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Parent Volunteers and COVID-19: Balancing Necessity, Enthusiasm, and Caution

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Abstract

The focus issue addressed in this Capstone Project is how the pandemic disrupted parent volunteering in schools. Parent volunteering is an essential issue for schools because parent involvement is essential for student success. An evidence-based argument is offered that schools struggled to staff the void left by parent volunteers. The three primary stakeholder perspectives chosen were parents, school leadership, and teachers. Parents make up the volunteer pool; teachers know what kind of assistance classrooms need, and school leadership creates policies. Three themes emerged from analyzing the data and explored ways to reintroduce parents to a school campus. Parent volunteers make in-class activities easier; parents want to feel engaged with their child's school, but school coronavirus policies limit access to the school. Balancing necessity, enthusiasm, and caution are argued to be the most effective way to achieve a school's parent involvement goals.

Setting The Stage

The coronavirus pandemic caused California public schools to close their campuses and go remote for nearly eight months. For public schools, The year 2020 was a year spent logged into a Zoom classroom. After the winter of 2020-2021, California schools gradually began to open back up. Hybrid classrooms, where some students were in class and others still remote, became more common. In order to get as many students on campus as possible, some schools resorted to half-day schedules. In this system, a class is split up into morning and afternoon groups. Each group would be on campus for roughly 4 hours and then home. The classroom is sanitized in between groups. This was campus life for most California schools for most of the 2020-2021 school year. The following autumn, public schools were able to return to a more typical all-day school schedule. In-person classes became safer as our understanding of the coronavirus improved, and vaccines became available for children as young as five.

For charter schools, this often meant finding the best course of action within their obligations to students, staff, and their charter. It is hard to make a general statement about charter schools in the pandemic because the schools took different paths as the virus's dangers started to recede. The mixture of approaches is especially true regarding parents' access to the school campus: some schools were flexible, and others were strict. A flexible school allowed parents to return to campus while students began hybrid instruction fully. Other schools restricted when and where a parent could come on campus: such as drop-off and pick-up. Some rules were made around the student's age so kindergarteners and first graders would be allowed to have a parent escort them on campus, while all older students would have to make the journey to class on their own. Some schools would only allow the parent to drive up to a designated location to drop their child off - adults remaining inside the car the whole time. However, the school chose

to implement limited unnecessary inneractions on campus, which often led to a deterioration of parent engagement with the school.

Parent volunteers play an essential role in filling the gaps typically filled with district funds for charter schools. Often charter schools do not rely on a school district to fully fund paraprofessionals or enrichment programs such as; art, music, language immersion, and athletics. Charter schools are also responsible for improvements to the campus, such as playground equipment, painting the buildings, and eradicating gophers from the school fields. Parent volunteers also play an essential role as in-class assistants. After making informal arrangements with their child's teacher, traditionally, parents can volunteer during lessons. In-class volunteering is beneficial for younger students who help develop their reading and writing skills and extra help with tools like scissors or tablet devices. Beyond in-class activities, parent volunteers play an essential role for the school by acting as field trip chaperones, fundraisers, and members of action committees and governance boards.

One charter school where parent volunteers play a prominent role is Worldview Charter Elementary (WCE) in Dune City, California. Before the pandemic, WCE used parent volunteers for positions such as in-class assistants, field trip chaperones, team coaches, and help at school events such as science and book fairs. Among the four charter schools in Cypress Unified School District, WCE initiated the strictest campus restrictions. By Spring 2022, WCE was still determining how to let parents back on campus, while the other charter schools had already allowed parents back on campus according to pre-pandemic rules. WCE continues to operate without parent volunteers on campus.

Access to school campuses is an issue people feel more passionate about since coronavirus threw schools into a state of havoc. Being on campus allows parents to see the state

of the school, gives them an idea of the school's curriculum, and gives the parent access to their child's teacher. Furthermore, some parents want to be involved because they feel their involvement reinforces the importance of education for their children. Schools want parent volunteers on campus to assist with a variety of tasks and to up the school's culture. Parents visible on campus send a message to all students that their school is not just a building; it is a community. The sense of community appears to be accurate at WCE and why it is the research setting in this paper. By investigating and analyzing the experiences of WCE during the pandemic, this research hopes to understand the best course of action when restricting volunteer access to a school.

Literature Synthesis & Integration

California's first positive COVID case occurred on January 25, 2020, and on March 7, Elk Grove became the first California school district to shut its campus doors and shift to remote learning (Procter, 2022). Worldview Charter Elementary (WCE) remained in-person until the beginning of the Spring Break, which marked the end of in-person learning for nearly a year. Traditionally WCE has relied on parents to volunteer to carry out the roles of in-class assistant, on-site maintenance projects, field trip chaperones, fundraisers, and members of action committees and governance boards. WCE does not rely on the school district to fund paraprofessionals or enrichment programs such as art, music, language immersion, and athletics as a charter school. WCE is also responsible for building maintenance and improvements. Parent volunteers play an essential role in filling the gaps typically filled with district funds. Along with

making informal arrangements with their child's teacher, traditionally, parents could volunteer by showing up for events like on-site Work Days, science fairs, and field trips.

What is the Problem/Opportunity?

The Covid Pandemic has curtailed parent volunteer programs schools like Worldview Charter Elementary use to increase levels of parental involvement on campus. Public health and school COVID safety protocols have added barriers beyond the traditional reasons parents cannot participate on school campuses. Parent volunteers at WCE have one or more children enrolled at the school. When a parent enrolls their child at a public charter school, they are requested, not required, to volunteer 30 hours per school year. Traditionally, *parental involvement* is reading at home, helping with homework, and being active on campus as a volunteer or a member of action committees (Aguilar, 2021). Established research has categorized parental involvement with schools into six categories: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2010). There is a positive relationship between the combined effects of family and school and academic performance (Epstien & Sanders, 2002).

