ABSTRACT

Title of Document: PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOL: CULTIVATING COMPREHENSIVE AND INCLUSIVE PROGRAMS OF PARTNERSHIP

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The purpose of this study was to investigate how middle schools can cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs. More specifically, this study explored the role of district- and school-level leadership on the implementation of one district's parent involvement policy. Using micro and macro perspectives of policy implementation and Epstein's Six Types of Involvement framework of comprehensive parent involvement, this study highlighted promising parent involvement practices implemented by eight middle schools within one mid-Atlantic school district and illuminated the need for further investigation of secondary-level partnership program development and policy implementation.

Data collection relied on case study methodology to investigate one district's implementation of middle school parent involvement policy. Data were triangulated from documents, district- and school-level interviews, and observations to explore how middle schools work with parents and how district administrators support school-level policy implementation. The document analysis portion of this study included the district's parent involvement policy, the eight participating schools'

improvement plans, and the schools' report cards which reports test scores, demographics, and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status. The interview portion consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven district leaders, eight middle school principals, 14 assistant principals, and 14 parents. The observation portion of this study included parent involvement workshops and school improvement team meetings.

Results of this study indicate that principal leadership has a strong influence over the extent to which schools create a welcoming climate and implement activities to work with all parents, particularly families deemed "under-served." Principals' relationships with other school-level colleagues and district administrators impact their participation in capacity building opportunities. This study also indicates that further investigation is necessary to inform policy, research, and practice in regards to middle school parent involvement.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOL: CULTIVATING COMPREHENSIVE AND INCLUSIVE PROGRAMS OF PARTNERSHIP

By

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Marcus and Andrea Hutchins,
whose involvement in my education shaped who
I am today and who I strive to be tomorrow.

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This work was made possible with the help of numerous people. To begin, I would like to thank my advisor, Bob Croninger, for providing guidance and insight to improve my work and calm my nerves. I would also like to thank my committee members—Joyce Epstein, Sherick Hughes, Francine Hultgren, Betty Malen, and Linda Valli—for offering their advice and expertise.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Parent involvement[1] is somewhat of an enigma within the field of education. Teachers often wonder how to encourage more parents to attend workshops while parents question how to best support their children's learning at home. Researchers struggle to conduct rigorous studies isolating home-school collaboration as a catalyst for student achievement and policymakers have difficulty drafting a document that guides schools to work with "hard-to-reach" parents. Simply stated, schools and districts across the country struggle to involve parents as partners in their children's education (Sheldon & Hutchins, 2011).

Positive home-school relationships at the secondary level are particularly difficult to foster. While most schools face similar challenges that negatively impact home-school collaboration—limited monetary resources, lack of time, minimal teacher training, middle and high schools encounter unique obstacles—increased parent-teacher ratio, further distance from school, complex curricula, adolescents' desire for increased autonomy—that often hinder the development of productive partnerships (Epstein et al., 2009). Secondary schools and parents both grapple with how and to what extent home-school collaboration should exist in adolescents' education.

After decades of study, researchers are beginning to shed light on factors and circumstances that help to mitigate the challenges that engulf home-school connections. District leadership, goal-linked activities, principal support, and capacity building opportunities may all strengthen parent involvement for student success. To date, the

[1] In this dissertation, I use parent involvement, parent engagement, home-school relationships, and home-school collaboration interchangeably.

vast majority of these studies occur at the elementary level. Much more exploration is still needed to illuminate best practices for middle and high schools to engage all parents in their children's scholastic success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how middle schools can cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs. More specifically, this study explores the role of district- and school-level leadership on the implementation of one district's parent involvement policy. Some studies focus on linking parent involvement to student achievement (e.g. Bleeker & Jacobs, 2004; Hill et al., 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Simon, 2004; Yan & Lin, 2005) while others discuss parent involvement challenges (e.g. Cooper & Christie, 2005; Cutler, 2000; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Hill, Tyson & Bromell, 2009; Olivos, 2006). A few researchers investigate why parents become involved in their children's education (e.g. Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2009) and others develope models or theories of parent involvement programs (e.g. Barton et al., 2004; Epstein et al., 2009). Far fewer studies focus on the role of leadership in parent involvement program and policy implementation and even fewer address how to cultivate such initiatives.

I chose to focus this study on middle school parent involvement for three reasons. First, as I previously mentioned, secondary-level teachers and administrators face unique challenges—increased parent-teacher ratio, distance from school, complex curricula, adolescents' desire for increased autonomy—that often hinder the development of a positive home-school relationship (Epstein et al., 2009). Second, hundreds of diverse middle schools across the United States are reporting minimal support from principals

and district-level administrators in regards to implementing parent involvement programs for student success (Sheldon & Hutchins, 2011). Finally, even though the literature is growing, there is a dearth of information about characteristics that impact the implementation of parent involvement policy and programs in middle school.

Given the information above, the overarching research question for this study is: *How can middle schools cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs?* A set of three additional questions guides the research for this study:

1. To what extent is the district's policy about parent involvement congruent with the implementation of policy at the middle school levels? Do district-level and school-level administrators have the same beliefs and attitudes about how to cultivate comprehensive parent involvement initiatives over time?
2. What is the role of capacity and will in cultivating parent involvement? How do key district-level and school-level administrators attempt to build capacity in support of comprehensive parent involvement? How strong is their will to do so?
3. What challenges persists in the implementation of comprehensive parent involvement? What are the attitudes and beliefs of key district-level and school-level administrators about these challenges? What are the attitudes and beliefs of middle school parents?

Literature Review

This study draws from a wide literature base in order to address the complexities of parent involvement and the ability of schools to implement federal- and district-level policies. The two overarching themes of the literature review are parent involvement and policy implementation. Prior to beginning this study, I conducted a preliminary review

of literature in order to uncover gaps in the research. I then completed the final literature review simultaneously with fieldwork in order to permit "a creative interplay among the processes of data collection, literature review, and researcher introspection" (Patton, 1990, p. 163).

The purpose of the literature review is threefold: to review the parent involvement literature; to highlight holes in the research about middle school parent involvement; and to discuss the conceptual perspective that guides this study. First, I discuss varying definitions and policy ambiguities that surround parent involvement in general. Second, I outline challenges that parents, administrators, and teachers experience when trying to collaborate. Some of these challenges are applicable to all families from kindergarten through high school while others are specific to secondary school parents. Third, I share research about partnership program development in middle school. Fourth, I discuss the body of literature that links promising partnership practices to secondary school outcomes. Finally, I elaborate on the conceptual perspective that informs this study.

Conceptual Perspectives

The topic of this study is inherently complex. In this dissertation, I look at the relationship between policy and practice within the context of middle school parent involvement. Cohen, Moffitt, and Goldin (2007) explain that a "dilemma" exists in the policy-practice relationship:

> The policymakers who define problems and devise remedies are rarely the ultimate problem solvers. They depend on the very people and organizations that have or are the problem to solve it. At the same time, those that have or are the

> problem depend on policy makers or others for some of the resources—ideas, incentives, money, and more—that may enable a solution. (p. 522)

Thus, policy makers and practitioners have an interdependent relationship that determines the success or failure of policy.

An added challenge to the subject of this dissertation is that relatively little is known about successful practices to involve parents in middle school. In addition, though I focus primarily on school-level practices, I also investigate district-level influences on middle school parent involvement. In searching for a theoretical base or conceptual perspective to inform this study, I sought to simplify the multidimensional aspect of these relationships as much as possible in order to better manage the data I collected. The conceptual perspectives I use to guide this dissertation illuminate the relationship between policy and practice and define comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement.

Policy and Practice

Scholars have studied the interdependent relationship between policy and practice for decades. While reading through the literature about policy implementation, I revisited my overarching research question—*How can middle schools cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement*?—to ensure the conceptual perspective coincided with the purpose of this study. Cultivating parent involvement requires successful implementation. In this study, I used both micro and macro lenses to assess how one district and its middle schools implement parent involvement policy and programs. Within the micro and macro perspectives, I investigated district administrators' and principals' capacity and will as factors that impact implementation of policy and practice.

Studying the policy process through a micro perspective focuses on the role of the individual. In my case study, I define the micro as middle school principals. However, I also interviewed district leaders, parents and assistant principals to determine how these administrators influence parent involvement implementation. Many factors determine how school-level leaders interpret policy. Beliefs, prior knowledge, attitudes, and experiences all impact how individuals reconcile policy (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Two of my five research questions seek to uncover these conditions that affect school-level implementation of parent involvement in middle school.

The macro perspective of implementation assumes that organizations and systems shape and frame implementation (McLaughlin, 1987). In this dissertation, I define the macro as district-level actions that impact school-level policy and program implementation. As Spillane et al. (2002) explain, "Implementing agents encounter policy in a complex web of organizational structures, professional affiliations, social networks, and traditions" (p. 404). These macro systems play into how individuals ultimately carry out action. This study explores whether interactions between district administrators and school principals impact home-school collaboration.

Cohen et al. (2007) also shed light on micro and macro perspectives of policy implementation. They outline four factors that impact the interrelated and interdependent relationship between policy and practice: aims, instruments, capability (capacity) and environments. While this dissertation does not focus specifically on aims and instruments, capability and environments coincide with micro and macro perspectives of policy implementation. Capability occurs at both the micro and macro levels. Individual (micro) capability includes values, interests, dispositions, skills, and knowledge. Social

(macro) capability, found within organizations and environments, are economic, cultural, and educational. Organizations have the ability to enhance or constrain capability, as well as shape the way individuals view a policy based on how they share knowledge with school leaders. In this study, I use the term capacity rather than capability to explain this factor of implementation.

Throughout the data analysis chapters, I explain situations in which social contexts influence individual actions, and vice versa. McLaughlin (1987) explains that capacity and will are two key factors that influence implementation:

> Capacity, admittedly a difficult issue, is something that policy can address. Training can be offered. Dollars can be provided. Consultants can be engaged to furnish missing expertise. But will, or the attitudes, motivation, and beliefs that underlie an implementer's response to a policy's goal or strategies, is less amenable to policy interventions. (p. 172)

In this study, I use the micro and macro perspectives to address factors of capacity and will. The school district that I studied (the macro) hires outside consultants, allocates a budget, and offers trainings to build capacity. These capacity building opportunities demonstrate to principals (the micro) that home-school collaboration is a priority within the district. However, the individual's attitudes, motivations, and beliefs ultimately determine the extent to which parent involvement occurs in each middle school.

Figure 1: Macro and Micro Perspectives of Policy Implementation.

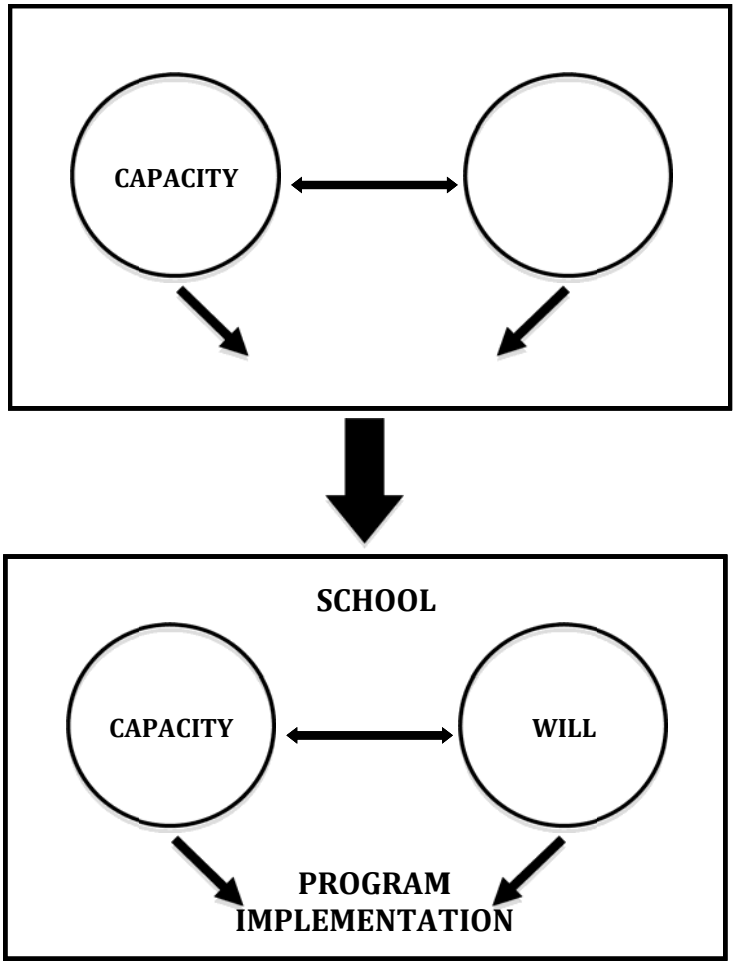


Figure 1 above illustrates the conceptual perspective that guides this dissertation. Throughout this document, I look at capacity and will as two factors that influence district-level parent involvement policy implementation and school-level parent involvement program implementation. I define *capacity* as the tools, resources, and opportunities to which district and school administrators have access that enable them to implement parent involvement initiatives. I define *will* as the attitudes, beliefs, and desire to conduct parent involvement activities and programs. As Cohen, Moffitt, and Goldin

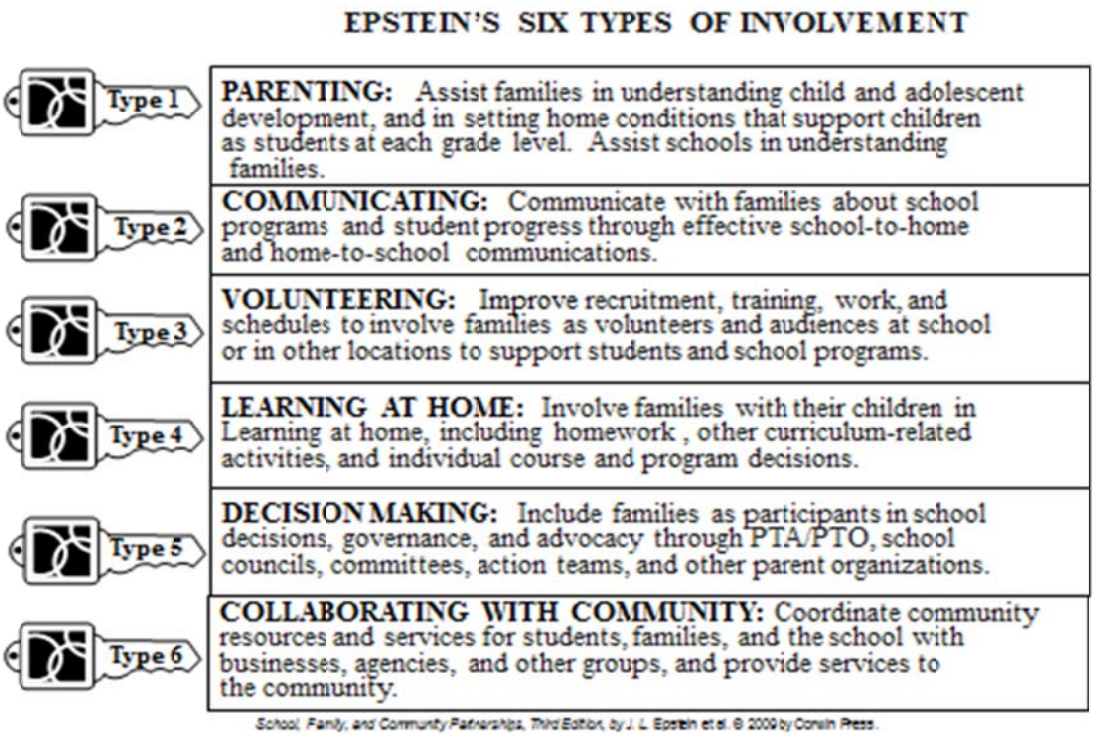
(2007) explain, will and capacity do not act in isolation, but rather have an interdependent relationship. I discuss capacity and will in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

Along with capacity and will at both the district- and school-level, I also investigate the congruence between district policy and school implementation. As my research questions illustrate, I look at how school-level parent involvement initiatives correspond to district-level supports, attitudes, and beliefs. I hypothesize that when capacity and will within macro and micro levels closely align, policy implementation will be more successful. In the case of this study in particular, I hypothesize that the congruence described above will likely allow the focal district and middle schools to cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs. Chapter Four discusses the congruence between district-level support and school-level program implementation.

Comprehensive and Inclusive Parent Involvement

Along with the conceptual perspective of capacity and will at micro and macro levels of policy implementation, I use the Overlapping Spheres of Influence and the Six Types of Involvement to define comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement. The Overlapping Spheres of Influence addresses partnership program development (Epstein, 2001). This theory asserts that families, schools, and the community all impact student outcomes. When these three entities unite to share common responsibilities, students will be more likely to succeed. Attitudes, beliefs and past experiences are variables that influence the relationship between schools, families, and the community.

Figure 2: The Six Types of Involvement.



Generally, when children are in elementary school, the three spheres are closer together and they tend to move apart as children get older, due to additional challenges of secondary education (Epstein et al., 2009). The Overlapping Spheres of Influence is an informative theory for this study because it defines the three groups—parents, teachers, and community—that impact student achievement and highlights the need to focus partnership program development in secondary school when the spheres are more likely to diverge.

The Six Types of Involvement provides a guide for schools, families, and the community to collaborate for student success. As shown in Figure 2 above, the six types are Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making, and Collaborating with the Community. North Shore School District, the focal district in this

case study uses the Six Types of Involvement as a framework to support school-level parent involvement implementation. Throughout this study, I use this framework to determine if and how the middle schools implement a comprehensive and inclusive partnership program.

Research Methods

This dissertation relies on case study methodology to investigate one district's middle school implementation of parent involvement policy. I triangulated data from documents, district- and school-level interviews, and observations to explore how middle schools work with parents. The document analysis portion of this study includes the district's parent involvement policy, the eight participating schools' improvement plans, and the schools' report cards which reports test scores, demographics, and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status. The interview portion of this study consists of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven district leaders, eight middle school principals, 14 assistant principals, and 14 parents. I also completed observations of parent involvement workshops and school improvement team meetings.

Organization of this Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. This chapter provides a general overview of the study's purpose, framework, and method. Chapter Two includes a literature review about parent involvement, particularly in middle school, policy implementation, capacity building, and leadership. Chapter Three provides an explanation of the research methodology, a justification for the case selection, and an outline for data collection and analysis. Chapter Four discusses the congruence between North Shore School District's parent involvement policy and school-level parent

involvement practices. Chapter Five explains the capacity and will of district and school leaders to implementation parent involvement practices. Chapter Six addresses both home- and school-based challenges and their impact on the implementation of middle school parent involvement. Finally, Chapter Seven includes an in-depth discussion of the research findings in relation to the overarching questions that guides this study, as well as implications for future research, policy, and practice.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The past 30 years has witnessed an increase in the quantity and quality of parent involvement research, as well as greater attention to partnership program implementation in federal education policy. Despite a general consensus of its importance, the inherent multifaceted nature of parent involvement necessitates continued investigation. Currently, researchers continue to study challenges, program development, and student outcomes linked to parent involvement. However, while the body of parent involvement literature continues to grow, knowledge about middle school program development and promising practices remains scant.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold: to review the parent involvement literature; to highlight holes in the research on middle school parent involvement; and to discuss the conceptual framework that guides this study. First, I discuss varying definitions and policy ambiguities that surround parent involvement in general. Second, I outline challenges that parents, administrators, and teachers experience when trying to collaborate. Some of these challenges are applicable to all families from kindergarten through high school while others are specific to secondary-level parents. Third, I share research about partnership program development in middle school. Fourth, I discuss the body of literature that links promising partnership practices to secondary school outcomes. Finally, I elaborate on the conceptual perspectives that I introduced in Chapter One.

Definitions and Policy Ambiguities of Parent Involvement

While researchers address a plethora of student outcomes and implementation challenges surrounding parent involvement, many teachers and administrators continue to struggle to conduct high-quality partnership activities that reach diverse populations of parents (Sheldon & Hutchins, 2011). One reason for this challenge is a lack of stakeholder consensus about what "parent involvement" entails and whether federal policy (currently NCLB, Section 1118) can and should mandate parent-teacher relationships. This section of the literature review discusses varying definitions of parent involvement and ambiguities of federal parent involvement policy that affects school- and district-level evaluation.

Varying Definitions of Parent Involvement

Schools and families often look at parent involvement from very different perspectives. Wright and Willis (2003/2004) argue that "teachers often focus on soliciting parents' support for academics, while parents typically focus more on the whole child, including his or her physical and emotional well-being" (p. 54). The validity of this assertion would explain some of the discrepancies surrounding what constitutes "promising practices" of parent involvement. Considering the whole child, parents may believe that they are highly involved in their children's education by getting them to school on time and supporting them in extracurricular activities. Teachers, on the other hand, generally only see what happens in the school building and may believe that parents are highly involved when they attend events such as family nights and parent-teacher conferences.

Olivos (2006) states that, "parent involvement is…often characterized quantitatively rather than qualitatively," such as high attendance at Back to School Night or Parent-Teacher Conferences as opposed to participation on decision making committees (p. 19). Supporting this opinion, Storer (1995) suggests that educators generally have a limited view of parent involvement and Baker (1997a) discovered in almost 25 focus groups of over 200 parents and teachers that little consensus exists between parents and teachers about what constitutes "effective" parent involvement. Some possible reasons why this disconnect exists will be discussed in the "challenge" section of this review.

The history of the relationship between families and teachers in the United States also influences the challenge of defining "effective" parent involvement (Cutler, 2000; Lareau, 1987). To begin, educational stakeholders are not in consensus about what role parents and community members should play in school decision making (Olivos, 2006). Public schools across the United States display varying degrees of parent input in school governance. The 1988 Chicago School Reform Act created "parent-dominated Local School Councils (LSCs) for each school and gave them the power to hire and fire their principals" (Sebring & Bryk, 2000, p. 441). Thus, in the Chicago Public Schools, some parents have had a great deal of input in decision making.

On the other hand, some urban school districts in Southern California that joined a project to promote parent involvement admitted to keeping parents at bay in order to maintain the upper hand in decision making (Cooper & Christie, 2005). Until a general agreement exists about the leadership role parents should play in their children's education, teachers and administrators will continue to struggle implementing effective

partnership activities. Such a consensus would be difficult (and perhaps even undesirable) to establish because parents and teachers have opposing opinions about what types of involvement are important and diverse beliefs about how closely families and schools should interact.

The evolution of teaching as an acceptable profession led to teachers gaining more authority and parents taking a backseat role in decision making (Anfara & Mertens, 2008). Teachers' presumed authority over parents led to what Seeley (1989) calls the "Delegation Model." Parents delegate the responsibility of teaching their children to educators, who assume complete dominance in the home-school relationship. Seeley (1989) states that, "Parents often signal, subconsciously and overtly, that they don't have to be involved because the job has been delegated to the schools" (p. 46).

Lareau (1996) corroborates tenets of the Delegation Model, especially as it impacts low-income parent involvement. "There is a fundamental disparity in the definitions of what parents mean by being involved, especially in the division of responsibility…working-class and lower-class parents had a very different standard of the meaning of what parents should do to help their children" (p. 60). Low-SES families often defer to the "expertise" of educators and administrators. Even though these parents are involved in their children's education, it is not on the schools' terms.

Lareau's (2003, 1996) ethnography indicates that parent involvement is not a one-size-fits-all policy, initiative, or means for school reform. Some parents revert to the Delegation Model while others strive for a more active role in decision making. Cultural and social capital influence how and which parents become involved in their children's education. In regards to defining parent involvement, Lareau (1996) suggests that, "the

more parents share the same standards of institutions, the easier it is for them to facilitate the success of their children" (p. 58).

Schools, families, and community members do exercise some control over specific aspects of children's lives. For example, educators should be primarily responsible for teaching students new material and parents often assume the task of instilling religious values in their children. However, current research suggests that, ideally, schools, families, and the community should work together to help all students succeed, regardless of their diverse backgrounds (Epstein et al., 2009). Unfortunately, the reality is that many parents do not know how to get involved and many teachers do not want to relinquish their authority.

Cooper and Christie's (2005) case study about a parent empowerment program in southern California reveals that even though parents gained greater decision making capabilities through the initiative, school leaders desired to keep the parents at arm's length. District-level administrators crave "more information…to help remove the threats of [parents] taking over the district" (p. 2266). Lareau (1987) has similar findings: "teachers and administrators spoke of being 'partners' with parents, and they stressed the need to maintain good communication, but it was clear that they desired parents to defer to their professional expertise" (p. 76). Thus, even though in conversation school leaders express a desire to improve parent involvement, in practice, they prefer to keep the status quo—the 'we-them' mentality.

Some of the confusion surrounding the definition of parent involvement rests in the hands of researchers and the complexity of the topic. One problem is that in the past people viewed parent involvement generally as opposed to specifically based on diverse

family backgrounds. In other words, studies do not focus on individual factors that impact parent participation. Though current studies isolate specific variables that affect involvement, the reality is that "definitions and measures of involvement remain difficult to isolate from everything else going on in students' lives" (McDermott, 2008, p. 7).

Another problem is that each scholar views parent involvement with a slightly different lens. For example, Kuperminc, Darnell, and Alvarez-Jimenez (2008) use a developmental perspective and define involvement as "the degree to which a parent dedicates resources of time and energy to his or her child in a given developmental or educational domain" (p. 470). Storer (1995) uses a more general definition and states that:

> Parent involvement is usually viewed as being comprised of two dimensions, one referring only to parents' involvement in their children's education through home learning activities and a broader definition encompassing decision making input regarding child placement, school finance, and staffing. (p. 16)

Varying conceptual frameworks advance the field of parent involvement research because they uncover the intricacies of the subject, such as why families struggle to remain involved in their adolescent's education (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Though a universal definition of parent involvement may be ideal in order to help all schools and policymakers evaluate partnership practices, the reality is that such a definition is near impossible and perhaps even undesirable because of the growing diversity of families and teachers, which impacts how they collaborate with one another.

Policy Ambiguities

Policies that promote positive parent involvement encourage trust, equal decision making, and open communication between all stakeholders. Davies (1987) suggests that schools adopt policies that recognize social class inequalities and try to reverse the effects of negative stereotyping. Similarly, McDermott (2008) states that effective partnership programs encourage responsive dialogue and different, yet equally valued, roles between parents and teachers. Multiple researchers agree that such relationships are more easily built when parents and teachers have clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and expectations (e.g. Brannon, 2007; Epstein & Dauber, 2001; Sanders & Epstein, 2000; Baker, 1997a).

Equality and honest communication are two important characteristics that programs and policies should try to more clearly describe and encourage. Unfortunately, as McLaughlin and Shields (1987) explain, "policy cannot mandate the things that really matter" (p. 158). Federal legislation can address, but not be the sole remedy for, the inherent tension that often dictates the home-school relationship, especially between diverse families and public school teachers (Olivos, 2006). One reason why parent involvement policy has difficulty bringing about positive parent involvement change rests in its many ambiguities.

Parent involvement in education has evolved from being an afterthought in the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) of 1965 to being an entire section in the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001. Federal policymakers define parent involvement as:

> The participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school related activities including ensuring—that parents play an integral role in assisting their children's learning: that parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their children's education at school; that parents are full partners in their child's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and that other activities are carried out, such as those described in Section 1118 of ESEA (Parent Involvement). (*No Child Left Behind*, 2001, Section 9101(32)

The definition above manages to be specific and vague at the same time. For example, the policymakers listed examples of how parents could be "equal partners" by serving on advisory boards and helping implement activities. However, phrases such as "as appropriate" provide a loophole for maintaining the status quo. Schools could easily deem such activities as "not appropriate." Perhaps such loopholes acknowledge the underlying, historical tension between parents and teachers, and ambiguous language allows individual schools to determine the extent to which they seek to encourage parents to assume an equal partnership with teachers.

Section 1118 of NCLB provides a list of six mandates and eight suggestions of activities for schools to conduct regarding parent involvement. Again, the vague language of the policy undermines its mandates for parents and teachers to actually become equal partners. For example, NCLB requires that schools hold an annual meeting for parents and teachers to discuss school-level policy. However, such a meeting is only required *at the request of the parents* (Cowan, Manasevit, Edwards, & Sattler,

2002). If parents are unaware about their right to convene a meeting, it is unlikely that they will do so.

Another policy challenge involves implementation. Parent involvement mandates are very difficult to monitor and measure (Davies, 1987). Phrases in the definition above—meaningful communication, actively involved, integral role—do not accompany any form of empirical analysis. For example, countless studies (e.g. Elish-Piper, 2008; Ferguson & Rodriguez, 2005; Epstein, 1995) praise two-way communication as an effective strategy to build home-school relationships, yet fail to define the characteristics of such communication or address the challenges associated with it.

Simply put, mandated parent involvement will unlikely bring about change. "Mandates have proved unable to generate parent involvement to any great extent. Norm-based pressures—those that are tied to the incentives, values, and priorities that influence the behavior of teachers and administrators—may prove more effective in encouraging parent involvement" (McLaughlin & Shields, 1987, p. 159). Voluntary programs or partnership activities attached with inducements rather than mandates, may be more successful in encouraging home-school collaboration because they are not as compulsory yet still come with some sort of incentive.

Policy implementation is also difficult because of struggles between policymakers and policy implementers. McDermott (2008) argues that even though parent involvement policy is often viewed as a grass-roots phenomenon, it is generally mandated and implemented through top-down management. In other words, parent involvement occurs at the school level between families and educators, yet is devised and monitored by district-, state-, and federal-level officials who have limited interaction with parents.

McLaughlin (1987) explains that the success of policy implementation depends on local capacity and will. While "higher-ups" may try to mandate equal partnership between families and schools, such a result will not occur without buy-in from teachers and school-level administrators.

NCLB Section 1118 offers schools several examples of activities to implement in order to "reach out" to all families. However, vague language, loopholes, and school-level implementation struggles (e.g. lack of capacity and will) prove challenging to the development of positive home-school relationships. The following section addresses home- and school-based challenges that impact the development and sustainability of parent involvement.

Challenges of Parent Involvement Implementation

Numerous challenges surround successful implementation of parent involvement. Beyond definitional and policy ambiguities, home- and school-based challenges exist that impact parent-teacher interaction. This section of the literature review outlines common challenges to implementing home-school collaboration. First, I discuss challenges that parents experience. Next, I delineate school-based challenges. Finally, I explore the small body of literature that specifically discusses secondary-level obstacles to successful parent involvement implementation.

Home-Based Parent Involvement Challenges

Many parent involvement challenges begin with family conditions, such as race, culture, socioeconomic status, resources, and perceptions. The evolving structure of the nuclear family unit changes the way that schools can involve parents in their children's education. Increased diversity, single-parent homes, and mothers in the workforce

require that teachers work with families in nontraditional ways, such as holding activities in the community instead of at school and offering multiple times for workshops. Many studies from the last ten years address specific challenges that surround home-based factors.

Race and culture. Numerous researchers focus on African American and Latino parent involvement in education. The history of discrimination in the United States sometimes inhibits positive relationships between teachers and parents of racial minorities (Diamond & Gomez, 2004). African American parents' experiences of racial discrimination often lead to the mistrust of school officials and divergent cultural values (Hill, Tyson, & Bromell, 2009). Diamond and Gomez (2004) conclude that, "African American parents' educational orientations are informed by their educational environments, their resources for negotiating these environments, and their prior social class and race-based educational experiences" (p. 387). Parents who experienced negative involvement in their own upbringing will be more reluctant to participate in their own children's school-based activities.

Latino parents differ from African American parents in regards to trust. Hill, Tyson, and Bromell (2009) found that Latino parents often place high trust in schools and view teachers as authority figures. Even though this is not a negative quality, per se, it does maintain the statue-quo of schools exhibiting power over parents. This may not be a problem if the goal of parent involvement is merely to foster a relationship between parents and teachers because both groups stay within their comfort zone. However, it could very well impede the formation of a level playing field and more open forms of communication that could prove useful to these two constituencies.

One of the greatest challenges Latino parents encounter is language related. The majority of Parent-Teacher-Association (PTA) members speak English (Desimone, 1999), which isolates Spanish speaking parents. Latinos are often less likely than White parents to attend meetings, primarily because of the discomfort of speaking English (Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2008). Another incongruence between schools and Latino families is their view of education. Drummond and Stipek (2004) found that Latino parents tend to define education more broadly than most teachers. School officials generally only see what occurs within the school walls, while parents know what they do to support their children at home as well as in school. Thus, a Latino parent is more likely than teachers to view him or herself as involved.

