in which they feel comfortable, thus it essential to create an environment where parents can be comfortable and feel valued (Johnson 3).

When schools are not accessible or welcoming to parents, what messages are communicated to families and the children? Schools should reflect over any possible discouraging factors might exist in the current systems and brainstorm and ask parents what would make these arenas more accessible. Not only can the school environment affect the parents' participation in the school, but in return affects their children and how they understand the relationship between their parents and their school. Students cannot succeed if their "connections among the adults in children's microsystems and congruence in behaviors, values, and attitudes across

settings” are challenged by actual or perceived discrimination of parent volunteers (Lee, J.-S., and N. K. Bowen 196). Thus it is essential to evaluate and reflect on factors that may discourage parents from investing time in the school and how these problems can be rectified.

Results of Limited Parent Out Reach: Parents

Previous negative connotations of school environments have left many parents alienated and discouraged from attempting to participate in schools. Contextually, Memphis schools have been fields of battle for high stake racial politics in the past and present. Reflecting to the busing desegregation of 1974, private schools out east of the city were formed to continue through de-facto segregation, leaving Memphis City Schools without strong tax base or much support for public schools. In 2001, the Jubilee School District was formed, to reopen Catholic Schools that had been abandoned during this period of white flight out east. It was a year and a half ago that Our Lady of Sorrows joined the Jubilee School System, as a Jubilee Model School, a model because it was never closed following desegregation and thus never reopened. With this context, private catholic education has been dynamic in the Memphis community, but not without some racial tensions. As for the public schools, this summer has exemplified the repercussions of the busing desegregation nearly forty years later with the merger of Shelby County Schools and Memphis City Schools. Now the public schools that were failing are being taken over by charter schools in the Achievement School District, while many Shelby County Schools are attempting to leave the unified school district once and for all. These politicized education games have displaced

many families and children, where the poorest neighborhoods have not been incorporated in decision-making. Parents have been dictated which schools they can and cannot go to, and if they cannot afford a private education for their kids, they must comply to the whims of the public school decisions. It is with this complex and messy history that parents hesitantly approach schools with.

Any hostile or unwelcoming experience can leave parents isolated and excluded from decision-making processes within schools as well as limit access to the resources or benefits associated with participating in school activities. Our Lady of Sorrows boasts a very diverse population, especially ensuing the unification as a Jubilee Model School, and the cultural dynamics are important to pay attention to in order to recognize historical discrimination that continues in varying ways today. If there are benefits for having parents involved in schools, there are certainly negative consequences when parents are excluded from decision-making processes, especially when there is significant racial ethnic, and economic diversity within the school. "Identifying and reducing barriers among African American, Latino/Hispanic, low-income, and less educated parents should be an emphasis of strategies to engage parents *at school* in the children's education" because at the school children hopefully engage in a learning environment that can reinforce the respect of diversity and witness the school respect their family, which is more conducive for a civically minded learning environment (Lee, J.-S., and N. K. Bowen 214). When discussing parents in education, schools, especially with populations like that of OLS, the "school administrators and staff must perceive parents as a resources...respect[ing] the cultural wealth that families bring to the school"

(Johnson 45). Cultural wealth cannot be undervalued in schools, but rather than reluctantly enforcing discrimination by ignoring cultural varieties, schools should proactively recognize and celebrate a place where families can proudly share their heritage. Cultural variations expand the opportunities for learning in and out of the classroom for students in addition to providing opportunities for parents to engage in a relationship with families with varying backgrounds.

Results of Limited Parent Outreach: Children's Learning

When considering parents in education, schools must “recognize and exploit the existence of cultural variations in parent involvement” (Lee, J.-S., and N. K. Bowen 214). In an environment like Our Lady of Sorrows or in Memphis at large, there are great opportunities to expand parent engagement from a cultural aspect. While interviewing a principal at a similar sized Jubilee school, he gave credit to the very successful variation of parent involvement to the Hispanic culture that is constantly present at the school. Additionally, there are many gifts of cultures to be exchanged in the context of Our Lady of Sorrows, whether that is the ability to grow up in a bi-lingual environment or sharing the rich cultures through music, sports, and food. Schools should seek ways to expand their definitions and expectations of parent participation. When the unique elements of the community are celebrated at the school, it naturally propels a friendly, inviting environment that encourages parents and the neighborhood to join the school community. The more effort the school can put forth to adjust to the contours of its community, the greater accessibility and comfort parents can feel in the school. From this point parents should be considered partners in the education process because, “once parents are

engaged with knowledge, respected and treated as equal partners, they are more likely to be involved in their child's education" (Johnson 4). Once parents are involved in their children's education as a partner, the entire community grows and benefits from dynamic relationships.

