

2012

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Exploring Parental Involvement in Schools

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Liberal Studies Capstone

May 18, 2012

Abstract

The economic challenges in today's society make it difficult for parents to be involved in their students' school environment. There are factors contributing to this issue, and as a parent of a middle school student, I wanted to explore the reasons and possible solutions to include parents in the school. Surveys were conducted with staff members and parents of students at Los Arboles Middle School in Marina California. The results of these surveys provided information that addressed what is being done as well as what should be done to include parents, and make them feel welcomed and needed at the school. I learned there are reasons parents cannot participate, but I also learned there are parents who want to feel wanted. Because of this project, more is being done to communicate with parents and keep them involved in the school environment.

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A School in the Not-Too Distant Future

Imagine a school where as soon as you enter campus in the morning, you see small groups of parents scattered around the quad area chatting and drinking tea or coffee. The students weave in and out of the groups as they scurry to their lockers, putting their supplies in their designated places. Their conversations are wafting into the air like feathers swirling carelessly to and fro. The adults and students interact with one another with a sense of calmness that makes the listener think they have all been friends for years. Later in the day, as students are given their lunches from the cafeteria, a similar scene to the morning's routine begins to unfold in the outdoor dining area. Students and adults sit around square tables, conversing while consuming their meals. Laughter billows up from a corner table. It appears one of the parents got the punch line from the student's joke.

For parents to feel comfortable and welcome, this scenario may take the efforts of many people working together for one common goal. Getting parents to participate in the daily routines of the school and feeling as if they are an integral part of the school environment will improve the school environment for everyone. Not every parent is available in the morning to participate in the greeting portion of the day, but there are other opportunities to spend time and get to know their students' classmates.

Every afternoon in the school's library, there are small groups of students sitting around the oval tables placed sparsely around the room. The adult at the table begins to read a book that compliments the material currently being taught in the student's classroom. At the end of the first paragraph, they stop and he asks, "So, what happened

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so far?” The boy to his left shares the opening to the story and sets the stage including the first few characters. “Great!” he exclaims, “who would like to take the next section?” The girl to the boy’s left speaks up and volunteers to read aloud. This continues for the next forty-five minutes, reading and discussing the material. Back and forth reading and questioning as the adult facilitates the exchanges between the students. They do not realize they are helping each other, or that they are getting a better understanding of the material. We will not tell.

When the image of the perfect school environment manifests in one’s mind, many different images appear. Only with the collaboration between schools, administrators, parents, and communities working together, will the possibility of a school like the one described here ever exist. Now it is up to us.

Parental Participation in our schools is paramount, especially during times when difficult economic decisions are made that affect funding and whether or not programs must be cut. Unfortunately, parental participation in schools is decreasing at the middle and high school levels. According to a report studied by Barth (2011), there is a direct correlation between parental participation in schools and student success; with student-parent discussion in the home being the most powerful predictor of student academic achievement. Many studies echo this opinion with varying degrees of importance, but all agree to its significance.

Reasons for Variation in Participation

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Some of the information gathered on this subject suggests several possible explanations for declining involvement. They include parents not feeling welcome on school campuses, lack of knowledge regarding the opportunity to volunteer at schools, and lack of time available to volunteer (Feuerstein 2000). Additionally, there are also levels of parental participation that consist of (a) school choice, (b) decision making through formal structures or site-based councils, (c) teaching and learning, (d) effect on the physical and material environment, and (e) communication. These will be examined in detail later. For the purpose here, level (c)-teaching and learning, refers to participation in the classroom in direct contact with students. This theme suggests parents are more involved at the elementary school level when students are first forming study habits and beginning to experience “homework” that needs to be completed in the home with the assistance of parents or guardians. There are several themes emerging that support various possible explanations for declining involvement.

Size of Schools

Opinions by Feuerstein (2000) and Kinnaman (2007) view the size of the school as having direct effect on parental involvement. One factor attributed to school size is the comfort level and sense of belonging of the students. Speakers at a recent seminar on school safety stressed:

“Students need to feel a sense of belonging to the school community, that they are known, that they matter, that they're not insignificant members of a nameless, faceless herd. In a word, students need to feel a sense of connectedness within the school community. They need meaningful connections to adults and to other students, and they need to be known by name” (Kinnaman 2007).