The research on this topic, while prevalent, does not provide conclusive results about how and why diverse parents become involved. Part of this discrepancy may rest in how the researchers defined parent involvement. As described above, parents of color may feel uncomfortable participating in school-based events, yet may be very involved at home. Another possible explanation for varying results is that many parent involvement studies struggle to isolate variables that impact involvement, such as education level and socioeconomic status, as explained below. Arguably, the most credible parent involvement studies are those that control for external variables and use rigorous methods to triangulate data.

Socioeconomic status and education level. Income and overall educational attainment appear to impact levels of parent involvement. Parents with less education, low job status, few social supports, and minimal financial resources are more likely to live in high-risk neighborhoods (Davis-Kean & Eccles, 2005) and consequently send

their children to poor-quality schools (Desimone, 1999). On the contrary, middle- and upper-class families typically send their children to schools with smaller class sizes, which encourages greater communication with teachers (Anfara & Mertens, 2008). These findings scratch the surface of why working class families often are more critical of schools than upper- and middle-class families (Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

Educational institutions have historically mirrored the values of middle-class, White America (Cutler, 2000). Not only do poorly funded schools lack the physical resources—textbooks, desks, extracurricular facilities—that can translate into a higher-quality education, but many of the parents who have children in these schools do not possess the social capital to navigate the system and advocate for their children (Olivos, 2006).

Socioeconomic status greatly determines how and which parents become involved in school-based activities. As mentioned above, the culture of public schools favors middle- and upper-class norms (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Dauber & Epstein, 2001; Lareau, 1987). For example, families with less education lack the understanding of educational jargon that regularly appears throughout school newsletters and websites (Moles, 1993). In order to overcome some of the challenges that surround communication, schools could seek parents' input about what forms of communication (e.g. websites, phone calls, letters) are most useful and write memos and newsletters in languages that families understand; however, schools often fail to take these actions in their communications with parents (Epstein et al., 2009).

Low-income parents also encounter policy-related challenges. Many of these parents are unfamiliar with school choice plans (Diamond & Gomez, 2004) and lack the

cultural and material resources to improve their children's educational attainment (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000). As mentioned earlier, one goal of parent involvement may be that parents serve as advocates for their children to gain access to resources to improve student outcomes (Olivos, 2006). Middle-class parents, however, tend to be more able to get their children into advanced placement courses and feel more comfortable questioning teachers' decisions about grades, assignments, and discipline (Lareau, 1987).

Federal education policy, intended for the educational improvement of schools serving "disadvantaged" students, provides parents with the right to send their children to higher performing schools or receive additional support to help their children achieve academically (*No Child Left Behind*, 2001). Unfortunately, these provisions often remain unused because schools do not disclose the information and many parents are unaware of their right to ask for these supports.

Moreover, the majority of parent involvement activities take place in the school building during the day or the evening on weekdays. Low-income parents may find it difficult to attend these events because of inflexible work schedules, lack of transportation, lack of time, or lack of child care (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008; Eccles & Harold, 1993). Because low-income families do not attend as many school events, they often have a smaller social network of parents and educators in the school and the community. This also restricts their capacity to advocate as effectively for their children.

Sheldon (2002) found that after controlling for background factors, network size predicts the level of parent involvement at home and in schools. "Social capital theory

suggests that network ties affect individuals by providing resources, such as favors and information, as well as by enforcing behavioral norms and expectations" (Sheldon, 2002, p. 311). Parents who have a greater amount of support from friends, community members, and teachers (i.e. a larger network size) likely will be more able to be involved at home and at school because of these added resources.

Low-income families face multiple struggles in becoming "traditionally" involved in their children's education. Schools that serve this population have an even greater obligation to reach out to low-income families because of their limited access to capital. Many schools across the country that serve diverse populations of students are addressing this challenge by holding activities for the purpose of helping parents increase their contacts with other parents and educators – that is, their social networks (Hutchins, Maushard, Colosino, Greenfeld, & Thomas, 2009). While empirical research is scant with regards to the success of these activities, anecdotal evidence suggests that parents appreciate the outreach and, in turn, attend more school events.

Parents' perceptions of schools. Many parents, especially those from racial minorities and low-income backgrounds, have negative perceptions of schools. Families, predominantly from culturally-diverse backgrounds, often express concern that questioning teachers may negatively impact their children's educational experience (Morris & Taylor, 1998) or generally do not believe that their children want them involved (Brannon, 2007).

In her qualitative study about parents' perceptions of involvement programs and practices, Baker (1997a) discovered that "some parents perceived the school as only wanting to inform but not eager to hear back from the parents about what they think" (p.

143). This same group of parents cited time, lost communication from the school to the home (e.g. students failing to bring home school newsletters or intercepting report cards), and lack of information regarding involvement as challenges to building relationships with teachers (Baker, 1997a). Other parents observe that teachers only contact them when a problem arises, which leads to suspicion and mistrust between stakeholders (Flynn & Nolan, 2008).

Parents differ from educators in their views of capability and responsibility. In focus groups that he held with rural parents and school officials, Storer (1995) found that the majority of these parents believed they should have the final word on educational matters, while very few of the administrators concurred. Though this result represents a very small segment of the population, and only one meeting with the focus group took place, Baker's case studies (1997a, 1997b) corroborate Storer's general conclusions – that is, parents, teachers and administrators have different ideas, beliefs, and attitudes about what involvement entails and what constitutes an appropriate amount of involvement.

Race, culture, income, educational attainment, resource accessibility, and perceptions about how parents can be involved and how teachers respond to involvement are all factors that create challenges in positive home-school relationships. While most of these challenges can be viewed from the perspective of parents in the home, other obstacles to involvement can be viewed from the perspective of educators in the school. The next section of this literature review outlines some challenges of parent involvement that take place at school.

School-Based Parent Involvement Challenges

Multiple researchers investigate the school's impact on parent involvement and agree that teachers and administrators should take responsibility for initiating positive relationships with parents (Burke, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009). Several school-based factors—normative values, organizational structure, limited resources, lack of training, and negative perceptions—hinder schools from accomplishing this goal.

Organizational structure and normative values of schools. Researchers argue that the norms and organization of traditional U.S. public schools discourage parent-teacher collaboration (Cutler, 2000; Davies, 1987; Davis-Kean & Eccles, 2005; Griffith, 2001; Storer, 1995). More specifically, schools tend to follow the values of bureaucracies in a capitalist society (Barton et al., 2004). Swap (1993) states that, "The traditional approach to managing schools emphasizes hierarchy, individualism, and technology rather than dialogue, relationship, and reciprocity" (p. 17). Moreover, capitalism encourages competition, which is not necessarily a characteristic conducive to building an equal partnership between parents and teachers.

School-based organizational and normative challenges occur at both the school-level, as well as the classroom-level. Swap (1993) found that school-level administrators tend to receive praise from the district for preserving the status quo and avoiding conflict with parents. This often translates into not encouraging collaboration because parents and teachers remain separate entities. In their analysis of various public establishments, Montjoy and O'Toole (1979) posit that existing organizational routines lead to the inflexibility of accepting new mandates because they are seen as costly to the existing structure. This explanation could explain some of the resistance school administrators

and teachers often exhibit when faced with implementing new parent involvement initiatives.

Voluntary parent involvement programs may do a better job of easing teachers' and administrators' fears of change because they are less forced than mandatory initiatives. However, as McLaughlin and Shields (1987) suggest, attitudes and beliefs about parent involvement greatly impact implementation. Because school officials' attitudes and beliefs are often not congruent with parents' attitudes and beliefs, and policy mandates or inducements seldom address this problem, implementation of partnership activities continues to be a challenge.

Policy mandates may also create classroom-based obstacles of involvement. Time constraints on both the part of parents and teachers inhibit collaboration (Moles, 1993). The amount of time and money that teachers and schools must spend on preparing their students for high-stakes testing significantly dwindle their resources for involving parents (Plevyak, 2003). In fact, 80% of principals cited "day-to-day stressors" (e.g. following the curriculum timeline, discipline problems, school management) as the number one challenge facing home-school relationships (Lazar & Slostad, 1999).

Parent involvement, of course, may alleviate some of these stressors. Students of all ages tend to have fewer behavior problems, increased attendance rates, and higher homework completion when their parents are involved in purposeful educational activities with them (e.g., Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Van Voorhis, 2003). Nonetheless, many teachers and administrators in Title I schools are so overwhelmed and focused on achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) that they view

parent involvement as an added responsibility instead of a resource to help accomplish school improvement goals.

Limited resources, support, and training. As illustrated above, whether overtly or subconsciously, districts often congratulate school leaders for maintaining an "us-them" mentality. "Schools throughout the country have developed useful ways to avoid conflict by bringing parents and teachers together in brief, ritualized encounters," such as parent-teacher conferences and family nights (Swap, 1993, p. 19). In general, schools lack the resources and knowledge to implement innovative parent involvement activities that address the changing demographics and cultures of today's families.

Parent involvement often takes a back seat to a school improvement plan's academic goals because that is the main measurement for Title I schools to receive federal funding. Thus, home-school collaboration is seen as a competing good to other school goals, and often gets overlooked or purposefully compartmentalized. Although parent involvement should be a component of all school improvement plans and is part of federal monitoring of Title I schools (*No Child Left Behind*, 2001), it often plays a minor role in school improvement plans. Rather than having parent involvement embedded throughout a plan as a key strategy for helping all students succeed, more often it is disconnected from other activities and isolated in a separate section of a plan.

Along with limited resources, preservice teachers receive little or no training regarding their relationship with parents. In a quantitative study about the importance of teacher education, Morris and Taylor (1998) found that 84 of the study's 105 new teachers "seldom experienced" parent involvement prior to taking the researchers' course on promoting and implementing partnerships with parents. Unfortunately, subsequent

professional development training rarely compensates for the lack of initial training (Moles, 1993). As a result, "most teachers are forced to rely on their accumulated life experiences in dealing with parents" (Morris & Taylor, 1998, p. 220).

Because most universities fail to prepare their preservice teachers to promote effective forms of parent involvement, many veteran and beginning educators do not execute parent involvement activities effectively (Moles, 1993); nor do they know what is expected of them or how to contribute to home-school relationships (Swap, 1993). Data from 171 Baltimore-area schools indicate that, "Teachers were more sure about what they wanted from parents than about what they wanted to do for parents" (Dauber & Epstein, 2001, p. 206). Although teacher-preparation courses will not eliminate the challenges surrounding parent involvement, they could better prepare educators about how and why to engage families in their children's education (Epstein, 2011).

Teachers' perceptions of parents. School staff's negative views of parents and their fear of losing "power" are two more obstacles that impede parent involvement. Teachers express ambiguity about their responsibility for the home-school relationship. Even though they deem it important for students' scholastic success, many teachers do not believe it is their charge to initiate such activities as recruiting parents to volunteer and attend school-based events (Burke, 2001). "Educators…generally feel that since it is the parents who are failing to meet their responsibilities of today's children, it is not the schools' responsibility to reach out to parents in new ways" (Swap, 1993, p. 15). Lazar and Slostad (1999) found that teachers were much more likely to involve parents if they believed that families were a valuable resource. However, many teachers express that

parents are not appreciative of their overloaded schedules and policy-mandated responsibilities (Storer, 1995).

Multiple studies suggest that teachers and principals avoid collaboration with parents for fear of losing their power and authority. Principal and district administrators report discouraging increased parent decision making because they do not want to be "held accountable" by parents (Cooper & Christie, 2005). When schools hold an open-door policy, many teachers perceive that parents will question their classroom management style (Burke, 2001). Rather than crack the door open and risk ridicule, some teachers prefer to remain independent and avoid the perceived burden and disruption that collaboration could entail.

Schools place a lot of the "blame" for failed parent involvement initiatives on the parents. After conducting 14 focus groups with 87 teachers, Baker (1997b) reports that teachers cite parents' work schedule, disconnected phone numbers, and limited education as a few of the "barriers" to effective collaboration. This same group of teachers state that improved parent involvement would result in more communication, parents being more receptive to problems, and parents following through with teacher-recommended consequences to behavior issues (Baker, 1997b). Evidently, teachers know the types of improvements they would like to see in regards to parent involvement, but, as Olivos (2006) suggests, these goals for parent involvement are often on the school's terms.

Secondary school challenges. As children get older, many parents, particularly minority and low-income parents, experience feelings of inadequacy (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). These parents do not believe that they can help their children succeed in school either because they had negative experiences in their own education or they do not

understand an increasingly complex curriculum (Mulhall, Mertens, & Flowers, 2001). Adolescents' need for autonomy (Bauch, 1993) and perceived desire to not have their parents involved (Williams & Chavkin, 1989) also lead many parents to question their role in their children's education.

Perhaps a greater obstacle in secondary school parent involvement is the organization of the schools themselves. Departmentalization of course subjects creates a larger student-teacher ratio, which leads to decreased time and opportunity of home-school communication. Eccles and Harold (1993) report that secondary school teachers desire to increase involvement but lack the support and skills to actually do so. In general, because of increased size, middle and high schools also exhibit greater bureaucracy, which translates into fewer opportunities for parents to become involved (Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000).

Parent involvement programs often address challenges and promising practices that are most useful for elementary schools. Hill, Tyson, and Bromell (2009) argue that current parent involvement frameworks fail to address the challenges and complexities of middle and high school students, teachers, and families. As a result, many parent involvement activities tend to be peripheral, such as fundraising and football game attendance (Elias, Patrikakou, & Weissberg, 2007). Few activities for parents of secondary-age children explicitly acknowledge the organizational and developmental challenges to effective parent-teacher collaboration at the secondary school level.

The relationship between schools and families is complex and dynamic. Challenges that surround parent-teacher collaboration stem from school, family, and policy issues that prove difficult to overcome. As research methodologies about parent

involvements evolve, policymakers and practitioners can learn more about how to effectively work toward bridging the home-school divide. In turn, students may have a greater possibility of succeeding academically and nonacademically as families and schools learn more effective ways to bridge the gap that exists between them.

Partnership Program Development

Parent involvement program[2] development is a challenge in and of itself, yet it may also help mitigate some of the collaboration obstacles I previously described. Many studies investigate characteristics and elements of partnership program development, which can lead to school-wide, goal-oriented school-family-community collaboration. Epstein and her colleagues (2009) explain that "Good programs of family and community involvement will look different at each site, as individual schools tailor their practices to meet the needs and interests, times and talents, and ages and grade levels of its students" (p. 13). In other words, a one-size-fits-all view of parent involvement is not effective. However, studies have identified commonalities that impact program development, regardless of grade level, including forming a team, implementing a comprehensive framework of partnerships, writing a plan linked to school improvement goals, and evaluating activities and the program as a whole.

This section explores the literature that addresses characteristics that impact partnership program development characteristics that may impact collaboration. Second, I outline teacher characteristics that influence program development and sustainability. Third, I highlight the literature about principal leadership as it pertains to parent

[2] In this dissertation, partnership (parent involvement) program refers to collective practices (activities) involving parents and/or the community to improve students' academic or nonacademic outcomes.

involvement. The bulk of this research focuses on school-level leadership because principals are the primary unit of analysis in this study.

Parent Characteristics

Positive parent characteristics are similar to positive teacher attributes in regards to parent involvement. To begin, higher levels of parent efficacy[3] generally translate into more hours of classroom volunteering, more hours spent working with children on educational activities, and fewer negative telephone calls with teachers (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992). These higher efficacy parents also more closely monitor their children's schoolwork and social activities. Rath et al. (2008) found that parents who remained active in academic matters had children who exhibited more positive classroom and prosocial behavior.

Parents of adolescents have unique responsibilities that enable them to remain positively involved in their children's education. Hill, Tyson, and Bromell (2009) suggest that "academic socialization" is the one of the most influential factors of middle school parent involvement. Academic socialization "builds on the parent-adolescent relationships, centers around socializing teens towards future goals, and proactively provides linkages between school work and adolescents' own goals and interests" (p. 67). In other words, parents can remain involved in their middle and high school children's education by talking with them about academic (postsecondary plans, completing homework) and nonacademic (avoiding gangs violence, attending school regularly) success strategies.

[3] Efficacy refers to parents' belief that their involvement and relationship with teachers and administrators positively and effectively impacts their children's education.

This form of involvement generally takes place at home and does not conflict directly with instructional time or teens' desire for autonomy. On the other hand, teachers and administrators rarely observe this form of parent involvement, and they may not recognize it as a strategy that promotes positive home-school interaction because it occurs beyond the school walls.

Teacher Characteristics

High teacher efficacy and positive attitudes about involvement are topics that many studies attribute to strong parent involvement programs. General findings indicate that teachers' efficacy—confidence in their teaching abilities and beliefs about the importance of parent involvement—translates into high parent efficacy—confidence in their ability to help their child succeed academically and beliefs about the impact of their involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992). More confident teachers are more proactive in involving families (Epstein & Dauber, 2001; Eccles & Harold, 1993) and parents are more likely to participate in school events if the teacher takes the initiative in the relationship (Drummond & Stipek, 2004).

Teacher efficacy and positive perceptions of families go hand-in-hand. Teachers with optimistic attitudes about families are more likely to conduct activities such as conferences, and phone calls and notes home (Epstein & Dauber, 2001). More generally, Dauber and Epstein (2001) found that parent involvement was "stronger in schools where teachers perceived that they, their colleagues, and parents all felt strongly about the importance of parent involvement" (p. 207). Teachers who collaborate with parents believe these partnerships actually reduce the general level of stress associated with teaching (Epstein, et al., 2009), and a cycle of efficacy, confidence, and positive results

creates more effective home-school interaction throughout the school and community (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

Administrator Characteristics

A large body of literature exists about how different characteristics of leadership impact change, namely school reform. Very few studies, however, look specifically at the role that principals play in the implementation of parent involvement programs. The studies that do exist indicate that principals play an equally important role in the implementation of parent involvement programs and activities.

School leadership is thought to be an integral factor in the implementation of parent involvement programs. In fact, Sanders and Sheldon (2009) suggest that, "without principal leadership, the implementation of any program is not likely to be successful or sustained" (p. 28). As a result, school leadership is a vital topic to investigate when trying to determine variables that impact program sustainability. Nonetheless, very few studies measure how principals impact parent involvement activities.

School-level administrators set the tone for the building and often allocate resources, such as time and money, to partnership activities (Sanders, 2001). Principals also play a key role in shaping the way that teachers perceive school-wide initiatives (Coburn, 2005). Administrators who spend time observing teaching practices and encouraging social interaction among teachers and between families report higher levels of parent participation both inside and outside of the school (Griffith, 2001). Coburn (2005) and Griffith (2001) found that principals who facilitate collaborative activities positively impact the way that teachers' view and implement parent involvement practices.

Principals play an integral role in both the development of a positive school climate and the implementation of specific partnership-related activities. Principals can create a collaborative school atmosphere by setting high expectations, establishing flexible activity schedules, and supporting teachers in their responsibilities (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008). For example, in the case study of a high-functioning urban elementary school, Sanders and Harvey (2000) found that the principal's support of teachers, high commitment to learning and vision of parent engagement increased involvement with community partners.

Eccles and Harold (1993) report that, "school factors are *the* primary influence on parent involvement" (p. 576). Such "factors" primarily include teachers' and principals' attitudes and beliefs about involving families. As a result, teacher and principal characteristics greatly impact whether and how parents become involved in their children's education. However, parents also possess attributes that contribute to home-school collaboration.

James Griffith (2001) conducted a quantitative investigation about which type of leadership style is most conducive to encouraging positive home-school relationships. The study involved a systematic sampling of 82 elementary schools (two-thirds of the school district) in a large suburban school district. Parents completed surveys about such topics as school climate, empowerment, and communication. Principals completed a survey and "indicated sets of behaviors or roles they commonly showed," for example observing teachers' classroom instruction or managing of classroom discipline issues (Griffith, 2001, p. 169). Using hierarchal linear modeling, Griffith (2001) concludes that two leadership attributes are especially helpful to create positive home-school

collaboration: frequent visits to classrooms to improve the quality of teaching and providing a "supportive environment" that meets the "social needs" of students, staff, and parents (p. 163). While the first task does not seem to be directly related to parent involvement, the second task identifies the importance of creating environments that support multiple stakeholders in schools.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995) work about why parents become involved in their children's education, however, provides some support for the importance of efforts to improve teaching. Teachers who have more confidence in their ability as an educator also are more likely to encourage parent involvement. Principals who ensure high quality teaching would likely have instructors who promote parent involvement. Likewise, principals who attend to the social needs of students, staff, and parents foster a friendly climate that probably encourages collaboration.

Van Voorhis and Sheldon's (2004) research looks more specifically at the role that principals play in partnership program development. Van Voorhis and Sheldon analyzed survey data about 320 schools in 27 states over the course of two years. Using multiple regression, Van Voorhis and Sheldon note a "significant and positive effect of principal support on partnership program quality" (p. 66). Principals who support parent involvement initiatives engage in a variety of tasks: they designate funds for activities, partner with community based organizations, and provide time for teachers, parents, and community members to meet and plan activities. Conversely, Van Voorhis and Sheldon (2004) suggest that "when principals fail to support partnership efforts, teachers may abandon their focus on partnerships and shift their energies elsewhere" (p. 66).

Van Voorhis and Sheldon's study extends the parent involvement literature because it focuses on specific actions that principals can do to support partnerships. The results are more generalizable than those of Griffith because the sample is broader. The schools in this study represent diverse locations—37% large urban, 17% small urban, 28% suburban, and 18% rural – but not necessarily grade levels—80% elementary schools, 13% middle schools, and 7% high schools. While the tasks that principals can conduct to support parent involvement is not exclusive to earlier grades, middle and high school families and staff may find different actions more helpful. Further investigation of a more diverse sample of secondary schools would strengthen the generalizability of the findings from this study.

Flynn and Nolan (2008) had a slightly more diverse grade level representation in their investigation about principals' perceptions of the parent-teacher relationship. Principals from 346 schools—207 elementary, 81 middle, 58 high—in suburban New York completed surveys about communication, new teacher preparedness, and district-level leadership. The general consensus of these principals is that "many parents are disengaged from their children's schooling" (Flynn & Nolan, 2008, p. 181). Survey responses indicate that approximately 59% of elementary, 52% of middle, and 36% of high school parents are involved in their children's education. Principals also indicate that they believe teachers are ineffective at communicating with parents and lack the skills to foster "alliances" with families (p. 182).

Sanders and Harvey's (2002) qualitative case study about principal leadership support many of the conclusions from the quantitative studies previously discussed. The researchers followed one urban elementary school over the course of seven months.

Sanders and Harvey (2002) used multiple methods of data collection, including community partner interviews, student focus groups, parent interviews, and interviews with school educators. At the time of data collection, the focal school had established partnerships with 10 community organizations that lasted at least two years. Sanders and Harvey (2002) identified four principal actions that contributed to the sustainability of community involvement: establishing a high commitment to learning, supporting community involvement, having a welcoming attitude, and fostering two-way communication. Parents, teachers, and community members all indicate that these four characteristics influenced their decision to partner with the school.

Sanders and Harvey's (2002) study provides an in-depth analysis about how one elementary school sustains school-community relationships. Even though data collection only lasted seven months, the researchers focused on community partners that worked with the school for at least two years. Perhaps future investigations can include survey data of a larger sample of schools to analyze the relationship between the four characteristics outlined above and the overall quality of partnership program development and sustainability.

School reform initiatives that took place in Chicago in the 1990s are another set of examples of how principal leadership influences parent involvement. The 1988 Chicago School Reform Act decentralized control of schools and made principals accountable to Local School Councils (LSC) instead of central office administrators. These LSCs were comprised primarily of parents.

Several elements of principal leadership in "productive" Chicago schools shed light on the impact this reform had on the home-school relationship. Sebring and Bryk

(2000) found that "principals of improving Chicago elementary schools skillfully use a combination of support and pressure to promote the efforts of adults who work directly with children" (p. 441). This finding is consistent with McLaughlin and Shields' (1987) conclusion that "little change or improvement occurs without some element of pressure—*even in instances in which participation is voluntary*" (p. 159).

Sebring and Bryk (2000) also note that, "productive schools have active LSCs and committed parents" (p. 442). It is not surprising that high quality schools have active and supportive governance and families. The noteworthy aspect of this finding is that the principals played an integral role in empowering their LSCs: "Like good chief executives, they make sure that their councils are well informed and prepared for the decisions they need to make" (Sebring & Bryk, 2000, p. 442).

The success or failure of the radical school reforms in Chicago link back, in part, to principals' actions during the transitions. Principals that encouraged parent and community leadership on the LSCs often had higher test scores and more parent participation in school events (Sebring & Bryk, 2000). Other principals found the decentralization difficult and "struggled hard to maintain separation between reform policy and every day school administration" (Smylie, Crowson, Chou & Levin, 1994, p. 353). In other words, the principal decided how to enact the decentralization policy in his/her school – some embraced it, while others sought to confine it.

Obviously, principal leadership is not the sole determining factor in the success or failure of policies, such as those in Chicago. Perhaps the leaders of "productive" schools already had higher test scores and worked with parents that were already actively involved in school governance. Maybe those principals received better training in

preservice courses about how to manage their budgets, staff, and other daily tasks of administrators. Successful school leaders may also have had better relationships with central office administrators, which helped to facilitate school-based initiatives, such as parent involvement.

Regardless, principals have the difficult role of being middle managers. They must bridge the demands made by district-level leaders with the concerns of local actors, including teachers, parents, community members, and students.

> On one hand, school leaders are street-level workers dependent on and responsible to their local community stakeholders and the district office for implementing school policy. On the other hand, school leaders depend on other street-level workers—classroom teachers—for the successful implementation of these policies. (Spillane et al, 2002, p. 734)

The relationship that principals have with both their school staff and the central office administrators influences the framing and implementation of policy. The research highlighted above addresses principals' relationships *with* street-level workers, i.e. classroom teachers, parents, and community members. The next sections examine what we know about student outcomes and discuss the conceptual perspectives that I used to investigate the relationship between district-level leaders and principals *as* street-level workers.

Secondary Student Outcomes

One reason why parental involvement is an important topic to study is because of its potential link to student achievement and other desirable outcomes. Current research yields mixed results about the extent to which home-school collaboration impacts child

and adolescent outcomes. Depending on the research method, the controlled variables, and the subject being studied, some parent involvement activities have a stronger link to student success than others. The following section discusses the contested relationship between parent involvement and students' academic and nonacademic outcomes. Even though I do not study student outcomes in my study, I believe it is important to address this literature because it is the most prevalent rationale for parent involvement in middle and high school. Even though my study only focuses on middle school parent involvement, the majority of the literature combines middle and high schools. Thus, most of the articles in this section cover secondary schools as opposed to only middle school.

Academic Outcomes

A plethora of researchers attempt to determine whether and to what extent parent involvement impacts students' achievement in reading, math, and science. The vast majority of these studies use quantitative designs, and a small portion of those measure the longitudinal effects of family involvement. While most of the literature focuses on literacy in early childhood and elementary education, the literature for math, science, and secondary school achievement appears to be increasing. Nonetheless, there is very limited information about the effects of parent involvement on achievement levels in the middle and high school grades.

General academic achievement. Many studies that examine the parent's influence on middle and high school achievement focus on general academic outcomes rather than achievement in specific subject areas. Parent involvement is more predictive of grades than test scores for students of all income and ethnic groups (Desimone, 1999). Thus, the

measures that researchers use to assess the relationship between parent involvement and student achievement influence the results. Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, and Simpkins (2004) echo the same sentiment when they advocate for researchers to use multiple measures of student outcomes (e.g. test scores, GPA, portfolios) when examining the effects of parent involvement, especially at the secondary level.

Adolescent, teacher, and parent perceptions of the importance of involvement all influence secondary school student outcomes. Frome and Eccles (1998) report that mothers' perceptions of their children's English abilities are stronger predictors of children's self-perceptions of their ability than past performance. That means that a mother's confidence in her child's ability could buffer the child from self-doubts and a low sense of efficacy that might arise from poor past performances. Similarly, Desimone (1999) found that middle school students' perceptions of their parents' involvement in their education mattered more for achievement than parents' perceptions of their involvement. For example, "students' perceptions of parent-child discussion and of household rules were much better predictors of achievement than were parent perceptions of similar constructs" (Desimone, 1999, p. 20).

Various forms of parent involvement in middle and high school impact students' general academic outcomes differently based on race and income. Middle- and high-income families and two-parent families are more likely to attend at-school events. Teachers see firsthand that these parents are involved and thus have more positive beliefs about their children's academic abilities (Ho & Willms, 1996). Even though parents who do not attend school events may very well be involved in other ways, school officials generally only see what occurs within the school walls and assess involvement

accordingly. These teacher and administrator perceptions may well be associated with the assessment of student work and student motivation.

White and Asian parents are more likely than African American and Latino parents to attend PTO meetings. One explanation for this phenomenon may be because of language barriers, particularly for Latino parents, or past negative educational experiences. However, Ho and Willms (1996) report that attending PTO meetings has effects, though modest, on students' achievement. Similar to the findings above about perceptions of parent involvement, it is difficult to link (even indirectly) PTO attendance to behaviors that would improve student achievement. There is the strong possibility that other forms of parent involvement (like those discussed in previous sections) also influence PTO attendance.

While it is hopeful to find potential measures of involvement that have positive associations with academic outcomes, the exact meaning of these relationships is unknown. Further research is needed to investigate how these measures of parents' influence translate into actions, and then how those actions directly (or indirectly) impact achievement. Alternatively, it may be that these measures of involvement are proxies for other important variables that more directly influence student success in schools. Regardless, this research provides some support for the importance of parent involvement in determining student academic outcomes, but the evidence is far from definitive.

Literacy. While the research presented above addresses general academic achievement, a smaller body of literature focuses on whether parent involvement impacts literacy achievement in middle schools and high schools. Congruent with the more broad findings, Lee and Croninger (1994) report that home and school supports of reading

achievement vary by SES. Even though parent involvement does not eliminate the effects of SES on achievement, middle school students' reading comprehension improves when there are substantial amounts of reading materials at home. Parents may acquire these materials themselves or be assisted by schools, libraries, and local businesses that provide families with greater access to literacy resources inside and outside of the home (Hutchins, Maushard, O'Donnell, Greenfeld, & Thomas, 2008).

It would seem reasonable to assume that school-based family involvement activities are beneficial for middle and high school students' literacy achievement, just as they are believed to be beneficial for elementary-school children. Even though PTO attendance and adult volunteering only moderately impact student grades at this level, students often excel when they read materials (both inside and outside of school) that match their daily experiences (Ho & Willms, 1996). Greenleaf, Schoenach, Cziko, and Mueller (2001) argue that teachers who tap into teens' interests and use families as "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) produce students who are better readers of a variety of texts. In other words, an important form of parent involvement may be the extent to which teachers encourage families to share their interests, expertise, and background with them and students; in this way parents can help teachers more effectively connect the school curriculum with students' prior and current life experiences.

Research about adolescent literacy achievement is scarce in the parent involvement literature. Further investigation is needed to address the challenge of implementing successful secondary-level parent involvement activities, specifically those related to literacy. Although research in this area is relatively under developed, there is

evidence that parents can help schools be more effective in promoting adolescents' literacy achievement.

Math. The literature linking parent involvement to students' math achievement is also modest, perhaps in part because the teaching of math is seen as requiring substantial expertise. The majority of math studies target middle and high school students. In general, two main areas of interest emerged from this body of research: the impact of familial variables on students' math achievement and school-initiated parent involvement interventions aimed to improve outcomes.

Race, culture, and SES appear to play a slight role in how parent involvement impacts students' math achievement. As outlined in the literature above that focuses on literacy achievement, race and income often determine which parents get involved in different math-centered activities. White, Asian, and middle-class parents are generally more involved in their high school students' school-based activities because they are more familiar and comfortable with the educational culture (Valadez, 2002; Yan & Lin, 2005). Parent involvement in math-related activities can involve encouraging their children to elect taking more advanced courses. Valadez (2002) concludes that Latino students increased their advanced course enrollment after discussing this option with their parents. This finding coincides with a similar hypothesis that students are more likely to succeed when their parents have high educational expectations for their children. For example, Yan and Lin (2005) found that parents' educational expectations and a positive home-school relationship were the two greatest predictors of high school math achievement.

