

The Family School Community Partnership: An Evaluation of a School-based Parent Engagement Initiative

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What We Studied

Minority parents are less likely to engage in their children's school though they are not less interested in their children's education or less involved in their children's lives at home. This gap in parent engagement affects the educational success of their children and has significant implications for minority communities and states with large minority populations like Texas.

Parents that are engaged in their children's education by meeting with their teachers, volunteering at their school, and participating in their school's activities are more likely to have children that experience academic achievement and social integration in their school. If minority parents are no less dedicated to their children, what policy levers exist for school leaders to facilitate parental engagement of minority families? This research study answers this question by evaluating an intervention that aimed to change the institutional arrangements of elementary schools that would have the effect of increasing parent engagement and ultimately student achievement.

Existing research has examined how parent attributes explain parent engagement, but limited research exists regarding the institutional arrangements of schools that can facilitate or stymie parental engagement. This study examined how one intervention worked to alter the institutional arrangements of schools serving minority families to increase parent engagement and ultimately improve student outcomes.

This study used qualitative methods to analyze the causal mechanisms of the intervention, including key informant interviews and focus group conversations. It used a cross-over research design that employed a latent class analysis to estimate effect sizes on school suspension rates and passage rates of state-mandated exams.

The study found that the program was associated with declines in school suspensions and increases in passage rates on state-mandated exams. Students in the middle, that is students who lacked a history of high or low ranking in their academic performance or social behavior, exhibited pronounced improvements when the intervention was implemented in their schools. Moreover, the implementations that were led by parents from the school community rather than a social worker from outside the school community produced greater improvements.

A child's academic achievement and social integration into their school community are highly correlated with the level of parental engagement experienced by their parents. Parents that are engaged in their children's education by meeting with their teachers, volunteering at their school, and participating in their school's activities are more likely to have children that experience academic achievement, less likely to experience absenteeism, less likely to have school disciplinary issues, and more likely to be happy with their school life.

Though minority parents are less likely to engage in their children’s school, they are not less interested in their children’s education or less involved in their children’s lives at home (Kim, 2009) ¹. In her review of the parental engagement literature, Kim (2009) recognized that nearly all of the existing research is focused on explaining low rates of parental engagement due to parent attributes: “language barriers, less education, low self-esteem, low socioeconomic status, differences in child-rearing practices, physically demanding jobs, lack of social networks, and uncomfortable feelings toward schools based on negative previous school experiences.” Kim (2009) concluded that education researchers could better serve policymakers if they studied school barriers to parent engagement equal to parent attributes.

This study followed this advice by evaluating the Family School Community Partnership (Partnership), an initiative of the United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County. The Partnership aimed to improve student outcomes by improving the institutional arrangements that support parental engagement within public elementary schools. These institutional arrangements included the norms and rules—written and unwritten—that direct the behavior and interactions of teachers, parents, and school administrators in their efforts to educate their school children. During the study period, this intervention was located in fourteen elementary schools within San Antonio Independent School District.

How We Analyzed the Data

This study used quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate the Partnership. The qualitative analysis consisted of key informant interviews and focus group conversations with principals, teachers, and parents. The aim of the qualitative analysis was to identify the causal mechanisms that linked participation in the Partnership with improved parental engagement and ultimately improved student outcomes. The quantitative analysis estimated changes in academic performance on state accountability exams and school suspension rates. In evaluating program effects, this study incorporated a theory of behavioral psychology that asserts that patterns of human behavior are influenced by latent classifications, which are based on unseen forces such as psychological and environmental conditions. Accordingly, I used latent class analysis to identify three subgroups of students before and after implementation of the school intervention (Nagin, 2005).