According to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, there are five basic structures where interactions affect human development. These structures are called the microsystem, the mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem. The microsystems are personal relationships crucial to development, such as family, schools, friends, community, and mass media. The mesosystems are the activities and places that connect members of other microsystems with the child. The exosystems are settings and activities children have no control over: like their parent's jobs, federal laws, and social services. Macrosystems are significant

society-wide actions and issues where children have even less influence. The chronosystem contains, and is constructed from changes in, the four smaller systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). When macrosystems act on exosystems, they create problems a child can not influence, such as barriers to learning created by pandemics. Studies have shown that exosystem factors such as parent employment, income, and even a zip code can affect a child's development (Huston et al., 1994). Dini (2021), a researcher in Malaysia, studied how parents with positive involvement habits during remote learning had a correlating influence on their child's academic performance. Proximity to engaged parents resulted in students picking up good habits and bringing those habits along when school returned to in-person .

Sometimes parents who volunteer do so for reasons unrelated to their child's academic success. Parents usually feel good about being able to help in their child's classroom, and teachers generally have a favorable view of their presence in the lower grades. Parents are genuinely curious about their child's life at school; some parents want to be active on campus to check up on their child's social habits. Other parent volunteers may be there to check up on their kids and how their child's teacher interacts with them (Marland-Peltoniemi, 2015). Many teachers agree that parental involvement is essential for a student's success (Aguilar, 2021). According to Bronfenbrenner (1996), the effectiveness of a mesosystem depends on the quality of the interactions between meaningful influences. Having a positive relationship or opinion of their child's school is crucial to the quality of the parent-school mesosystem.

Parent-Teacher communication is vital to make parents feel like their volunteer service is still valued. As a Long Beach area principal recently said, "parents are the lifeblood of our school" (Guardabascio, 2022). After the isolation of remote work and school, parents could feel like they have lost familiarity with their child's school. When a parent feels they have a rapport

with their child's teacher, they are more likely to be involved on campus (Aguilar, 2021). Creating more avenues for parent volunteers on campus would allow curious parents to inquire about their children (Marland-Peltoniemi, 2015). Conversely, suppose a parent feels like they are engaged in a meaningful way. In that case, they will be more likely to answer calls from the school to fill volunteer jobs, including support for Covid testing, signing in students at lunch, recess duty, light custodial duties, working in the office preparing materials, and classroom support (Fensterwald, 2022).

COVID restrictions superseded traditional barriers to parent involvement and added more. Since schools could become locations where COVID is transmitted and then brought home, schools were closed to stop the spread of COVID in the community (Dini, 2021). On April 5, 2021, WCE reopened the campus with a hybrid model, which lasted until the 2020-21 school year. The campus returned to a full in-person model at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year. California schools are now open for in-person learning and closely monitor their staff and students for COVID symptoms. The once little runny nose became a reason for a student to be sent home for the day (California Department of Health, 2022). Charter schools in California have begun to allow parent volunteers back on campus as long as they comply with additional precautions; such as mask-wearing, a negative covid test, or proof of vaccination (Guardabascio, 2022)

Why is it an Issue/Opportunity?

WCE's decision to restrict access to their campus has decreased the opportunities for parents to be involved in their child's school through volunteering. Parent volunteering is a function of the mesosystem. The activity serves as the family and school microsystems

interacting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Increased parent involvement in learning programs positively affects learning; research has shown that collaboration between parents and the school is vital in parent and teacher relationships (Dini, 2021). Diminishing the role of the parents, and by extension, the home, in this sphere of influence could have adverse effects on the child's relationship with their school. Established research by Bronfenbrenner (1979) has concluded child development is enhanced when there is maximal linkage between home and school in terms of values, experiences, objects and behavioral styles (p. 214). Other research has demonstrated that when the family's interaction style is similar to the school's, students have improved academic performance (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Parents who are enthusiastic about the goings-on at the school could transfer that excitement to their child, increasing the motivation of the child to achieve at school (Smith, 2006). Generally, teachers see parent volunteers as helpful in the early grades when young students are still developing motor skills (Marland-Peltoniemi, 2015). Teachers at WCE have said parent volunteers allow them to differentiate instruction. Volunteers can help cut down the time teachers and paraprofessionals spend with "small tasks" like cutting, gluing, taking the caps off markers, and cleaning up after activities (King, 2022).

On-campus volunteer opportunities provide chances for the parent to make inquiries about their child (Marland-Peltoniemi, 2015). The lack of communication between parents and teachers can discourage the parents from volunteering. When parents cannot commit to regular volunteer hours, it hinders cooperation between the school and family. The absence of volunteers is especially pronounced in the lower grades because older students do not need help. The drop in communication between parents and school can increase the feeling of helplessness among the parents (Marland-Peltoniemi, 2015). During remote learning, a lack of face-to-face experiences with the school weakened the partnership between teachers and parents (Dini, 2021). They are

missing out on regular volunteer opportunities, resulting in fewer chances for parents to "check-in" with their child's progress. The loss of this face-to-face experience is an example of the diminishment of the parent-teacher mesosystem. The parents cannot express enthusiasm for the work done at school (Smith, 2006). There is evidence that this excitement leads to higher levels of academic achievement (Epstein, 2010). One study found that having more exposure to parent involvement through lockdowns and remote learning - basically being stuck together, could positively affect a child's development (Dini, 2021).

In order to be a volunteer, WCE parents needed to submit to a Live Scan background check to be an in-class assistant; and submit to a driver's safety quiz to be a field trip driver. Other traditional barriers to parent volunteering at WCE are not unique. The traditional barriers to parent involvement include work schedules, other commitments, language barriers, lack of information, childcare needs, and a lack of access to the internet (Aguilar, 2021). Some parents believe it is solely the teacher's job to educate the child. Some parents have chosen to be uninvolved in the child's education out of respect for the teacher's role to educate (Smith, 2006). Another barrier to parents volunteering is that teachers do not know how to utilize parent volunteers. Teachers who are unsure how to incorporate parents are less likely to advertise volunteer opportunities (Epstein, 2010). Teachers are also aware of technology gaps and language barriers to communication with some families (Aguilar, 2021). WCE's policies also present a problem for parent volunteers who do not wish to wear a face mask or be vaccinated, as both are now requirements for volunteer work pre-approved by a WCE administrator (WCE, 2022).