Parents' gender also influences students' achievement in math. Bleeker and Jacobs (2004) note a relationship between mothers' positive perceptions of their children's math abilities and students' academic achievement and future career choice. Other studies, as noted earlier, have identified a link between mother's beliefs about their child's ability and student performance, irrespective of earlier performance. This may be because mothers, in general, are more directly involved in the education of their children. For example, mothers are more involved than fathers in events held at school (Keith et al., 1998; Shumow & Miller, 2001), though more schools throughout the country are focusing parent involvement on activities that encourage father participation as well (Hutchins, Maushard, Colosino, Greenfeld, & Thomas, 2009).

School-based math interventions in the form of parent training appear to occur more frequently at the preschool and elementary school level than at the secondary level. Parents who place their children in Head Start have the option of attending workshops to gain ideas about how to boost student achievement through home-based interactions, and parents who receive training about developmentally appropriate math practices have been found to enhance their children's readiness for elementary school (Starkey & Klein, 2000). Moreover, communication between teachers and parents is essential for positive student outcomes at all levels. When teachers provided low-achieving elementary school youth and their parents with specific feedback about performance, those children raised their mathematics test scores .68 of a standard deviation (Baker, Gersten, & Lee, 2002). Unfortunately, this study has not been replicated in the upper grades.

Nonetheless, there is evidence that grade-appropriate interventions can influence math achievement in middle school. Interventions—such as parent workshops and the

provision of math kits to use at home—have proven to be beneficial for both high and low functioning children (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Starkey & Klein, 2000). For example, Sheldon and Epstein (2005) found that "mathematics-focused, learning-at-home activities consistently and positively related to improvements in the percentage of students who were proficient on mathematics achievement tests" (p. 204). Learning at home activities may include home assignments that require a parent partner for some of the questions or a discussion between parents and their children about what they learned about math that school day.

Multiple researchers investigate the relationship between parent involvement with homework and students' math achievement. The majority of these studies occur at the elementary and middle school level. Parents' educational attainment and confidence about their own knowledge of math are some of the variables that determine the extent to which they assist with homework (Hyde, Else-Quest, Alibali, Knuth, & Romberg, 2006). School-initiated trainings often target parents' sense of efficacy in an effort to mitigate the negative effects of prior educational experiences and low confidence.

In their quantitative study of 18 elementary and middle schools across the United States, Sheldon and Epstein (2005) found that schools that provide homework prompts and suggest activities for parents and children to complete at home together positively relate to students' motivation and math test scores. Balli, Demo, and Wedman (1998) support this finding and conclude that school-initiated homework supports moderates the effects of income and parents' education levels. In other words, children from diverse backgrounds can benefit from activities that promote learning at home. This finding is optimistic because it suggests that schools serving families with limited resources can

still implement low-cost parent involvement activities to potentially influence student success.

Science. Research about parent involvement's link to students' science achievement is sparse, but yield results that largely mimic those found elsewhere in the literature. Science-centered articles predominantly address promising home-school activities that influence secondary school students' attitudes and frequency of completing science-related activities; fewer, however, link either parent involvement or parent-supported science activities directly to test scores and grades.

Teachers Involvement Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) is one form of interactive homework that encourages students to "take the lead" in assignment completion but always includes an element of partnership (i.e. conducting experiments with a parent, interviewing a partner). Van Voorhis (2001, 2003) found that TIPS assignments promote higher levels of parent involvement at home and a higher homework return rates. After controlling for background variables and past performance, TIPS students had significantly higher report card grades than non-TIPS students (Van Voorhis, 2003). The study does not, however, determine whether the higher grades resulted from greater knowledge, higher rates of completed homework, or both.

Teachers hoping to increase parent involvement in science might benefit by providing families with specific ideas for extending science learning in the home, as the TIPS study demonstrated. Von Secker (2004) reported that "outside of school factors" explain between 65% and 70% of the variance in students' science outcomes, suggesting the potential for a substantial influence by parents. Even if students benefit most from high-quality teaching, parents' beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and confidence around the

science curriculum influences, at least indirectly, students' scores and grades (George & Kaplan, 1998; McNeal, 1999; Von Secker, 2004). Thus, parent involvement may be an important factor in promoting positive student outcomes in science.

In sum, the extent to which parent involvement influences students' academic achievement varies based on measures of achievement and variables used in studies. Families who begin their involvement when children are young may be better able to gain techniques and resources that help them remain effective participants in their children's secondary educational experiences, though very few studies have actually tested this proposition. Certainly further research that focuses on both immediate and long term effects of parent involvement, particularly on student academic outcomes, could help to clarify these relationships.

Non-Academic Outcomes

Non-academic student outcomes—behavior, attendance, transitions—and their link to parent involvement are also important for scholars to study. Behavior (e.g., bullying, classroom disruptions, and discipline) is by far the largest topic of interest in this body of research. Not surprisingly, secondary-level students receive the most attention when it comes to measuring the effects of parent involvement on non-academic achievement. Attendance and transitions between grade spans comprise a much smaller portion of the research, yet most of those articles span the entire K-12 age spectrum.

Behavior. Both parents and the community can positively or negatively influence students' behavior in school. Family characteristics—number of siblings, race, and age of child, parent education level—appear to have a slight impact on bullying and classroom disruptions. Ma (2001) reports that middle school children from large families

have a higher frequency of bullying. From the perspective of school partnerships, this form of negative behavior may decrease if parents and schools work together to reinforce positive behavior at home and in the school. However, I found no evidence in the literature that documents such an effect.

Parents' education level indirectly affects high school students' behavior, regardless of SES and race. Parents with more education have children with fewer behavior problems in the eighth grade, greater achievement in the ninth grade, and higher aspirations in the eleventh grade (Hill et al., 2004). Some schools offer continuing education courses for parents, such as earning their GED or learning English as a second language (Hutchins, Maushard, Colosino, Greenfeld, & Thomas, 2009). Though research has not been conducted about the impact of these specific activities on students' behavior, such activities may communicate parents' personal investments in education to their children, which in turn could influence student behaviors.

Community and neighborhood characteristics play an equally important role in young children's and adolescent's school behavior. Neighborhood violence and disorganization can permeate the classroom, though researchers disagree about the manner in which neighborhood characteristics influence student behaviors. Beyers, Bates, Pettit, and Dodge (2003) found that neighborhood structure plays an indirect role in parental monitoring of their students' behavior outside of school, which affects middle schoolers' socialization and ultimately classroom behavior. Other research studies offer more definitive results and report that neighborhood violence directly impacts school violence because parents are less able to respond to their teens' "emotional needs,"

though the authors do not define what those emotional needs include or encompass (Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Bowen, Bowen, & Ware, 2002).

Neighborhood safety concerns can isolate schools from the rest of the community. Taylor and Adelman (2000) lament that, "schools are located in communities, but often are islands with no bridges to the mainland" (p. 298). Policymakers and practitioners have sought to create bridges through a wide range of school, family, and community partnerships, including one-on-one mentoring, after school programs, and family fun nights (Hutchins, Maushard, Colosino, Greenfeld, & Thomas, 2009; McPartland & Nettles, 1991; Nettles, 1991).

Parenting and volunteering activities are another beneficial technique for bridging schools and communities. Sheldon and Epstein (2002) report that even though student behavior may be a minor problem in most schools (especially at the elementary level), positive parenting practices and volunteering are most predictive of improving behavior across the grades. More specifically, "the more family and community involvement activities were implemented [in schools], the fewer students were disciplined by being sent to principals' offices or given detention or in-school suspensions" (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002, p. 22).

Teachers may also collaborate with the community and establish positive two-way communication to encourage acceptable classroom behavior. Gottfredson et al. (1990) and McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, and Sekino (2004) conclud that, with the principal's support, schools can initiate positive practices to improve students' behavior by facilitating equal decision making and soliciting advice from parents, teachers, and the community. In other words, students may demonstrate better behavior

inside and outside of school when multiple stakeholders work together to enforce high standards for learning and conduct. Open communication between these constituencies helps to ensure that students receive complementary messages about appropriate behavior and its link to academic achievement.

Attendance. School attendance seems critical for students' academic and nonacademic achievement. Parental support and understanding of the importance of attendance assists schools in ensuring that students attain positive outcomes through good grades and high school completion. Teachers' utilization of family and community support for this goal is straight forward, though not necessarily easy to achieve, even at ages when attendance is legally compulsory.

In general, schools that desire to boost student attendance may conduct workshops and engage in open communication about the importance of on-time arrival. Simon (2001, 2004) found that when high school personnel spoke with parents about improving their adolescents' attendance, those students were more likely to attend school. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) report similar findings—that attendance targeted workshops increase daily attendance averages. High attendance rates translate into better grades, increased graduation rates, and fewer behavior problems (Sheldon, 2007).

Other successful practices that may increase attendance include: inviting parents to attend school with their children, rewarding high attendance with raffle prizes, and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Hutchins, Maushard, O'Donnell, Greenfeld, & Thomas, 2008). While these practices may be beneficial to increase attendance for certain groups of students, they may not be beneficial for all groups of students. For example, chronic absenteeism is

more problematic in large urban, high-poverty, and secondary schools (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). These schools may require more comprehensive parent involvement and partnership programs to meaningfully influence attendance.

Research about the link between parent involvement and student attendance is scant. The topic is quite complex because many variables come into play that may hinder a child's attendance—parents' work schedule, lack of transportation, neighborhood safety, prior achievement, and uninspired curriculum. Parent involvement cannot address all of the issues that impact truancy and tardiness. Nonetheless, there is at least some evidence that parents can influence the attendance of their children.

Transitions. Transitions to a new school can be difficult for both the child and the parent. The transition from elementary to middle school often results in significant declines in grades across a diverse population of students (Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Gutman & Midgley, 2000). Schools play a pivotal role, however, in the extent to which parents begin or remain involved during transitions (Epstein et al., 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000). Gutman and Midgley (2000) conclud that schools that are inclusive, supporting, and welcoming to new families have students with higher grades than schools that do not demonstrate such qualities.

Students experience similar issues during secondary and post-secondary transitions, albeit behavior is a greater concern at this age than in elementary school. Parent monitoring (e.g. checking homework, overseeing social networks) and expectations appear to play a significant role in whether students make smooth transitions from middle school to high school (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001). Schools that encourage and facilitate parental monitoring generally report that

students have higher grades and fewer behavior problems during these transitions. However, as Lareau (1996) suggests, parents from varying economic circumstances differ in their child-rearing practices and even their ability to monitor specific aspects of education, including homework. In other words, "successful parental monitoring" may not mean the same thing in all families. Researchers that explore factors influencing student transitions should consider the differential challenges that families face from different economic backgrounds.

Parental support also is thought to be critical in determining students' post-secondary choices and transitions. As with earlier grade transitions, school-initiated practices can help families work with their children in making these decisions (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). Schools and parents may work together to advise teens' academic decisions in high school to encourage college attendance and greater post-secondary options after graduation. Catsambis (2001) found that parents' high expectations and positive home-school relationships were linked to students' college attendance. Similarly, when schools inform parents about the high school course requirements for college admittance, teens are more likely to be prepared for post-secondary education (Simon, 2001). As with parental monitoring, less is known about how various forms of parental support occur for students from different economic backgrounds.

The limited amount of research that documents parent involvement's link to nonacademic outcomes suggests that home-school activities do help to improve behavior, increase attendance, and ensure successful transitions. Family and school characteristics play important roles in determining which students are at risk of engaging in negative forms of behavior. Although school-initiated family involvement activities tend to

produce positive effects in this area, less is known about how these forms of involvement influence nonacademic outcomes for students from different economic and cultural backgrounds.

Conceptual Perspective

The research highlighted in this literature review indicates that parent involvement is difficult to implement for a number of reasons but that it is a worthwhile goal for administrators, teachers, and parents. Variances in the definitions of parent involvement, differing opinions between parents and teachers about what constitutes "effective" involvement, and limited resources at the district-, school-, and home-level are some of the many challenges stakeholders encounter when trying to implement partnership programs and activities. The root of many of these obstacles seems to lead back to implementation and the scarcity of reliable examples of what constitutes positive home-school collaboration in middle school. In Chapter One, I explained the conceptual perspectives that guides this study. Below, I provide more detail about the two conceptual frameworks that guide this study. First, I explore a comprehensive framework of school-family-community partnerships. Next, I discuss the two key factors that determine the relative success or failure of implementation—capacity and will.

Six Types of Involvement

The framework I use to define comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement is the Six Types of Involvement (Epstein et al, 2009). These Six Types are: *Parenting*—schools assist parents with basic needs and developmentally appropriate practices; *Communicating*—schools and families use two-way communication to discuss students' academic and nonacademic progress; *Volunteering*—parents working in the school, for

the school, or as audience members, *Learning at Home*—parents understand requirements to pass each grade or subject and work with students to complete interactive homework; *Decision Making*—parents, teachers, administrators, and community members work together to serve on various committees; and *Collaborating with the Community*—a variety of potential partners provide services for schools and students in turn "give back" to the community.

While this framework is meant to provide guidance for all grade levels, K-12, the activities that schools conduct to involve all families differ based on level. In other words, elementary, middle, and high schools can all conduct activities that fit within the Six Types framework, but the way in which the activities translate into practice varies. This study uses the Six Types of Involvement to determine whether or not the middle schools I investigated have a comprehensive and inclusive partnership program. However, I also hope to uncover which practices are successful and which are more difficult to implement from the viewpoint of various stakeholders interviewed in the study.

Micro and Macro Perspectives of Policy Implementation

I use micro and macro perspectives to explore the policy implementation portion of this study. Although micro and macro are relative terms, such a perspective underscores that education policies take place in complex, multilayered organizational structures. What constitutes a macro relationship depends in part on the areas of an organization that is the focus of a study. I primarily study principals' influence on middle school parent involvement (micro), yet recognize the manner in which broader attitudes, beliefs, and actions of principals, teachers, and district-level administrators (macro) shape

the implementation of parent involvement programs in schools. Two primary factors of implementation on which I focus are capacity and will.

Capacity

McLaughlin (1987) explains that, "capacity, admittedly a difficult issue, is something that policy can address. Training can be offered. Dollars can be provided. Consultants can be engaged to furnish missing expertise" (p. 172). As the literature examined in previous sections indicates, teachers and principals typically do not receive the opportunity to build their capacity to work with parents. Pre-service teachers rarely receive parent involvement training (Morris & Taylor, 1998) and the heavy emphasis on high-stakes testing often pushes the home-school relationship to the back burner.

District central offices can ameliorate the limited capacity that school-level workers face when working with parents. District facilitators can provide training, allocate funds, and help principals evaluate their parent involvement activities (Sheldon & Hutchins, 2011). As schools face more and more demands because of Title I policy mandates and an increasingly diverse student population, districts are beginning to work more closely with principals and teachers to assist with implementation. As Meredith Honig (2006, p. 357) states, "Central offices are to shift from traditional top-down, command-and-control relationships with schools to relationships in which they support schools and their community partners in making key decisions about how to improve student learning and other outcomes."

Honig (2006) refers to this new role of district administrators as "boundary spanners." These central office employees work with other district-level colleagues and school-level personnel to optimize policy implementation. "These individuals work

between communities of practice and their external environments (including other communities of practice). In those in-between spaces, they help communities bridge to new ideas and understandings that might advance their participation and also buffer those communities from potentially unproductive ideas and understandings" (Honig, 2008, p. 639). I argue that these boundary-spanning activities, and the beliefs, attitudes, and actions that underscore them, are an important part of the macro context that influences parent involvement in schools.

Boundary spanners typically have three tasks that guide their work: search, incorporation, and retrieval (Honig, 2008). First, district leaders *search* their communities for resources that will allow them to better assist schools implement policy. Second, boundary spanners *incorporate* these new resources into what the district does, i.e., these resources become a part of the district's policies. Third, district leaders continue to *retrieve* information that will guide and assist implementation. As Honig (2008) explains, "During retrieval, organizational members continually draw on incorporated evidence to guide their subsequent choices and actions" (p. 646). The cyclical process of search, incorporation, and retrieval continually influence the work of boundary spanners as they assist schools to implement policy by building capacity.

Epstein, Galindo, and Sheldon (2011) built on Honig's boundary spanning work to explore influences on school-level partnership program development. One aspect of their work investigated how district factors affect school-level partnership program implementation. Results indicate that schools nested within districts that support parent involvement initiatives are more likely to conduct basic program requirements, such as writing an action plan, allocating funding for events, and implementing activities that

draw from a comprehensive framework. District supports help to build capacity in schools to implement and sustain parent involvement programs.

Will

Will is the second factor that determines the success of policy implementation. McLaughlin (1987) asserts that, "will, or the attitudes, motivation, and beliefs that underlie an implementor's response to a policy's goals or strategies, is less amenable to policy intervention" (p. 172). In other words, even if teachers and principals have the capacity to develop parent involvement activities, without the will to do so, such efforts will be difficult to sustain. Macro and micro perspectives of policy implementation help to explain conditions that impact actors' attitudes, motivations, and beliefs about parent involvement and, thus, potentially, their will to implement and sustain parent involvement initiatives.

Policy actors do not make decisions in isolation but rather through broader contexts shaped by past experiences and social situations. Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) and Coburn (2005, 2001) use cognitive theories to explain how street-level bureaucrats—teachers and principals—make sense of policy. These cognitive theories illuminate the complexities that influence the will of policy implementers.

Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) argue that, "What a policy means for implementing agents is constituted in the interaction of their existing cognitive structures (including knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), their situation, and the policy signals" (p. 388). The implementing agents at the center of this dissertation are principals and district administrators. Both school- and district-level leaders make sense of policy through individual cognition and their social interactions with each other.

Coburn (2001, 2005) also uses a cognitive lens of policy analysis but specifically looks at leaderships' influence on the sensemaking process. Principals shape where sensemaking happens, bring in policy messages from outside actors, frame policy messages, and structure teacher collaboration (Coburn, 2001). Coburn (2005) also found that teachers' pre-existing knowledge of policy influenced their implementation. Thus, personal cognition and situational cognition interact to shape the way that teachers make sense of policy and ultimately implement policy.

To date, researchers have not yet studied how district leaders influence principals' implementation of parent involvement policy, and I argue that this is an important component of the macro context that influences the implementation of parent involvement programs. This topic is important because district leaders are beginning to work more closely with schools (Honig, 2006) and because principals help to foster a school climate that can either encourage of discourage parent involvement (Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). Macro and micro perspectives address the challenges that principals face in their role as middle managers as they negotiate being leaders in their own schools but also being led by central office administrators (Spillane et al., 2002).

Micro and macro perspectives are both important for framing the findings in this study. A macro perspective addresses the capacity of actors that implement policy within the context of their schools. A micro lens helps to explain the will of street-level bureaucrats as shaped by their understanding and beliefs about parent involvement and specific policies meant to promote parent involvement. Both factors are necessary to explore in order to more fully explain the case district's implementation of parent involvement and ability to cultivate these efforts over time. The capacity and will of

school leaders provide a possible explanation for why a policy succeeds or fails. This study investigates both the capacity and will of school-level leaders to better understand the challenges associated with implementing parent involvement initiatives in middle schools.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate how middle schools can cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs. More specifically, this study explores the role of district- and school-level leadership on the implementation of one district's parent involvement policy. Some studies focus on linking parent involvement to student achievement (e.g. Bleeker & Jacobs, 2004; Hill et al., 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Simon, 2004; Yan & Lin, 2005) while others discuss parent involvement challenges (e.g. Cooper & Christie, 2005; Cutler, 2000; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Hill, Tyson & Bromell, 2009; Olivos, 2006). A few researchers investigated why parents become involved in their children's education (e.g. Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2009) and others developed models or theories of parent involvement programs (e.g. Barton et al., 2004; Epstein et al., 2009). Far fewer studies focus on the role of leadership in parent involvement program and policy implementation and even fewer address how leaders can cultivate successfully such initiatives in middle schools.

I chose to focus this study on middle school parent involvement for three reasons. First, secondary-level (middle school and high school) teachers and administrators face unique challenges—increased parent-teacher ratio, further distance from school, complex curricula, adolescents' desire for increased autonomy—that often hinder the development of a positive home-school relationship (Epstein et al., 2009). Second, hundreds of diverse middle schools across the United States are reporting minimal support from principals and district-level administrators in regards to implementing parent involvement

programs for student success (Hutchins, Sheldon, & Epstein, 2009). Finally, even though the literature is growing, there is a dearth of information about characteristics that impact the implementation of parent involvement policy and programs in middle school.

Given the information above, the overarching research question for this study is: *How can middle schools cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs?* A set of three additional questions guides the research for this study:

1. To what extent is the district's policy about parent involvement congruent with the implementation of policy at the middle school levels? Do district-level and school-level administrators have the same beliefs and attitudes about how to cultivate comprehensive parent involvement initiatives over time?
2. What is the role of capacity and will in cultivating parent involvement? How do key district-level and school-level administrators attempt to build capacity in support of comprehensive parent involvement? How strong is their will to do so?
3. What challenges persists in the implementation of comprehensive parent involvement? What are the attitudes and beliefs of key district-level and school-level administrators about these challenges? What are the attitudes and beliefs of middle school parents?

These research questions and the conceptual framework that guided and informed my study indicate that qualitative methods are most appropriate for this dissertation. Specifically, I conducted an embedded single case study to investigate how middle schools cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs. This chapter outlines my research methodology. I begin with an explanation for my study design. Next, I outline a rationale for my case selection. I conclude this section with a

description of my study design, which includes procedures for data collection and analysis.

Rationale for Study Design

Creswell (2009) suggests that research designs include three components: philosophical worldviews, strategies of inquiry, and research methods. These three elements help to determine which methodology—e.g., quantitative, qualitative, mixed method—best suits the investigation. The following portion of this section explains the three components of research designs for my dissertation, which supports an embedded single case study design.

Philosophical Worldviews

A universal definition of "philosophical worldview" does not exist, though the concept is quite influential in a researcher's study design. For the purpose of this study, I use Creswell's (2009) definition of philosophical worldview because I am using his three elements of research design. According to Creswell (2009), a worldview (i.e. epistemology, paradigm) is a "general orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher holds" (p. 6). An individual's philosophical leaning, especially beliefs about what warrants truth, will naturally guide researchers toward a methodological design.

I believe that individuals' epistemologies (i.e., how people know what they know) come from their experiences and interactions with others. This philosophical worldview aligns with social constructivism, which posits that, "individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8.). Constructivist tenets align with qualitative research, which "is a

means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2009, p. 4).

Qualitative designs are useful for researchers who seek to study the depth, rather than the breadth, of a phenomenon (Patton, 1990). My study explores the complex relationship between district leaders, school-level administrators, and parents and how that relationship impacts the implementation of parent involvement in middle school. An in-depth investigation of this phenomenon allowed me to explore characteristics and circumstances that influence these interactions.

Strategies of Inquiry

Creswell (2009) defines strategies of inquiry as "types of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs or models that provide specific direction for procedures in a research design" (p. 11). Five methodologies fall under the qualitative umbrella: ethnography, case study, biography, phenomenology, and grounded theory (Creswell, 1998). Based on my research questions, philosophical worldview, and research method, case study is an appropriate strategy of inquiry to use for this dissertation.

Yin (2003) suggests that case study methodology helps to answer "'how' or 'why' questions…about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control" (p. 9). Stake (1995) defines a case as a "specific, a complex, functioning thing" (p. 2). The "how" questions that guide my research seek to explore the "complex, functioning" relationship of district- and school-level leaders. This exploration yields itself to case study inquiry because I am looking at one school district, bound by location (a mid-Atlantic district) and time (2009-2010 school year).

Multiple forms of case studies exist and are beneficial based on the unit of analysis and the research questions. A single or multiple case study can either explain, describe, or explore a phenomenon (Yin, 2003). My dissertation is an exploratory embedded single case study. The strategy of inquiry is exploratory because my research questions seek to "explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes" (Yin, 2003, p. 15). My research method is an embedded single case because the unit of analysis is one suburban school district, but I am also collecting data from eight middle schools. Embedded case studies "occur when, within a single case, attention is also given to a subunit or subunits" (Yin, 2003, p. 42). Thus, a single case is the one school district and the subunits are the eight middle schools participating in this study.

Research Method

Once researchers determine their philosophical worldview and the strategy of inquiry, Creswell (2009) suggests that they should identify the research method; "the concrete techniques or procedures we plan to use" (Crotty, 2003, p. 6). Methods that a researcher uses depend on the strategy of inquiry. Yin (2003) lists six sources of evidence that are most common in case studies: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observations, and physical artifacts (p. 85). Qualitative studies that demonstrate rigor triangulate multiple sources of data to form conclusions.

My research methods include documentation, observations, and interviews. The documentation relevant to my case study includes: the district's parent involvement policy, the parent involvement component of the middle schools' improvement plans, and

the 2009-2010 school report cards that indicate demographics and test scores. I rely slightly on observations that I conducted of some of the middle schools' decision making meetings and parent involvement activities. I observed three School Improvement Team meetings and two evening events for parents. I do not rely too heavily on these observations because I was not able to collect this form of data from every participant middle school. However, I did use these observations to corroborate data from interviews, where possible. Semi-structured interviews with district administrators and middle school principals, assistant principals, and parents comprise the largest portion of data collection for this study. I interviewed seven district leaders, eight middle school principals, 14 assistant principals, and 14 parents in order to capture a comprehensive and inclusive picture of parent involvement in middle grades (See Appendices A-D). A further explanation of data collection is in the next section of this chapter.

My philosophical worldview, strategy of inquiry, and research methods indicate that an embedded single case study is an appropriate methodology to use for my research design. Choosing a case district is another task that researchers must complete. One common type of sampling in case study research is purposeful. Merriam (1998) explains that, "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 61). The next section of this chapter explains the rationale of my purposeful case selection for this research study.

Rationale for Case Selection

As I explained above, the purpose of this study is to investigate how middle schools can cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs.

Because a portion of my theoretical base involves policy implementation, I sought a school district that had a parent involvement policy in place. Within my theoretical base is the concept of shared leadership through the theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence. Thus, another qualification for my case was a district that worked with middle schools and parents to implement parent involvement policy. In order to satisfy the "comprehensive" and "inclusive" portion of my research question, I wanted to find a school district that serves a diverse population of students and one that followed my conceptual framework of comprehensive parent involvement, as described in Chapter One. My job at the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University helped me to identify the focal district for this study.

Established in 1996, NNPS provides schools, districts, states, and organizations with a framework for planning, implementing, and evaluating a comprehensive school, family, and community partnership program for student success. Sites that join NNPS typically follow Joyce Epstein's (1995) Six Types of Parent Involvement: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making, and Collaborating with the Community. Parent involvement activities that draw from the Six Types align with capacity building mandates in Section 1118 of NCLB (2001). Hundreds of Title I schools across the United States join NNPS to assist with policy compliance (Hutchins, Sheldon, & Epstein, 2010).

Context of Focal District

North Shore School District[4] (NSSD), a mid-Atlantic suburban school district, satisfies each of the characteristics I sought in a focal district. To begin, NSSD initiated a district-wide parent involvement policy during the 2008-2009 school year as part of its

[4] I use pseudonyms for the district, schools, and individuals who participated in this study.

strategic plan, Blueprint to 2015. The district assigned an assistant superintendent and an elementary school principal to oversee the implementation of this policy. Prior to drafting Blueprint to 2015, NSSD held town hall meetings with parents, community members, and educators to receive feedback about how to improve home-school collaboration.

North Shore School District also commissioned an outside research agency to examine parents', teachers', and students' perceptions of parent involvement. This gap analysis also identified characteristics of "under-served" parents, which researchers defined as caregivers who indicated low-levels of involvement and who reported "barriers" to involvement. Specifically, NSSD and the outside research agency characterized under-served parents as: 1) not attending school events or after-school activities; 2) being unable to get involved in their children's education or limiting their involvement to support at home; 3) evaluating school-initiated communication as ineffective; 4) believing barriers exist to prevent them (parents) from involvement. This gap analysis identified common demographic factors among these under-served parents, including: single parents, less than college education, less than $30,000 annual income, and high mobility. District leaders used this information to draft the partnership component of Blueprint to 2015 to include strategies to increase active engagement of under-served parents.

Another requirement for my focal district was the existence of distributed leadership for parent involvement implementation. North Shore School District appointed two stakeholders—Mrs. Gardner, an Assistant Superintendent, and Mr. O'Neill, a former elementary school principal—to oversee the parent involvement policy.

Within the Office of Media and Communications, another administrator, Ms. Lockhart, works closely with schools to ensure they implement the policy mandates. Ms. Lockhart and her colleagues work directly with principals, assistant principals, and parents to build capacity for school-level leadership.

A final characteristic I sought in a focal district was one that served a diverse population and defined parent involvement with a comprehensive conceptual framework as defined by the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS). As of December 2010, according to the NSSD website, the district's student population was—50.4% Caucasian, 27.1% African American, 6.1% Hispanic, 5.8% Asian, and 5.5 % other or unspecified ethnicity. Approximately 29% of students receive free or reduced-price meals. The eight middle schools that participated in this study have similar diversity within each of their buildings.

North Shore School District also follows the Six Types of Involvement framework of comprehensive parent involvement I use in this study. The district joined NNPS in August 2005. They have remained active members of NNPS since that time and have won three NNPS awards for their sustainability and implementation of parent involvement at the district-level and their facilitation of parent involvement at the school-level. This suburban school district consists of 14 "traditional" middle schools. NSSD's middle schools demonstrate varied lengths of membership in NNPS since the district joined in 2005. Ten of these 14 middle schools joined NNPS in 2005 with the district. Of those ten schools, three ended NNPS membership after the 2007-2008 school year, three ended membership after the 2008-2009 school year, and four remain active NNPS

members. Of the eight middle schools that agreed to participate in this study, one never joined NNPS, one has ended membership, and six remain active NNPS members.

I have no way of knowing why some of the middle schools never joined or subsequently ended membership with NNPS because most of those schools did not participate in the study. District leaders in NNSD have stated that some schools feel overextended and do not want to join NNPS because they believe it will be added work. However, based on my data analysis, which I discuss in the next three chapters, middle school membership in NNPS did not appear to influence parent involvement implementation of those schools participating in the study. Regardless of school-level affiliation with NNPS, North Shore's district leaders use the Six Types of Involvement framework to guide their facilitation of school-level parent involvement.

Based on the information above, NSSD appears to have the capacity and will, at least at the district level, to implement a parent involvement policy and support its schools in partnership initiatives. District administrators had the will to conduct research about under-served parents, gain input from stakeholders, include parent involvement in their strategic plan, and assign staff to oversee the policy's implementation. NSSD also took measures to build capacity at the district-level by joining a research-based organization (NNPS) that outlines strategies to conduct comprehensive partnership programs for student success. Given the conceptual perspective of capacity and will that guides this study, I believe that NSSD is an appropriate focal district.

Study Design

The design of my dissertation is an embedded single case study with purposeful sampling. This portion of the methodology outlines how I collected and analyzed data.

First, I describe the sources from which I gathered evidence. Next, I explain the methods I used to analyze data and I address checks for internal validity, external validity, and reliability. I conclude this section with my research expectations and study limitations.

Data Collection

Qualitative researchers use several sources for data collection, including documents, interviews, and participant observation. Merriam (1998) explains simply that, "Data are nothing more than ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment" (p. 69). One difficulty of collecting data is deciding which sources of evidence are most useful to informing the study. I selected sources for my dissertation based on accessibility, reliability, and relevance to my research questions. The data that I collected for this case study come from documents, observations, and interviews.

Documentation. Documents serve multiple purposes in case study research. Yin (2003) suggests that, "the most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (p. 87). Stake (1995), on the other hand, states that, "documents serve as substitutes for records of activity that the researcher could not observe directly" (p. 68). Regardless of the reasons why researchers include documents in data collection, Merriam (1998) explains that one should first find relevant materials and then assess their authenticity (p. 120-121).

I used multiple sources of documentation in this study that are both relevant and likely authentic. To begin, I collected the eight participating middle schools' State Report Cards. These documents outline each schools' demographics, test scores, and AYP status. The schools' report cards are both relevant and authentic. They are relevant because they provide background information about the schools, including a portrait of

demographics. As the literature review in Chapter Two indicated, multiple home and school factors affect parent involvement. School report cards provide insights about many of those potential factors. These documents are authentic because they use data from test scores and official school records about the student population.

Another document I used heavily in this study was the district's parent involvement policy. This document outlines strategies and supports that central office administrators will conduct to facilitate schools' parent involvement activities. The document also addresses expectations for school-level parent involvement implementation. Similarly, I also collected the parent involvement portions of each schools' improvement plan. The district policy is essential to the study because it specifically addresses how the district plans to work with schools regarding parent involvement. This document can be considered authentic because it serves as the formal statement of the district's efforts to involve parents, though certainly other activities may be discovered that are not formally included in the plan. The school improvement plans are relevant and authentic because they explain how specific schools intend to involve parents in their children's education.