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According to Casey (2012), having parents directly connected to their school has a direct impact on the student. This supports the opinion schools need more parent involvement and a stronger relationship between students and parents.

Participation across Ethnic Differences

Examining various levels of parental participation across several ethnic backgrounds shows that the level or type of participation varies slightly across the board. Mexican-American families, for example, are shown to provide more parental participation in the home environment assisting with homework, rather than directly in the classrooms. In addition, “parent’s investment of financial resources was found to have a slightly higher impact on academic achievement than forms of involvement that require parents’ investment of time” (Altschul, 2011). In addition, Casey (2012) holds a similar opinion in that the families may provide various types of participation, depending on the various ethnic backgrounds.

Private, Charter or Public Schools

A less examined factor to this point is different types of schools and the levels of participation that may or may not correlate with these differences. One opinion is that there may be a correlation between the socioeconomic status of a community and the amount of direct financial support given to a specific school (Carey 2012). There is some evidence to support this finding, and further studies may be warranted. Kinnaman (2007) also attests the size of the school may be in direct correlation to the type of involvement parents are able to provide at the various schools.

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As time has gone by, there have been various plans enacted to encourage parental participation and involvement in schools across the United States and in other countries around the world. Many parent groups have been formed, bake sales held, fundraiser after fundraiser planned and carried out, as well as field trips chaperoned and activities conducted in the classroom. The list is endless. There are several themes that repeat time after time and when circumstances permit, they have been quite successful. These include PTA/PTO groups, engaging the community through action projects, parents sitting on school boards, school projects such as community gardens and open communication between school staff, parents and the community as a whole, just to name a few. Parents are currently involved in many ways. According to Batey (1996), there are five avenues of parent participation. These include 1-Parenting, 2-Communication, 3-Volunteering, 4-Learning at home, and 5-Representing other parents. When examining these five categories, the first, parenting, is the beginning and basic connection between parents and children. "Schools help parents create a supportive learning environment at home" (Batey 1996). Research has shown that parental involvement begins in the home with as simple an activity as assisting the student with their homework. These will all be discussed in further detail shortly. The first avenue to be looked at is Volunteering.

PTA/PTO organizations are found to be the first line of defense when parents want to be involved in the inner workings of their child's' school (Schurr, 1993). The role of the parent organization varies from school to school, but their mission is basically the same.

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Adopted in October 2009, the mission statement of the California PTA states, “The mission of the California State PTA is to positively impact the lives of all children and families by representing our members, and empowering and supporting them with skills in advocacy, leadership and communications” (capta.org, 2012). The PTA/PTO is only the stepping-stone to bring parents into the school environment. Even though parents know an organization is available for them to participate, some families still do not feel comfortable getting involved. There are more options for them to consider.

Another avenue for parental participation that has been proven successful is to include school families in a community project. Some examples include local park renovations, local community farmers markets and inviting local school families to participate in joint projects with City Councils and Recreation departments (Boult 2006). These activities provide an informal environment for families to interact with one another as well as have fun while accomplishing an activity that promotes partnership. For example, Boult (2006) suggests students and parents become involved in the community when the local park needs a makeover, or even just a good cleaning. This provides an opportunity for the families to get to know each other. She also suggests if the school has a community garden, to offer the vegetables at the local farmers market. This also provides the community the opportunity to get an additional look at what is going on at the local school. Another suggestion she has is to collaborate with the city government in an activity that will benefit the community as well as show the community that the students and their families care about the community and want to do their part

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to make it a better place to live. As these have all proven to be successful, one point Boulton also made was the importance of communication to make any ideas successful. Communication in school communities can take many different forms. One very popular form is the use of email newsletters. This allows the parents and families to be kept informed on school activities, and provide the opportunity to keep an electronic copy for use later (Boulton 2006). In the realm of communication, the author states that one major factor to consider in newsletter communications is to consider the languages spoken by the families the school serves. Getting the word out to the families does not matter if it is in a form the families cannot read or understand. Knowing the languages used by the school population will make the communication more useful, as well as honoring the diversity of the families.

Another form of communication is the use of a school website. According to Boulton (2006), the use of a centralized school website has proven to be very successful. One pitfall she mentions is to be careful and make sure the information is kept up-to-date. Having information posted that is a month or two old does not help families to stay connected. The information needs to be current. This is crucial for families to feel important.