Importance of School Outreach and Welcoming

Although changing a school culture does not happen overnight, there should be discussions of how to implement inclusivity and how to invite parents to participate in the community conversations. "By creating culturally aware school-family partnerships, school systems can reduce cultural discontinuities, facilitate intercultural transitions, improve ethnic and racial perceptions and attitudes, and foster interethnic friendships" (Patrikakou 184). Parent involvement is rewarding for everyone when there is a welcoming environment to share one's culture. Additionally, "parent and teacher expectations regarding the academic, social, and emotional development of children have been shown to be among the best predictors of school success. Educators should make parents aware of this powerful factor, and assist them to communicate their expectations clearly and in developmentally appropriate ways to their children. Having a clear picture of what is expected and specific strategies to achieve the goals set fosters consistency and more learning opportunities" (Patrikakou 183). Open and ongoing communication between parents and teachers about these benefits should be incorporated along with teachers being willing to introduce potential opportunities and methods parents can engage in how to encourage their children at home.

Importance of Expectations and Communications

As recommended in multiple sources, clear communication between families and schools is essential for successful relationships and healthy school-home environments. Expectations of parents and teachers need to be clear and there must be an accessible avenue for parents to communicate their concerns and ideas, as well as the school providing constant clarity of parents' responsibilities. "Any form of parent engagement must be based on mutual conversation or dialogue between school staff and families" (Hong 180). Parents should be incorporated into relationships where they have support and a voice. A good strategy to build trust with parents is through building relationships; these are stronger bonds than an educational service provider and consumer. Relational engagement is very important "because schools can be such intimidating and confusing environments, even the most naturally confident parents can feel challenged by the complex practices and expectations of schools" (Hong 105). Those relational approaches help dilute the obstacles in the way of parents and build interpersonal confidence for parents to engage.

Expanding understanding of Parent Participation

In my research, multiple models of parent engagement rose to the surface as going far above and beyond what is expected of parents and teachers; in return the results have tremendously expanded the importance of schools' roles in communities. Most recent research focuses on expanding understanding of parent engagement beyond a traditional model of involvement. Repeatedly, parents are challenged to engage in the school community, which has led to an ongoing process

of building leadership skills and taking ownership of the school's community. Simultaneously, there are three basic models I would like to explore include in the overall discussion of engagement: parent action teams, parent mentorship, and parent activism. These three groups indicate varying practices of parent participation while demonstrating effective communication, reading the community needs, and exemplifying parents as partners in education. Parent engagement is an evolving process and is unique to each neighborhood and setting. Although the Frayser area has its own assets and challenges for Our Lady of Sorrows, there are some lessons to be learned from other communities that have explored progressive methods to get parents involved in the school.

Epstein: Action Teams for Partnerships

One of the most popular pieces of literature in the field of parent involvement comes from Joyce Epstein. "The way that schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families" (Epstein 389). This methodology is essential when thinking about education, because children cannot be divorced from their family and community as a support network outside the school. In the Epstein model, there are three spheres that influence students that overlap for education: family, school, and community. Ideally, these three spheres form partnerships to support one another. With this in mind it is important to recognize that there is no magic formula for successful parent participation, "good programs of family and community involvement will look different in each site, as individual schools tailor their practices to meet the needs and interests, time and talents, and ages and grade levels of students" (Epstein 394).

Epstein outlines the elements of parent involvement; beginning with parenting (establish a supportive home environment), communicating (between all spheres), volunteering (recruit and organize parent help and support) learning at home (provide ideas and information for parents to encourage), decision making (including parents in decision making processes, parent leaders and representatives), and concludes with the importance of collaborating with the community (Epstein 395). Although these variables are important factors in parent involvement, it is important to recognize that solely one administrator or a teacher cannot achieve these goals, but they require commitment and dedication from multiple individuals. The Action Teams for Partnerships (ATP) are possible vessels to execute these steps toward comprehensive partnerships and to access ways to involve parents and the community. The role of an ATP is to “take responsibility for assessing present family and community involvement practices, organizing options for new partnerships, implementing selected activities, delegating leadership for other activities, evaluating next steps, and continuing to improve and coordinate practices for all six types of involvement” (Epstein 403). ATPs are similar to a PTO; however, they consist of a greater variety of members and relay tasks to other groups.