Having a policy or plan and implementing that policy or plan are two different things. I am not only interested in the documents themselves but in how those documents translate into action (or inaction). Interviews and observations were also essential to inform how NSSD implements middle school parent involvement.

Observations. Direct observation and participant observation are two common sources of data in case studies. Direct observations are those that occur during field work, sometimes simultaneously with other data collection. For instance, "direct

observations might be made throughout a field visit…such as that from interviews" (Yin, 2003, p. 92). Participant observation occurs when the researcher interacts with others in the activity being observed. "Observations work the researcher toward greater understanding of the case" because it allows the researcher to gather data from a naturally occurring situation, such as a parent involvement activity or a district-level policy meeting (Stake, 1995, p. 60). "Observations are also conducted to triangulate emerging findings; that is, they are useful in conjunction with interviewing and document analysis to substantiate the findings" (Merriam, 1998, p. 96).

I conducted direct observations at three school improvement team meetings and participant observations at two evening parent workshops. Because I did not have access to attend meetings and activities for each participating school, I did not rely heavily on this data. I did use this information to corroborate evidence gleaned from interviews at these sites.

Interviews. Interviews are "one of the most important sources of case study information" (Yin, 2003, p. 89). They can occur as focus groups, face-to-face, telephone, or e-mail interviews. Creswell (2009) suggests that interviews are beneficial when participants cannot be directly observed in relevant situations or when the researcher wants to ask specific questions of study participants. Conducting useful interviews takes practice and depends in large part upon asking probing questions (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Merriam (1998) recommends that researchers avoid asking multiple questions, leading questions, and yes-or-no questions (p. 79). Good questions ask informants to hypothesize about a situation, or challenge the respondent to consider an opposing view (Merriam, 1998, p. 77).

One-on-one, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews are the primary source of evidence in this case study. I conducted two sets of interviews with stakeholders in NSSD. These interviews took place the week of November 30-December 4, 2009 and the week of February 15-19, 2010. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. During my first week of interviews, I met with each principal and the seven district administrators directly responsible for working toward comprehensive parent involvement. After the first round of interviews, I determined to also interview parent leaders and assistant principals to obtain varied perspectives of parent involvement implementation. Principals identified parents who served on the PTA executive board and on the school improvement team to participate in the second round of interviews.

When I returned to NSSD in February 2010, I conducted a brief follow-up interview with principals about how they define "actively engaged partner" in education (See Appendix F). I also sought their opinion about whether some middle schools are more successful than others in implementing parent involvement. These interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. During that week in February, I also conducted a follow-up interview with Ms. Lockhart, the key district administrator over parent involvement. Finally, I met with parents and assistant principals to gain knowledge about their perceptions of parent involvement in NSSD, particularly as it related to principal leadership and inclusion of parents (See Appendix F and G).

I was fortunate to interview every principal, assistant principal, district leader, and parent who initially agreed to participate in my study. I did not encounter any scheduling conflicts or cancellations. However, I was unable to gather an equal number of interviews from each school. With the exception of Greenwich Middle School, every

principal allowed me to interview between one and three parents. Most principals nominated two parents to interviews. I also interviewed between one and three assistant principals at each school, depending on availability and their work with parent involvement. Appendices A-D provide tables that describe the participants in this study, their school affiliation, and their role within the schools or district.

Access to Sites

Access to NSSD's central office was not a challenge for me because I have worked with a Title I Specialist and the Director of Community Engagement since they joined NNPS in 2005. The support that I already have from gatekeepers at the district-level helped me to gain support for this study from the majority of middle school principals. However, as Hammerseley and Atkinson (1995) state, "Access is not simply a matter of physical presence or absence. It is far more than the granting or withholding of permission for research to be conducted" (p. 55). Access also includes fostering a trusting relationship with the study's informants in order to gather the most accurate and useful data for analysis. The fact that I already had a relationship with district-level administrators in NSSD likely assisted with the validity of their responses. The measures I took to ensure confidentiality also helped me to gather useful and, I believe, accurate data from principals and district leaders.

Informant Consent and Confidentiality

I ensured the confidentiality of this study's informants in a number of ways: 1) I assigned pseudonyms to all participants and used those pseudonyms in all recorded information. 2) All transcripts were password protected and were kept only on my computer, which was stored either at work or in my home. 3) Through the use of an

identification key, I linked transcriptions to an informant's identity; and 4) I was the only person to have access to the identification key. All subjects also received an introductory letter explaining the study and requesting their participation. After follow-up correspondence, the informants signed a consent form, which outlined the nature and purpose of the study. In addition, the researcher's full contact information was available to the participants (See Appendix H).

Institutional Review

Prior to beginning this study, I needed to seek approval from the Human Subjects Review Board (IRB) at the University of Maryland, as well as the school district in which I collected data. After completing the designated paperwork and including copies of my interview and observation protocols, both the IRB and the focal school district approved the design of this study. However, principals and district leaders did not have to participate in the study if they were not interested or did not have the time. Seven district leaders, eight middle school principals, 14 assistant principals, and 14 parents agreed to participate in my case study. Six middle school principals did not agree to participate in the study.

Researcher's Role

The researcher plays an integral role in the processes of qualitative data collection and analysis. Merriam (1998) suggests that, "in a qualitative study the investigator is the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data" (p. 20). Likewise, Stake (1995) asserts that, "Of all the roles, the role of interpreter and gatherer of interpretations, is central" (p. 99). This integral role the researcher plays in case study research can sometimes lead to bias and unreliability of results. Goetz and LeCompte (1984)

recommend that in order avoid bias, relationships that researchers have with participants "must be addressed and discussed clearly and openly for the study to be credible" (p. 238).

My relationship with district leaders in the school district has advantages and disadvantages. One obvious advantage is that my work with the district helped me to gain access to the site. I was able to interview individuals that other researcher may not have been able to access because I have worked with the Director of Community Engagement and the Title I Specialist for many years. One clear disadvantage of my unique situation is that I may have inaccurate or even biased perceptions of the parent involvement initiatives that take place within the district. As I collected data, I tried to keep these potential biases in check so that I did not draw conclusions about parent involvement that do not, in fact, exist.

Even though I have assisted NSSD with their parent involvement program development since 2005, I have not directly worked with schools. Thus, I do not explicitly have any preconceived perceptions about how middle school principals implement parent involvement policy. Likewise, my work with district leaders has been as an outside consultant. I am not aware of the intra-office work that occurs within the district or how, specifically, the district implements their parent involvement policy. Thus, I entered this case study with some background information about the focal district but very little knowledge about how district-level leaders work with middle school principals to support their parent involvement programs. My role as the researcher was to gather multiple sources of evidence to accurately assess how NSSD and its middle schools implement parent involvement policy.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred both simultaneously with data collection, and after the completion of fieldwork. Merriam (1998) suggests that "Data analysis is one of the few facets, perhaps the only facet, of doing qualitative research in which there is a right way and a wrong way…Without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed" (p. 162). Simultaneous data analysis and field work guided me to make decisions about follow-up interviews and adding assistant principals and parents to my list of interviewees. Most of the analysis, however, occurred after I completed all interviews in February 2010.

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed each interview, word for word, and entered it into NUD*IST, a qualitative software program, that helped me store and sort data. I first coded the interview and observation data based on my overarching research topics: Principal Leadership, District Support, District Policy (Blueprint to 2015) and the Six Types of Involvement—Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making, and Collaborating with the Community. I printed these codes from NUD*IST and read through them to see if other themes emerged.

When working with NUD*IST, I quickly noticed that I work better with a hard copy in my hand as opposed to a computer database. I see categories more clearly by color-coding as opposed to clicking a button on a computer. Once I printed the initial codings from NUD*IST, I color-coded additional themes on the paper copies. These categories included challenges, climate, capacity building, and congruence between policy and practice. I organized Chapters Four through Six of this study on those final codes—Congruence, Challenges, and Capacity Building, because they address my main

research questions and paint a detailed picture of NSSD's middle school parent involvement implementation.

Computer and by-hand analysis both played an important role in my final analysis. NUD*IST served as a useful resource to store the data. The technology provided an easy way to initially categorize interview and observation data and sort by and search for broad categories. One drawback of using technology to analyze evidence is that it may "distance the user from the data" (Merriam, 1998, p. 173). In order to double-check the computer-based analyses and to better satisfy my preferred method of analysis, I color-coded additional categories which ultimately became the data chapters of this dissertation. Using both a self-made database and a computer database helped me to ensure accurate analysis and results.

Yin (2003) suggests four principles researchers should address to ensure high quality analysis: 1) attend to all the evidence, 2) address all major rival interpretations, 3) address the most significant aspect of the case study, and 4) use prior, expert knowledge (p. 137). These four suggestions guided my analysis of data and ensured that this study exemplified rigor and reliability.

Attend to all the evidence. Qualitative researchers should rely on multiple sources of evidence to gather and analyze data. "A major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence" (Yin, 2003, p. 97). The sources of evidence in my case study—documentation, observations, and interviews—each played a role in informing the overarching questions of the project. During data analysis, I used all of the sources of evidence, to varying degrees, to either support or refute prior knowledge and assessments. For example, the data I collect from interviews

and observations illuminated the information I gathered from the district's parent involvement policy and the schools' improvement plans.

Address all major rival interpretations. By using and attending to multiple sources of evidence, I was able to address major rival interpretations about middle school parent involvement. A thorough review of the parent involvement and theoretical literature also assisted in identifying possible rival interpretations. This dissertation consists of a literature review that addresses current research about middle school parent involvement, as well as under-developed areas in the research about policy implementation, school leadership, and the district-school relationship. I tie this study back into the literature base in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Address the most significant aspect of the case study. The focus of this case study is how middle schools implement policy to cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement. The most significant aspect of this case is both school-level implementation and district support of school actions. This investigation initially started as an investigation of parent involvement sustainability. As I progressed with data collection and analysis, I realized that "cultivation" was a better word to describe what I was actually interested in studying. As a qualitative researcher, I was open to unexpected changes in hypotheses and focus so as to address the most significant aspects of the case.

Use prior, expert knowledge. As I explained previously, I begin this study with some prior knowledge about the case district and schools. In fact, prior knowledge is what led me to seek approval for data collection in NSSD. My work with schools, districts, states, and organizations across the United States helped me to develop probing questions for interview protocols and allowed me access to this district to conduct the

case study. Prior, expert knowledge was also beneficial as I conducted interviews and observations because I looked for characteristics and behaviors that influence the parent involvement implementation.

Internal Validity

Threats to internal validity include "procedures, treatments, or experiences of the participants that threaten the researcher's ability to draw correct inferences from the data about the population in an experiment" (Creswell, 2009, p. 230). I sought to overcome threats to internal validity by analyzing data from multiple sources and coding data with both computer and self-made databases. I conducted interviews with district leaders, principals, assistant principals, and parents who each have their own sets of beliefs and experiences about parent involvement. I also do not rely too heavily on one source of data thereby further limiting threats to internal validity. Recognizing the influence of potential bias and prior knowledge on data collection and analysis may also limit threats to internal validity.

Another potential threat to internal validity is limited data, particularly from the six middle schools that did not participate in the study. Similarly, I only interviewed 14 parents, all of which the principals elected to participate. A population of principals and parents with potentially different beliefs and experiences about parent involvement did not participate in this study. I sought to overcome these threats to internal validity by clearly explaining the limitations of this study and situating my findings within the context in which data were collected. In other words, within the data chapters and the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I explain that further research and investigation is

needed in order to fully capture the context of parent involvement in NSSD's middle schools and school districts similar to NSSD.

Yin (2003) suggests that, "internal validity is only a concern for causal (or explanatory) case studies" (p. 36). I have already identified that this case study seeks to *explore*, rather than explain or describe, parent involvement in middle school. Nonetheless, I took actions to limit threats to internal validity so that more confidence could be placed in my descriptions of parent involvement, interpretations, and study conclusions.

External Validity

"External validity threats arise when experimenters draw incorrect inferences from the sample data to other persons, other settings, and past of future situations" (Creswell, 2009, p. 229). Perhaps the greatest threat to external validity in qualitative research is the lack of generalizability due to small and selected samples. Depth versus breadth is a trade-off that qualitative researchers make when choosing a method with which to investigate a phenomenon (Patton, 1990). Case study research helped me to understand, in-depth, how one district supports its middle schools with parent involvement policy implementation. However, because I am only looking at one school district, I cannot generalize the results to the entire U.S. public school population.

The purpose of my study, however, is not to develop a generalizable set of leadership characteristics that impact middle school parent involvement. Rather, I seek to identify how one seemingly successful district cultivates comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement. Firestone (1993) delineates three types of generalizability: sample-to-population, case-to-theory, and case-to-case. My dissertation seeks to generalize case-

to-theory. I use information from this study and theories about parent involvement and policy implementation to illuminate how the relationship between district- and school-level leaders impacts middle school parent involvement.

Reliability

"The goal of reliability is to minimize the errors and biases in a study" (Yin, 2003, p. 37). Above, I addressed several means by which I minimized threats to internal and external validity, which should improve the reliability of my case study. However, Merriam (1998) warns that, "reliability is problematic in the social sciences simply because human behavior is never static" (p. 205). Even though a researcher may design and implement a high quality study, another researcher may not replicate the results because of different biases and prior knowledge.

In his definition of reliability, Yin (2003) notes that, "the emphasis is on doing the *same* case over again, not on "replicating" the results of one case study by doing another case study" (p. 37). The majority of data I collected for this study occurred in natural settings which would be difficult, if not impossible, to replicate. For example, observations of a district-led parent involvement activity in 2010 may be completely different from observations of a similar activity in 2012. In other words, using the same protocols, instruments, and overall study design will not ensure replicable results in qualitative research.

I achieved reliability in this case study by "making as many steps as operational as possible and to conduct research as if someone were always looking over [my] shoulder" (Yin, 2003, p. 38). Even though much of qualitative data analysis is interpretive and intuitive (Stake, 1995), one can still draw reliable conclusions by being

systematic. I followed Creswell's (2009) model for ensuring accuracy of data analysis: 1) collect raw data, 2) organize and prepare data for analysis, 3) read through all data, 4) code the data (by hand or by computer), 5) generate themes/descriptions based on coding, 6) interrelate themes/descriptions, and 7) interpret the meaning of the themes/descriptions (p. 185). Following this systematic approach to data analysis increased the reliability of the results and will hopefully allow another researcher to conduct, if not replicate, the procedures.

Research Expectations and Limitations

Many schools, districts, states, and organizations across the Unites States are striving to implement parent involvement programs for student success. Leadership is one variable that influences school-level parent involvement implementation. This study does not seek to generalize leadership characteristics that impact the home-school relationship. Rather, I hope to influence the nature of research, policy, and practice by examining and interpreting how middle schools in one school district implement comprehensive and inclusive partnership programs. An in-depth case study of one district's work with eight middle schools can help to develop theories that inform research, policy, and practice.

My goal for this study was to address aspects of district- and school-level leadership and alignment that influence the home-school relationship and impact parent involvement policy implementation. North Shore School District helped me to accomplish this goal. My exploration of NSSD helped me, and hopefully will help others, to better understand whether and how district-level support influences schools'

decisions to implement and cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs.

This study does have some limitations that may impact its usefulness. I have already addressed some of these limitations, including the possibility of personal biases and the inherent threats to internal and external validity that accompany qualitative research. Another limitation is that six of the 14 middle schools in the case district did not agree to participate in the study. Although full middle school participation may have strengthened the validity and reliability of the results, the schools that agreed to participate provide opportunities to examine parent involvement efforts from a variety of perspectives. Although I was unable to determine precisely why these schools declined to participate, it is worth noting that five of these six schools do not belong to NNPS. Nonetheless, membership in NNPS cannot be the sole reason because one of the declining schools was a member of NNPS and two participating schools were not members of NNPS.

To date, research that addresses the role of leadership in parent involvement is scant. This study seeks to add to that small body of literature by exploring how district- and school-leaders impact parent involvement policy implementation. The focal district in this case study works with many diverse middle schools to help support their parent involvement initiatives. The results of this study could inform, at least indirectly, both parent involvement policies and practices. Policymakers could be provided with a better understanding of the important role of local capacity and the will of street-level bureaucrats in cultivating comprehensive programs. Practitioners could be provided with additional perspectives about the ways in which unique challenges influence families'

decisions to become involved in their children's education. Ultimately, I hope to deepen our understanding of how parent involvement policy is implemented through the interactions of policymakers, school leaders, and street-level practitioners in middle schools.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONGRUENCE BETWEEN DISTRICT POLICY AND SCHOOL IMPLEMENTATION

Education policy, whether at the federal, state, or local level, outlines expectations for the implementation of various programs, including parent involvement. The difficulty with analyzing and evaluating policy is that it does not exist in isolation. From the journey of inception to implementation, policy changes based on many factors, including how implementers interpret policy, their beliefs about the policy, and their resources to implement the policy. . In Chapter One, I hypothesized that policy implementation would likely be successful if capacity and will within macro and micro levels of implementation align. This chapter examines the congruence between North Shore School District's parent involvement policy and implementation of that policy in eight of its middle schools.

In 2008, North Shore School District (NSSD) drafted a new strategic plan for student success, consisting of five overarching goals; one of which involves parent and community involvement. The parent involvement goal of NSSD's district policy states that the district "will create opportunities for parents, community, and business leaders to fulfill their essential roles as actively engaged partners in supporting student achievement and outcomes for student success." One of the questions I asked the participants in their interview was: "How do you define actively engaged partner in middle school?" Three main categories emerged from this question: supporting academics, communicating, and volunteering. In addition to defining their attitudes and beliefs about parent involvement

in middle school, all of the interviewees agreed that parents were more likely to be involved if the school created a welcoming climate.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the congruence of NSSD's district parent involvement policy with school-level parent involvement practices. I begin by outlining the district's suggested strategies to achieve its parent involvement goals. Next, I discuss school-level definitions and practices of parent involvement in middle school. Finally, I assess the congruence of NSSD's policy and practices of middle school parent involvement.

District-Level Parent Involvement Policy

North Shore School District places great emphasis on the importance of parent involvement and appears to be successful at its implementation based on the positive responses of interviewees. One of the assistant principals from West Side Middle School, Mrs. Hamilton, used to work at the state office prior to becoming an AP. In our interview, she stated:

> I think that from my vantage point because I worked at the state department and looked at what other divisions do across the district or across the [state], North Shore by far is number one. I think that this district does a stellar job with getting parental involvement. They have every type of program known to man. These students have so many opportunities. They have so many choices and the parents do as well.

Having district-level support is critical for the success of parent involvement at the school-level. Understanding the district's policy and the resources it provides for schools is necessary in order to measure congruence between policy and practice. This

section of the chapter focuses on district policy, beliefs, and actions regarding parent involvement. First, I detail the district's parent involvement portion of its strategic plan. Next, I provide examples of resources the district provides too support all schools' (K-12) implementation of parent involvement. Finally, I discuss the district's attitudes and beliefs about parent involvement as they relate to middle school programs.

North Shore School District's Strategic Plan for Parent Involvement

At the time of my study, NSSD's strategic plan was in its second year of implementation. Prior to drafting the parent involvement portion of this policy, the district conducted multiple community forums and parent focus groups to understand what these stakeholders wanted to see in the district. The Office of Media and Communications also conducted multiple studies to determine which parents were being "underserved" and how parents' perceptions of their involvement differed from teachers' perceptions of involvement.[5] The strategic plan steering committee then used this information to draft a goal for parent and community involvement that would benefit NSSD's population.

NSSD is a good example of a district using research to draft policy that guides practice. Mrs. Gardner, the Assistant Superintendent and Director of the Office of Media and Communications commented on the process of writing this parent involvement goal and ensuring it remains relevant to NSSD's parent and student population:

> We have a very organized system. We've gotten research. We've built profiles of the type of parent we want to focus on. We've looked at what kind of barriers they have to parental involvement and we have built a plan based on that research.

[5] See Chapter Three for a detailed description of definitions and characteristics of under-served parents.

We have the resources in place and we are continually searching for new resources.

As I mentioned in the introduction section of this chapter, NSSD states that they will "create opportunities for parents, community and business leaders to fulfill their essential roles as actively engaged partners in supporting student achievement and outcomes for student success." Within this policy, NSSD listed eight "Key Strategies" to accomplish this goal, all of which either have an explicit or implied link to student achievement. Each of the eight strategies also has measures to monitor its success.

One of the eight strategies on NSSD's parent involvement policy is to "Develop resources for parents and other stakeholders showing how they can support the NSSD outcomes for student success." A measure of this strategy is to receive positive trends on annual parent satisfaction surveys. Principals provided a copy of these surveys for me from the past five years. Even though the response rate was small (generally under 10%), parents' satisfaction in their child's middle school did generally increase across the five-year span.

Another strategy in the parent involvement policy is to "Provide resources for parents to monitor students' academic progress." The measure of this strategy is to launch a School Net Parent Portal so that parents can receive grades of homework assignments and tests in real time. Every principal, AP, and parent that I interviewed mentioned the Parent Portal as one of the best ways they can stay involved in their children's education. I discuss Parent Portal in further detail in a later section of this chapter.

The district also has a strategy to "Strengthen the NSSD volunteer mentorship program." The measure of this strategy is to increase attendance at Parent Connection activities. Each year, NSSD conducts a conference with a keynote speaker and dozens of breakout sessions for parents. These sessions provide information for parents about how they can support their children's learning both inside and outside of school and mentor their children for academic success. Ms. Lockhart, the Director of Community Relations, spearheads this program and reports continual success at their larger conference and smaller meetings throughout the year.

"Ensure that processes exist to involve parents and stakeholders in district initiatives" and "Implement parent training and provide resources" are two more key strategies of NSSD's policy. The Office of Media and Communications measures those strategies by increased parent and community involvement based on increased participation at events and positive responses on parent climate surveys. These artifacts and interviews provide considerable evidence that resources are in place to support parents involvement, both at school and at home. At each school the individuals that I interviewed also mentioned multiple community partners, though community involvement is not the focus of this study. I cannot speak to whether or not parent and community involvement is increasing because this dissertation is not longitudinal, but it certainly exists.

One strategy on which NSSD has spent a great deal of focus is to "Continue to develop and implement outreach to under-served families." As I mentioned above, the Office of Media and Communications conducted several studies to identify "under-served families" and to determine the best means of support. One measure of this strategy is to

increase participation in the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS). North Shore School District joined NNPS in 2005 to implement its research-based model of parent involvement. Most of the middle schools that I interviewed for this study participate in NNPS, which is optional for NSSD schools at the secondary level.

The last two strategies on NSSD's parent involvement policy were outside the scope of this study. One strategy is to "Strengthen the division's partnership program with emphasis on workforce and college readiness" and the other is to "Improve collaboration with city agencies, civic groups and community organizations that have similar educational missions." These strategies mostly involve community partners, which was not the focus of this study.

All eight of these strategies to improve parent involvement within NSSD emphasize how the schools should work with parents and community partners. All of the study participants could identify these strategies and speak intelligently about NSSD's parent involvement policy. The principals in particular mentioned that parent involvement is important in the district, which is manifest in the fact that it is one of five goals on NSSD's strategic plan.

Overall, everyone I interviewed agreed that the district-level administrators set the tone and expectation for parent involvement. Mrs. Gardner, the district leader who ultimately oversees NSSD's parent involvement implementation, explained the importance of having support from the superintendent and the School Board. "I think that the school board and the superintendent, they deserve a lot of credit for investing the resources in a department [for parent involvement]."

The Office of Media and Communication, which houses parent involvement, holds multiple events and provides on-call technical assistance to all of its schools. Ms. McKay, a Title I Specialist explained that, "We are very good at having the events, opening the doors, come in, you know? We're very good about that. The [district] is very good about honoring and recognizing that."

Dr. Young, principal of Morningside Middle School, also recognized that the district sets a good example of the importance of parent involvement and provides schools with the necessary resources and strategies to be effective:

> Having come from other school divisions, what NSSD does is so far more above and beyond any other school division that I've ever been associated with. They do an excellent job of reaching out, especially for a school system of this size. They reach out to their parents in so many ways. I think parents have an opportunity if they want to be involved…They can be involved in so many different ways.

The importance of parent involvement set by the district-level leaders has trickled down to the building level.

Though the principals I interviewed implement parent involvement to varying degrees, they all agreed that having a partnership with parents was important for student success. As Mr. Jones, an AP at Draper Middle, stated:

> I mean, we all realize and value and know that the parent contact is vitally important. Then again just vicariously what I've heard and talking to other colleagues at the schools, I've got to say that [North Shore], every school I've work with and had contact with, they all value that parent contact and support.

> They realize just how important it is. If you can't keep the parents on your side or at least engaged, you've lost 99% of the battle right there.

As I illustrated above, clearly the district places great emphasis on encouraging parents to be "actively engaged partners" in their children's education. NSSD has a parent involvement policy in place and identifies key strategies and measures for improving engagement, particularly with under-served parents. As with any policy, however, the strategies are broad enough to span the K-12 spectrum. Parent involvement does not look the same in elementary, middle, and high school. A later section of this chapter discusses the district's and school's general definitions about and actions toward parent involvement in middle school.

Resources for School-Level Parent Involvement Implementation

North Shore School District has an infrastructure in place to be able to provide ample support for their schools regarding parent involvement. Ms. Lockhart explained that, "there's a lot of resources put toward parent involvement, community relations, the education foundation, partners and volunteers partners." Because they have the infrastructure to support parent involvement, the schools are able to implement more successful activities with the district's support.

Mr. Goodman, currently the principal of Townlanding Middle School, used to work in NSSD's central office. He explained that:

> Well, we've allocated staff for [parent involvement]. And we've got an Office of Community Relations. We have people that are paid with district funds to look after that and to come up with ideas and to work on parent outreach. So I think when you're willing to allocate the resources, you see things grow.

The Office of Community Relations within NSSD provides considerable resources to support the schools' parent involvement efforts. The "resource" that appeared most evident in my research was technical assistance. Staff in the Office of Community Relations are on-call to assist the schools when needed. Morningside Middle's AP, Mr. Atkinson, explained that the district is "right behind us all the way. Anything you need, anything you want within reason, they'll support it."

Similarly, Morningside's Principal, Dr. Young stated, "They are so helpful. I don't know how any school system, especially one this size, can function without an office like that. They make a lot of difference and they help out a lot."

Finally, Mr. Goodman, principal at Townlanding Middle agreed. "I think that that's one of the things that makes it easier to do my job as principal is that I know that I can pick up the phone and say, 'Ms. Lockhart, we're doing this parent thing. Do you have anything I can give them?'"

Mrs. Daily, Greenwich Middle's principal, provided an example of the type of help she receives from the district. "We are very fortunate in this school division to not only have an amazing Media and Communication Department but then to have Curriculum and Instruction people that will come out and give their time to serve as experts."

Simply having the district presence as a support, or just a potential support, went a long way in the eyes of the school-level leaders and parents. Even the principals that did not utilize the district's assistance recognized that they could do so. For example, Thorne's principal, Dr. Simpson, did not call on the district for parent involvement support, but explained that he was sure they would be helpful if he did.

Another resource the district provides for schools is regular communication that recognizes positive parent involvement practices. One of Southport Middle's APs, Mr. Pearson, stated that, "The district does a recognition ceremony towards the end of the year, recognizing different volunteers and different business organizations that help out." Recognizing parent and community volunteers is important in order to maintain and increase positive partnership relationships.

Ms. McKay, an NSSD Title I Specialist shared another form of recognition:

> You have the Superintendent Spotlights…We have a Kaleidoscope publication, which is an internal employee publication. And the pages are designated to schools and things that they have done with parents. Things that they're doing to get parents in and what they're doing to involve the community, their parents, their business partners, or whatever in their schools. We also have An Apple A Day, which is our parent publication, which does the same thing.

Mrs. Gardner shared with me why NSSD focuses such great attention on recognizing positive school-level parent involvement practices. "Nothing breeds participation like success. And if another school sees that another school has had success, they might borrow or tailor. So I think celebrating the successful is important."

The NSSD central office provides many capacity building activities for building leaders and parents as well, which I discuss in detail in Chapter Five. District leaders model the parent involvement behavior they desire in all of their schools. They allocate monetary and human resources to ensure that schools have the capacity to implement parent involvement. However, while NSSD stresses the importance of partnerships, they recognize that secondary-level engagement is more difficult than elementary school

engagement and that they need to place more emphasis on encouraging middle school parent involvement.

Attitudes and Beliefs about Parent Involvement in Middle School

Relatively little is known about successful parent involvement strategies in middle school. Some may even argue that parent involvement should decrease once children enter middle school. As Mrs. Jackson, a parent with a sixth grader in West Side Middle School stated, "I don't know how much parent involvement on a middle school level you realistically want." Mrs. Jackson's opinion, however, was certainly in the minority, as most interviewees, particularly parents, stated that they believe that parent involvement is more important in middle school than at any other grade level.

For example, Mrs. Lowell, a parent and PTA President at Townlanding Middle explained that, "I think that actually you need to be more involved at this level than you do at an elementary level or at high school level. I think it's more important, actually." Similarly, Mrs. Armstrong, a parent from Draper Middle stated, "Just because they're in middle school, it doesn't mean that you're done and you don't have to do anything else. You need to do more." Finally, Mrs. Kimball, a parent from West Side Middle School told me, "I think [children] need it all the more in middle school. They want more guidance because it's such a crazy time."

Even though most stakeholders agree that parent involvement is at least equally, if not more important in middle school, district- and school-leaders still struggle to distinguish a successful middle school model of parent involvement. Mrs. Gardner, and Ms. Lockhart are the two district leaders who work most closely to implement and oversee parent involvement. Mrs. Gardner said that, "I feel bad sometimes for secondary

schools because they listen to all the elementary world, you know, and what was going on in the elementary world." Mrs. Gardner went on to say that she believes parent involvement in middle school is "the toughest nut." In other words, middle school parent involvement is the most difficult to implement.

Many principals, parents, and APs that I interviewed lamented that parent involvement decreases once children enter middle school. However, Ms. Lockhart had a different view of that "drop-off." She stated that:

> The perception is that parent involvement drops off once kids get to middle school and I reassure them that they need to look at it not so much as dropping off but as changing. That function of parent involvement is different based on what the kids need. You know, for example, my middle school kids didn't really want me hanging around reading to their class. That would be mortifying. However, they loved when I showed up at their soccer game or their concert or whatever. So you have to take the opportunities when parents are there to, you know, let them know what you need to let them know…it's a function of a changing child's need and a changing child's sort of connection with their parents and parents functioning in a role that works for that level.

As Ms. Lockhart explained, parent involvement in middle school isn't necessarily more or less important, it's just different. Currently, NSSD's district leaders are developing more activities targeted to middle school parent involvement as opposed to having a "one-size-fits-all" parent involvement model, as Mrs. Gardner described it. Mrs. Gardner believes that NSSD is now at a point in the implementation of its parent involvement policy to focus more on middle and high school parent involvement:

> To be honest, we really just concentrated on getting [principals] in a culture of wanting to involve parents and by electronically and face to face through our training efforts and whatever. But I think this year we're working with doing the middle school outreach and that was really successful and, you know, realizing that we really need to turn in that direction.

Ms. Lockhart provided a specific example of how NSSD is trying to focus more on middle school parent involvement. The district began implementing a middle school transition program, including a panel, for students and parents. Ms. Lockhart explained, "I started getting feedback that middle school needed help. That there were a lot of high school transition programs and a lot of kindergarten to elementary transition programs, but not enough for middle school." The central office turned this feedback into a transition program for all fifth grade students and their parents.

Ms. Lockhart and Ms. McKay, another district-level parent involvement leader, both see parent involvement through the eyes of an administrator and a middle school parent. They both stated that most parent involvement at this level occurs at home, because, as Ms. Lockhart indicated above, adolescents generally do not want their parents involved at school. Ms. McKay explained:

> I think even at the secondary level they are doing so much, they don't necessarily realize that it's parent involvement. They don't necessarily realize that there may be a purpose behind it. But there's so much in place, whether it be division-wide or whether it be individual school-wide, that's done that parents can attend…I do think that there's a lot across the division that's being done.