Studies have been conducted connecting parental involvement in schools to academic achievement of students. One particular study by Altschul (2011) that focuses on Mexican American families, shows a direct correlation between parent involvement in the home does indeed have a positive impact on student achievement. This study also acknowledges that parent involvement in the home has more of an impact than

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parent involvement in the school. In contrast, this study also showed that “Parents' investment of financial resources in their children's education was found to have a somewhat higher impact on achievement than forms of involvement that require parents' investment of time” (Altschul 2011).

As various studies have shown that parental involvement and participation holds different forms, one point is clear. No matter what the form, involvement is involvement,. It is all important.

Method

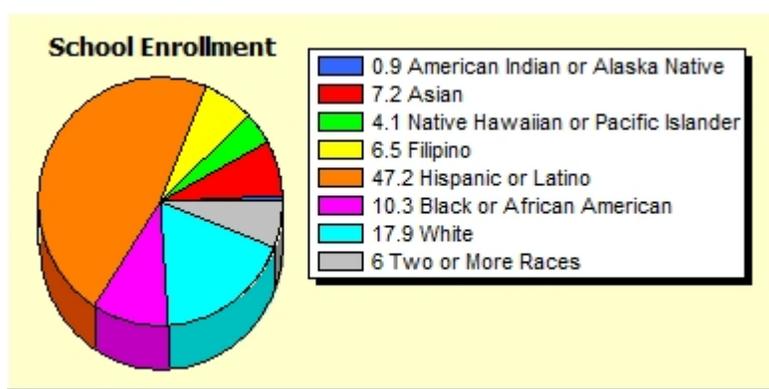
Parental Participation in our schools is paramount, especially during times when difficult economic decisions are made that affect funding and whether or not programs must be cut. For this Capstone Project, the researcher investigated through surveys how local education professionals specifically teachers and administrators, view the decline of parental participation once students reach the middle school level and steps to be taken to improve it. Based on analysis of the data and research findings, the researcher will use what she learned to manifest a plan of action that addresses the issue in a way that inspires, informs, and involves the parents in the Marina area.

Context

Los Arboles Middle School is located at 294 Hillcrest Avenue in Marina California. The school serves approximately 645 sixth, seventh and eighth grade students. The demographics at Los Arboles are vast as it is one of the most diverse schools in the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District. The area is considered

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suburban, a mid-size territory. The average class size is 24.8 students per class. As of the 2010-2011 school year, there were 137 computers on campus. This worked out to approximately five students per computer. Thirty-nine classrooms on the campus have Internet access. The demographic breakdown of the school looks like:



<http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/>

At Los Arboles Middle School, 14.1% of the students are English language learners; in addition, 62% are on the free or reduced price meal program. Of the students considered English language learners, 12% are Spanish speakers, 0.9% Vietnamese speakers, 0.7% Pilipino or Tagalog speakers, 0.1% Hindi speakers, 0.1% Samoan speakers, and all others make up an additional 0.1%.

Participants and Participant Selection

The staff and parents/guardians of the student body at Los Arboles Middle School were invited to participate in the survey. This afforded them the opportunity to

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provide their opinions on parental participation at the school as well as have their voices heard on the subject.

Researcher

As an educator, I feel it is paramount to continue parent/family involvement in the schools. Making parental figures feel welcome and important is a passion I want to fulfill. As a parent, I have experience participating in school activities and it creates a relationship between the adult and students that can provide mentoring and guidance to the student. As President of the Los Arboles Middle School Parent Teacher Student Association, I see a dramatic void where parent involvement is concerned. I feel I am not different from the other parents at Los Arboles. We have a very diverse student/family population. Below are the questions I asked the staff and families of the students.

Survey Questions

1. How would you describe parental participation at Los Arboles Middle School?
2. What are you concerned about when it comes to parental participation?
3. What is currently being done about increasing parental participation? How do you feel about these efforts?
4. What do you think should be done to increase parental participation?
5. What do you think are the obstacles or challenges to increasing parental participation?

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6. Is there anything that I should have asked about parent participation at Los Arboles, but did not?

Procedure

The six-question survey was offered to parents and staff at Los Arboles Middle School in Marina, California. Staff participants were offered the questionnaires at a staff meeting on February 29, 2012. A brief explanation of the methodology and purpose of the survey was provided at that time. Due to time constraints, the surveys were left with the staff members to complete at their leisure. After completion, the staff placed the surveys in a mailbox in the front office at the school. Surveys for parent participants were sent home with their students that also included an explanation of the project and the guidelines for participating. ie: 100% voluntary.