This study relied on student-level data collected by the Texas Education Agency and stored at the University of Texas at Austin Education Research Center². The study population included students enrolled in San Antonio Independent School District during the study period of fiscal years ending 2007 to 2012. The study sample included data on 119,856 unique students, spanning first to twelfth grade. Students enrolled in alternative education schools and other types of specialty schools such as early college high schools, single-gender schools, and magnet programs were excluded from the study. These schools were excluded because their unique nature prevented the identification of a comparison group. In summary, this study answered the following research questions:

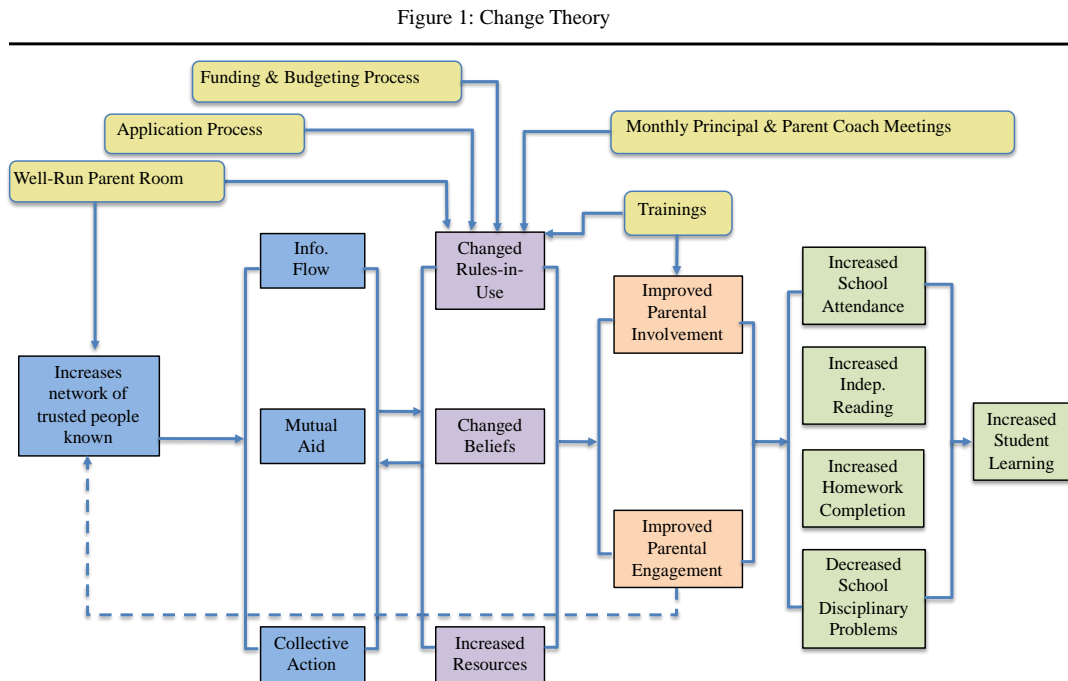
1. What are the mechanisms that link participation in the Partnership to increased parental engagement and involvement and ultimately to improved outcomes for students?
2. What is the impact of the Partnership on academic performance on state accountability exams and school suspension rates, respectively?
3. How do estimated impacts vary by the two nonprofit organizations implementing the Partnership?

¹ I used the online Scout search engine of the library system at University of Texas at Austin, the databases of Academic Search Complete, Education Source, ERIC, and the Google Scholar search engine. I searched for articles published in peer-reviewed journals and dissertations that included the following terms: parent engagement, parent involvement, effects on student outcomes. I limited my search to research in US. This literature review benefited from a comprehensive review of the literature by Yanghee Kim (2009) on parent engagement and the parent-school relationship from 1978 to 2006.

² The conclusions of this research do not necessarily reflect the opinion or official position of the Texas Education Research Center, the Texas Education Agency or the State of Texas.

What We Discovered

- This study found that the programmatic design of the Partnership included multiple research-based activities that aligned with its intended goal of changing how parents relate to their child and the child’s school community, as shown in Figure 1.