After conducting my interviews for this study and based on what I know from working with NSSD for five years, I agree with Ms. McKay that the district has a plethora of activities in place to involve parents. However, in specifically reviewing my data about middle school parent involvement, I noticed a paradox. On one hand, most of the participants, particularly parents, agreed that middle school parent involvement is "most important." However, very few examples exist about what successful middle school parent involvement looks like and how it is manifested. Similarly, Ms. Lockhart stated that parent involvement in middle school changes to occur mostly at home because adolescents do not want their parents "hanging around schools." But as Ms. McKay mentioned, most of the activities that NSSD schools conduct for parents are events that take place at school. Clearly, this is a potential disconnect between what the district and schools believe about parent involvement and how they are seeking to manifest it in practice.

Parent involvement in middle school differs from that in elementary and high school. In order to better understand parent involvement implementation at the middle school level and its congruence to the district's policy, I examined principals', APs', and parents' attitudes and beliefs about the topic. The following section of this chapter discusses how schools define parents as "actively engaged partners" at the middle school-level and provides examples of how definitions are exhibited in action.

Definitions and Practices of Actively Engaged Partners in Middle School

The purpose of this section is to outline school-level (principals', APs, and parents) definitions and practices of parent involvement in order to address its congruence to NSSD's district-level policy. As I noted previously, NSSD's parent

involvement policy states that parents should be "actively engaged partners in their children's education." Active engagement in middle school is quite different than in elementary school. Three categories of active engagement emerged from my interviews with parents, principals, and APs. First, these stakeholders believed parents should continue to support their children's academic success. Second, they stated that parents and schools should remain in constant communication with one another. Finally, the study participants agreed that parents should volunteer in and for the school.

Another theme that emerged from the data about middle school parent involvement implementation is the importance of schools having a welcoming climate. While this topic is not a definition of active engagement, it may influence the extent to which parents become or remain actively engaged. Creating a welcoming climate can also demonstrate congruence (or incongruence) between policy and practice. Thus, after I present the three definitions of active engagement in middle school, I discuss how middle school principals attempt to create a welcoming climate.

Supporting Academics

NSSD's district-level parent involvement strategic plan emphasizes the importance of having parent involvement for students' academic success. The principals', APs', and parents' attitudes coincide with the policy's strategies and measures. Interviewees mentioned three key ways that parents can remain actively engaged partners to support academic success: by checking Parent Portal, by helping with homework, and by attending parent nights.

Parent portal. Again, one key strategy on NSSD's district parent involvement policy is to "Provide resources for parents to monitor students' academic progress."

Parent Portal is the key measure of that strategy. Townlanding Middle's principal, Mr. Goodman, explained this resource to me. "Parent Portal is a component of our school and allows parents to go in and get real-time access to grades."

Ms. Quinn, an AP at Southport Middle School echoed Mr. Goodman's explanation, but took it a step further:

> We use the Parent Portal so our parents have access to their student's grades at all times. It's actual access to the teacher's grade book online, so that's available and through our website they can see exactly what the upcoming assignments are and access that as well.

The administrators within NSSD's middle schools promote Parent Portal extensively. During one of my trips to the district, I observed a parent technology night at Townlanding Middle School. Parents had the opportunity to sign up for Parent Portal and receive a tutorial about how to access the information at home. Other middle schools held similar events.

Most of the middle schools mentioned discussing Parent Portal in newsletters and informal conversations with parents. Draper Middle School, in particular, advertised Parent Portal extensively. Mr. Jones, one of Draper's three assistant principals, stated, "Virtually every piece of mail that we send out, you know, has something in there about, you know, checking the Parent Portal and all these types of things."

Mrs. Nelson, another one of Draper's APs echoed her colleague's remarks:

> I see actively engaged, especially at middle school, by definitely following up and checking on student academic progress. Checking Parent Portal. You know,

every time I have a conversation with parents, I ask, 'Have you signed up for Parent Portal? Are you getting our homework list serve emails?'

Administrators that I interviewed from the other seven middle schools corroborated Mrs. Nelson's and Mr. Jones' comments. Parent Portal was the first way the schools mentioned that parents can remain involved in their middle school children's education. They stated that it is easy to access, free to use, and can be done either at school or at home.

The parents that I interviewed also agreed about the effectiveness of Parent Portal. A parent from Brier Hill Middle, Mrs. Ebert, shared, "I'm sure you know we have a Parent Portal for the grades…it's an awesome tool. We were afraid of it at first but it's just an awesome tool. The parents love it!"

Mrs. Kimball, a West Side Middle parent stated that she tries to encourage other parents to be actively involved by keeping up with their children's grades. She believes that parents should "make sure they all have Parent Portal. And making the parents more responsible and involved in their children's academics and not let it get to a 'D.'"

Finally, Mrs. Nissen, a new middle school parent at Townlanding with a daughter in the sixth grade, shared how she defines "actively engaged partner." "I consider it as being part of the School Net Portal. Looking from time to time. I don't do it every day, like OK, you slipped a tenth of a point. But I've caught things such as unexcused absences."

I could fill dozens of pages with participants' responses about the benefits and their experiences with Parent Portal. It was definitely the most mentioned form of involvement in middle school, though there was less evidence about actual participation

rates, especially by underserved families. Another common response to how parents can assist with academic success in middle school is related to Parent Portal. Principals, APs, and parents mentioned that helping with homework and major projects is a form of parental support and active engagement.

Helping with homework. Parents help their children with homework in different ways in middle school than elementary school. Because the curriculum is more complex, most parents told me that they rarely help their children complete assignments. Rather, they check to ensure their children did their homework and provide a home environment conducive to learning.

Mrs. Jackson, a parent from West Side Middle, stated, "I think being actively engaged is knowing what their classes are, knowing their curriculum, knowing what's coming up as far as assignments, tests, what have you. Have open contact with their teachers." Though Mrs. Jackson didn't "baby" her son, she knew what he was learning in school and made sure it was done well.

The PTA President at Morningside, Mrs. Barnett, went a step further than Mrs. Jackson. She defined active engagement as:

> Speaking with your child, seeing what the school requirements are. I think it's providing a quiet environment in which to study, being available to answer questions. I think it is getting them the resources they need. Sometimes I go above and beyond what I probably should do as far as [PAUSE] I purchase all my kids' textbooks so they have them at home.

Draper's principal, Mrs. Johnson, explained to me that she just wants parents to provide "an environment, discussing it with their child, following up and checking for their homework completion."

In a follow-up interview, Mrs. Johnson stated that, "Actively involved in their children's education is more than just saying, 'How was your day sweetheart?' It's a 'Let me see your homework. Let me help you study for your quiz or test.'"

Mr. Goodman, Townlanding's principal, defined active engagement similarly.

> I didn't mention that earlier and I probably should have but that's another way to be actively engaged. Parents can say, 'OK, let me see your planner tonight. What do you have written down in your planner? Have you done your homework? OK, let me see it.' There's probably not enough of that that goes on.

Some of the principals defined this form of engagement as "informal." Rather than "formally" being involved by coming to the school and attending events, informal involvement, according to some of the school administrators, consists of discussions and continually monitoring progress. An AP at West Side, Mrs. Hamilton, stated:

> I would say at middle school level I would definitely say the informal piece is so important as opposed to the formal. The reason why I say that informal piece is because in middle school the students don't want their parents up here eating lunch with them on a daily basis as in elementary school. Just maintaining that open line of communication once the student gets home and having that open dialogue with them, asking them over the dinner table, 'How was school?" So that informal piece at the middle school level I think is the most important and the most valuable.

While other administrators did not go so far as to say informal involvement was most valuable, they did agree that parents should have dialogues with their children about academics and that they should monitor their children's progress by checking planners and homework completion. As Greenwich Middle's principal, Mrs. Daily summarized, "there are all sorts of levels of active engagement and the most important for the child's future is for the parent to be sending the message that education is important." Informally encouraging homework completion is a common way for middle school parents to support their children's education.

Attend parent and family nights. Though not as prevalent as in elementary school, all of the middle schools held some sort of parent night at their buildings, other than the mandatory Open House. Most of the parent nights were open to all parents, while a smaller percentage involved a target population.

Most of NSSD's middle schools have AVID—Advancement Via Individual Determination—at their buildings. This national program focuses on potential first time college-goers in grades four through 12. AVID has a partnership component, requiring parents to sign a contract agreeing to check their child's homework and participate in family nights. The middle schools that have AVID listed participation in it among their definition of actively engaged partner.

For example, Ms. Quinn, an AP at Southport Middle School, recounted a particularly popular AVID parent night:

> We had a tailgating party on the weekend for parents and students. Oh, it was a huge success. You should have seen the cafeteria. Each family had to bring in, you know, a food item to share. We had families that brought in crockpots. One

family brought in this pulled pork roast. We had BBQ hamburgers, hot dogs, everything.

The tailgating party had many components that led to its success. Families took a leadership role in bringing food for the event. It took place on a weekend when many parents likely did not have a work schedule conflict. Finally, Southport's tailgating party was an informal gathering to have fun rather than a formal instructional workshop.

Mr. Feather, the principal at West Side Middle, mentioned AVID, along with his school's gifted and talented program and English as a Second Language (ESL) program, and various groups that hold their own parent nights. Mrs. Johnson also conducts an ESL parent night at Draper Middle Schools:

> We're actually having an ESL parent night in December when we're inviting our parents out and this one is geared just for them. We will have several of our foreign language teachers there so they will be able to translate. And we'll be able to show and share them again, what Draper offers and how we need their support.

The middle school principals in NSSD recognize that different groups of parents have different needs in terms of receiving support for being actively engaged partners in their children's education. Various family nights for a smaller population of parents are one way these middle schools tailor their activities to reach more and different groups of parents.

While these smaller family nights are beneficial to the parents they target, most of the middle schools' parent nights involved the entire school population. Other than the well-attended Open Houses at the beginning of the year, NSSD's middle schools

conducted periodic parent nights revolving around both academic themes and creating a welcoming climate. Some topics of these family nights included: BINGO night, dodge ball and kickball night, skating parties, technology night, career night, and a workshop to help prepare their children for testing.

Brier Hill's principal, Mr. Caldwell described two student-centered family nights that involved parents in unique and active ways. "We have a very large science fair here. We bring parents in for judges…Our sixth graders do a murder mystery lab and the parents come in and assist with that lab as well."

Most of the schools also conducted a transition program for rising sixth graders. Draper's transition evening takes place in January for fifth graders and their parents. Mrs. Johnson, the principals, described this event as an:

> Information night in January when we tell all our feeder schools about Draper. We actually had people whose kids weren't zoned for our school attend because they heard about our school and they want to be here and they're hoping by coming that they can get an out-of-zone request. I mean, it was packed! It was standing room only in the cafeteria and then we moved into the gym where our parents can actually talk to our teachers and ask questions and things like that.

Thorne Middle School holds a week-long transition program for students in the summer before school begins. Ms. Vogler, one of the Salem parents that I interviewed, commented that she lives in her current house so that her daughter would be zoned for Thorne Middle and attend its transition program. Ms. Vogler, along with most of the other interviewees from every school I interviewed mentioned Thorne's annual Parents' Day activity.

Dr. Simpson, Thorne's principal, explained, "We have a huge function, Parents' Day…We have almost 400 parents, about 40% of our parents, come and spend the full day here with their child. It's probably the greatest turnout we get."

Mr. Hunt, an AP at Townlanding Middle, used to work at Thorne. He echoed Dr. Simpson's explanation of Parents' Day:

> In one of my previous middle schools we did a Parents' Day and we would have over 400 parents attend and spend the school day with their child. That was one of the best community programs we did because the parents really got a feel for what the day is like and what the kids go through.

Other middle school principals stated they would like to implement a Parents' Day at their school but Thorne is the only one I know about that conducts it annually on such a large scale. I discuss this activity in further detail in Chapter Six as an example of how this activity builds parent capacity.

Parents, principals, and assistant principals all agreed that one of the best way for parents to be actively engaged partners in their children's education is to support students' academic success. In middle school, the interviewees defined actively engaged as checking Parent Portal, discussing homework, and attending parent or family nights. Another definition of active engagement involved communication. The following section of this chapter outlines the participants' attitudes and beliefs about how schools and families should remain in contact.

Establishing Two-Way Communication

In this technological age, schools have a multitude of mediums in which to communicate with parents. School-to-home communication takes place regularly

through emails, phone calls, websites, report cards, conferences, and home visits. Making communication two-way, however, is more of a challenge. Below I describe how NSSD's middle schools define active engagement as having parents stay in contact with schools. I also include some challenges parents report around communication.

School-to-home communication. The middle school administrators I interviewed mentioned multiple uses of technology to communicate with parents, including teacher websites, My School Mail, weekly newsletters, email, automated phone calls, and Parent Portal. Ms. Lockhart, from the central office, explained, "A lot of times in the past you had to be an active seeker of information and now, you know, you it's being practically delivered in your ear at your work basically and I think that helps."

The Alert Now automated phone service was the most common form of communication mentioned in the interviews. Greenwich Middle's principal, Mrs. Daily mentioned that this technology is "an easy way so that, you know, you've reached every parent without depending on a child to deliver something."

Draper's administrators spoke the most about using the Alert Now system to keep parents actively involved. Mr. Bishop, an AP, stated, "I don't think there's a child in this school that doesn't have a telephone and as the chief executive of our building, Mrs. Johnson as head principal, she makes the Alert Now calls."

Mrs. Johnson mentioned Alert Now, along with sending out a Friday newsletter, as a way to reach all parents:

> We try to send out Alert Now messages. I do the majority of those, keeping the parents informed of what's going on, what's coming up, and the likes. So,

whether they're actively engaged in the building or not, they're still made aware of what's going on.

While Alert Now was the most common form of communication mentioned in the interviews, the administrators were forthcoming in stating that they did not overuse this form of technology. As Mrs. Daily made very clear, "We don't over-use [Alert Now]. I don't want you to think that." Mrs. Johnson and her three assistant principals also explained that they use Alert Now when they have a big announcement or to remind parents about an upcoming activity.

NSSD's middle schools did not rely solely on technology to keep their parents actively engaged through communication. Mrs. Nelson, one of Draper Middle's APs agreed that technology made communicating with a large population easier but:

> I always tell my teachers that if you have a lot to say to a parent, don't put it in an email. Pick up the phone and call them. Otherwise, would you want to be on the receiving end of that laundry list of here's what your child's missing?

Despite being the largest middle school in North Shore the administrators at Townlanding Middle try to focus on personal communication, as well. Along with sending home congratulatory notes to parents of children who excel, Mr. Goodman explains the importance of communicating to ease with the transition from elementary to middle school:

> Middle school years are years when parents have been used to being very dialed in as elementary school parents and they're still not sure if they can trust their kid can get from point A to point B. So there's a lot of hand holding, kind of in

quotes, but it appears that our folks are doing a nice job with being in touch with parents, or else I'd hear about it.

Ms. Irving, an AP at Townlanding, takes advantage of running into parents in the community:

I see a lot of parents in stores that I attend and I, you know, I always tell them to stop by [the school]. I call them drive-bys. I tell the parents that if you feel the need, you need to drive by or just stop by and see what your kids are doing in school. You just have to keep inviting them until they decide to come in.

NSSD's middle school administrators certainly appeared persistent when it came to communication. I had the impression that they struck a good balance between technology and personal communication via conferences and phone calls. When I inquired about parents' access to technology, all of the school administrators were confident that their families were able to receive Alert Now messages and access the schools' web pages.

Home-to-school communication- Making communication two-way is a challenge that all schools identified. Most of the administrators didn't necessarily mention examples of how they receive communication from parents, but rather that it's an expectation in order to be actively engaged. Every school defined parents as an actively engaged partner by staying in communication with their children's teachers, both for academic and behavioral matters. Ms. Davis, an AP at Brier Hill Middle explained:

There's a lot of parents that have to work, a lot, and they can't be in the school but just by helping us with good communication to support their kids academically or

if we have a behavior problem at school, supporting us that way. To me, that's all being engaged.

Ms. Irving is the parent of a sixth grader at Townlanding Middle School and stays in very close contact with her son's teachers:

> Well, I really feel like the parents should work with the teachers. Um, my son's teachers probably get tired of hearing from me and I always say to them, 'please don't think I'm crazy,' but I am constantly in contact with them…I know the school net to me is their way of letting me know how he's doing with grades. But I like to know what is his attitude like in the classroom? Is he being attentive? Is he contributing to the conversation?...So things like that you can't necessarily get from school net, so yes, I do initiate those types of conversations.

A lot of the middle schools had an open door policy of parents being able to come in and meet with the principal or visit their child's classroom. In fact, Mr. Feather, West Side's principal, commented that unless he's meeting with a student, he drops everything if a parent wants to come in for a conference. Mrs. Kimball, a parent at West Side, appreciated this policy:

> Parents can come and look in the classroom. There's always an open door to contact or ask questions and the teachers have been really super responding back…I very much still check [my son's] planner. I talk via e-mail quite often with his teachers. He's feeling his oats, so we've been on top of him. So I e-mail, I call, I send [the teachers] gifts.

While some parents take the initiative to dialogue with teachers and administrators or reciprocate the schools' communication, other parents do not. The PTA president at Townlanding, Mrs. Lowell, hypothesized:

> I think that what happens there is that [parents] get comfortable in the fact that as long as their child is not having any issues or disciplinary problems or anything like that, then they don't need to step in and get involved because everything seems to be going fine so you don't need me.

A few other parents made similar comments about families only getting "involved" when something really good happens or something really bad happens. For example, the parents will come to the honor roll assembly or to the discipline conference, but the parents with students "in the middle" do not stay in as much communication with the school. That's not to say that these parents are not involved at home. Rather, school administrators do not know the extent of parents' involvement because of the minimal home-to-school communication.

Communication challenges. Overall, the parents I interviewed were very pleased with the amount of communication they receive from the schools. These parents also commented that they felt comfortable communicating back with their children's teachers and administrators. One main challenge that parents of sixth graders mentioned was a disconnect between communication in elementary school and middle school.

Ms. Vogler, the mother of a sixth grade girl at Thorne Middle School, used to work in the NSSD central office and thus knows the "ins and outs" of the school system. She commented that:

> I think communication is very lacking…They definitely rely on parents having access to the Internet, to the website, and getting information from that. There's nothing that's going home in any other capacity…The middle school principals need to be more aware of how middle school parents are receiving information in an elementary school and it doesn't have to be copied the same, but they need to be aware and understand that there's a big gap and figure out how to bridge that gap.

The PTA president from Brier Hill Middle, Mrs. Franklin, agreed with Ms. Vogler's challenge:

> At the beginning of the school year, especially for incoming sixth grade parents, I think that there still needs to be some more information in terms of how to link up to the daily announcements and how to get in touch with certain things.

All of the parents acknowledged that NSSD's middle schools communicated with parents in multiple ways. The main challenge that these parents identified is just becoming familiar with how the schools communicate and the expectations for two-way communications, particularly between parents and teachers. School administrators may be able to resolve this challenge by discussing communication methods in a transition activity or at Open House.

Volunteering

Volunteering is the final way that parents, principals, and APs mentioned parents can stay actively engaged partners in their children's education. Many of the parents explained that by the time their children enter middle school, they're burned out from all the volunteering they did in elementary school. Unless they're PTA president or the

Volunteer Coordinator of the school, the parents said they are most likely to volunteer when it directly relates to their child. Three ways that the interviewees identified parents as volunteers were through extracurricular activities, behind the scenes, and in the classroom.

Volunteering through extracurricular activities. Parents with children in band, chorus, plays, or sports seemed more likely to be actively engaged partners at the school than parents whose children did not participate in extracurricular activities. The parents and administrators that I interviewed included parents as audience members, chauffeurs, and booster sponsors in their definitions of an actively engaged volunteer.

Sporting events and concerts draw the biggest crowds of parents. Since becoming Townlanding's principal, Mr. Goodman started to hold a "Purple Pride" event every nine weeks in an effort to increase attendance at sporting events. Mr. Goodman explained that students stayed after school to learn cheers and eat a free dinner. Parents received a special invitation to attend the game. Mr. Goodman stated, "We found that when there was an increase in students attending the event, there was also an increase in the number of parents (beyond those of athletes) attending the game."

Ms. Irving, an AP at Townlanding Middle shared that when they attach "Purple Pride" to their schools' sporting activities, they draw more parents. "We had Purple Pride and we had a game outside against another school and it was the largest attended football game in the city ever for middle school."

Draper Middle School also added an element to their sporting events. Some parents had to go straight from work to the school in order to watch their child's game. To encourage parents to volunteer as audience members at these extracurricular events,

Draper Middle School started selling snacks for parents. Mrs. Johnson, the principal, explained:

> This year we've started something new. We're selling sports concessions at the sporting events. Even soccer, you know, we were outside with coolers selling drinks and all and I can't say how many parents said to me, you know, 'Oh my gosh, you know, we came straight from work, we haven't had anything since lunch. Chips and a candy bar and a soda are just what I need right now.' We didn't make any money. It's not a fundraiser. It's a service that we've started.

Draper and NSSD's other middle schools hold banquets for parents of students who participate in various activities. Mrs. Kimball, a parent at West Side Middle explained, "I think with the extracurricular things there is more parent involvement. Like with music. A couple of times a year there will be dinner and you can come here." Parents from other middle schools had similar comments about attending dinners.

As I mentioned above, parents volunteer their time in extracurricular activities to the extent that their children are involved. Ms. Vogler, the parent of a sixth grader at Thorne Middle stated, "Like second quarter, yes we were involved because [my daughter] was the mascot at basketball games, but I didn't know anything else that was going on at the school because it didn't pertain to her, so to speak."

Similarly, Mrs. Jackson, a parent from West Side, has an autistic son at the middle school who is not involved in extracurricular activities, per se. In explaining her level of involvement, Mrs. Jackson stated:

> I tend to not pay attention to all the noise that's going on at the school, be at the dances, be at the football games…I think I'm emotionally as involved, I'm not as

> physically involved, if that makes sense to you. I mean my investment is no different, but my expenditure of energy is.

Rather than volunteer at the extracurricular events, Mrs. Jackson stays in close contact with her son's teachers. She volunteers her time in a way that meets her son's needs, which is in the classroom, not on the football field.

Mrs. Lowell, Townlanding's PTA president, explained her thoughts about parents as volunteers through extracurricular activities:

> I think when there's opportunities to be involved with the children in social activities, like the dances or field trips, where you get to interact with your child and their peers, I think is, um, yeah, that's the one that to me is most important.

Other parents shared stories about driving their children to and from swimming practice, picking their children up at school dances, and making sure they had snacks after a football game. All of these examples fit into the definition of parents showing active engagement through volunteering at extracurricular events. Another form of volunteering, according to the interviewees, involved behind the scenes work.

Volunteering behind the scenes. Most of the volunteer opportunities for parents at the school take place during the day and consist of helping in the library, selling dance tickets, and chaperoning field trips. Southport Middle's AP, Ms. Quinn, listed many examples of how parents volunteer behind the scenes:

> We do have one parent [who] comes in that will help some teachers if they need copies made. We have parents that will help sell tickets for, like, dances. And this past week we had candy-grams for Valentine's Day and so different parents

came in to sell those. During picture day parents will come in to help out with that information in the gym, distributing cards to the students.

This form of volunteering was not as common, based on the data, because it involves a smaller population of parents who do not work during the school day. Mrs. Nissen has a daughter in the sixth grade at Townlanding Middle School and a son at the feeder elementary school. She is a very active volunteer at the elementary school but works during the day. When I asked her about volunteering in the middle school, Mrs. Nissen responded:

> It's not like there's a lot of opportunities to get involved. I mean, some of the volunteer opportunities have come up, like selling tickets during lunch. There again, if you work, you may not be able to do that. Um, or chaperoning, that's still 4:00 in the evening and people are getting ready to come home. So you know, that makes it difficult.

I asked the participants if there were opportunities for parents to volunteer in this way if they worked during the day. Mrs. Ebert, a mother from Brier Hill Middle, explained, "Well, we have dances at night. There are things after hours. You could help with the newsletter. You could help with something at home." So while most of the parents who volunteer at the school do not work outside of the home or have flexible job schedules, a few possibilities do exist for parents who cannot make it to the school during the day.

Another difficulty with volunteering behind the scenes is that it does not directly involve the parents with their children. Even though most of the participants agreed that their children do not want them volunteering in their classroom, parents stated that they

were more likely to get involved if it impacts their child. Mr. Feather, West Side's principal, lamented:

> If I could say one area that I'd like to see more [involvement] it would just be more parent volunteers coming in during the day that want to help us do different things…we have an assembly for the principal's list and the honor roll and that kind of thing and we get lots of parents for those but we don't get a lot of parents who just want to come in and volunteer to work in the library or help out with that kind of thing.

Other principals and volunteer coordinator parents shared similar challenges. The PTA president at Morningside mentioned that her volunteer pool decreased by over 50% from last year to this year. Other parents believed that the economy affected the number of behind the scenes volunteers, which I discuss in further detail in Chapter Five. Even though these types of volunteer opportunities were not as popular as attending sporting events or concerts, the parents who are able to volunteer at the school during the day comment about its benefit. Brier Hill's parent, Mrs. Ebert, stated:

> You see what a difference you make you know, and the things that we do. It it's just stuffing envelopes or making copies, I mean, that's somebody they're not having to pay to do that and that's helping somebody somewhere. I know at the end of the year when I was at the elementary level we used to take the volunteer hours and multiply it by minimum wage and say this was what you guys were worth to this school this year.

Volunteering in the classroom. Many parents of sixth graders enter middle school hoping for opportunities to volunteer in their children's classroom. In actuality, those

possibilities are few and far between. Morningside Middle's former volunteer coordinator, Mrs. Barnett, called this reality a "rude awakening." She explained, "Anything I can do to get in there and help that class, they're looking for those opportunities and they don't exist as much at the middle school level."

Similarly, Draper's PTA president, Mrs. Hicks is now familiar with volunteer expectations in middle school. Speaking of new middle school parents, Mrs. Hicks stated, "There's not as many volunteer opportunities here as compared to elementary school. It's just not that many. But there are some. It's just maybe [the parents] are not interested. They're used to what was and not what is now."

Even though classroom volunteer opportunities are not very common, all of the principals agreed that this is a form of active engagement in which they would like to improve. As Dr. Simpson, the principal at Thorne Middle School explained:

> I would say actively engaged means coming into the building, volunteering in classrooms, having an active role rather than, ah, you know, checking Parent Portal or you know, chaperoning at a dance. I think that actively involved means in the instructional process and we have very, very few people that do that.

Mrs. Barnett, a Morningside parent, agrees with Dr. Simpson, " I think honestly that if there were more opportunities to be in the classroom that that would foster more involvement, like synergistically."

I have already mentioned some of the challenges surrounding classroom volunteering in middle school—most children do not want their parents in the classroom, parents work during the day, the curriculum is more complex, etc. However, some schools do have opportunities for parents to volunteer in the classroom.

Thorne's PTA president, Mrs. Walsh, shared that parents are currently volunteering to judge an essay contest at the school. Draper Middle School has parents come in to help children organize their binders and assignments. Brier Hill Middle's parents mentioned several ways that parents volunteer in the classroom, including teaching sewing, guest speaking, and tutoring children after school.

In sum, the participants of this study defined parents as actively engaged partners in their children's education in three ways: through academic support, by communicating, and by volunteering. Parents were most likely involved when it directly affected their children's success. Currently, NSSD's middle schools still struggle to find "meaningful" volunteer opportunities but seem to communicate with their families and focus on involving parents for students' academic achievement.

Creating a Welcoming Climate

Regardless of how the parents, principals, and APs defined involvement, they all agreed that parents were more likely to be involved if the school created a welcoming climate of partnership. The district administrators that I interviewed, particularly Ms. Lockhart and Mrs. Gardner, mentioned that they believe principals are the determining factor as to whether or not a school has a welcoming climate for parents. Based on my interviews with APs and parents, I agree that the building leader sets the tone for how the rest of the staff works with families.

While this is not a definition of active engagement, it is a factor that likely impacts the success or failure of parent involvement program implementation. I believe these data merit discussion in this chapter because they highlight a possible incongruence between policy and practice. Even though all participants, including district

administrators, agreed that a welcoming climate fosters positive home-school relationships, NSSD's policy does not address it as a strategy or measure of active engagement. From the data, three themes emerged as ways that NSSD's middle schools' leaders can foster a welcoming climate: creating a friendly atmosphere in the school, being present and available, and establishing clear parent involvement expectations.

Creating a friendly atmosphere. As I pulled into the parking lots of the eight schools that participated in this study, I admit that I felt a little anxious. I didn't know the location of the front entrance. When I finally reached the front entrance I saw multiple doors, only one of which was unlocked. Each time I went to a school, even if it was for the second or third time, I tugged at locked doors while the person at the sign-in desk watched me struggle. Inevitably, the correct door to enter was the last I chose.

As soon as I entered the buildings, the staff member sitting at the desk was very friendly. He or she would have me sign-in, gave me a visitor's pass, and made sure I knew where to go to meet with the principal. However, that initial anxiety over not knowing how to enter the building left an impression on me. I understood how many new parents may feel coming to the school for the first time, not knowing the routines, procedures, and policies.

Most parents that I interviewed shared similar feelings to navigating the large middle schools for the first time. The parents I interviewed mentioned that they are more likely to be involved at school if they feel welcome in the building. However, most interviewees stated that their first impression of the buildings was not welcoming. Because of heightened security, all of the middle schools require visitors to sign in at the front desk and to receive a visitor's badge. While the parents I interviewed understood

the necessary security measures, other parents, perhaps with less involvement experience, may find that as a hindrance to coming to the school.

Ms. Vogler, a parent at Thorne Middle, explained:

> I know the process of security and the history behind it and I understand the process and that kind of stuff and it's frustrating for me. And I'm still going to do it. I'm still going to push forward. But there are people, you think, if there's a language issue, those people who didn't like school to start with, they're not going to come up there and they're not going to do that kind of stuff.

Even though the first impression may not be welcoming, once parents enter the building, as with my own experience, friendly faces greeted them and helped them feel comfortable. Mrs. Hicks, Draper's PTA president stated:

> As soon as you walk in they're all so friendly and Mrs. Johnson, she doesn't know a stranger. She's about the friendliest person known to man. And she makes you want to come in and makes you want to do for her and the school.

Many of the principals mentioned that their main goal is to help parents feel comfortable. Thorne's principal, Dr. Simpson, explained:

> I think that there has to be a very welcoming climate at the school. I think that despite what you say when they come in, they have to feel welcome and appreciated and valued that what they're doing here is valued.

Likewise, Mr. Feather from Brier Hill Middle simply stated, "I just want the parents to feel comfortable to come out here."

The principals that I interviewed in this study all agreed that parent involvement will increase if parents feel that the school is a friendly place. The leaders of the building

play a critical role in ensuring that parents feel welcome. One thing that many principals try to do to promote positive home-school relationships is to be present at events and available to speak with parents.

Principals' presence and availability. The most common factor that parents and APs mentioned as a way for schools to create a positive climate was through principal presence. As Morningside's AP, Mr. Atkinson, explained, "They have to be on board with the importance of getting that relationship built with parents. I mean, they've got to be there. They need to be available when a parent requests to talk to them."

The expectation that principals need to be available to parents stems from the district leaders. Ms. McKay shared her views about the role middle school principals play in creating a welcoming climate:

> The principal definitely needs to be involved. And I mean involved, involved. Not just the figure head that says yes you can do this, that's fine with me…if the principal at the middle level is on the morning announcements on the TV, you know, pumping up the event, um, that kind of stuff, you definitely see a lot more involvement…I think they definitely have to be hands-on involved in order to make [parent involvement] as successful as you want it to be.

The parents I interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about the job the principals did to create a welcoming climate for parents. As Mrs. Walsh, PTA president at Thorne Middle recounts:

> The first thing I remember being told about [Dr. Simpson], we were test monitoring. It was actually my friend and I test monitoring and he walked the hallway and he remembered kids names and we heard rumors that he memorizes

the yearbook or something. He can identify these kids by name forever. You know, and it's like, that's somebody that's interested in what's going on and what's up with the school.

One of West Side's APs, Ms. Gillespie, agreed that if the principals are outgoing with the students, they will be more outgoing with the parents as well. In speaking of West Side Middle's principal, Mr. Feather, Ms. Gillespie explained:

The kids know who he is and so forth. He's very friendly and outgoing, although he's only been with us this year. I mean, I think his visibility, his being out there, kids knowing him, so they can go home, they know who the principal is and those kinds of things. That's important. There've been times where I've been in schools where the kids didn't know who the principal was.