It is advised that the ATP be made up of two to three teachers from different grades, departments, two or three parents representing cultural groups with different aged children, one administrator, and potentially including a community member, two students from different grade levels, and a high school representative. With a team of at least six people committed to respectful discourse and fostering

partnerships for the school, OLS could begin to direct the beginning of a PTO as well as use this committee as a launching point for parent liaisons, parent mentors, or parent community organizing. With shared responsibilities, two to three year terms, and with project directors the group can relay and defer organizational tasks to exemplify the talents within the group while simultaneously growing relationships with others in the school community. An ATP would require explicit support from principal and board members. For OLS, a member of the parish would be a valuable asset to include (Epstein 403-408).

PARENT LIAISONS

Parent Liaisons are parents who are a part the school community who intentionally seek out parents who may be hard to reach or not feel comfortable in the school system. Often this liaison was once a timid parent, but who learned through the processes of engagement how to help other parents feel comfortable and develop confidence in the school. “Parents need opportunities to build leadership and advocacy skills to enhance student-parent-community partnerships” (Johnson 23). Parent liaisons embody this form of leadership, which empowers parents to claim ownership and pride in their school.

PARENT MENTOR PROGRAM

Soo Hong’s research, based in the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, in the Northwest Chicago where she observed the parent mentor program at work. Essentially, parents were trained to assist in the classroom, at the digression of the teacher. “The parent mentor program is designed for broad participation—parents with a variety of experiences within schools and parents with a variety of English-

language abilities” (Hong 95). Essentially, parent mentors help tackle problems that occur in urban schools “by working in the classrooms of teachers who are often overwhelmed by the demands of growing classes and high expectations, parent mentors provide invaluable assistance and support to struggling students” (Hong 95).

Models that engage the parent and the teacher in this way foster natural relationships as well as supporting kids in the school environment. Relationships are key to how the LSNA Parent mentor program operates; it “seeks to change the institutional nature of the schools, moving from anonymous, rigid, tradition-baring institutions to a community of individuals who are connected by relationships of trust and caring” (Hong 119). Access to other parents and school staff “clearly reveal school culture and opened up relationships” (Hong 105). The culture of a place is dependent on how groups of people interact. In the parent mentor program, the walls that prevent relational engagement are torn down.

Resulting from working in the classroom “parents begin to change some of their expectations and are willing to share some of these insights with [other] parents. When public sentiment toward teachers seems exceedingly harsh or critical, parent mentors are often the first to defend them, citing the difficulties in bringing such a wide variety of students together on task” (Hong 97). Parents then become advocates for teachers, rather than inciting division that might develop with less transparent or less relational methods. “By their [parents’] presence alone, parent mentors add familiarity and security to school environments where the worlds of school and community are distinct and separate” which connects the

worlds of their children and is an encouragement to parents about what engagement is possible in the lives of parents and students alike (Hong 108).

The Parent Mentor program, designed by LSNA is a program that encourages parent participation in a way that is mutually engaging...often traditional models of parent participation “fail to build broad and diverse forms of parent involvement” (Hong 114-115). The unique nature of this model is shown through how “LSNA seeks out those parents who may not respond to school invitations—immigrants who are unfamiliar with expectations of schools, mothers who are not fluent in English, parents haunted by negative exchanges with schools—to find means of parents participation that will be inviting, respectful, and eye-opening” (Hong 115). Not only does this program assist teachers and students, but it also expands its potential through incorporating many parents to be allies in their school and their community.

Communication and clarity are emphasized again as important components of the teacher-parent relationship. “When parents and teachers work together to communicate mutual expectations and adapt their plan for working together, programs such as the Parent Mentor program can be [sustainable] for both the parents and the teachers” (Hong 97). Through communication, which involves a great deal of listening to parents, the schools can begin to act within “broader contours of the community and society... [to create] central sites for community organizing” (Hong 147). In Hong’s study the parents really began to demonstrate the hopes of parent engagement: “leadership development, an explicit understanding of power, and a pathway toward community activism through school

involvement, parent mentors begin to act and collaborate in ways that seek to build positive change for schools and families” (Hong 168). OLS should seek a model that focuses on the strengths of the parents in the community and avoid the “vicious cycle” of subordination and disappointment for parents who struggle to be involved in schools (Hong 178).