There is research focusing on traditional barriers to parent involvement at school. Regardless of their motivation or desire to be on campus, some parents cannot because of work

schedules, other commitments, language barriers, lack of information about ways to volunteer, and the needs of another child or family member (Aguilar, 2021). For example, families could be dealing with a crisis at home and may not have time available to be involved at the school (Smith, 2006). Sometimes there is a feeling of discouragement because parents feel the volunteer opportunities available do not incubate a feeling of cooperation. Instead, it reinforces the school hierarchy where school staff and educators dominate. Parents feel their presence is only required when the school needs a driver or a body. Unappealing can increase the feeling of helplessness among the parents. (Marland-Peltoniemi, 2015). Alternatively, a teacher may not know how to utilize a parent volunteer (Epstein, 2010). Parent-Teacher communication is vital to make parents feel like their volunteer service is still valued. WCE's restricted campus presents a problem for parents who wish to have face-to-face contact with their child's teacher or volunteer at the school.

What Has Be Done?

Parent volunteering is just one aspect of education where the pandemic added layers of difficulty. The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent event that has added a new layer of difficulty for parents volunteering at schools. In order to mitigate the spread of coronavirus, schools in Cypress Unified School District have been directed to "limit non-essential visitors" to campus but allow principals and directors to create their respective protocols for on-campus visitors (CUSD, 2021). The protocols established at WCE decreased opportunities to volunteer even though established research has shown the benefits of school-family solid interrelationships (Epstien, 2010).

The available research on the pandemic's effect on education focuses on issues like the digital divide and face masks in schools. One report into the inequities of access to the technology found that 1 in 4 California students lack access to the internet. The same report blamed the digital divide on Black and Latinx students losing twice their learning time as their White cohorts (Innovate Public Schools, 2021). This study is vital for WCE because 60% of CUSD's students identify as Latinx (EdData, 2022). Another example of pandemic-specific research is one report on how face masks affect the development of speech development and language skills in young children. This report suggests that a teacher wearing a face mask does not significantly reduce students' ability to hear the correct sound pronunciation. However, the same report states that wearing a face mask will interfere with a student's ability to see proper placement. As stated by Dr. Sarabeth Kirkland, "One important aspect for speech development is the use of correct phonetic placement, our ability to use our articulators (lips, cheeks, teeth, tongue) to produce sounds" (Sager, Teachstarter.com, 2021). Another report from Malaysia found a positive correlation between remote learning alongside a parent and academic achievement. This study found that the parent's watchful eye and positive reinforcement are helpful to students locked out of their campuses (Dini, 2021).

The California Department of Education has determined that parents should be involved with a charter school's decision-making. This involvement includes promoting family participation in the education process for all students, including students with disabilities. California has determined that charter schools must maintain specific resources to ensure all students are healthy, safe, engaged, challenged, and supported. The state calls this policy Whole Child (California Department of Education, 2021). When a charter school like WCE determines its priorities concerning its Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), it must consider the Whole

Child demands placed on them by the state. The Whole Child policy encourages WCE to have parents involved with daily school life and policy decisions.

Conclusion

This research aims to understand the value of parent volunteers to daily life on any school campus. Through multiple studies, parental involvement has positively affected a student's academic performance. Increased participation by parents scaffolds the school culture to increase a child's motivation to do well at school. Traditional barriers such as a parent's work schedule, family commitments, and language barriers are exacerbated by the COVID pandemic because school campuses were off-limits to parents who might otherwise be willing to lend a hand. California schools are loosening their COVID restrictions, but schools like WCE continue to limit the number of parents on campus. Schools like WCE appear to weigh the public health concern over parental access.

Method

Parent volunteers played a crucial role in life at Worldview Charter Elementary (WCE). The COVID pandemic disrupted the volunteer program by severely limiting the number of volunteers allowed on campus. For this Capstone Project, the researcher investigated how the WCE community (i.e., parents, teachers, & staff) viewed the limited volunteer opportunities and what they thought could be done to improve involvement. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researcher used what they learned to formulate an action that responded to the pandemic's effect on volunteer opportunities at the WCE in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience. Understanding the necessity of parent volunteers is vital since they have played a crucial role in school life before the pandemic.

Context

WCE is located in Dune City, California, and is part of the Cypress Unified School District. Pulling in students from all areas of Cypress County, in the 2020-21 school year, there were 424 students enrolled in grades K-8. WCE organizes its International Baccalaureate Program by grade level: K-5 in the Primary Years Program and 6-8 in the Middle Years Program. WCE students identify as 36% Latinx; 27% identify as white; 17% identify as “two or more races.” Ninety-nine students qualify for Free or Reduced-Price lunch meals. In 2021, 54.6% of WCE students met or exceeded state standards for English Language Arts on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) exam. In the same year, 31.9% of students met or exceeded state standards on the CAASPP mathematics exam (Ed-Data, 2022).

WCE leases facilities from the Cypress Unified School District. The school campus has 15 full-sized classrooms, a multi-use room (cafeteria/auditorium), a library within an administration building, three playgrounds, two fields, and three gardens. Each grade has two homeroom teachers. The school also has three full-time Spanish teachers, three Arts and Performing Arts teachers, and one full-time P.E. Teacher. WCE benefits from a very active volunteer community that includes parents, guardians, grandparents, extended family, and family friends and neighbors. WCE communicates the benefits of families volunteering and supporting students. Monetary donations and volunteer hours are not a condition of enrollment, but the school requests both practices.

Participants

Like many of my research participants, my child attends WCE. My daughter has attended WCE since kindergarten. Before the coronavirus pandemic, I was a very active parent volunteer; I was in her classrooms at least once a week. The most common job for me was supervising a small group of students in the garden or running a counting game. At the pandemic's start, I tried to continue the effort as much as possible. The school modified the definition of parent volunteer work so parents could count the hours helping with remote learning as volunteering. I tried to help my daughter's 3rd-grade teacher in the Zoom breakout rooms. However, I saw 15 different children in many other states of activity on the Zoom meeting screen. The students were jumping. They were spinning in office chairs, and they held their Ipad up to their mouth for extreme close-ups of eating granola bars. I became nauseous. I started to wonder about the other challenges of the pandemic for educators and well-intentioned parents. My research is trying to find a way to best use those good intentions while keeping the school staff safe.

Participants: WCE Administrators, Parents, and Teachers

WCE is the setting because of my extensive experience at the school as a parent volunteer and a service learner. I have developed relationships with teachers, school administrators, and members of the board of trustees. I chose to interview a board of trustees member to see how parent volunteers fit into the big picture for WCE. The board of trustees is the school's executive committee that is responsible for, among other duties, hiring the school director. Any parent can be a member of the board of trustees.