A Townlanding parent, Mrs. Miller, also commented about the importance of principal presence. The day before our interview, Mrs. Miller attended an honors assembly for her son. She recounted how impressed she was that Mr. Goodman, the principal, went row by row, welcoming the parents to the school. Townlanding Middle is the largest school in NSSD and Mrs. Miller said that sort of action goes a long way:

Just like at the elementary school, the principal needs to be on the front lines, saying, you know, we need you here and this is what you can do and just making us feel like we're welcome at the school.

The principals themselves acknowledged that they sometimes have to play a "political role" to create a welcoming climate for parents. All of the principals attend school functions such as family nights and sporting events. If they cannot make the activity, one of the APs attends. Dr. Simpson, Thorne's principal, explained, "I think that

my role is more as an ambassador. When I have the audience, whether it be large or small, I certainly take the opportunity to brag about the things that are going on here."

Draper's principal, Mrs. Johnson, gets involved with her students' and their families in many ways. She believes that being visible plays an important role in fostering a positive home-school relationship. She stated:

> There are many times where I do, what's called, the political role. I show my face. I wave…and then people start to recognize that I'm real, meaning I'm not the principal who hides behind the desk. I'm at the dances dancing, you know? I'm in the hallways getting on kids that they're not doing what they're supposed to, but also recognizing those that do well.

As I mentioned above, all of the parents that I interviewed agreed that the principal is the leader of the school who sets the tone about parent involvement. Their presence at school events and their availability to parents sets the expectations for other administrators, teachers, and staff to follow. The next section of this chapter provides examples of schools in which principals set positive and clear expectations for parent involvement.

Setting positive and clear expectations. Everyone that I interviewed agreed that parents will more likely be involved if the principal sets high expectations with his staff to reach out and encourage home-school collaboration. One of West Side's APs, Mrs. Hamilton, stated, "I think that it's very important that the principal sends the clear message that they want that high parental involvement."

Similarly, Ms. Quinn, one of Southport's APs, explained, "I think [Dr. Olsen] is primary. He sets our goals and really sets what the culture's going to be in that respect."

Morningside's principal, Dr. Young, sets a standard at her school that teachers should focus on building positive relationships with parents:

> Well, I made it an issue here. A thrust if you will. When I talk to my staff and about things that we need to establish relationships. That's the key. And that's the first step and that has to happen all throughout.

NSSD's central office staff agrees with the importance of principal leadership and conducts activities to build principals' capacity in this role, which I discuss in detail in Chapter Five. In one of my interviews with Ms. Lockhart, NSSD's district leader over parent involvement, she stated:

> I hate to keep going back to leadership of the school but I really do think that's key. It really is and if a principal communicates it's an expectation or it's a given that this will happen, you know it's going to happen. And if they don't, it may not.

Many of the parents I interviewed recounted stories comparing principals with positive attitudes about parent involvement versus those that were more negative. Mrs. Nissen, a new parent of a sixth grader at Townlanding Middle was so pleased that Mr. Goodman was now the principal. She told me that had the previous principal still been at the school, she would send her daughter to another school because the climate in the school was not friendly. Other parents shared similar stories from other schools.

Mrs. Lowell, another Townlanding parent had a child go through the school under the previous principal and now has a child under Mr. Goodman's leadership. In making a comparison between the two, Mrs. Lowell explained:

> I think there's been a huge change this year, with Mr. Goodman coming on board…the teachers this year have kind of been influenced by his positive spirit. And they have all, in a sense, stepped up to the plate as well. It's been an interesting change to watch from last year with a lot of the same teachers. But a different principal…parents now just seem to be more apt to volunteer and chaperone.

Because of Mr. Goodman's positive attitude about parents and having an expectation of creating a welcoming climate, his staff follows suit. When I asked Mr. Goodman to explain his role in promoting positive home-school relationships, he said:

> I need to create a welcoming atmosphere and I can do that in a number of ways as principal. I can set the tone in terms of greeting and welcoming parents when they're in the building. I can indicate to our office associates and our front desk staff that I expect parents to be treated with respect when they get here.

Mr. Goodman has also taken the extra step and placed his home phone number on the school's website in case parents need to contact him for an emergency. In response to that, he said, "I don't think a lot of principals have gone to that yet." Even though Townlanding is a large school with over 1,500 students, parents feel welcome, primarily because Mr. Goodman sets the expectation with his staff to build positive relationships with families.

Mr. Caldwell, principal at Brier Hill Middle School, is another example that came up in multiple interviews about a principal who changed the climate of a school. One of Brier Hills' parents, Mrs. Ebert, asserted:

> I think the perfect example is that we used to have a principal that did not promote parental involvement. Now we have a principal that really not only promotes parental involvement, but even student involvement. I mean, he has the kids do so much more than my older son ever got to do. I mean, paint the hallways, that sort of thing. So I think [Mr. Caldwell] looks at it as this isn't his school but it's more of this is our school.

I asked Mr. Caldwell in an interview about his role regarding parent involvement at Brier Hill. He responded, "I try to model a lot. I lead by example. I talk with the faculty and the community often about their thoughts and ideas of where we need to go."

Mr. Caldwell's AP, Ms. Davis, agrees that Brier Hill's parent involvement has improved due to the principal's expectations:

> I think it's the leadership in the building. I think it has to start with the top…Under Mr. Caldwell, he's very community involvement-driven and because of that it's trickled down to the rest of the staff. I think that leadership plays a huge role in [parent involvement]. I think that's the biggest role. I do.

Other parents shared similar positive stories about their current principals setting high standards for their staff about promoting collaboration and encouraging the development of a more welcoming climate. Based on what I gathered from my interviews, middle schools within NSSD that are least welcoming are those that did not participate in the study. Unfortunately, I did not collect data from those schools and thus cannot speak about their climate of parent involvement. Based on the data I did gather, however, parents were overwhelmingly positive about principals in their schools. And if parents feel welcome getting involved, they will be more likely to do so.

Discussion

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the congruence between NSSD's parent involvement policy and its middle school parent involvement actions. I outlined the eight key strategies that NSSD has to help parents be actively engaged partners in their children's education and shared resources district administrators provide for their middle schools to promote parent involvement. I also provided a summary of how the study participants defined middle school parent involvement and discussed what principals can do to create a welcoming climate.

I focused this chapter on congruence because successful policy implementation is more likely to occur if it aligns with practice. With few exceptions, NSSD's parent involvement policy does align with school-level attitudes, beliefs, and actions. To begin, NSSD provides schools with the resources they need to implement the policy. While I go into much more detail about building capacity in Chapter Five, I briefly discussed that topic in this chapter. NSSD has an office that oversees engagement. They provide technical assistance to schools and offer support when needed. Principals and APs fully agreed that the district alleviated some of the difficulty in focusing on parent involvement amidst so many other competing demands.

The main focus of the district's parent involvement goal is to involve parents for students' academic success. Many of the strategies that schools use to involve middle school parents focus on academics, including Parent Portal, helping with homework, communication with teachers, and volunteering in the classroom. Even though many principals mentioned they wanted more parent involvement around academics, it seems as though these schools do well based on the parameters of middle school partnerships.

In other words, a common theme was that most parent involvement in middle school occurs at home. Currently, through Parent Portal and many other forms of communication, parents can support their children academically at home.

A third example of congruence involves trainings and outreach. NSSD's district policy requires schools to provide workshops for parents and opportunities to involve "under-served" families. Many of the middle schools provided various family nights about academic topics, such as technology, sciences, and reading. These same schools target under-served families through AVID and ESL nights. While the best-attended events are generally the "fun" activities—skating parties, athletic events, concerts—schools do provide workshops and outreach.

Based on the data, one disconnect between policy, attitudes, and practice involves volunteering. Parents mentioned that in middle school, they are most likely to get involved in ways that directly impact their child. Other than volunteering as audience members at games, concerts, and assemblies, most volunteer opportunities took place behind the scenes, rather than with children. The dilemma is that while parents want to directly impact their children, adolescents want more independence. Many middle school teachers and administrators also seem ambivalent about involving parents as volunteers in classrooms. Also, at-school volunteering limits the number of parents who can get involved because of scheduling conflicts.

A final theme around congruence, or rather incongruence, involved creating a welcoming climate to encourage involvement. The general consensus was that principals played the biggest role in fostering a positive environment. Through their presence, expectations, and priorities, principals set the tone of collaboration for the entire building.

The district leaders set an overall example and expectation by modeling desired behavior and making engagement a priority. Climate is an example of incongruence because even though everyone agreed on its importance, NSSD's policy does not mention it as a strategy or measure toward active engagement.

This chapter addressed the congruence between policy and practice or middle school parent involvement. While I believe that congruence between policy and practice is important, it is not the end-all-be-all of successful implementation. Capacity and will are also factors that impact implementation and may help to explain congruence. McLaughlin (1987) explains that policy success depends on capacity and will. She states:

> Capacity, admittedly, a difficult issue, is something that policy can address. Training can be offered. Dollars can be provided. Consultants can be engaged to furnish missing expertise. But will, or the attitudes, motivation, and beliefs that underlie an implementer's response to a policy's goals or strategies, is less amenable to policy intervention. (p. 172)

The next chapter outlines the capacity and will of NSSD's district and school leaders to implement parent involvement policy and practice.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISTRICT- AND SCHOOL-LEVEL CAPACITY AND WILL

Section 1118 of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 includes mandates and strategies to help schools and districts work effectively with parents for student achievement. One portion of this federal policy requires that districts and schools build capacity in administers, teachers, and parents. Of the 14 strategies listed in this portion of Section 1118, six are mandates and eight are suggestions. Some of the building capacity mandates include helping parents understand state standards, training parents to improve student achievement, and educating school staff about how to work with parents as equal partners.

The middle schools in North Shore School District are not Title I and thus are not under the same obligation as schools that receive Title I funding to follow these mandates. However, most of the middle school parents and administrators that I interviewed implement strategies similar to those mentioned in NCLB Section 1118 to build capacity in education stakeholders. Ms. Lockhart, the key district administrator who works with schools to implement parent involvement, mentioned using Section 1118 as a guide to support administrators, teachers, and parents. Likewise, district leaders within NSSD use the capacity building strategies from Section 1118 to work with all of their schools, regardless of grade level and Title I status.

The conceptual perspective of this study indicates that capacity does not occur in isolation. Will is another factor that not only impacts policy implementation but also may influence the extent to which stakeholders participate in capacity building opportunities. In Chapter Three, I indicated that one reason why I selected NSSD as the

focal site for this case study is because district administrators appear to have the capacity and will to implementation parent involvement policy. District leaders have the capacity (resources, infrastructure, and tools) in place to support their schools' implementation of parent involvement programs. These same leaders also appear to demonstrate the will to implement parent involvement policy and practices by seeking external support from a research-based organization and putting the mechanisms in place to build capacity in school leaders and parents.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings related to the capacity and will of key district and school administrators to implement parent involvement policy and practice. Three levels of capacity building emerged from the data. To begin, I highlight examples of how district-level administrators build capacity in principals. Next, I outline examples of how the district helps to build capacity in parents. Finally, I discuss strategies that school-level administrators implement to build capacity in parents. Within these three sections, I also discuss the will of stakeholders to either participate in activities to build their capacity or to conduct activities to build capacity in others. For the purpose of this chapter, I use NCLB Section 1118's definition of building capacity when I discuss examples of North Shore School District's efforts to build capacity in school and parent leaders.

District-Initiated Capacity Building

Section 1118 of NCLB requires that both schools *and* districts implement strategies to build capacity for effective parent involvement. North Shore School District's (NSSD) central office conducts many activities to support school-level capacity building. District-level administrators recognize the importance of parent involvement

and work directly with administrators, teachers, and parents to encourage positive home-school collaboration. As Ms. McKay, a leader in NSSD explained, "the real heavy-lifters, when it comes to parent involvement are the principals and the teachers in our schools."

North Shore's initiatives coincide with Ms. McKay's statement that schools are where most parent involvement takes place. As such, NSSD provides many opportunities for administrators, teachers, and parents to build capacity for more positive home-school collaboration. The following section of this chapter outlines activities and opportunities that NSSD district-level leaders offer to build capacity in middle school-level administrators and parents. First, I explain NSSD's overarching philosophy about building capacity in school leaders. Next, I discuss ways that the district collaborates with principals to encourage parent involvement, including workshops, technical assistance, and principal meetings. Finally, I provide examples of how the district works directly with middle school parents to support positive home-school collaboration.

Building Capacity in School-Level Administrators

North Shore's district leaders understand the important role that school-level administrators play in positive home-school relationships. As Ms. McKay simply stated about parent involvement, "It all goes to leadership, leadership, leadership." While NSSD encourages principals to partner with parents and they provide opportunities for school leaders to build their capacity, the district does not have many mandates about parent involvement.

For example, in 2005, NSSD joined the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University, for assistance with implementing, sustaining, and

evaluating comprehensive programs of partnership. This program satisfies Section 1118 (e)(3) of NCLB (2001), which states that each school and local educational agency receiving Title I funds,

> shall educate teachers, pupil services personnel, principals, and other staff, with the assistance of parents, in the value and utility of contributions of parents, and in how to reach out to, communicate with, and work with parents as equal partners, implement and coordinate parent programs, and build ties between parents and the school.

Since 2005, North Shore School District has mandated that all Title I schools join NNPS. In NNSD, only elementary schools receive Title I funding. In addition, the district also required any middle school and high school that did not achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) to join NNPS. Membership in NNPS was optional for the rest of the elementary, middle, and high schools that did not fall under the categories listed above. During the 2009-2010 school year, the year that this study took place, eight of NSSD's 14 middle schools were members of NNPS, most of which joined on their own accord.

In all of my interviews with district leaders, school administrators, and parents, I asked the participants if the district had any mandates about parent involvement. The answer was always either "no" or "I don't think so," followed by a long list of optional programs and support the district offers to build capacity. Ms. Lockhart, a district-level leader elaborated about why the district does not have many parent involvement mandates:

> You don't want people to be dragged kicking and screaming into a program that they don't believe in…my view is that if you make it easy for people and you make it helpful and relevant, they'll become converts over time and they'll realize that it's useful.

The example above is simply one instance of how NSSD provides schools with the autonomy to choose various programs in which they will be involved. Not surprisingly, however, NSSD's middle schools vary in their reliance on district support. As Ms. Lockhart explained, "I think that district involvement helps to the extent that the schools are receptive to the resources." I found that two main factors—personal relationships and tenure as principal—influence the administrators' will to seek support from district leaders

Generally speaking, when principals had a personal relationship with the district leaders—i.e. they attended graduate school classes together or were friends outside of the office—they were more likely to ask the central office for assistance. For example, Brier Hill Middle School's administrators wanted to improve their partnerships with community members and their feeder elementary school, so they asked Ms. Lockhart from the district office for assistance in finding, securing, and maintaining these relationships. Ms. Lockhart and Mr. Caldwell (Brier Hill's principal) attended classes together.

Similarly, Townlanding Middle School held a parent technology night early in the 2009-2010 school year. Townlanding's new principal, Mr. Goodman, asked Ms. Lockhart's office if they had any resources to distribute to parents. On the evening of the event, Ms. Lockhart's office provided flash drives and books for all the parents who

attended. Though Ms. Lockhart would have provided the same resources for any middle school principal that asked for help, she and Mr. Goodman are friends and have already established a good rapport.

Another factor that determines the extent to which school administrators ask the district for help with parent involvement is the length of their tenure as principal. In the examples I provided above, both Mr. Goodman and Mr. Caldwell are relatively new principals and may be more likely to ask for advice and assistance. Other principals, such as Dr. Simpson, Mr. Feather, and Dr. Young are more established and do not call on Ms. Lockhart's office for help. As Dr. Young, principal of Morning Middle, stated about the district, "I use them when I need them."

Ms. Lockhart corroborates this finding, "I think that when a principal is very established and feels like they kind of have a handle on things and they have a good thing going, they feel like they're good, they don't need help." Most administrators reported that if they need something regarding parent involvement, they know that the district is there to help. As Mr. Feather explained, "I think we have a pretty good handle on what we need to do but [the district] is obviously there to provide us with whatever support we need."

Coincidentally, many of the principals who were friends with Ms. Lockhart and her office also had the shortest tenure as a school administrator. I do not believe that these two factors are mutually exclusive, and age of the principal did not appear to have a bearing on friendships. Perhaps new principals were more likely to be in graduate school, which is where many of these administrators became friends with Ms. Lockhart and others on her staff.

Regardless of how often principals call on the district for support, they all reported that NSSD is responsive and always happy to help. Multiple administrators echoed Draper Middle School's AP, Mr. Bishop's statement about parent involvement: "We are supported." No school-level administrator responded negatively or even indifferently about NSSD's assistance with home-school collaboration. Some principals did not take advantage of the district's resources, but across the board they were appreciative of the help and knew that the district was there if needed.

Trainings and technical assistance. As I mentioned above, NSSD provides on-call technical assistance to middle schools if they request such services. Based on what I gleaned from the interviews, the schools *and* the district benefit from this form of collaboration. Ms. Lockhart recounted a story about when she assisted Brier Hill Middle School's parent involvement coordinator and assistant principals:

> Brier Hill called me out there to talk to the AP and their Partnership Coordinator about parent involvement and they were kind of scratching their heads, "well, what are we going to do about parent involvement?" And you know, I got the impression that they didn't have a lot of parent involvement. But when I got out there, their real problem was that they had a ton of parent involvement and so they were having meetings to structure parent involvement, but it was already happening.

This example from Ms. Lockhart illustrates that when district administrators visit schools and provide technical assistance, they become more aware of what is actually taking place within the building in terms of parent involvement. Not only was this reassuring to Ms. Lockhart that Brier Hill Middle partners with parents, it also provided

insight about how the district can continue to best support Brier Hill and reach out to other middle schools in the district.

In order to build positive relationships with every middle school in NSSD and encourage them to ask for technical assistance, Ms. Lockhart communicates with principals regularly: "I am meticulous about answering my messages from [principals], you know, doing whatever I can to be responsive. Because I know that as a district-level person, that's my role."

In addition to technical assistance, the district offers various meetings and workshops for principals. As I previously noted, NSSD joined NNPS in 2005 to provide a framework for schools to work with parents. Even though NNPS membership is optional for most middle schools, many elected to join. District leaders conduct training for this model of parent involvement periodically throughout the school year. These workshops are optional for administrators, teachers, and parents to attend to learn more about NNPS and to continue planning current and future collaboration activities.

I attended one of these workshops during a trip to NSSD in December, 2009. The attendees consisted primarily of elementary schools. Only two middle schools had representatives at the training. This workshop took place during the school day. Participants had the option to attend either the entire session or only the afternoon "planning" portion. The middle schools only attended the afternoon portion. When I asked Thorne Middle School's principal about why his AP only attended the afternoon, he responded, "it's not always convenient to get a teacher out of class or to get a team there to take advantage of [the workshops].

Many middle school administrators mentioned the same challenge—time—as a reason as to why they do not call on the district for more support with parent involvement. As I will elaborate in Chapter Six, schools are currently so stressed with testing, budgets, and other day-to-day responsibilities that parent involvement falls low on their list of priorities. Even though NSSD offers workshops, trainings, and technical assistance to schools about parent involvement, many do not take advantage, partially because of time. And while these services are apparently beneficial for those who participate, they are not mandated so many do not attend.

Principal collaboration. Another way that NSSD builds capacity in school administrators is through monthly "league meetings" with middle school principals. These meetings generally do not entail parent involvement per se, but they do encourage camaraderie among the principals, which indirectly leads to discussions about how to work with parents.

For example, six of NSSD's 14 middle school principals share their weekly newsletters that go to parents. That way, they can simply cut and paste articles to ensure that every middle school parent has accurate information about events, resources, etc. School-level administrators also collaborate on ideas for parent activities. Ms. Quinn, an AP at Southport Middle School shared this experience with me:

> I remember last year when we did our family movie night, another principal was asking [Southport's principal] about it and, you know, how he ended up getting it started. And so I just gave him a copy of the ticket flier and everything and he shared that with the other principal. I think they all share stuff.

Many other interviewees discussed similar experiences of sharing ideas, newsletters, suggestions, etc., when it comes to parent involvement. Mr. Caldwell, Brier Hill's principal, stated:

> As middle school principals we're really good about sharing our information and we lift stuff from each other all the time. So if we see someone is doing some parent involvement thing we probably talk about it and find out what's going on and in a year or two, they're probably starting to do it too. I think that's one thing we're really strong in the division is sharing ideas.

In my interviews with NSSD's district leaders, they concurred that of all school-level administrators, middle school principals were probably the most cohesive. Mr. O'Neill, one district leader, explained to me that elementary school principals are not as collaborative because there are so many of them. High school principals in general are not close because they are so competitive with sports. With middle school principals, however, there is less athletic competition and they are fewer in numbers so it is more realistic that they would all collaborate.

Morningside's principal, Dr. Young, stated that when she needs advice,

> They're the first people I call. Just the average running of our middle school. You know if I say, I'm thinking about doing this or that, let me call another principal and see if they've ever experienced this and how they handled it. They're a great resource…the things we do for each other.

Three of NSSD's middle school principals, Mr. Caldwell, Mr. Goodman, and Mr. Feather have even formed their own Professional Learning Community (PLC) to share the ups and downs of being an administrator. Mr. Feather shared with me:

> We usually meet somewhere after work and have a beer but really get a lot of work done. It's really interesting to see the dynamic. And a lot of times it's really just about bouncing informal ideas but then we, you know, give advice and suggestions for improvement.

Of course, the discussion at such meetings is not always positive about parents. When I asked Mr. Caldwell about what the three principals generally discussed (regarding parent involvement) in their meetings, he stated that, "Usually we just commiserate when we've had a bad phone call or something like that." He also explained that the three of them share parent involvement activities that are on their school improvement plans.

North Shore's middle school principals collaborate regularly about parent involvement. Between sharing ideas and resources about activities and exchanging weekly newsletters, these administrators garner ideas for fostering positive home-school relationships. District leaders in NSSD may not directly be involved with this collaboration, but they do provide the mechanisms and encouragement for this camaraderie.

Building Capacity in Parents

Most of NCLB Section 1118's capacity building for parents occurs at the school-level. However, the NSSD does implement a handful of initiatives at the district-level that directly impact parents' ability to partner effectively with teachers and administrators and work with their children for scholastic success. District leaders include parents in policy decision making, conduct workshops to inform them of strategies to support learning at home, and provide basic needs and incentives to create a welcoming climate.

Include parents in policy decision making. In the building capacity portion of NCLB, Section 1118 (e) (12) states that schools or districts "may establish a district-wide parent advisory council to provide advice on all matters related to parental involvement in programs supported under this section." Prior to drafting its new district-wide policy, NSSD formed a parent and community advisory committee to solicit advice about how parents should be involved in their children's education. Ms. McKay, a NSSD district leader explained:

> The drafting of the policy was done by our Title I Coordinator. It was put forth to our parent review board that I mentioned earlier, which is just a random sampling of parents from Title I schools. And, you know, they offered input. They did all that kind of stuff. They approved.

District leaders also used data collected by an outside agency that compared NSSD's teachers' and parents' perceptions of parent involvement prior to drafting this new policy. Parent and community collaboration is one of five goals that the district focuses on in its district-wide plan for student achievement.

During my interviews with middle school parents, I was impressed that every parent knew this policy by name, was part of the drafting process, and was aware of what the parent involvement portion of this policy entailed. I must also note, however, that the parents I interviewed for this study are often highly involved in their children's education. Thus, I interviewed a biased sample of parents who are likely more involved in decision making than the average middle school parent in NSSD. I will address this topic in further depth during the *discussion* portion of this chapter.

Conduct workshops. Another mandate in NCLB Section 1118 (e) (2) states that schools and districts

> Shall provide materials and trainings to help parents to work with their children to improve their children's achievement such as literacy training and using technology, as appropriate, to foster parental involvement.

Each year, North Shore School District conducts multiple workshops in which parents can attend to learn strategies to help their children achieve both academically and nonacademically. Once a year on a Saturday morning, NSSD holds a "Parent Connection" conference that consists of a nationally-recognized keynote speaker, local vendors, and several breakout sessions about topics the parents select. Hundreds of parents attend this annual conference.

Because of parent feedback on surveys, the district also offers secondary-specific trainings for parents. For example, during the 2009-2010 school year, NSSD provided a transition program for middle school students and parents. Ms. Lockhart explained this program to me:

> I started getting feedback that middle schools needed help. There were a lot of high school transition programs and a lot of kindergarten to elementary transition programs, but not enough for middle school. And I started getting that feedback from a number of different places, so at the beginning of the year, we did "Helping Your Child Make a Successful Transition to Middle School" panel. I was amazed at the turnout. I was amazed at the really basic questions that parents wanted answered.

Ms. Lockhart went on to explain that teachers, administrators, and students were on this panel to answer parents' questions. According to Ms. Lockhart, some of the questions included "what kind of shelves should I buy for my kids' locker?" and "how should my child arrange his binders for A and B schedule?" Many parents that I interviewed mentioned that after attending this transition panel, they felt more at ease sending their children to middle school. This capacity building activity came to fruition because NSSD leaders followed through with feedback from parents.

Ms. Lockhart and her staff conduct multiple NNPS trainings per year to share current research and get more schools on board with the program. Several parents also attend these trainings to gain ideas about how to effectively partner with their children's teachers. Though the vast majority of workshop attendees are teachers and administrators, especially at the secondary school level, a small handful of parents do attend to provide their input to teachers and administrators prior to planning parent involvement activities.

Incentives and basic needs. Even though incentives and assisting with basic needs are not mentioned in NCLB Section 1118 as mandates or suggestions to build capacity for parent involvement, I believe that these two strategies create a welcoming climate and encourage parents to be more involved in their children's education.

Many principals that I interviewed mentioned that the district supports parents by providing incentives and recognition for their involvement. Morningside Middle's principal, Dr. Young, explained that parents receive bumper stickers for their volunteer hours at school. Both Dr. Young and Dr. Simpson, Thorne's principal, expressed gratitude for the district's volunteer banquet. As Dr. Young explained,

> [the district] does awards and banquets for volunteer of the year and those kinds of things which surprisingly parents are really into that. And I guess I shouldn't be surprised because for some people, that is their recognition. That is what they aspire to and so to be recognized for that, that's great.

North Shore district also has a program that supports families with low income. District-level leaders within NSSD "adopts" a family for the school year and buys that family nonperishable food items so that they get fed over the weekend. School and district leaders noticed that many children came to school hungry on Monday mornings. These leaders wanted to make sure that every family within the district had their basic needs met. This project began as a small initiative and has spread to include community partners and most people within the NSSD central office.

While this program does not specifically address mandates within the building capacity portion of NCLB Section 1118, it does promote positive home-school relationships. The districts' belief is that if parents do not need to worry about putting food on the table, they will have more time to spend helping their children with homework or extracurricular activities.

In sum, NSSD implements many activities to encourage capacity building for school leaders and parents to foster positive relationships. While the majority of these initiatives are not mandatory, many principals and parents seem to have the will to find some avenue in which to gain strategies that help build effective home-school partnerships. Most importantly, NSSD leaders have the will to continually seek advice from parents and administrators about how to build capacity in education stakeholders.

Through surveys and anecdotal feedback, NSSD has formulated programs, such as the transition panel, that directly address the challenges of middle schools.

School-Initiated Capacity Building

The majority of capacity building activities for parents occur at the school level. Within the building capacity portion of NCLB, Section 1118 primarily encourages schools to conduct workshops and trainings that inform parents about how to support their children's scholastic achievement. Every middle school administrator and parent that I interviewed mentioned a long list of "family nights" that they conduct to support this mandate: technology nights, reading nights, math nights, movie nights, etc.

Far fewer interviewees discussed how to involve parents in the school-level decision making process. NCLB Section 1118 (e) states that the purpose of building capacity for involvement is "to ensure effective involvement of parents and to support a partnership among the schools involved, parents, and the community to improve student academic achievement." One important, yet often overlooked mechanism to ensure "effective involvement" is through decision making.

The purpose of this section is to discuss ways in which NSSD middle schools include parents as equal partners in decision making. First I outline examples of how middle schools recommend and utilize parents on their School Planning Councils (school-based management committee). Next, I explain the different strategies these schools employ to build capacity in stay-at-home parents versus working parents. Finally, I end this section with a discussion of why many of these middle schools still lack diversity on their decision making committees.

Parents on the School Planning Council

North Shore School District mandates that parent representatives serve on the School Planning Council (SPC). This team consists of parents, teachers, and administrators who meet to discuss goals from the Plan for Continuous Improvement (PCI). Some of the middle schools convene this team once a month while others meet quarterly. During my interviews, particularly those with principals, I heard several examples of how these teams can be both productive and unproductive. For the most part, principals valued the parents' input on the SPC. In the following portion of this chapter, I include vignettes of how some middle schools in NSSD include parents in decision making.

Productive school planning councils. The middle school administrators that I interviewed each had different ways of gaining and using parent input in their SPCs, PTAs, and other committees. Even though NSSD schools are mandated to include parents on the SPC, not all principals responded favorably to having these voices on the team. Below are examples of how NSSD middle schools include parents in school-level decision making.

Southport Middle School. One of the smallest middle schools in NSSD, Southport Middle has an active PTA and SPC. In fact, Southport's PTA president is a father, the only male parent I interviewed for this study. While all of the middle schools that participated in this study had a PTA, Southport's seemed to be the most active. Ms. Quinn, one of Southport's APs reported that the school

> has a very strong PTA board and as far as with the different committees, the PTA has several committees in which they help out a lot. They have a fundraising

committee, they have a dance committee. They have several different committees which help the school.

In my interview with Mr. Reese, Southport's PTA president, he named even more committees that support students, teachers, and administrators. Perhaps one reason why Southport's PTA is so strong is because of its smaller size and the fact that families live in close proximity of the school building. The school's administrators are also very supportive of parent involvement. They often participate in district-led parent involvement initiatives and collaborate with other principals to share ideas about partnership with parents and the community.

I asked the principal, Dr. Olsen, about the role he believes parents play on the school's SPC. He responded:

> I think [parents] need to be a part of the decision making process, particularly when it comes to the thrust of [the district's policy] in preparing students for the workforce, preparing them to be critical thinkers, and problems solvers…Our parent groups actually work in the community and they know the skill sets they are looking for and what the kids come with so its good to have their feedback and to hear what they define as a problem solver and a critical thinker. We do that through School Planning Council and we do that through PTA.

Dr. Olsen and the other administrators at Southport Middle School use parents' expertise in the workforce to help prepare students for postsecondary ventures. He did not explain how the school recruits parents to serve on the SPC or how they gain insight from parents who are not a part of the SPC or PTA committees. However, Southport

Middle School was unique for using parents' experiences to better prepare students with the skill sets needed to be productive in the workforce.

West Side Middle School. West Side Middle is one of the largest in NSSD. It's location is removed from families and serves an economically and racially diverse population. The administrators at West Side Middle School explained a unique way of selecting parents to serve on the SPC. The principal and both APs that I interviewed mentioned that they have two parents who habitually came to the building to complain about various matters. The interviewees did not go into details about the nature of these "complaints." Because they were so vocal, the principal decided they should serve on the SPC. Mrs. Hamilton, an AP at West Side explained:

> We're really excited about having two parents on the committee with us. They were actually parents who were also at the school about something that was not right or something that was not going right at the school and so I said, you know, to [the principal] that we need to encourage them to be a part of the [SPC]. Do you know since they've been on this committee we rarely see them and it's wonderful just empowering them and they're able to see 'You know what? They really have a lot going on.'

Rather than viewing these parents negatively, West Side's administrators opened the door and invited them to be productive members of the School Planning Council. I believe that part of the reason why this school turned a potentially negative situation into a positive is because of the principal's view of parents. Multiple times, Mr. Feather expressed his appreciation for the different perspectives that parents bring to the SPC and other decision making committees. As he explained in his interview, "You know, I think

one of the things that [parents] need to do is to keep us in line…They just have a completely different perspective."

Even though he has served as a principal at other middle schools within NSSD, Mr. Feather is new to West Side in 2009. He did not waste time in recruiting parents to the SPC and ensuring that they felt welcome to express their views. Because West Side Middle is so large, I presume it is difficult to solicit feedback from *all* parents. This is a challenge I will address in the discussion section of this chapter. However, based on the interviews, particularly Mr. Feather's comments, West Side Middle School appears to productively include parents on the SPC.