- This study identified model beliefs and behaviors that support parent engagement and that were held by parents, teachers, administrators, and head parent couches, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Rules-in-Use & Beliefs that Support Parental Engagement

Rules-In-Use

- Parents are welcomed to contribute to the school community of find assistance in the parent room anytime during the school day.
- Parents are invited to walk their children to class in the mornings.
- Teachers walk their classroom out of the school building and wait for parents to pick them up and engage in any vital communication.
- Parents reach out to other parents at their home by door-to-door canvassing, phone banking or targeted interventions.
- Parents meet with principal monthly to discuss school community operations, offer feedback and give insights

Beliefs

- All parents have an important role to play for their children and their school community.
- Parental involvement leads to student learning.
- Parental engagement is an asset to a school community.
- Parents have a unique ability to take certain actions such as comforting a child or reaching a fellow parent at their home, which teachers and principals are less inclined to do.
- Parents can be given responsibilities that support school community operations.
- Parents can play leadership roles.
- Parents can offer unique insights to the operations of the school community.

- The Partnership was associated with a 32 and 15 percentage point reduction in the probability of school suspension for students with a mid and high propensity of school suspension, respectively, as shown in Table 2. Students with a low propensity of school suspension were not affected by the Partnership.

Table 2. Partnership Effects on Suspension Rate, Overall and by Nonprofits

	Low		Middle		High		N
	Effect	SE	Effect	SE	Effect	SE	
All treated schools	0.004	0.05	-0.323	0.049***	-0.152	0.038***	119,856
Nonprofit A	-0.003	0.058	-0.707	.067***	-0.102	.043***	119,856
Nonprofit B	0.145	0.067*	0.065	0.066	-0.255	0.064***	119,856

Note: The above effect sizes were produced using a latent case analysis, where the dependent variable represents probability of school suspension by grade. A logit regression was used to model the relationship between the probability of school suspension and treatment by three latent classes.

P-value: *** < .01, ** < .05, * < 0.1

- The Partnership was associated with a 17.5 percentage point increase in the probability of passing state-mandated exams for students with a mid-level propensity of passage, as shown in Table 3. Students with a low or high propensity of passage were not affected by the Partnership.

Table 3. Partnership Effects on Passage of State-mandated Exams, Overall and by Nonprofits

	Low		Middle		High		N
	Effect	SE	Effect	SE	Effect	SE	
Treatment school	0.014	0.076	0.175	0.063**	-0.062	0.165	82,154
Nonprofit A	0.218	0.093*	0.388	0.093***	0.036	0.244	82,137
Nonprofit B	-0.328	0.133**	-0.024	0.088	-0.258	0.213	82,154

Note: The above effect sizes were produced using a latent case analysis, where the dependent variable represents probability of school suspension by grade. A logit regression was used to model the relationship between the probability of school suspension and treatment by three latent classes.

P-value: *** < .01, ** < .05, * < 0.1

- Pronounced effects were also associated with Nonprofit A, the administrator who hired local parents to lead the parent rooms instead of licensed social workers from outside the school community, as shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Policy Recommendations

- School leaders should assess once a semester the perceptions of the role of parents in their schools held by teachers, principals, and parents. The assessment could take the form of a survey that measures the degree to which teachers, principals, and parents hold the positive beliefs of parent engagement.
- School leaders should adopt policies that result in the establishment of a dedicated room or space where parents can gather to find resources, network, and easily connect to volunteer and leadership opportunities at the school. To effectively activate a parent room, school leaders should consider hiring a local parent to serve as the head parent coach who will provide an inclusive, service-oriented leadership approach to organizing parents.

3. School leaders should dedicate resources to developing a parent leadership program that builds parent agency and capacities and results in meaningful parent engagement.
4. School leaders should adopt a formal policy that require principals to facilitate monthly meetings with parents where there is a genuine exchange of ideas, feedback and collaboration. Principal reviews should incorporate an expectation of active and broad parent engagement.

References

Kim, Yanghee. 2009. Minority parental involvement and school barriers: Moving the focus away from deficiencies of parents. *Educational Research Review* 4 (2): 80-102.

Nagin, D. (2005) *Group-Based Modeling of Development*. Harvard University Press. ISBN: 0-674-01686-6

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