The school director is the school's executive officer, responsible for hiring the principal. The school director plays a crucial role in managing administrators, teaching staff, and

interfacing with parents. I interviewed the school director to further my understanding of the role of parent involvement at the school and see the disruption of volunteering from a staff perspective. Similarly, I interviewed WCE's Operations Manager because this position addresses every logistical challenge the school faces. The operations manager has a good sense of what systems, routines, and materials could be suffering because of the void left by parent volunteers.

To elicit as many responses as possible, I chose to survey the two other stakeholders in my research project. Parents and teachers from WCE were surveyed for their pandemic volunteer experiences. A survey was advertised on WCE's ParentSquare social media platform to contact the parents. I sent out a questionnaire for WCE teachers via email. I feel both stakeholders would be able to give me first-hand accounts of what help is needed and what kind of help is available.

Participant Selection, WCE Director, WCE Operations Manager

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Director and Operations manager

1. Traditionally, how are parent volunteers related to WCE's mission?
2. How has the COVID pandemic changed WCE's approach to using parent volunteers?
3. Is there a particular aspect of life at WCE that has been impacted by fewer volunteers?
4. How would you judge how motivated parents are to be back in those volunteer positions?
5. What are the local and state guidelines WCE uses to shape its policy toward volunteers on campus?
6. What kind of volunteer opportunities are currently available at WCE? How are those opportunities advertised?
7. What do you think are the challenges to increasing parent volunteer opportunities?
- 8.. What do you think could be done to increase parent volunteer opportunities?

9.. Is there anything else that you would like to say about volunteering at WCE and/or improving the changes in volunteer opportunities during the pandemic?

Procedure

WCE staff were interviewed via Zoom for 20-30 minutes. These interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants. The interviews were analyzed for emergent themes.

Participant Selection, WCE Trustee Member

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Traditionally, how are parent volunteers related to the school's mission?
- 2.) What is the board's relationship to the school and the school district?
- 3.) How does WCE encourage family involvement?
- 4.) Do parent volunteers offer a financial benefit to the school? How important is that benefit to the school's mission?
5. What do you think are the challenges to increasing parent volunteer opportunities?
6. What kind of efforts are made to encourage involvement from families with work/language/time barriers?
- 7). Can you describe the decision making process behind the campus restriction?
- 8) Did you personally receive feedback from parents regarding the campus restriction, how would you describe their general tone? Were parents understanding or angry?
- 9) How did the pandemic affect your volunteer work? How did the board meet, was it less frequent? Did you find yourself taking on new or extra responsibilities?

Procedure

The WCE Director of the Board of Trustees was interviewed in person for 20-30 minutes. The interview was recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participant. The interviews were analyzed for emergent themes.

Participant Selection WCE Parents***Survey Questions***

1. Before the COVID pandemic, what was your experience as a parent volunteer?
2. Can you think of any ways parent volunteers could have been used differently during the COVID pandemic?
3. What do you see as the challenges to parent volunteer opportunities during the COVID pandemic?
4. What kind of volunteer opportunities have you been made aware of recently?
5. What would you like to see done to increase opportunities to volunteer?
6. What kind of volunteer opportunities interest you the most?
7. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience as a parent volunteer, how you would like to help, or anything about parent volunteering?

Procedure

WCE parents were asked to complete a survey about their experiences as volunteers. Their responses were recorded and analyzed to find emergent themes regarding parent volunteering at WCE.

Participant Selection WCE Teachers***Survey Questions***

1. What grade do you teach?
2. Before the pandemic, how common were parent volunteers in your classroom?
3. During the pandemic, anytime between Spring 2020-now, where have you felt the absence of volunteers the most?
4. Would you be willing to share an aspect of your day on the campus you feel could be improved by more volunteer involvement?
5. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences with parent volunteers?

Procedure

Teachers were contacted via email with a link to a Google Form with the following questions.. The responses were collected and analyzed for emergent themes.

Data Analysis

Interviews with WCE administrators and trustees were coded and transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes. Survey responses from WCE parents and teachers were collected anonymously, coded, transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes. Minutes from Town Hall and Community Connection Meetings were coded, transcribed, and analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, WCE leadership was interviewed to explain school policies and see what ideas they had to improve parent volunteer opportunities during the pandemic. WCE parents and WCE teachers were also surveyed to see what they thought could be done to improve volunteer opportunities during the pandemic. The issue of parents on campus is

essential because the COVID pandemic is an emergency for which our understanding has evolved since 2020. This research focuses on how the gradual easing of health restrictions has affected one charter school's reliance on parent volunteers. Parent volunteering is valuable to WCE's mission because they provide a valuable source of on-campus assistance. WCE also views parent volunteering as a crucial component of engaging parents with their child's education and reinforcing the school's sense of community. For parents, volunteering fulfills a request by WCE. It allows them to have a personal preference for engaging with their child's school. Volunteering allows parents to offer their expertise, individual talents, and physical labor to their child's school. Surveys of the WCE parents found they particularly cherish the time they have in their child's classroom, especially in their younger years.

Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision making requires evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria:

- how much the action increases campus life by easing the workload of teachers and staff;
- how much the action increases parent engagement by giving them access to the WCE campus; and
- how much the action increases the chance of transmitting coronavirus.