PARENT ACTIVISM

Mary Johnson, an activist and co-director of urban schooling at Pepperdine University, and is a specialist in the influence of racial and cultural differences on teaching and learning and how these interactions affect the way students interact, is also the founder of parent of the advocacy organization, Parent-U-Turn in the Las Angeles area (Johnson 57-58). This model of parent involvement is utilized in an activist role of community organizing in order to ensure all parents’ voices are heard. Her view of parent involvement contrasts with Epstein’s review, Johnson claims Epstein’s “model disempowers parents of color from the potential we have to create change in our schools” (Johnson 6). Johnson argues that scholars such as Epstein and Comer have limited the understanding of involvement from the working class parents of color. Johnson and Parent-U-Turn advocate for parents to “understand the school structure and policies that govern schools, and particularly the language of education, they can hold the system accountable” (Johnson 22). Through her personal experience, she unpacks some important elements of effective parent participation applicable to all school settings, not limited to school activism.

Parent activism operates as parent engagement, because it focuses on inviting parents to take part in holding schools and school districts accountable to make the best decisions possible for their children's education. Activism does not have to be viewed as an antagonist form of parent participation; often this form of engagement can work with schools, in partnerships. Johnson's work through Parent-U-Turn demonstrates some characteristics that embody parent engagement, where "[p]arents have moved from traditional roles of being a parent fundraisers, hall monitors, and bathroom monitors to facilitators of leadership workshops" (Johnson 32-33). Inviting parents into these leadership roles grows from a focused effort to welcome parents into schools.

Schools can use specific strategies and have definite attitudes to encourage parents to be apart; Johnson has listed a few in her multicultural parent engagement and leadership strategies. First off, developing an "atmosphere of a user-friendly campus" is strategy that aims to help parents to navigate the school with ease and get to where they need to be. Schools should have clear signs and indications where parents need to go, as well as communicating an invitation to parents into classrooms and the administrative offices. Communication with parents is absolutely key in relationships between schools and families, "Parent-U-Turn has found that parents' overall evaluation of a teacher, their sense of comfort with the school, and their parent involvement in school activities is higher when teachers send frequent and effective communication to parents" (Johnson 3). Johnson also stresses the emphasis on the clarity of communication whether it is through "computers, newsletters, personal contact, letters/flyers, and the school marquee"

but not to mention a parent liaison (Johnson 27). The role of a parent liaison is very culturally valuable however; Johnson places the most emphasis on the relationships between the parents and teachers (Johnson 27).

Not only should the school communicate frequently and openly with the parents, but also through the most accessible mediums for parents. OLS sends home a newsletter every week, printed both in English and in Spanish, this is a prime example of effective methods to communicate with parents. However, it is still important to remember that partnerships are essential in parent-student success. “If parent roles are limited to chaperoning field trips and organizing bake sales, home-school relations remain on the surface level, with no true partnership is occurring” (Patrikakou 183). In a true partnership there is accountability and ownership over the school and a desire to do well for the children who attend the school.

In addition to investigating the academic literature, I began to explore the Frayser community to get a feel for the neighborhood. Frayser has a unique history, once anticipated to be the greatest suburb outside of Memphis; today it has been identified as one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the Memphis community. I was able to talk with community members, the director of the Frayser Community Development Corporation, and attend a Frayser Neighborhood Council Meeting. These experiences set up the current context of the neighborhood from the demographic transition that has written the history of Our Lady of Sorrows.