Morningside Middle School. Like all of the other middle schools in NSSD, Morningside has several parents on the SPC. The unique aspect of this school, however, is that the principal delegates responsibilities equally between parents and teachers. As Dr. Young, Morningside's principal explains,

> Whoever has a plank in the school, in the PCI, participates in it all. I can't do it all, so of course I definitely delegate. And everybody contributes and we all come together, then it all comes together too. We talk and revise and restructure, head in a new direction if we need to. And part of what we emphasize too is that we talk to parents. What do parents think about this?

Dr. Young does not just have parents on the SPC because NSSD mandates she do so. Rather, Morningside's parents serve as equal partners and active leaders on the decision making committee. The two parents that I interviewed from Morningside echoed Dr. Young's statement. One parent who serves on the SPC, Mrs. Barnett, stated that the team

> looks at data that is captured, quantitatively from testing and from teacher feedback and testing specialists dicing data and looking at what goals were set and what we can do to look for improvement. My role is to come from a parent perspective and what we see are issues and how we can help the scores go up, or whatever the issues are.

Ms. Campbell is another parent that sits on the School Planning Council. She explained, "I definitely felt that they listened to [parents] and we have input. And when something was open for discussion, they definitely took what we said and used it. Or at least talked about it later on."

These two parents expressed that the administration at Morningside Middle School values parents' opinions and encourages feedback. Actively soliciting and then utilizing parents' input is one way that NSSD's middle schools are building capacity in parents and encouraging them to be partners in their children's education.

Brier Hill Middle School. The administrators at Brier Hill Middle School encourage parents to serve on decision making committees by creating a welcoming climate in the school. Mr. Caldwell, the principal, stated:

> I think the friendly factor is one of the biggest things. [Parents] need to feel like they're appreciated. They need to know that we want them to be out here. And they need to know that what they did was not in vain.

In other words, Mr. Caldwell works with his administrators to make sure that they use parent feedback appropriately and let the parents know they appreciate the input. The parents that I interviewed from Brier Hill certainly agreed that Mr. Caldwell is very supportive of parents and encourages all parents to participate in various committees.

Unlike many of the other middle schools in this study, Brier Hill has an active Action Team for Partnership (ATP). Schools that participate in the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) should form an ATP to plan activities that involve parents and the community in school-centered goals. The ATP consists of parents, teachers, and administrators.

Brier Hill's ATP meets regularly to plan parent involvement activities, such as a school beautification day and a mentorship program with their elementary feeder school across the street. Mr. Caldwell explained:

> This year we've started our first community-parent action team. They meet quarterly and they talk about what we need to do to spread out what we're doing and to get more involvement…We have goals of, um, having at least four major guest speakers here. Goals of having a way for parents to sign-up to help in classrooms and we have a real, real rich resource of parents in our community that have a great knowledge base that we want to bring into the classroom.

Through the help of this action team, Brier Hill Middle has moved beyond the standard family nights and has started to build capacity in parents to help teachers in the classroom. Mr. Caldwell also told me about a homework club in which parents volunteer to work with sixth graders after school to help them with various assignments. The administrators at Brier Hill have tapped into their community and gained support from parents in a way that many middle schools have yet to accomplish. They are one of the few middle schools in this study to mention that parents actually volunteer in the classroom. Perhaps one reason why parents are actively involved at Brier Middle School

is because the administration includes them in many aspects of the decision making process.

Townlanding Middle School. The principal at Townlanding Middle began his principalship during the 2009-2010 school year. Before formally inviting parents to serve on the School Planning Council, he first met with teachers and other administrators to understand the goals, concerns, and challenges of the school. When he held his first formal SPC meeting in February 2010, Mr. Goodman deliberately included a diverse group of parents on the committee.

I observed one of Townlanding's SPC meetings and it included eight racially diverse parents. Unlike most of the other meetings I observed in different schools, Townlanding also had an equal number of male and female parents on the team. All other middle schools had either all or mostly women. One strategy that Mr. Goodman used to encourage sustainability of the SPC was that he heavily recruited parents of sixth graders. In our interview, Mr. Goodman explained to me that he hoped that by encouraging collaboration early, these sixth grade parents would remain actively involved throughout their time at Townlanding.

In regards to the planful way that Mr. Goodman included parents on the SPC, Mrs. Lowell, a parent and longstanding PTA president stated:

> I've seen first year principals that came in and just had all these sweeping changing's all in the first year rather than sitting back and trying to understand the community and the school culture and I don't think Mr. Goodman did that. And so I really respect that because I think the surest way to cause an uproar among

parents is to come in and just get rid of all the traditions that the community has come to know and love and you know, so I really appreciate that.

Another parent, Mrs. Miller, explained that she decided to serve on the SPC as a way to remain involved in her sixth-grade son's education. Mrs. Miller was very active on the PTA in elementary school and wanted to remain involved, but to a lesser extent. She found that being a representative on the SPC helped her achieve this goal. When I asked Mrs. Miller about what role she (and other parents) play on the SPC, she responded:

> Based on my previous experience with other school planning councils is that they are kind of looking at the parents to be the voice of all the parents. So we kind of represent all the parents and um, just being able to offer the parental perspective as to how parents may be interpreting these goals, how parents might find the website as being useful or accessible.

This response was no different from that of other parents at other NSSD middle schools. Many parents mentioned that they represent the voice of all the parents within the school. One challenge that no parent leader addressed, however, was how to disseminate information from the SPC to every parent in the school. I will discuss this challenge in further detail at the end of the chapter.

Draper Middle School. Mrs. Johnson, Draper's principal, is a very experienced secondary school administrator. Compared with my interviews at other middle schools, Draper had the most examples of including parents on the SPC, PTA, and in the decision making process in general.

Mrs. Johnson is a very data-driven administrator. She continually meets with her APs to review test scores, parent satisfaction surveys, and any other tool the district has to measure student outcomes. As Mrs. Nelson, one of Draper's three APs stated,

> Mrs. Johnson does a lot of different surveys and things. And when the division does their parent survey, when we get those back we actually sit down and talk about them as an administrative team…And I think our parents feel like, during our School Planning Council if they come up with ideas or generate ideas, we actually take them back as an administrative team and we look at them and talk about what's doable and what's not.

The parents that I interviewed from Draper Middle School both serve on the SPC and are also on the PTA. They shared with me that Draper does a good job of getting new leaders on the PTA. Mrs. Hicks, one of the parents, stated:

> You find that each year, with each new PTA board, they bring new ideas. Every time, you know, it's like new blood. So you always welcome new volunteers because somebody has always done something a different way or done something that they think will work here and that again is bringing in new people, getting new volunteers, and just getting new ideas.

Mrs. Armstrong, the other Draper parent that I interviewed explained the importance of having a strong PTA board:

> If the PTA is good, you have more school involvement and everything with parents. Because I've heard of schools where the teachers outnumber the parents because they just can't get parent volunteers so the teachers end up doing

everything. But that's not the case here. All of our executive board members are parents.

Perhaps one reason why parents feel comfortable serving on the SPC and PTA is because the principal, Mrs. Johnson, is very upfront and personable. Mrs. Johnson mentioned to me several times that she believes customer service is a priority. She tries to create a welcoming climate in the school in which parents and teachers feel comfortable voicing opinions and concerns. In my first interview with Mrs. Johnson, she explained:

> I have a School Planning Council tomorrow night and our numbers continue to increase, increase, increase in regards to parents' satisfaction. I don't hide things. I tell folks, I don't have time to. If there's a problem that comes about, then we, as a group, need to work on it…I can't stand when people ask me my advice or my opinions and knowing they never wanted it so one thing as a principal you have to recognize is that if you truly want somebody's opinion, you have to ask, and if you don't want their opinion, then don't ask.

I observed one of Draper's SPC meetings and even though Mrs. Johnson definitely dominated the conversation, the five parents who attended did offer their opinion. Some even mentioned having conversations with parents who did not sit on the SPC and bringing their voice to the table.

Mrs. Johnson's frank discussion about soliciting and implementing parents' opinions was not unique to the majority of principals I interviewed. As I illustrated in the vignettes above, many middle schools in NSSD productively involve parents on their SPC. However, even though NSSD mandates that parents serve on this committee, some

principals were better than others at including parents. Even in the examples above, principals recruited and used parents in different ways. Two principals were candid about the fact that sometimes parents' representation on the SPC is more for show than for actual collaboration.

Unproductive school planning councils. Interviewees at two of the eight middle schools, Thorne Middle and Greenwich Middle, did not mention anything about parents' role in their SPC. Thus, I cannot state the effectiveness of parents in decision making at these schools. Greenwich Middle did not allow me to interview parents for my dissertation and the parents who I interviewed for Salem had mixed things to say about parent involvement.

Two principals that I mentioned in the vignettes above, Mr. Feather (West Side Middle School) and Dr. Olsen (Southport Middle School) discussed that in the past, and sometimes currently, the SPC is not an effective mechanism to build capacity in parents. Dr. Olsen stated:

> Anyone can put on a dog and pony show and make it look like they're involved when really they're not. I have members on my School Planning Council, that we try to speak to the jargon of education to them but they don't understand AYP all the time, so you have to put things to them in an elementary sense. I can't even say that my own School Planning Council actually truly understands everything that gets into the academic and the curricula because it's so big.

Dr. Olsen brings up the important fact that all parents, especially those who serve in a decision making capacity, must be trained and informed about the school's plan, policy, and other educational issues. Likewise, teachers and administrators must be

aware that parents may not know the jargon and educational acronyms that are second-nature to those in the field. West Side's principal, Mr. Feather, also used the expression "dog and pony show" when discussing the SPC with me. He said:

> One thing I don't want to make the planning council is just to be the dog and pony show because number one I don't have time to do that and it truly is a waste of time if that's what it becomes…but if I'm going to do it I'm going to make it do something that is going to help us.

Mr. Feather went on to briefly explain the history of NSSD's School Planning Council. He confided:

> The planning council has always been kind of like a thorn in our sides as principals because it was something that the former superintendent came up with and it had to do with our PCI, which is our school improvement plan. It's an entity that is supposed to help and design and support and kind of be a watchdog over that PCI. But as that kind of group it is not very effective. And the reasons it's not is not enough people who really have the knowledge of how the PCI should work are on that team. And that's really what it is. It's a team and the parents don't feel comfortable enough providing the right kind of input to do what it should do for that.

Mr. Feather's comments highlight a common problem of having parents be "equal partners" in their children's education that policy often overlooks. Many school and district policies require that parents serve in a decision making capacity but lack the direction, training, and oversight to actually ensure that this happens. Based on my interviews, NSSD's middle schools do a good job of helping the parents on the SPC

understand the education jargon. Unfortunately because of the smaller scope of this study, I cannot speak about how well the district disseminates this information to every parent.

Strategies to Build Capacity in Parents

In the section above, I cited examples of how NSSD's middle schools build capacity in parents who participate in decision making committees, particularly the PTA and SPC. These groups only serve a minute percentage of parents within the total population. I only interviewed between one and three parents in each of the eight middle schools, so my sample size is small and skewed. However, many administrators and parents did mention strategies that the middle schools use to build capacity in all parents, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, etc.

All of the interviewees acknowledged that there are currently more opportunities for stay-at-home parents or parents with flexible work schedules to get involved at school. As Ms. Campbell, a stay-at-home mom from Morningside Middle School told me, "Because I have the luxury of being a stay-home mom, I'm very involved in my daughter's education and I pick her up from school. We talk about the day. We do the homework together."

However, because so many more parents work multiple jobs or simply don't have time to get involved during the school day, NSSD's middle schools are finding ways to build parents' capacity and get them involved in other ways. Some examples of how these middle schools work to build capacity in all parents, not just stay-at-home parents, is through scheduling activities in the evening and on weekends and holding activities in the community rather than at school.

Scheduling activities in evenings and on weekends. In order to build capacity in all parents, most NSSD middle schools conduct activities in the evenings. Every administrator that I interviewed mentioned family events that took place at night during the school week. At Morningside Middle, administrators invite parents to attend a workshop to receive specific guidelines about how they can help with homework. West Side Middle has a strong athletic program and sometimes combines a sporting event with a workshop so that more parents will attend.

When I asked Mr. Goodman, Townlanding's principal, about how he schedules events to accommodate most parents' schedules, he stated:

> There are some things that take place during the day, but in the grand scheme of things you can usually work your schedule around being able to be at meetings and whatever else. Um, so there's really not an excuse but that's unfortunately a hard message to get across.

Brier Hill Middle School held a Beautification Day on a Saturday in April 2010 to spruce up the grounds of the school. The action team partnered with different businesses within the community and the school's student Garden Club took the lead on landscaping ideas. Parents, students, staff, and community members gathered on a Saturday morning, had a breakfast and coffee donated by business partners, and worked together to create a more welcoming exterior of the building. Parents who work during the week and would not otherwise be able to participate in activities attended Beautification Day because it took place on a weekend.

Even though NSSD's middle schools are implementing strategies to encourage more parents to attend at-school events, such as the plethora of family nights held in

NSSD, some parents work in the evening and other parents may not feel comfortable coming to school because of poor past experiences. A handful of schools recognize these challenges and elect to hold activities in the community to build capacity for parents who cannot or will not attend school-based workshops.

Activities in the community. Two middle schools in this study, Morningside Middle School and West Side Middle School, held activities in the community as a way to reach more parents. Morningside's principal, Dr. Young described an "Empowerment Dinner" that her staff held at an apartment complex to engage families who often did not attend school functions:

> Last week we had an empowerment dinner where we invited parents. We targeted specific groups of parents, our low-income parents, our ESL parents and parents who generally needed a little help who were at-risk. We invited them to come and have a sit-down and have chicken dinner with us; all the fixins' and then just talk. No program set aside.

The parents that Morningside's administrators invited to the Empowerment Dinner were traditionally not involved in many school workshops. However, the principal still wanted to build their capacity and they did so by creating a welcoming climate and holding the activity outside of the school building in a convenient location. The Empowerment Dinner laid the groundwork for effective collaboration between Morningside staff and parents.

West Side Middle School also held an activity in the community as a way to build capacity in more parents. As I mentioned earlier West Side's location is remote and not easily accessible for many of the families it serves, particularly those who lack

transportation. Ms. Gillespie, one of West Side's APs explained an activity they held to encourage home-school collaboration:

> We thought maybe we could go out to our subsidized housing that comes to our school, and at the beginning of the school year we took out the health department to give the shots that kids might need. We had book bags and school supplies and all those types of things. The PTA did snow cones and popcorn and we spent the day out there in the community and the community came to us.

Holding activities in the community is a good way for schools to create a positive climate and help to overcome some of the many challenges that I addressed in Chapter Four that impede home-school collaboration. Unfortunately, even though many middle schools are working to address the involvement challenges and are trying to build capacity in all families, many parents who are involved in a leadership role (for example, on the SPC or PTA boards) are still predominantly White, middle-class women. NSSD still struggles to collaborate with a diverse group of parents.

Lack of diversity. The administrators and parents that I interviewed were very candid about the fact that often times, the same core group of parents is involved in everything. Typically, these parents have flexible work schedules and have children who are actively involved in extracurricular activities. Ideally, principals expressed that they wanted to have parents on the SPC that mirrored the population of the school. With the exception of Townlanding Middle, most of the parents who served on their schools' SPCs were White women.

Mrs. Barnet, the PTA president at Morningside Middle, also serves on the SPC. When I asked her if the parents on the SPC are representative of the school population she stated:

> No. It's unfortunate. But I do feel that those who are on the SPC do a very good job of attempting to represent. I'm also on the PTA so we're very concerned about making sure we meet the needs of everybody. And a lot of times I'd say the population who aren't necessarily there to represent are the ones we are talking about that we're trying to help and I think it is addressed.

I posed the same question to Mrs. Ebert, a parent and PTA president at Brier Hill Middle School, who had a similar response:

> I know [the SPC] has a couple of teachers and guidance counselors. I know that as far as race is concerned, it's somewhat diverse. I know that [the principal] does have some male teachers. We don't have any males on the PTA board. So I mean, it's not all White women but it's certainly not an eclectic mix of the school population.

While Mrs. Barnett, Mrs. Ebert, and other parents I interviewed stated that parents "attempt to represent" the school population, it is still troubling that these schools do not or cannot find more diverse parents to serve in a leadership capacity. When I asked Mrs. Hicks, one of the parents from Draper Middle School, how the principal chose parents for the SPC, she responded:

> They usually ask involved parents and they usually ask the PTA president and I'm the PTA president and then whatever parents are up here volunteering a lot they know that are invested and interested tends to be the parents they ask.

Of course it is easier to involve parents on the SPC who are already involved in other aspects of their children's education. However, this technique for building capacity automatically excludes parents who are seemingly not as involved because they do not volunteer during the day. The PTA president at Southport Middle, Mr. Reese, shared a similar sentiment, "I would say that the 15-20 parents [who] are the movers and shakers in middle school were the same movers and shakers at the elementary school."

Many parents mentioned the fact that PTAs in NSSD middle schools have a bad reputation of being a clique. This fact is not surprising considering historically PTAs have been a social club for White, middle-class women (Cutler, 2000). The one father that I interviewed, Mr. Reese, is the PTA president at Southport Middle School. He recounted an amusing, yet alarming story about the first PTA meeting he attended three years prior to becoming the president:

> The very first meeting I came to, you know, a couple of years ago, I was asked point blank, 'What are you doing here?' You know? And the person who asked me that, that person was the president and we swam on the summer club team with this person and she was like, 'What are you doing here?'

Even though Mr. Reese laughed while telling that story, probably because he was friends with the other parent outside of school, the fact is that to this day he still struggles to get more fathers involved in PTA and SPC activities. Mr. Reese explained:

> I've had the same 15, 18 people that are doing all the work and trying to figure out a way to reach out to some folks that aren't as involved and get them involved. It's been difficult. It's very hard to put a lot of energy behind folks that won't volunteer or don't want to volunteer, you know?

Mrs. Hicks at Draper Middle expressed the same frustration. “It’s just the same group. You know I wish that we could get more involved and I don’t know the reason why. Again, I don’t know why we can’t.”

Finally, Mrs. Johnson, Draper’s principal shared her thoughts about the lack of parent involvement diversity:

> Parents are usually the same ones [who] are on my PTA executive board, my School Planning Council, who you can call on in a moment’s notice and who will be here. They’re the same ones who sell the dance tickets, who will chaperone field trips, and the likes…I’ve gotten to know that core group of parents and we quite often discuss, you know, what we can do to open the doors and embrace parents.

Every participant in this study mentioned that they want all parents to be involved and that they try to represent diverse groups of parents on the SPC and PTA. Unfortunately, even after implementing promising practices to include more families, the same “core group” are often the ones most represented in leadership roles. As I highlighted above, holding activities at different times of the day and conducting workshops or dinners in the community is one strategy some schools employ to build capacity in all parents. However, clearly more steps need to be taken to build capacity in more parent leaders so the “core group” does not continually represent the entire school.

Discussion

The purpose of this chapter was to highlight the capacity and will of district and school administrators to implement parent involvement policy and practices. Most of the district’s capacity building activities occur at the school-level. As Mr. O’Neill, a district

administrator who oversees the parent involvement portion of NSSD's district-wide policy stated, "[principals and teachers] are the nuts and bolts and [the district] provides the little grease. We lubricate."

Several findings stood out regarding capacity building and will in NSSD's middle schools. First, the district allocates a significant amount of time, money, and manpower to implement their parent involvement policy. However, at the secondary level, these capacity building opportunities are optional. As McLaughlin (1987) explains, it takes both capacity and will to implement policy successfully. In NSSD, school leaders have access to capacity but may lack the will to make parent involvement a priority. Though the principals agreed parent involvement is important, they all had a different hierarchy of priorities.

Another finding involved social networks. Parents and principals became more actively engaged if they had connections within the district and schools. Building leaders who knew district administrators on a personal level were likely to reach out for support. Similarly, parents who already established relationships with school leaders were more likely to serve on decision making committees. Though schools attempted to build capacity in under-served parents by holding activities on weekends and in the community, a large population still seems to be under-represented among NSSD parents.

Finally, an important finding involves policy and its oversight. Going down the list of capacity building mandates and inducements, NSSD's schools comply with every one. Schools hold workshops, make decisions collaboratively with parents, provide ways for parents to stay in contact with the schools about academics, etc. However, when actually looking at which parents seem actively engaged, it's the same "movers and

shakers," as one parent stated, that have held leadership roles since elementary school. Thus, while NSSD's schools comply with mandates and have the capacity and will for successful implementation, a relatively small percentage of parents appear to be involved, particularly regarding decision making and school-based events.

Having congruence between policy and practice, and building capacity and will, are some factors that influence the implementation of policy to encourage parents to be actively engaged partners in their children's education. However, additional challenges occur beyond congruence, capacity, and will that impact parent involvement. The next chapter of this dissertation discusses home- and school-based challenges of implementing parent involvement policy and practices.

CHAPTER SIX

HOME- AND SCHOOL-BASED CHALLENGES

Challenges are an inevitable reality when schools and families collaborate. Epstein et al. (2009) state that, "there are challenges—that is, problems—for every activity that must be resolved in order to reach and engage all families in the best ways" (p. 14). The parent involvement challenges that stakeholders encounter, and more importantly the solutions they seek to employ, impact the quality of the home-school relationship.

Multiple challenges surround middle school parent involvement that impact congruence, capacity, and will. Some are unique to that specific grade level (e.g. children's increased autonomy, class size, and structure), while others are common to most K-12 institutions (e.g. competing demands, time, and misconceptions). The parents, administrators, and district leaders who participated in this study agreed that these challenges impact the extent to which parents and teachers collaborate.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline school- and home-based challenges that impact parent involvement implementation. First, I discuss challenges that families face regarding parent involvement—work demands, time, socioeconomic status, past experiences, and adolescent development. Next, I outline obstacles that schools (administrators and teachers) encounter with parent involvement—competing demands, teacher hesitance, school size, location, and schedule. Finally, I discuss how these challenges impact home-school collaboration in North Shore School District's middle schools and how they coincide with the congruence, capacity, and will data from Chapters Four and Five.

Home-Based Challenges

Participants went into great detail in their interviews discussing challenges that families and schools encounter when trying to collaborate. Most of these obstacles were home-based—challenges that parents face. Some of the most common challenges were limited time, jobs, socioeconomic status (SES), poor past experiences, and adolescent development.

Limited Time

A general lack of time is one challenge that families encounter when getting involved in their children's education, especially when it comes to attending events at school. Children and parents' busy schedules limit families' involvement in school activities. In fact, often times school functions compete with each other and parents must choose which activities to attend. In the following section, I discuss both parent and child time conflicts that impact the extent to which home-school collaboration occurs.

Parents' time. During the interviews, administrators were very sympathetic to families' busy schedules and recognized that even if parents could not attend school-based events that they still cared about the educational well-being of their children. For example, Morningside's AP, Mr. Atkinson stated that:

> I don't think there's a parent out there that I've ever met that didn't have a concern for their child. Extenuating circumstances may not allow them to get here [to be] involved…I've seen parents that try to be [at school] for a conference and…you come to find out they're taking care of a little one, they're going to school, they're a single parent, they're working…it just doesn't always work for them, no matter how much they try.

Not only were administrators sympathetic about parents' busy schedules, they also mentioned feeling bad for the students when their parents could not attend events such as band concerts, football games, and other assemblies. Mrs. Daily, Greenwich Middle's principal stated:

> It's always a sad time when you have some function—band, chorus, team activity—and the child has performed and done a marvelous job and then the parent comes and picks him up…didn't even get to see it. And your heart breaks a little bit for those kids. But you can't do anything but continue to value the parent and know that they must be having lots of things that they have to do because surely in your heart, you believe they would rather be here.

Because administrators recognized and sympathized with parents' limited time, many tried to accommodate meetings and activities around families' schedules. Mr. Pearson, an assistant principal at Southport Middle School, provided an example of how he attempts to work around parents' hectic schedules:

> I hold special education committees generally on a Tuesday. A lot of those meetings are in the morning, but it's not uncommon for us to hold them on any other day and at other times because those are the times when we can get the parent in.

Mr. Pearson recognized the importance of parents attending special education meetings and was flexible with his committee about holding meetings when parents could attend. Unfortunately, while some schools found success in rearranging meetings, others reported that time was too heavy a burden to overcome. Mr. Jones, one of Draper's assistant principals, stated:

> Time is the biggest thing, which I don't have any way of resolving…parents only have so many hours in the day and they've got to devote a certain number to making their own way in the world…they're tired, they're busy, they're whatever.

Parents' time is certainly an inevitable challenge that families and schools encounter when trying to collaborate. As the quotes above indicate, schools can try to work around parents' busy schedules, but that does not guarantee a high level of participation at school events. Interviewees did mention that, in general, parents are more likely to attend an extracurricular activity, such as a sporting event or play, as opposed to a formal meeting, including IEPs and other academic-related conferences. However, even parents' attendance at football games and band concerts is sometimes sparse because children are enrolled in so many other activities.

Children's time. One common theme among the parents I interviewed was that children's involvement in extracurricular activities prevents their parents from being more involved at schools. Family members drive their children to various lessons all across town, which limits the amount of time they have to attend evening events. A parent from Draper Middle School, Mrs. Nelson, simply stated that, "The big thing now is that you have so many after school activities that are available now so a lot of these kids, it's like every single night you have something." However, as I mentioned in Chapter Four, parents volunteering in this manner serves as a form of active engagement.

Because children are so busy outside of school, their attendance at school events is dwindling just as much as their parents'. Morningside's PTA President, Mrs. Barnett, illustrated this phenomenon: "I tell you, dances, that's a big thing for kids. We can't

even get the kids here. Everybody's busy. So we're grappling with even how to get the kids here, let alone how to get the parents here."

Another parent, Mr. Reese, epitomized the busy household. He is an executive and his wife is a teacher. Mr. Reese is also taking night classes and serves as the PTA president at Southport Middle School. During his interview, he lamented about his hectic schedule:

> It's today's dynamic in the household…We're swimming on a club team, we're playing soccer on a club team. So between soccer, swim team, both of us working, and a volunteer effort, you know, if I give up a movie night just to catch up, you know. Being the president of PTA, believe me I try to make as many events as I can, but I think it's just the society today and the active pace that we're all embarking on.

In the interviews, parents and administrators recognized the inevitable challenge that time plays when schools and families try to collaborate. As Mr. Reese stated above, "It's today's dynamic in the household." We live in a busy, fast-paced society that prevents parents, and sometimes even children, from getting more involved in school. When the participants I interviewed discussed the obstacle of time, the most common variable that continually arose was parents' jobs.

Parents' Work Demands

Parents' work schedules were the most common challenge mentioned in the interviews. This obstacle also seemed to be the most universal. In other words, regardless of socioeconomic status, family demographics, or the school in which their

children attend, many parents find their job as a prohibiting factor in getting more involved in their middle schoolers' education.

General scheduling conflicts- Many interviewees indicated that general work schedules prohibit parents from getting involved, particularly *in* the school. Most of these responses indicated that parents who work multiple jobs—whether full-time or part-time—experience less flexibility in their schedules.

When asked to identify the most prevalent parent involvement challenge her school faces, Mrs. Walsh, a stay-at-home mother at Thorne Middle School, replied:

> Working. A lot of [parents] work. I don't. And some of them, you know, even if it's working part time and they have two or three part time jobs…You know, in the evenings, after working a job or two or three I don't know if I'd be really happy about having to run out…I think it is hard with working parents.

In response to the same question, Mr. Pearson, an assistant principal at Southport Middle School stated:

> I think it's always hard if you have a parent that has to work a couple of jobs and trying to find the time for [involvement]. It has to just do with the parents' constraints of what they have to do to support the family.

Finally, a parent from Draper Middle, Mrs. Armstrong, summed up the obstacle of not having many parent volunteers: "The biggest challenge is working, because a lot of parents work and it's just hard for them to do that."

The challenge of parents working multiple jobs is certainly on schools' radars. One assistant principal in particular discussed trying to accommodate parents' busy and

often inflexible work situations. Mrs. Hamilton, an assistant principal at West Side, stated:

> We have to really be very careful about understanding that these parents do often times work so their work schedules vary tremendously. So when we do things it definitely has to be in the late afternoon or in the late evening to get parents to come in to parent conferences.

Other administrators and parents also mentioned ways in which they try to involve working parents. I will discuss these data more fully in Chapter Six.

Economy. The recent economic downturn was another prevalent theme regarding the challenge of parents' work schedules. At least one representative from each school indicated that many parents either re-entered the workforce or held multiple jobs in order to make ends meet.

Mrs. Daily, the principal of Greenwich Middle School, discussed the struggle that parents face when trying to attend school events during the day. She stated that parents "cannot come to parent conferences because they cannot afford to lose money to come and it's sad that they have to make that choice but that's what life is."

Similarly, one of Draper Middle School's assistant principals, Mr. Jones, stated that there is a "time crunch on families…more and more families working longer hours. I hate to blame everything on the economy in the past year, but I think it has made some difference in the past year or so with the economy. Parents just don't have the time."

Many parents, especially in a bad economy, struggle to provide for their families. When faced with the decision of either putting food on the table or attending a parent-teacher conference, many parents clearly opt for the former. Teachers and administrators

in North Shore School District understand this challenge and try to accommodate parents' difficult schedules. Therefore, because of competing demands of both schools and families, many parents simply cannot attend at-school events, particularly during the day.

The economy has also affected the schools' volunteer pool. Most volunteer opportunities are in the school during the day, when many parents have to work. Mrs. Barnett, a stay-at-home mother and volunteer coordinator at Morningside Middle School, reported her struggles with finding assistance from other parents:

> People, even my die-hard volunteers are like I just can't do it. I took a job…We had 700 volunteers last year to pull from. We had 1,200 students so you would think we'd have enough parental volunteers. We're down below 300 this year I'm pulling from…We've been struggling.

Ms. Vogler, a single parent of a daughter at Thorne Middle School, works in one of North Shore's elementary schools. While she would like to volunteer more at her daughter's school and is very interested in being involved in her education, Ms. Vogler expressed her frustration with the lack of volunteer opportunities available for working parents:

> At the beginning of the year at Open House, PTA was there with their little envelopes and their little volunteer sign-up sheets and that kind of stuff. And that's fine. At the time, because I couldn't do snack cart, you know, because of working…I don't recall them ever asking for anything at night…anything you could do after work.

While most of the interviewees shared Mrs. Barnett's and Ms. Vogler's opinion about volunteerism decreasing because of limited evening opportunities, one parent had a different opinion. Ms. Campbell, from Morningside Middle stated:

> I wish I knew why we were struggling so much this year. You know I talked to a lot of people and the consensus seems to be because of the economy, more people are going back to work…And honestly a lot of the volunteer work here is not during the day. I mean, there's some that's during the day. But for the most part, you're not even at the school that much. It's just things you would do at other times.

When I probed Ms. Campbell further for examples of these types of volunteer opportunities, she could not think of any off hand. Thus, if parents can become more involved outside of school or during the evening and weekend, then most are not aware of these opportunities. Channels of communication currently appear to be weak between schools and parents in regards to volunteerism. Perhaps schools do not broadcast such volunteer possibilities or maybe parents do not read the communication. As schools reported, volunteers play a critical role in helping to provide an important resource in a struggling economy. Opening the lines of communication to match schools' needs with volunteers' skills would help to ensure that schools make the best use of a declining volunteer pool.

Family demographics. Another factor that influences parents' work schedules is family demographics. Though not as prevalent a topic in the interviews, multiple participants, all of whom are principals or assistant principals, indicated that an increase of single-parent families and two-parent working families impacts the extent to which

parents get involved in school. The principal at Townlanding Middle School, Mr. Goodman, indicated that:

> People have to work, and most have two parents that work, so they can't necessarily be stay at home moms or stay at home dads. I think that, you know, the latchkey society that we are factors in extensively and ironically, my personal belief is that we work so hard to be able to buy stuff for our kids but the reality is that they'd rather just have you.

Similarly, Dr. Simpson, Thorne Middle's principal, stated:

> I would think that the greatest factor to, um, sustaining and generating [parent involvement] is, um, that the parents just don't have the time. They are working parents. I don't care if they're single parents or married, it's the exception that they're the housewife or the husband who doesn't work. Who can come over here and do these things?

West Side's principal, Mr. Feather, concurred:

> You know, there are a lot of one-parent families and there are a lot of, well, there's one- or two-parent families, a lot of parents that work in the evening and they're not there for the kids all the time, and it's more difficult for them to make those kinds of connections and to be those kinds of parents that we traditionally visualize.

Mr. Feather indicated that schools still "visualize" and perhaps even plan activities for two-parent families. In reality, family demographics, particularly in the workforce, look very different from the "Ozzie and Harriet" years. As family dynamics change, with more single-parent homes and children living with other relatives, schools

must reach-out to parents in varied, more creative ways. I discuss examples of these initiatives in further detail in Chapter Six.