As an evaluation criteria, improving the quality of life on campus attempts to measure the value of parent volunteers. Interviews with WCE staff indicated, before the pandemic, parent volunteer hours make up at least 8 full time staff members (WCE Operations Manager, personal communication/ March 31, 2022). Increasing parent engagement is vital because recent WCE parent surveys reflect a sense of disconnection with the school. Finally, each action will be evaluated by its chance of increasing COVID-19 transmission rates on campus; this is important

because coronavirus is the cause of the health restrictions. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option, one will then be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	Increasing quality of campus life	Increasing parent engagement	Risk of coronavirus transmission
Unrestricted access to parent volunteers	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH
Modify volunteer opportunities and increase outreach	MED	MED	LOW
K-2 returns to pre-pandemic levels of classroom access	MED	MED	HIGH

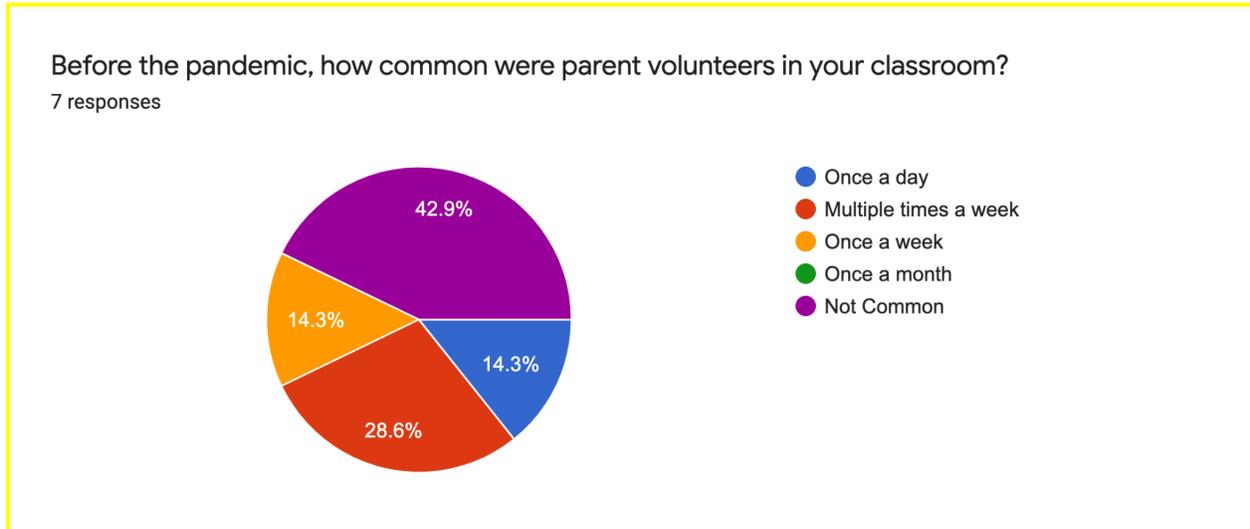
Return Campus Access to Pre-Pandemic Levels

The most direct course of action that capitalizes on parents' enthusiasm and addresses the needs of the school is returning the campus to pre-pandemic levels of access. A total return would mean complying with WCE's long-standing request that parents be fingerprinted, have a TB clearance, and be fully vaccinated for coronavirus. Once completed, parents should be allowed to volunteer in any class after making arrangements with the teacher, as was the standard practice before the pandemic. In this action plan, parents would be given access to the campus at drop-off and pick-up times.

Fatigue from the prolonged pandemic is a theme that emerged from interviews and surveys of the WCE community. From views expressed by many of the parents, there is a sense that the spread of coronavirus is not the same emergency it was at the beginning of the pandemic. More than one parent voiced their frustration over the strictness of WCE's campus restrictions,

stating "I feel so unwanted on campus; they have lost so much community and support" (WCE Parent, personal communication, April 13, 2022). This feeling of disconnection speaks to how the campus restrictions dampened a sense of community engagement from WCE parents. Parents put a high emphasis on being on campus for pick-up and drop-off procedures. While short in time, research has shown that this kind of brief face-to-face interaction is crucial to building relationships between the student's teacher and the school. It also gives parents a sense of "permission" to be involved (Aguilar, 2020).

From interviews with WCE leadership, it becomes clear that parent volunteering their time has been a centerpiece of the school since its inception. Returning to an open campus would allow parents to return as regular fixtures on campus. WCE's dedication to parental involvement is seen in the school's history. The school was founded in partnership with parents; parents serve in positions of school governance; parents play an essential role in reinforcing their student's education. A WCE Trustee outlined the goal of the synergy created by parents working hand in hand with school staff is to "create a critical mass of parents showing their kids their actions; that school is *important*, that education is important through their volunteering "(WCE Trustee, personal communication, April 29, 2022). Research around the benefits of parent involvement on campus backs this goal; partnerships between families and schools help reinforce the importance of education to the pupil (Epstien, 2002).

Figure 1: Results of Teacher Survey Question

Another theme arose from the interviews and surveys of the value parent volunteers bring to the school. The school director reported that parents regularly tallied between 10,000 and 15,000 volunteer hours every school year (WCE Director, personal communication, March 31, 2022). It has been equivalent to having 8 full-time staff members when you look at that in dollars and cents.” A survey conducted among 7 WCE teachers ½ reported parents in their classrooms weekly (Figure 1). One teacher responded that parent volunteers make it easier to differentiate instruction (WCE Teacher, personal communication, May 1, 2022). By capitalizing on the wealth of parent enthusiasm, reopening the campus would ease the work burden on WCE teachers and staff. Since mask mandates are rescinded, and the vaccination rates among WCE students decrease with age, this choice could be considered risky for coronavirus transmission.

Modify Volunteer Opportunities and Increase Outreach

Another theme that emerged from a survey of WCE parents is disconnection from the school throughout the pandemic. WCE could combat this creeping disengagement by revamping its parent outreach efforts. A survey of WCE parents found that many felt "disconnected" and "disengaged" from the school's traditional sense of community, stating for example that "We have lost our WCE 'Let us all pitch-in community, and it will take lots of effort to rebuild it" (WCE Parent, personal communication, April 13, 2022). Engaging parents is crucial to the mission of the school because of the positive impact parental involvement has on learning (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). One WCE teacher summed it up nicely:

Biggest thing would be the parent - school connection. Students like having their families in class. Parents have the opportunity to build a relationship with the teacher and see what we are doing in class. It helps with transparency as well as build community for students and trust with parents & staff. (WCE Teacher, personal communication, April 22, 2022)

The degradation of the volunteer program could have a long-term consequence on the motivation of families to hold to the WCE mission. One parent offered a solution: "Maybe encourage committees for the various subgroups; then like-minded parents /teachers can develop a plan to implement together." Another suggested that WCE act as a hub for parents to team up in committees to offer assistance or guidance. WCE is open to creative uses of parent volunteers; as stated by the Operations Manager, "We try to be open-minded to what people are bringing to the table." Regularly informing parents of outdoor, remote, or school governance opportunities will increase parents' sense of engagement in the school. WCE does keep in contact with parents with daily emails; a weekly YouTube update (produced by students and staff); a social media

platform; town hall meetings (in person and then virtual), and parents are notified at chances to sit on committees; the school does try to involve parents. Some parents responded they were disappointed at the volunteer opportunities being made available. These were tasks like Book Fair Assistant, which was on campus and required a vaccine; and working a water booth at a local marathon.