The Frayser Community: Transitions and Assets

The narration of Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic parish is one and the same as the transition found in the historical narrative of the Frayser community located just

north of Memphis. As Memphis developed a relationship with this community, Father Natalis Wellner pioneered into the area in 1938 and a new church named Our Sorrowful Mother opened August 20th of 1939. The School of Our Sorrowful Mother began in August of 1945 serving 48 children from the community; tuition was \$1.50 a month for the Catholic students and \$2.00 a month for the non-Catholic students. In 1949 the name was changed to Our Lady of Sorrows and by 1957 the school enrollment had reached 500 students, and increased in the years following, at one point it reached 600. In 1958 the small farming community of Frayser was annexed to be apart of the city of Memphis, adding nearly twenty-square miles of mostly farmland and a few key factories like Firestone and International Harvester in the Memphis city limits. At the time, Frayser was notably a white working-class community with many WWII veterans. According to the school's historical documents "the school has continued to change entity, representative of the changes in the Frayser community". In the mid to late 1960s religious schools flourished following the desegregation of schools. In one interview with a Frayser historian, he remarked that through the retirement of factories like Firestone and International Harvester in the early 1980s as well as in conjunction with subsidized housing developments placed in Frayser the result was a massive demographic transition to what is now recognized as a predominantly African American neighborhood. After Firestone and International Harvester closed operations in Frayser, many residents moved away seeking jobs in conjunction with white flight out east as the neighborhood began to change. As one resident described it, Frayser was

considered the “step-child of Memphis” and following the destruction of public housing, Frayser was a convenient place to displace poverty.

Today Frayser is made up of over 40,000 residents and according to neighborhood leaders; if it were counted as a city independent from Memphis it would be the 10th largest city in Tennessee. Some say that the previous culture of Frayser has disappeared as civic clubs started to disappear, and the over all pride in community started to disappear with more renters versus homeowners, many of which associated with Section 8 housing vouchers. Currently, 40% of population in Frayser are renters and are regarded as a mobile population, which can undermine the educational environment as well as reflect the poor financial situation many residents face. In recent years a devastating flood wiped out a trailer park where many OLS students lived; thereafter park was closed down because of its location located in a “100 year flood plane”. It is no secret that Frayser has not become the wealthy suburb it once was predicted to be, but now ranked as the second poorest neighborhood in Memphis, that is generally the only narrative told. There is much overlooked and undervalued cultural wealth in the community.

Local Recommendations

Looking to other schools in Memphis, parent participation is a key focus for educators. In Manassas High School, a school located in North Memphis, there is a strong relational approach to bring in families into the educational environment: “After calling a child who has fallen behind, Griffin [the principal] often brings in the family to see him in person. He once traveled to the workplace of a mother who couldn't make it to the school” (Garland). This “hands on” approach is a great

example of reaching out to parents in meaningful ways, and is easily replicated with intentionality. Additionally, the president of the PTO at St. Anne's Catholic school on Highland generated some suggestions and encouragement for the starting and facilitating a young PTO. Although St. Anne's was originally a satellite school for OLS, today it is operated as a Jubilee school and encounters similar struggles to incorporate parents in the school as OLS. The PTO president originally got involved when her oldest child was going into kindergarten. Before her involvement, school staff primarily took on the PTO and she stepped up to see how she could get involved. From the position of president she was introduced to other parents and began to advocate through relationships how important it was to be "involved and visible for both the kids and the teachers". She also developed an ally with the Father of the parish, which enriched her focus on education through faith-based motivation. In a meeting with parents she introduced herself and thereafter asked for volunteers to join. In PTO meetings they review the accounts and discuss fundraising while discussing events in the school and church, as well as incorporating dinner in night meetings. While fundraising is an important part of their PTO, she also stressed that it is "important to make sure that the PTO makes school life fun for the kids and being fully transparent to the parents". They focus on assisting those in the school community who might be in need. Her ultimate advice for a successful PTO "is to always remember the PTO is the about the students. It is about giving tirelessly of yourself, it is about having a passion to see children succeed". It seems like this particular PTO is a successful model by including parents as partners and building relationships. I would recommend any parents potentially

interested in a PTO council at OLS should be put in touch with the PTO president at St. Anne's for support and advice.

Expectations of Teachers and Parents, their aims and focuses

Since this research is primarily focused on the relationships between parents and teachers, and this is a project on parent incorporation, I asked to interview parents and teachers from OLS for a greater understanding of the OLS community. A common theme that occurred in two meetings was the need for accountability for both parents and students to succeed. A teacher stressed the need for parents to hold students accountable, while a parent emphasized the need for parents to be held accountable in contributing to the school. This mutual value of accountability shows some common ground to build partnerships, as well as the desire to see their children succeed. There also seemed to be an open forum of communication between parents and teachers. However, there is room to improve the foundation of these mutual interests, and rework valid suggestions and expose blind spots between parents and the school. There was proved interest in starting a PTO council that parents could participate in. Some practical suggestions would be to have a microphone at parent meetings, as well as provide a bilingual speaker at these events. Another suggestion was having a parent orientation available, where the expectations of parent involvement would be addressed and to communicate encouragement for parents to get involved. Many parents would benefit from resource materials to help their kids with homework, either distributed at parent meetings, or through the teachers. Also parents wanted to stress that they would like to be informed so they can help with needs in the school, financial or otherwise.