The questions requested input regarding the level of parental involvement/participation at the school, what is currently being done and what should be done to improve it in the future. Almost all staff members who participated in the survey felt that there is definitely a lack of parental involvement at the school. An analysis of the data revealed three major themes as to why there is a lack of involvement. ,

Time Conflicts

One recurring reason, in their opinion, is the fact that many parents work full-time during school hours. This reason is compounded in two-parent homes where both parents need to work just to keep the family unit afloat. Single parent households have

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their own challenges that include the necessity to work and parents wanting to be available to assist their students with homework.

One resounding opinion to what should be done is to provide opportunities for parents to be involved at times when school is not in session. Many parents work Monday through Friday every week, so they cannot participate during the school hours. Prior research shows there are projects, such as fundraiser car washes or other community activities that provide the opportunity for parents to participate and feel involved. These do include parents, and they do not involve “school work” directly.

Lack of communication

Under low participation, a sub topic emerged showing that due to the diverse cultural makeup of the school, many parents do not understand information that is not presented in their home language. Clearly, it is imperative that all communications to parents and families be delivered in at least English and Spanish. There is some evidence that students need to translate the communications from the school into the language spoken by the adults in the home. Not understanding the language contributes to some parents being even less apt to participate in the school environment. Some parents feel embarrassed when their student must translate for them when communicating with school. Respondents also felt that communications from school to home were not arriving at the homes. This was attributed to several different reasons in addition to the language barrier. One resonating perspective is that the students neglected to give the information to the adults upon arrival at home. Several respondents commented as to finding flyers left in classroom, in garbage cans, or just

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not handed out to the students. The first two can be attributed to the students themselves, while the last perspective can be attributed to lack of staff involvement to get the information out to the families.

Another option proposed to improve parental involvement is to provide a place on campus for parents to gather and provide resources available to assist them. This would include, but not be limited to resources for parenting issues and classes, information regarding local community resources such as food banks, medical facilities and other pertinent information. All of these resources must be provided in multiple languages. If multiple language literature is not available for all items, a resource needs to be provided where multiple language materials can be accessed.

In a society where there are many cultures make up the population, steps must be taken to include all of the various groups. Keeping in mind the needs of the individual groups is paramount to being successful in including them in activities to improve the overall educational experience of our youth.

Action Documentation

As language differences contributed to the miscommunications on campus, it was paramount the information be provided in both English and Spanish. The flyer was sent out with English on one side and Spanish on the other. The photo below shows only a few of the workers who participated in the campus clean up. Pictured front row by the can are the school principal, Annette Bitter and Marina Mayor, Bruce Delgado.

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As well as the cleanup day posters, the surveys administered to the staff and parents were provided in English and Spanish.

Reflection

Through the process of planning and bringing this activity to fruition, I encountered several obstacles. The one that affected the project the most was the language barrier. It was difficult to ensure as many families as possible were receiving the information. Some parents do not communicate in English, so it was paramount all flyers and information be presented in English and Spanish.

Many people were enthused and excited about the opportunity to participate in the campus project. Bruce Delgado, who works with Return of the Natives, had ideas to share that included doing a planting day on campus with plants from the Natives project. I have spoken with the school Principal and she agrees for the project to proceed.

After the completion of this project, it was obvious communication with parents is an ongoing issue to be addressed. I have spoken with school administrators regarding sending the monthly newsletter home in both English and Spanish. Another possibility is to provide links on the school web page that will provide versions in English and

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Spanish. Local libraries have computers available for public use for those who do not have a computer in their home. This will hopefully encourage the families to become more familiar with communications from the school.

The flyer sent home to families looked similar to what is shown below with the exception that the Spanish version was on the reverse side.

**The Los Arboles Middle School PTSA
INVITES YOU TO ATTEND...**



Los Arboles Middle School

Campus Clean-up Day

The Los Arboles Middle School PTSA is hosting a campus clean-up day. Coffee and snacks will be available.

Rubber gloves, garbage bags and some brooms, etc. will be provided.

Time: 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon

For more information email: lamsptsa@gmail.com

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If I continue as PTSA President at Los Arboles next year, I would like to see quarterly events planned that would include opportunities for all families and family members to participate. All of these are in the early planning stages.

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