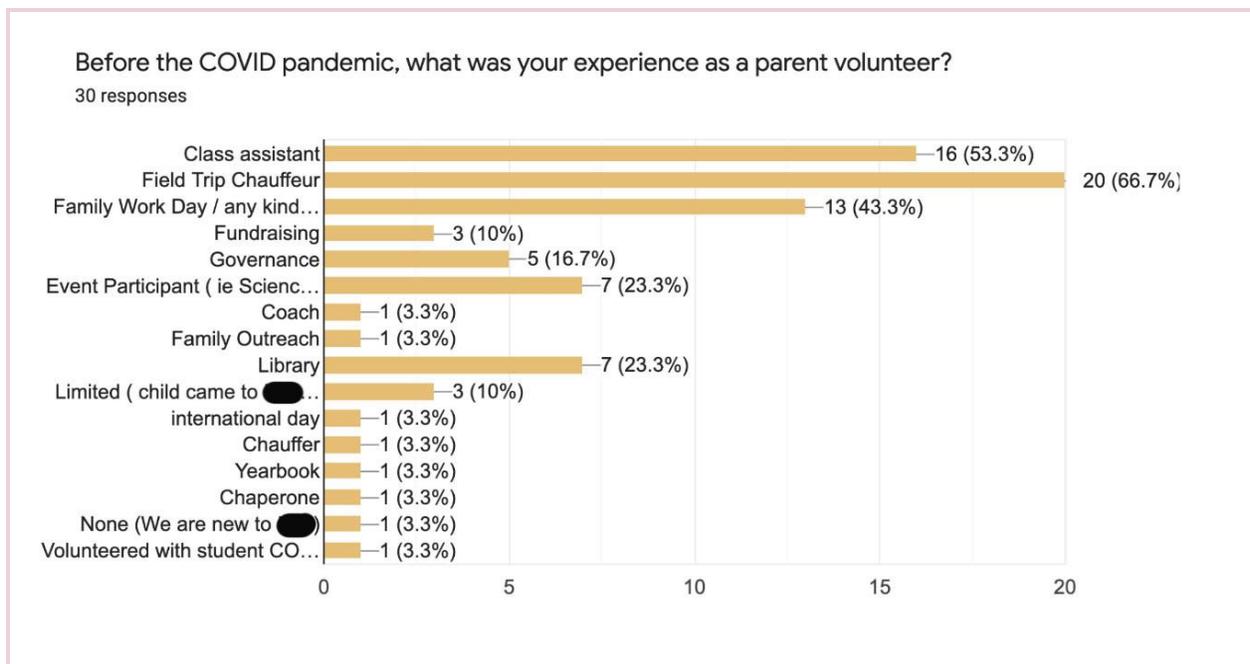
An effort should be made to modify volunteer opportunities so they are held outdoors or remotely so they can incorporate parent volunteers. The campus restrictions could be left in place regarding in-class activities, but parent volunteers could resume their on-campus work just outside. Traditionally WCE has operated multiple weekly Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) classes, and parents often lead these lessons. In a survey of WCE many of them requested to participate in SEM classes once again. Such classes could be set up outside. That would include extra materials like a desk and possibly something to produce shade. Classes that could be held outside. Conducting such activities outside with vaccinated parent volunteers, even without face masks, is considered generally safe by the Centers for Disease Control (2022).

Parent volunteers could also help with maintenance projects around the campus. As part of their charter with Cypress Unified School District, WCE can make minor improvements to the school. Traditionally the school held a Saturday Work Day where parents would pitch in to help beautify the campus. One of the more successful workdays in the pre-pandemic era resulted in 200 volunteer hours between 60 parents (WCE Operations Manager, personal communication, March 31, 2022). Among the parents, there is enthusiasm to help. Instead of once a month, WCE could make a weekly posting of “fix-it” projects to share with parents. A "will-call" approach to maintenance and beautification jobs allows parents to view a list of needs and come help when convenient to their schedule. Parent volunteers are strongly associated with field trips and special

events. While field trips are an off-campus activity, they make the parents feel engaged. School activities such as performances or science fairs could be altered and held outdoors.

Another way WCE made adjustments during the pandemic is by allowing parents to count the time they spent helping their child with remote learning. WCE leadership felt it was important to recognize the work behind getting a child into a Zoom lesson. This practice could be extended by allowing remote volunteering. In the parent survey, some respondents expressed interest in helping out with technology training; multiple parents reported helping out in Zoom breakout rooms or virtual “hang-outs” during the pandemic's peak (WCE Parent, personal communication, April 13, 2022). Remote classes could be a way to manage the risk of in-person transmission and use parent volunteers. For example, an offsite parent volunteer with expertise in G-Suite or Adobe Photoshop could lead a session made up of students on-campus. Multiple parents suggested using Zoom to form reading groups. Another way an off-campus parent could be used is to lead a small on-campus book club remotely.

Figure 3: Common Parent Volunteer Assignments



Open K-2 Classrooms to Parent Volunteers

Interviews with WCE leadership and teachers revealed a need for volunteers in grades K-2. “In-class assistant” is the second most common volunteer job parent volunteers did on campus (Figure 2). There is reason to believe those responding parents spoke of their time assisting in K-2 classrooms. They are commonly the only classrooms with active parent volunteers. 42% of teachers responded that parent volunteers “are not common in their classrooms.” One 8th-grade teacher said they “have not had any parent volunteers for the last four years as an 8th-grade teacher.” Responses from K-2 teachers said parent volunteers are crucial to running small groups and learning centers. The classroom has multiple groups in different areas of the classroom or campus. The WCE director recognizes the importance of volunteers in K-2 classes. He acknowledges, “I think the teachers in the lower grades, particularly kinder, their request was to bring back volunteers to have them in the classroom to make those support rules that I listed earlier. Things like reading groups and learning rotations.” Opening the K-2 classrooms to parent volunteers allows the school to send volunteers where the perceived need is greatest.