Any parent involvement efforts at OLS need to focus to review the demographic appeal for parents, to unearth any cultural barriers restricting the non-participants from feeling welcomed or separate from the community. OLS should strive for “authentic school-community partnerships” that are centered around “respectful alliances among educators, families, and community groups based on equity goals and marked by a willingness to engage in relationship building, dialogue, and power sharing” (Johnson 45-46). For this to be possible there must be an open and transparent discussion about the school between administrators and families. Issues surrounding the education system need to be addressed in an effective and clear manner; the school has the responsibility to communicate with the parents frequently and openly. Hopefully, the community will experience growth and dedication to develop ways parents can get connected. Growing this community is a process, like parent engagement, which will begin with relationships and evolve into leadership experiences that can mature into empowerment and intrinsic motivation to take ownership of the school and community.

Parent engagement is a group effort and a continuous cycle of welcoming parents into schools, wearing down defenses, and providing opportunities for them to be involved. Parent-teacher organizations play an important role in communicating between these two parties, and providing leadership experience for the parents. The most effective methods and strategies used to involve parents almost always begin with clear and effective communication between the school and families. Additionally, there must be a clear expectation and invitation for parent support. Before these steps can take root, the school must strive to create a user-

friendly ether, where parents, of all cultural backgrounds have the resources they need to provide input and understand the expectations. In relation to the classroom, teachers must be transparent and reach out to parents beyond disciplinary focused calls. It is also important to have flexible times and methods for incorporating parents in ways that allow them to be comfortable. Helpful models include parent liaisons and parent mentors. Parents provide many resources beyond financial contributions and asking parents for input and leadership allows parents to grow as advocates and community partners.

The Future of OLS

In my final interview, I was taken by surprise to learn there is some uncertainty about the future of Our Lady of Sorrows. As a Jubilee Model School, OLS does not receive funding from the Jubilee program, and the school received money from a foundation in 2011 that supplied them with a grant to run the school for three years. Originally, the Jubilee School System planned to fund the school after the foundation, however this plan has fallen through. Learning that “OLS School is a Jubilee Model School, and none of its funding comes from the Jubilee Schools program” came as a shock and appears to be a severe misnomer in my research. Apparently, following the demographic shifts in Frayser, the once up and coming suburb shifted after the closing of factories and desegregation, leaving it sparse of revenue and students to attend OLS as it had in its former glory. The parish has also declined in membership as a generation grows older, and their kids who attended OLS have moved out east, which has many other options for catholic schools. For a long time Catholic parishes were able to make a profit on bingo at the church, in fact

it was said there was "\$1 million a year in bingo proceeds" that remained in the diocese. However, bingo was outlawed in Tennessee in 1989 although there are efforts to repeal it today (Treadwell). Since the parish cannot support the school, where tuition is extraordinarily reduced, the school is dependent on finding a foundation or another source of funding in the next year. This has cast a cloud of doubt over the future of OLS and it is not certain when the administration can or will notify parents and teachers.

However, throughout my research I have encountered many assets that OLS possesses within the school, parish, and Frayser community. Considering the national focus on Frayser at this time, there maybe more resources available, if not a larger network that the school can appeal to. Reaching into the history of Our Lady of Sorrows, there are infinite alumni that could be contacted to help support the school, not to mention Fred Smith's family, CEO of FedEx, whose wife attended OLS. Although bingo was outlawed in Shelby County, there are other methods of funding the school. Appealing to the Catholic Diocese for assistance is a viable option and to examine the potential of altering the definition of a Jubilee school to incorporate OLS. One pressing option is to begin looking for a foundation that would like to support this school. However, the question might be, who would do this extra work? It was suggested that the ideal candidate to pursue these options is a person with passion and who could articulate why OLS is important. Who is better to represent these qualities than the parents who have the most at stake in the future of the school?