Opening the campus to K-2 parents will help parent engagement levels because it gives the parents of the youngest students and families new to the school an idea of the school culture. A parent of a kindergartener would be able to meet WCE staff and observe older grades, giving that parent a preview of what is the middle and final product of a WCE education. If a parent has an idea of the future, they may be more invested in it. Volunteering in the first years could also be a way for new parents to relieve their child's anxiety about being at school for the first time (Marland-peltoniemi 2015). Furthermore, unquestionably, K-2 teachers seem eager to welcome

volunteers to their classroom and build lasting partnerships, “I love building relationships. They are key to a student's success. We need them, and they are precious to the students' learning and investment in their education.” We need them, and they are precious to the students' learning and investment in their education.” There is an increase in the risk of coronavirus transmission to students in this model since only 50% of the K-5 WCE students are vaccinated (WCE Operations Manager, personal communication, March 10, 2022). County-wide, only 10% of children 5-10 have been vaccinated (Cypress County, 2022). The teachers and parent volunteers are safer regarding their vaccination rates, the type of PPE they are wearing, and their ability to be mindful of social distancing.

Recommendation

Given the three action options, the school should modify volunteer opportunities and increase outreach to parents. This option allows all grade levels to participate in outdoor or remote activities supported or led by a parent volunteer. Increasing outreach to parents makes them aware of volunteering opportunities at events or on school governance committees. This plan also gives WCE access to some of the thousands of volunteer hours available prior to the pandemic. Literature and collected data support this plan. This action offers the least risk of virus transmission to the students, addresses the parent’s enthusiasm to help on campus, and will help increase the quality of life on the WCE campus. The following sections will outline this action plan's concessions, limitations, and adverse outcomes.

Concessions

The recommendation of modifying volunteer activities and increasing outreach should not discount the strengths of the two alternative plans. The criteria for judging each plan is if the plan makes life on campus better. The plan increases parent engagement; finally, the plan

increases the rate of coronavirus transmission. When considering the quality of life on campus, opening the campus back up to pre-pandemic levels should be considered a good plan. From interviews with WCE staff and WCE teachers, there is a need for the help of parents on campus as the pandemic goes on and local, state, and federal guidelines as to what is a safe change. For example, the face mask mandate was lifted during the writing of this report. Based on guidelines written by doctors and government officials, it could be argued that there is no better time than the present to allow parents back on campus. Some parents feel strongly about being denied access to the campus and that even adding the vaccine requirement “promotes discrimination. Parents have a right to know what is going on in their child's classroom.” Parents who can come on campus could also interact with teachers and staff and witness older students model the progression of a successful WCE program. An accurate return to pre-pandemic access could also return to fingerprinting and a TB test, with no vaccine requirement.

Focusing parent volunteer hours on the K-2 addresses the most significant need discovered from the survey of teachers listed in the METHODS section. K-2 teachers expressed the highest need and most success with parent volunteers in the classroom. Teachers reported that parent volunteers are valuable in aiding small group lessons and allow teachers to differentiate instruction better. Interviews with WCE staff indicated that K-2 teachers had expressed the greatest need for classroom assistance. Results of an inner-school survey of teachers regarding the school's strategic vision revealed that many respondents asked for assistance with reading groups, math, and SPED. While only one respondent specifically mentioned parent volunteers, this secondary survey does reveal needs where parent volunteers can work in a supportive role. For example, reading groups is a job where parents express interest in helping on campus.

Limitations

While modifying the activities and increasing the outreach to parents attempts to spread the benefits of parent volunteering across the entire school, it does not address the traditional barriers to parent volunteering. The socio-economic realities of Dune City also create a barrier to parents volunteering at WCE. As expressed by WCE Operations Manager, "we live in a place where there's a lot of hospitality, people work on the weekend so like scheduling wise and also single parents there's a lot of natural things that happen in our everyday lives that just make it hard for parents to get here." Even if the volunteer opportunities are outside, they still occur during the workday. Materials such as desks, shade, sunscreen, and dividers to reduce stimulation would have to be purchased to make the students and teachers comfortable in Dune City's midday sun. Attempts at outreach could come into the typical barriers of language and intimidation. There were several parents who said the covid restrictions already made them feel "unwanted" (WCE Parent, personal communication, April 13, 2022). One Spanish speaking parent said language barriers limited his knowledge of opportunities to help (WCE Parent, personal communication, May 2, 2022).

Another limitation of this plan is it does not address one of the most popular forms of volunteering, field trips. Field trips are complicated for WCE because they do not have a bus; parent volunteers transport students to their destinations via carpool. Parents and students consistently mention field trips as a favorite activity. Since field trips do not occur on the school campus, field trips were not considered as part of this action option. However, the trips do serve as a great source of parent engagement. Field trips allow parents with barriers to regular volunteer opportunities a unique chance to see their child in action with their classmates.

Potential negative outcomes

A potentially harmful outcome of this plan is the lack of in-class help in K-2 classrooms, where teachers have expressed the most success with parent volunteers. Parents who cannot make time to lead a remote learning activity or get to the campus to help outdoors; would still be excluded from engaging at the school. There is also the limitation of making parent volunteers follow through on their commitments. The school director spoke to one difficulty of relying too much on parent volunteers, “The challenge with that is that it is tough to hold people responsible for their schedules.” Sometimes, parents do not show up. The weather is another barrier, and if there is a rainy day, outdoor activities will have to be canceled or moved inside. An inside activity does increase the chance of coronavirus transmission.

Conclusion

Despite the possible limitations, concessions, and negative impact of this action plan, modifying volunteer activities and increasing outreach to parents is the correct course of action. Especially as a school moves further away from the dangers of the pandemic, this is because it is the safest alternative to access at pre-pandemic levels. By modifying volunteer activities to be outdoors or remote, WCE encourages most parents to participate with students during the school day. Keeping the activities outdoors and remote also decreases the chances of coronavirus transmission. Increasing outreach to parents regarding volunteer opportunities works to chip away at the sense of disengagement that has taken root during the pandemic. Highlighting opportunities for parents to use their voice in governance, fundraising, or special events is an excellent way to signal to parents that their experience is valued. By modifying the setting, WCE

could successfully balance the necessity for volunteers, the enthusiasm of parents, and caution when on-campus.