This obstacle in the future of OLS is looming and will have serious implications for the families and students who could be displaced from private education all together. Most families would be reallocated into the public school systems, which will be under the Achievement School District, because some of the schools have been identified as severely underachieving schools. One interview sticks in my mind with a parent who had her son in the Millington public school before OLS. At the public school he was put into a special education class and fell behind, but after coming to OLS he was able to not only meet grade level requirements, but also earned an academic scholarship through the diocese that he has been able to maintain today as he attends Christian Brothers High School. His parents are very dedicated individuals who are faithful in their efforts to nurture their children's education, despite the long commutes. With two children still in the OLS school system, and given their experience with public schools, these parents are prime candidates to be included in this conversation about possibilities for the future of OLS and be incorporated to reach out to other parents.

When seeking to engage parents in schools, there is considerable research that demonstrates that parent involvement can be very beneficial to students learning process. So what does parent involvement consist of and how can it be optimized to benefit all participants? Also what about parent involvement is so beneficial? My conclusion has been that deconstructing research reveals that students learn better in environments where their parents, family, and community are respected and welcomed into the classroom. Then the question becomes, how can schools create an environment where parents feel welcomed and like partners

in their child's education? While schools are scrambling to work toward achievement in Memphis, parents should be considered as a determining factor and major actor in the success of schools. However, powerful, complex institutions need to work on the intentionality of initiating strong responsive relationships with parents and the surrounding communities. Situating conversations about change in schools should not only take place in the world of scholarly discourse and academic professionals. Parents have an important role in deciding how the education system cannot only be optimal for their children, but also as a hub for the community, where parents and teachers alike can utilize their talents.

With all research in mind, it is undisputable that parents need to be included in the decision making processes of a school, especially in times that are difficult for a school. In my last interview I was severely disappointed by the lack of information that was passed on to the parents when the future of OLS is uncertain. When the deacon lamented the fact there was no one to advocate for the school's survival, my stomach churned with frustration that parents have been stiff armed from situations where they could be powerful allies. Although Achievement School District (ASD) is taking over some public schools in Frayser; there will still be many students displaced and categorized in an environment that has been noted for resisting outside help from the community. Parents need to be viewed as partners in education, advocates for the community, and should be respected and celebrated for their cultural experiences. It is devastating to think that this school closing could have been avoided through active parent engagement earlier. Although the hands of administration might be tied in communicating the financial

situation, parents should be viewed as allies and confidants in this upcoming year, because they have a lot at stake for their children's future.

The strategies to expand parent engagement are not simple or clean cut, but should be organic and intrinsic for the school community. During this transitional period in the Memphis school system coupled with the intentional funding in the Frayser community, there are many variables to consider for the family-school relationships. However, it's during this time that schools like Our Lady of Sorrows have an opportunity to become an active node of learning, advocacy, and partnerships in Frayser. My interactions with the parents and teachers of OLS have been extraordinarily encouraging for what might be possible to develop overtime in regards to parent engagement. I plan on submitting an executive summary to Tracey Russell, displaying the various models, key totems of positive parent participation, and other findings regarding the community's assets. It is my hope that parents are included in the ensuing conversations and brainstorming about the future of the school as well as the community leaders can be involved in offering viable options. The Frayser community contains the grit to overcome and urban education in Memphis has been cast as the underdog for too long. Although there are many proposed methods of overcoming all these odds, a recognition of the role parents play in education must be hailed and harnessed. For many schools converting to the ASD and Shelby County School District this fall, there is uncertainty in the future Memphis schools, but the importance of parent engagement should be a key component as all schools transition.

Transparency is absolutely essential to form a trustworthy and safe environment for parents to engage in. "Parenting, volunteering, and supporting home learning result

primarily from the efforts of parents; but communicating, participating in decision making, and collaborating with the community also require commitment and effort from schools” (Mattingly 552). This process of partnerships is not a quick fix or an easy course, but it is essential to recognize that parents will always play an invaluable role in their kids’ education, although we might seek the best teachers and most sophisticated schools in the world, we must rely on parents to get their kids to the classroom. OLS has many challenges to overcome, but there are many assets that lie within the community of Frayser, the OLS parish, and the parents and teachers already present, with this in mind, it is my hope that OLS is not viewed as a lost cause, because it is very rich in spirit and opportunities.

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