Action Documentation and Critical Reflection

This research focuses on how the gradual easing of health restrictions during the pandemic has affected one charter school's reliance on parent volunteers. Parent volunteering is valuable to WCE's mission because they provide a valuable source of on-campus assistance. The researcher interviewed WCE leadership to explain school policies and see what ideas they had to improve parent volunteer opportunities during the pandemic. WCE parents and WCE teachers were surveyed to see what they thought could be done to enhance volunteer opportunities during the pandemic. Three options emerged based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature. The first is reopening the school to pre-pandemic levels. The second is modifying volunteer opportunities and increasing parent outreach, and focusing parent volunteers on K-2 grades where the expressed need is greatest. The researcher evaluated each action on the following criteria: how much the activity increases campus life, how much the action increases parent engagement, and how much the move increases the chance of transmitting coronavirus. Modifying volunteer opportunities and increasing outreach is the action item chosen. This action focuses on engaging the most parents, schoolwide, in an outdoor setting where transmission rates are low. Increased outreach makes parents aware of opportunities that may not be in-class or on-campus, such as governance committees or remote lessons. These findings were communicated to the school director in a letter.

Action Research Project Documentation and Reflection

Wednesday, April 6, 2022, 12:00- 12:45

Invited/Attending

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] ~ Jarrod Myers (JM)

Agenda/Summary

- **Agenda for Meeting 1**
 - **Team Introductions**
 - **Admin:** [REDACTED]
 - **Board:** [REDACTED]
 - **Staff:** [REDACTED]
 - **Community Connection:** [REDACTED]
 - **Parents:** [REDACTED] Jarrod
 - **Goals and Process**
 - **LCAP review, discussion of evidence, plan for continuing and new foci**

I joined WCE's Strategic Advisory Team. This committee of parents, staff, and teachers works to shape the school's goals for the district LCAP. I used my research to help be a voice for parents on the WCE Strategic Advisory Committee. I modified my recommendations to maximize the amount of engagement with the school. Parents expressed much enthusiasm for being on campus, more than concern for the transmission of the virus. I think I underestimated the level of disconnection between the parents and the school. I would have formed my inquiry more to provide pathways and outreach for parents to feel more involved on campus. Outreach for governance, fundraisings, maybe focusing on the specificity of the task. I learned that my experience at CSUMB has prepared me for hearing a variety of voices/issues from parents. Some of the responses from parents were intense in passion. Having some background on solutions and practices prepared me for some of the voices I heard in my answers.

Critical Reflection

From this project, I discovered the joy of piecing together a narrative that considers many points of view. The process of data collection, interviews, and researching the policies shaping decisions made in schools was an exciting experience. Having adults with experience and motivation in the room helps K-2 homeroom teachers be the best at their jobs. In my experience as a parent in a kindergarten classroom, I ran the counting table and card game table. Volunteering in class allowed another group of students to do phonics lessons with a paraprofessional while the teacher worked 1-on-1 with another small group. There is a wealth of enthusiasm among parents to help in their child's school. My research shows the value of making parents feel like they are "in the loop" with their child's school. There are various ways schools could use parents at this school and others. Some parents want to do more, and they should have avenues to use their talents.

Synthesis and Integration

This research project and the Liberal Studies coursework will prepare me with the introductory pedagogical skills and methods to apply perspectives of the Educational Foundations to develop my professional practices. The most prudent way I can use my skills as a developing educator is to become a substitute teacher as soon as possible. There is a high demand for parents to be back on WCE's campus; staffing shortages limit the school's administration options when a teacher gets sick. There are not enough substitute teachers. A larger pool of trained substitutes would allow schools to consider a more open approach as coronavirus becomes more managed. The coursework has developed my educational practices and perspectives with concepts and theories of diversity and multiculturalism. Along with my

personal experience, these concepts shaped my understanding of parent volunteerism. This project has shaped my belief that parents deserve support in their efforts to help in their child's school. Schools should consider brooding their definitions of assisting the school and then conveying all those opportunities to the parents. Outreach is one way to ensure families from all backgrounds get representation at functions and governance committees.

The pandemic era has caused me to often reflect on the role of technologies for innovative teaching and learning and practical instruction. Technology has played a significant role in pandemic life. I started CSUMB in the Spring of 2020. I finished that semester learning virtually at my kitchen table across from my 8-year-old daughter, who was also remote-learning. I relied on G-Suite to conduct and compile my surveys and Zoom to record and transcribe my interviews with WCE staff. California, the home of multiple information companies, should be supplying its students with adequate and equitable technology in its classrooms. State and local policymakers should be working to make sure California students and their families have access to technology.

This project required me to collaborate with stakeholders to advocate for access, equity, and justice in public education and other societal institutions. A theme that emerged from the research is the parent's enthusiasm to help and a feeling of disconnection from the school culture. These are opinions held by parents of any cultural or socioeconomic background; the desire to be more involved. When possible, there needs to be an effort to include parents in the decision-making processes at their child's school. Outreach to parents may have taken on more low-tech approaches if email blasts keep attracting the same group of parents repeatedly. Sometimes outreach needs to be face to face. Sometimes the teacher and school staff are the people who will need to cross a language barrier by seeking out community representatives or

other intermediaries.

This research project demonstrates my content knowledge and completes a coherent depth of study for successful practice in California public education. Social Foundations of Multicultural Education is where I learned the structure of a charter school. This coursework helped me decide whom I was going to interview and why they would be necessary to understand the pandemic's logistical challenges. Linguistics gave me an understanding of how children gain phonological awareness; and why some parents would have concerns with face masks during the reading lessons in lower grades. Pedagogy for Linguistic Diversity explored the experience of an English Language Learner and the importance of scaffolding across the curriculum. Special Education Inclusionary Practices taught me the history, value, and methods of making a classroom inclusive to a special needs learner. I intend to use the knowledge from both of these classes as I continue my work on WCE's Strategic Advisory Team to work toward creating an equitable school. I could do the most good immediately by becoming a substitute teacher. Long term, I enjoyed the investigative nature of this research project. I want to continue to examine schools and the education system in an investigative manner.

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