Past Educational Experiences

Parents' own educational experiences sometimes hinder their relationships with teachers and administrators. The interview participants overwhelmingly agreed that if parents had poor experiences in school growing up that they were less likely to be involved in their own children's education.

One of Draper's APs, Mrs. Nelson, stated, "And for some [parents], they've had poor schooling experiences. They'll tell you, 'I didn't like school. If I don't have to come, I won't.'" Mrs. Nelson went on to hypothesize that, "Some of your kids who have lower skills, their parents also have low skills and they've had poor rememberings of school so they try not to come to school that often."

Ms. Vogler, the parent of 6th grader at Thorne Middle added:

> Whatever circumstances have occurred in a parent's life, you know, if they weren't a good student, if they had bad experiences or…if they feel interior to, you know, the teacher. If the teacher puts on that kind of air, if the teacher is only contacting parents for the negative…nobody is going to want to come up just to hear the negative.

When parents only hear negative comments about their children or if they had poor educational experiences in the past, chances are they will not feel welcome in schools, regardless of how hard administrators and teachers try to make them be comfortable. One of Southport's APs, Mr. Pearson, commented:

> It's always a challenge with trying to, you know, get the parents involved, making them feel comfortable because that tends to be a problem. Sometimes parents feel as though they're not welcome in school. Or they just don't feel comfortable, maybe because of their experiences from being in school.

As I discussed in Chapter Four, school climate was definitely a common theme that participants discussed in their interviews. Parents and administrators were unanimous in believing that school climate is one of the greatest contributing factors to whether and which parents get involved in their children's education at school. Some parents may view the schools' procedures with signing in as unwelcoming. Unfortunately, because of security issues, what some may deem unfriendly is an un-negotiable reality.

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status was another theme that emerged from my interviews when I discussed parent involvement challenges with participants. However, most of the discussions were speculative. In other words, only one interviewee provided a concrete example of how socioeconomic status impacted one parent's level of involvement. Other interviewees suggested that this factor influences the ease at which schools work with parents.

An assistant principal at West Side Middle School, Ms. Gillespie, shared a story about one devoted parent who struggled finding transportation to a parent-teacher conference.

> We have parents that don't have transportation. I've had a mother walk all the way to school from her neighborhood to come to a parent-teacher

> conference…didn't realize until she was here because obviously it's easy for us to pick her up and to take her home, but yeah, transportation can be an issue…especially with the lower-income families, because that's just one more expense with these economic times that they can't afford.

West Side is located several miles away from its families' homes, in a rather remote location. Ms. Gillespie went on to explain that this mother walked many miles, while pushing a child in a stroller, in order to attend the scheduled conference. Ms. Gillespie's story is one example of how schools need to be aware of families' circumstances and try to accommodate their unique situations.

As I mentioned above, of the few respondents who mentioned socioeconomic status as a challenge, most speculated that schools working with higher-income families encounter fewer obstacles. When asked if some middle schools are better than others at involving parents, West Side's principal stated that, "I think the difference is, because some of the schools draw from different socioeconomic groups that they have a more difficult time getting parents involved.

Greenwich's principal had a similar response to the same question:

> I could assume that there's some of that in schools, where there's people with greater, um, disposable income where one person in the family can earn sufficient funds so that the other parent, if there are two parents, doesn't have to work outside the home which is the most important job in the world. I'm assuming those schools have an easier time of having active parental involvement because the parents have time to get here.

Socioeconomic status did not seem to be a common challenge to parent involvement, based on participants' responses. In some interviews, I posed a follow-up question asking participants whether or not they believed SES was an obstacle and most individuals answered with a simple, "no." Socioeconomic status encompasses many of the other challenges that schools and families encounter regarding parent involvement, including jobs, past educational experiences, and time. Thus, while participants did not necessarily mention it as a specific challenge, some alluded to it in their responses about other challenges.

Adolescent Development

A final challenge that participants mentioned families face regarding parent involvement is adolescent development. However, interviewees were not as unanimous in their opinions about how and whether children's age plays a role in middle school parent involvement.

Many participants conveyed that parent involvement decreases in middle school because the students don't want their parents around. Greenwich's assistant principal stated, "I think [parent involvement] is more complex in middle and high school because of the children's focus on becoming independent people and relying on their peers."

Similarly, Morningside's principal, Dr. Young, reported that her students are "exerting their independence and they want to break away. They don't want mom and dad involved. That's torture."

During an interview, one of Draper Middle Schools' assistant principals recounted a story of a recent Valentine's Day dance. Toward the end of the dance parents began to congregate outside of the school to pick up their children. The evening

of the dance was particularly cold so Mrs. Nelson, Draper's AP, invited the parents to come into the building and wait in the lobby. The parents refused the invitation, claiming that their children would be mortified to have their parents in the building. These parents would rather wait outside in the cold than "embarrass" their children at a school dance.

The examples above illustrate child-initiated independence. In other words, many parents hesitate to get involved at school because their children are seeking more autonomy and are focusing on friends rather than family. Other interviewees spoke about parent-initiated independence; instances in which parents become less involved in order to encourage children to make their own decisions.

West Side's principal, Mr. Feather, stated that "The problem with getting parents involved especially at the middle school level is, number one, their kids aren't babies anymore so [the parents] are not babying them as much."

In his short tenure as principal at Townlanding Middle School, Mr. Goodman, has found that:

> A lot of parents at this point, from my perspective, want their kids to be more self-sufficient and don't necessarily feel like they need to be or have time to be involved, especially if it's a parent that has a middle school child and an elementary school child. My middle school student should be able to get on the bus without my help, get off the bus, get home, start their homework, and help me with the elementary-aged kid.

Mr. Goodman's experience with parent involvement is common amongst all of North Shore's middle schools. Parents juggle many responsibilities and multiple children. When having to make a choice between attending an elementary school

function or a middle school function, most participants indicated that parents choose their younger child's activity.

Some parents are even relying on their middle school children to take care of younger siblings. Morningside's AP, Mr. Atkinson, stated that many of his students are responsible for picking up their elementary-age siblings from school because their parents are at work. Mr. Atkinson said, "I saw a 12-year-old the other day who's worrying about his elementary school sister coming home on time."

Many parents of middle school children struggle to find a balance between remaining actively involved in their children's education and allowing their children more independence. Townlanding Middle's PTA president now has her third and youngest child going through the school. Mrs. Lowell often gives other parents advice about striking the balance between being involved and allowing their children more autonomy:

> I always laugh and I tell [parents] that I don't talk to my child here at the school unless she talks to me. And everybody knows who she is and everybody knows who I am but unless she's walking down the hall or whatever I don't address her or anything because it's a weird age group.

Children's autonomy is a complex parent involvement challenge. Adolescent's desire for autonomy is a natural consequence of growing up, yet many parents struggle with how much independence they should allow during these preteen years. Schools also struggle with how to involve parents in meaningful ways when their children may not want them in the building.

One trend that emerged in most of the interviews is that adolescent development greatly depends on each individual child. Regardless of grade-level or gender, some parents stated that their children don't mind (or even enjoy) their participation in school-based events. Other parents found that their children beg them not to come to school. As one parent at Brier Hill Middle lamented, "my son doesn't want to see me around here. He just doesn't want me here."

Based on interview responses, many parents get involved in middle school to the extent that their child wants them involved. As illustrated above, most parents encounter time, occupational, or personal challenges that prevent them getting more involved in school. In NSSD, there are multiple opportunities to become involved outside of school through Parent Portal, communicating, and participating in extracurricular activities. However, it is difficult to measure and monitor those forms of involvement because they do occur beyond school walls. Despite these challenges, all interviewees agreed that parents care about their children's success in school and get involved to the extent they can and feel comfortable.

School-Based Challenges

Just like families, schools face multiple challenges when trying to reach out to parents. Teachers' and administrators' obstacles are different from those of families because they have the primary responsibility for reaching out to parents (Epstein et al., 2009). Thus, as family-based challenges increase because of the poor economy and changing family demographics, school-based challenges increase as well. Some of the most common obstacles schools face when trying to involve all parents in their children's

education include competing demands, teacher hesitance, school size, school location, and school schedule.

Competing Demands

Current educational culture involves high-stakes testing, complex curricula, and a plethora of paperwork. A theme that emerged time and again during interviews was that parent involvement often takes a back seat to academia. Teachers and administrators who are strapped for time will focus on preparing their students to reach quarterly benchmarks rather than figuring out how to ensure that all families can attend parent-teacher conferences.

Mrs. Daily, the principal at Greenwich Middle School, explained that while she believes parent involvement is important, the reality is that "any extra time we have has got to be on academics."

Similarly, Thorne's principal, Dr. Simpson, stated that, "There are too many competing demands. I wish that I could spend more time on [parent involvement] and I just can't. There aren't enough hours in the day."

Morningside's principal had a similar experience to her colleagues. Dr. Young stated that:

> There's always too much to do and we put our resources of time basically where we can. Sometimes you just have to prioritize things and some things don't get as much attention as a principal as other things get but when it comes full circle around the course of the year, things are addressed. The communication with parents…is very important.

District leaders agree that academic achievement takes precedence over parent involvement. Mrs. Gardner, a district-level administrator over parent and community involvement asserted that:

> I think that, you know, academic achievement, and rightly so, is the number one focus of the principals. And so, you know, they're putting their efforts largely behind those strategies that they can put in place to improve the performance of their students.

While parent involvement may be one strategy schools can use to assist with student achievement, teachers are subject-specific experts and see other initiatives, such as tutoring, new curricula, and rigorous instruction, as the fastest path to student success. Competing demands also prove challenging as student enrollment changes and class size increases. Some administrators that I interviewed lost assistant principals because student enrollment decreased. Schools in North Shore School District must have 1200 students in order to have three assistant principals. One school, in particular, fell only a few students shy of that "magic number" and as a result decreased to two assistance principals. Losing staff members because of lower student enrollment hindered some middle schools from actively reaching out to parents because they tried to reallocate administration responsibilities.

Another interviewee hypothesized that large class sizes prevent teachers from working with parents. One of Townlanding's parents stated that, "teachers just don't have a lot of time, I would imagine. I imagine that they have even less time with the number of students they're responsible for."

Teachers have a much easier time building positive relationships with parents when they work with fewer students. For example, when teachers, especially in elementary school, only have 20-30 students, they can more easily make personal phone calls, write individualized letters, or in some cases even do home visits. Middle school teachers typically work with at least 100 students so they rely more on mass communication—websites, email, automated phone messages—to communicate with parents. The parents that I interviewed recognize that schools encounter this type of challenge, yet also agree that personal communication helps families feel more welcome in school.

As schools face competing demands, typically academic in nature, many administrators encourage parents to take a leadership role on school-based committees. Unfortunately, many schools reported having difficulty finding parents willing to "step up to the plate." One of Townlanding's APs, Mr. Hunt, stated:

> We've had a hard time over the past five years getting parents to want to be on the PTA; wanting to step up and take leadership. They'll come to sporting events. They'll come to the chorus concert, but they don't want to have to be in charge and do it.

When asked about how he would like to improve parent involvement at Thorne, the principal, Dr. Simpsons replied:

> I'd like to not pull teeth every year to get a PTA board together and to get committees together that work on the PTA whether it be a volunteer coordinator or someone to handle snack carts at, you know, break time or whatever it may be. I pull teeth every year.

Some parents also feel Dr. Simpson and Mr. Hunt's frustration about finding parent leaders. Townlanding's PTA president, Mrs. Lowell, has held her leadership role for many years and is actively searching for a new president. I asked her some of the ins and outs of having an active PTA in her school because she mentioned that they currently do not have a vice president or volunteer coordinator. She responded:

> You have to have a president and a treasurer in order to have an active PTA. Those are usually the two hardest positions to fill. Nobody wants to be responsible for the money and nobody wants to be responsible for the whole thing. So it takes a person who is willing to step up to the plate to do those jobs.

I hypothesize that most of the factors that prohibit parents from taking leadership positions in school are the same challenges that parents face in becoming involved in general. For example, some parents may not have the time to be the president of the PTA because they work during the day or lack transportation to get to school. Other parents may not feel welcome in school because of poor past experiences so they are less likely to serve on PTA boards or other committees. Some parents that I interviewed are very active on their elementary-age child's PTA and do not have time to serve a middle school committee as well. Regardless of the reason, middle school principals have difficulty delegating parent involvement responsibilities and many lack the time to make it a priority amongst their own staff.

Teacher Hesitance

Though I didn't interview any classroom teachers for this study, administrators and parents both mentioned that many teachers are hesitant to reach out to families. Just as some parents don't become involved because of poor past experiences, some teachers

encounter the same challenge. When asked if teachers at her school do a good job of involving parents, Ms. Kaplan, one of Townlanding's APs said that:

> I think the teachers are a little gun shy of stuff like that because the only time they hear from the parents is because of a problem. A parent doesn't call a teacher and say, 'Hey, you're doing a great job with my child." Instead, it's always, 'You're picking on my child.' So [teachers] are a little leery of that parent.

A parent at Morningside Middle, Ms. Campbell, echoed Ms. Kaplan's assertion. When talking about teachers' experiences with parents, Ms. Campbell stated that:

> Probably 90% of what [teachers] hear from parents is negative. I mean, I try so hard to say when they do something great, like, 'that was just awesome or something.' But you can tell they're not used to that. So that may be why they don't want as much interaction with parents.

This challenge is similar to one mentioned in the previous section about parents not getting involved because they only hear negative comments from teachers about their children. One of Brier Hill's APs, Ms. Davis, summarized this challenge as being miscommunication and misconceptions about middle school parent involvement:

> My own opinion is that there's this huge misconception in middle school on both ends. I think parents think that we don't want them involved in middle school…And because of that, I think that our teachers feel like, oh, maybe the kids are too old so we're not going to ask the parents [to get involved].

Ms. Davis followed up this response by saying that as soon as schools and families overcome this misconception, "I think we'll start to see more engagement in middle school."

Some participants alluded to the fact that because of poor experiences with parents, some teachers may be suspicious when a family member asks for a conference or requests to observe a lesson. Mrs. Hamilton, one of West Side's assistant principals, stated that:

> I think that just being able to communicate to the teachers that just because a parent wants to come in and observe your class, that's a great thing. You know, embrace that. Be that show on the stage and show [the parents] what you're doing in your classroom.

Other interviewees suggested that teachers are so used to working solo that they don't recognize parents as an asset. Ms. Campbell, a Morningside parent, explained that, "I've reached out to teachers and I think they're surprised by that. I think they're just so used to doing it on their own that they don't realize these are resources they could really be using."

Teachers in the public school system face a multitude of challenges while trying to educate students to reach benchmarks. Working with parents is often low on their list of priorities because other day-to-day stresses and responsibilities take over. While the district is a support for schools' parent involvement efforts, NSSD's administrators generally work with principals and not teachers. This technical assistance may need to trickle down more to classroom teachers in order to encourage better parent involvement.

School Size

The size of middle schools in North Shore School District is a prevalent challenge to parent involvement. Across the board, study participants agreed that the smaller middle schools had an easier time of involving parents than the larger middle schools. As

I mentioned above, the size of a school affects the amount of time teachers can spend personally contacting parents. However, the physical size of North Shore's middle schools can also impact the overall climate.

Middle schools in North Shore District range in total enrollment from 850 students to over 1500 students. Parents whose children attend the smaller schools appreciate the "family-like" environment. Both Southport Middle School and Brier Hill Middle School have fewer than 900 students.

A parent from Brier Hill Middle reported, "That's what's so great about our school. You have only three or four elementary schools that feed into one. It's easier to get to know everyone and to get involved."

One parent from Southport Middle stated:

> Our sister and brother middle schools surrounding us have 2500 students [together], you know? We have 850 so it's very small. There's 300 or less per grade level. Everyone is still very, very in touch with the student and the school is extremely engaged with community and the parent base.

Similarly, one of Southport's APs explained:

> We only have 900 or so students as opposed to 1400 or 1500 so I think that helps with that because there's a closer feel to a small school. But I think the things we do are no different than the bigger schools. It's just I think sometimes we can reach more because there's less to reach.

After comparing the interviews, I did find that many of North Shore's middle schools conducted similar parent involvement activities, such as BINGO nights, concerts, family workshops, etc. Even though the smaller schools experienced the same family-

based challenges as larger schools, they did recognize that having fewer families with which to work alleviated some of the obstacles to family engagement.

On the other side of the student enrollment spectrum are West Side, Morningside, and Townlanding Middle Schools. All three schools have over 1200 students and their principals recognize the challenge of reaching out to all their families.

When I asked Morningside Middle's principal, Dr. Young, about the most important factor for fostering positive home-school collaboration, she responded:

> Relationships are the most important thing. And of course the bigger the school, the harder it is for me personally to have relationships with every parent. That's why all of us in the school have to work toward that.

In my interview with West Side's principal, Mr. Feather compared his parent involvement experiences with that of his friend Mr. Caldwell, principal of Brier Hill Middle. Mr. Feather explained:

> The bigger the school, the harder [parent involvement] is. [Mr. Caldwell's] school is a third of the size of my school. So that lends itself to be in a closer-knit family. The bigger the school the less familiar you are with one another and so forth.

Townlanding Middle is the largest of North Shore's middle schools, topping off at 1561 students. The PTA President, Mrs. Lowell, is now used to the size of her daughter's school but explained that, "It's such a huge building and [parents] are afraid that their child's gonna get lost."

Mr. Goodman, Townlanding's principal, concurred that his school's size is intimidating to parents. When speaking particularly about 6th grade parents, he stated that

parents are “still not sure if they can trust that their kid can get from point A to point B. So there’s a lot of hand holding.”

North Shore’s district leaders recognize that size can be both a help and a hindrance. The district has 14 traditional middle schools of varying size and demographics. Mrs. Gardner, a district-level administrator told me that:

> Our biggest resources are our biggest deficit. We’re a large school system so we have a lot of resources but we’re a large school system so it’s really hard to customize and do all these things when we’re this large.

While the size of the schools certainly proved challenging, I found that leadership in the buildings played a bigger role for involvement. Even though Townlanding is the largest school, Mr. Goodman’s expectations for parent involvement make it a priority. Once parents overcome the initial intimidation of the size, they will likely feel welcome. The same is true for Morningside and West Side Middle Schools. If the principals encourage parent involvement, regardless of the school size, it will more likely happen.

School Location

One challenge that coincides with student enrollment is school location. North Shore’s smaller middle schools are located within neighborhoods while the larger schools are further removed from families’ homes. To my surprise, however, only a small handful of participants, mentioned that school location was a challenge to parent involvement.

One of Townlanding’s parents explained that the area from which her school pulls is very long, with the school in the center. She explained that, “it can be challenging just to get reach all the way around.” Especially for parents with transportation problems, the

location of the school can prevent families from attending school-based events. It can also hinder schools from holding activities in the community because even central locations are far for some families to travel.

West Side's AP also mentioned location as a challenge to parent involvement. In comparing her school to Thorne Middle, a smaller neighborhood middle school, Ms. Gillespie stated:

> [Dr. Simpson's] school is right in the middle of the community. I mean, there's houses across the street and everything's right there. And you know, it's just his neighborhood expanded around. Whereas we have a mall down here. We've got the hospital here, we've got the university…so our neighborhoods are pushed away from us. They're not right up on top of us so I think that plays a key factor too.

In reviewing the data, I was actually surprised that more participants did not mention location as a challenge to parent involvement. Administrators and parents mentioned time, competing demands, jobs, etc as more prevalent to location. However, the parents that I interviewed did not personally experience transportation issues so perhaps they were less likely to recognize location as a challenge to getting involved.

School Schedule

A final school-based challenge that emerged in multiple interviews was that of middle schools' schedules. The actual time of day that schools are in session plays a role in home-school collaboration. Elementary schools in North Shore begin earlier in the day than middle schools, which allows some parents to attend conferences, meetings, and

activities in the morning without taking time off of work. As Townlanding's principal Mr. Goodman explained:

> We start a little after 9:00 and go until almost 4:00. It is difficult for parents who work to kind of work that into their day unless they work a shift schedule where they are on all night or they go in in the evening.

Similarly, a district administrator, Ms. Lockhart, stated:

> One thing that happens in middle school is that there is such a change in the time of day. I think that is one thing that is a factor because a lot of parents work. [They] have to be at work at 8:00 and their kids don't go to school until close to 9:00 so I think that that creates somewhat of a disconnect with parents.

All of North Shore's middle schools, regardless of size, location, or the demographics from which they pull, experience this challenge. As a result, all of the administrators that I interviewed mentioned how difficult it is to have parents participate on decision making committees because of having to work around so many different schedules. Brier Hill's AP, Ms. Davis, summarized this challenge. In regards to when the school holds meetings, Ms. Davis responded, "We've tried before school. We've tried during school. We're tried after school. We have found here that our school starts later in the day so our 8:00 meetings seem to work for parents."

Other schools, such as Draper and Townlanding, hold their school council and other decision making committee meetings in the evening because that is most convenient for their parent populations. While every middle school expressed concern about finding a good time for parents to meet and attend activities, interview responses

did lead me to believe that all of the middle schools are trying to work around parents' and teachers' schedules to find the best time for collaboration.

Discussion

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the challenges surrounding parents becoming actively engaged partners in their children's education. Families and schools both encounter inevitable realities that challenge home-school collaboration. These obstacles are often unavoidable and while some solutions may be attainable, they are difficult to produce.

Family-based challenges were most commonly mentioned and apparently the most difficult to overcome. All of these challenges (time, jobs, poor past experiences) are outside of the schools', and often the families, control. Many middle schools tried to work around challenges by holding activities during different times of the day and by communicating regularly. Even with these strategies in place, many schools still struggle to gain greater engagement.

Perhaps broadening the definition of involvement to include more at-home opportunities would alleviate some of this stress. However, that still involves providing useful opportunities for parents to get involved outside of school. It also requires that parents have the time and the capacity to be actively engaged at home. In reality, many parents may lack both.

School-based challenges may be slightly easier to overcome than family-based challenges because administrators have more control over the situation. While principals cannot change their school size, location, or even competing demands, they can impact parent involvement by setting high expectations and creating a welcoming climate. They

can also mitigate teachers' hesitance by encouraging or even requiring that they attend some of the district's parent involvement trainings. Currently, those trainings are optional for secondary schools but could become mandatory, if needed.

In addition to impacting the extent to which parents become actively engaged, challenges may also influence congruence, capacity, and will. North Shore School District has measures and strategies in its district policy to address challenges. For example, technologies (Parent Portal, Alert Now) exist to overcome some of the challenges of communicating with parents who cannot attend school events. School and district capacity building activities may also meet parent involvement challenges, such as conducting workshops in the community and providing meals on the weekend for low-income families.

The degree to which congruence between policy and practice exists and capacity building takes place depends a great deal on will. The will of principals to seek solutions for common parent involvement challenges differs based on their beliefs and attitudes toward collaboration. With the exception of school size and location, most principals I interviewed experience similar challenges. They work with similar demographics of parents and have the same competing demands. Yet, principals view and treat challenges differently based on will. I address this assertion more fully in Chapter Seven.

In sum, NSSD district and school leaders recognize the need to continue outreach for under-served families. Currently, they have strategies in place to begin this effort. The district has a policy in place with strategies and measures to improve involvement. District and school administrators conduct and participate in various capacity building activities. Building principals recognize the value of parent involvement, albeit to

varying degrees. School administrators identify and acknowledge the challenges that families and schools experience to increase engagement. Chapter Seven revisits the conceptual perspective and research questions that guide this study in order to address how middle schools can cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS

The body of literature about parent involvement has grown over the past two decades. However, the amount of research specific to secondary-level parent involvement, particularly in middle school, remains limited. Some studies focus on linking parent involvement to student achievement (e.g. Bleeker & Jacobs, 2004; Hill et al., 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Simon, 2004; Yan & Lin, 2005). Others discuss parent involvement challenges (e.g. Cooper & Christie, 2005; Cutler, 2000; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Hill, Tyson & Bromell, 2009; Olivos, 2006). A few researchers investigated why parents become involved in their children's education (e.g. Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2009), and others developed models or theories of parent involvement programs (e.g. Barton et al., 2004; Epstein et al., 2009). This study builds on and extends the current body of literature by examining the role of district- and school-level leaders in cultivating parent involvement in middle schools.

The purpose of this study was to explore how middle schools can cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs. I used case study methodology to investigate three factors that may impact the implementation of comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement in middle school: 1) congruence between district policy and middle school practices; 2) the capacity and will of district and school leaders to encourage home-school collaboration; and 3) additional home- and school-based challenges that potentially influence congruence, capacity, and will. Several findings presented in Chapters Four, Five, and Six merit further discussion.

In this chapter, I discuss the relevance and implications of my research findings. First, I revise the conceptual perspective that guided this study. Second, I outline findings related to three key terms from my overarching research question about *cultivating comprehensive* and *inclusive* parent involvement programs. Third, I discuss how this study contributes to current literature on the implementation of parent involvement policies in middle grades. Finally, I discuss implications for future research, policy, and practice.

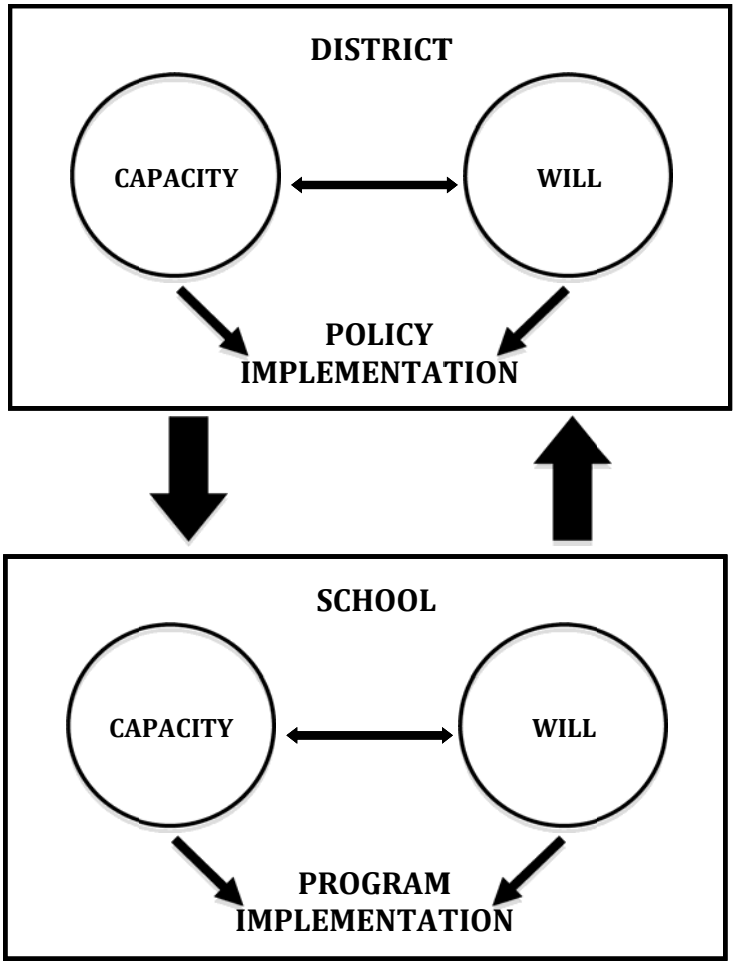
Revisiting the Conceptual Perspective

The conceptual perspective that guided this study used macro and micro perspectives of policy implementation to explore the parent involvement initiatives of one district and eight of its middle schools. I investigated concepts of congruence, capacity, will, and additional challenges that may impact the success or failure of the implementation of district-level policies by schools. The findings presented in Chapters Four, Five, and Six indicate that these factors have interactive relationships that influence the translation of district policy into school practice.

Congruence between District Policy and School Practices

In Chapter One, I introduced Figure 1 as a graphic that explains the relationship between macro and micro policy implementation. I explored the initiatives and supports that district leaders provide for middle school leaders to conduct parent involvement programs. These initiatives, such as technical assistance and technologies for Parent Portal, are represented by the arrow pointing from the district down to the school.

Figure 3: Revised Macro and Micro Perspectives of Policy Implementation.



As the data presented in Chapter Four indicate, the congruence between district support and schools' actions is critical for successful policy implementation. For example, most school-level interviewees (principals, assistant principals, and parents) who participated in this study mentioned that communication is a key aspect of how parents can be actively engaged partners in their middle school children's education. The district supports this aspect of involvement by providing the technologies (Parent Portal, Alert Now, websites) necessary to communicate with parents.

While NSSD's district administrators offer supports that are congruent with school-level definitions of parent involvement (e.g., support for good communications with parents), the willingness of principals to accept support from the district is critical for their effectiveness. Figure 3 (above) modifies my original conceptual perspective introduced in Chapter One. Figure 3 indicates that congruence between policy and practice may develop from macro-level to micro-level (i.e., from district policy, information, tools, and other support to adoption and use by schools) and from micro to macro (i. e., from school-level feedback and definitions about parent involvement to district policy and supports).

School leaders depend on district administrators to provide the necessary tools to implement policy. In so doing, district leaders influence or affect principals' and other school level ideas and action. Simultaneously, district leaders rely on schools to accept the support and tailor it to the school site. In so doing, school principals and others at the school expand district leaders understanding of how the district's overarching policy takes different forms when implemented at a school. Capacity and will are two elements that impact the extent to which principals accept and utilize assistance from district leaders.

Impact of Capacity and Will on Policy Implementation

Chapter Five reported examples of district- and school-initiated capacity building opportunities. The effectiveness of those activities depended, in large part, on the will of school administrators. Principals varied in capacity and will in two categories: 1) the will to build their own capacity through district-initiated activities and 2) the will to build

capacity of others (assistant principals, parents, and teachers) through school-initiated activities.

Principals' willingness to build capacity in parents appeared to be directly related to their willingness to seek support from district leaders. One aspect of capacity building that I explored was the use of parents on the School Planning Council (SPC). Townlanding Middle School had greater parent diversity on its SPC than did the other middle schools I studied. Mr. Goodman, Townlanding's principal, was very active in district-led parent involvement activities and frequently called on Ms. Lockhart, NSSD's district parent involvement leader, for assistance.

Conversely, Thorne Middle School's principal, Dr. Simpson, rarely sought district support. He acknowledges that Ms. Lockhart and her staff are available to provide guidance, but explained that other demands, such as standardized test preparations, take precedence over parent involvement. It should be noted that, Thorne Middle School's SPC is not comprised of a diverse group of parents. Rather, the parents on Thorne's SPC are the same parents that serve on the PTA executive board.

The examples above illustrate one instance (Mr. Goodman) in which capacity and will at the macro-level (at the district level) are reflected in capacity and will at the micro-level (in one principal's attention to the design and conduct of the school's partnership program). Principals who participated in district-initiated capacity building opportunities appeared more likely to provide capacity building opportunities to a more diverse group of parents. One factor that influenced principals' will was their relationships with school and district colleagues. The counter-example (Dr. Simpson) suggests that principals who do not utilize district support or do not collaborate with

school- or district-level colleagues are less likely to build capacity in a diverse group of parents.

The principals in this study varied in their levels of collaboration with district leaders and with each other. Chapter Five presented findings in which principals participated in and conducted capacity building activities. Some middle school principals worked closely with their colleagues. Three principals even formed their own Professional Learning Community and met monthly to discuss school improvement issues, including parent involvement. Another group of principals shared their weekly newsletter to parents.

Principals who collaborated closely with fellow school-level administrators tended to be more willing to seek support from district leaders. Likewise, these same principals were generally friends with district leaders outside of work. Although these school-level social networks did not appear to influence the support that district leaders offered to schools, they did impact the extent to which principals accepted the support from district leaders. The capacity and will of principals also played a role in the impact of additional challenges on parent involvement implementation.

Impact of Additional Challenges on Policy Implementation

In Chapter Six, I outlined home- and school-based challenges that seemed to impact the congruence of district and school policies and actions, and the capacity and will of school leaders to implement parent involvement policies and practices. I defined these challenges as inevitable realities that families and schools encounter when trying to collaborate. Challenges may hinder or improve home-school relationships based, in part, on the capacities of principals and their will to take action.

The middle schools in this study varied in size and community location, but generally served a similar demographic of students. Each principal also reported several competing demands for their time, such as meetings, raising test scores, students' behavior problems, and budgets. In short, the eight principals I interviewed faced similar challenges.

The manner in which these principals sought solutions to challenges differed based, in part, on capacity and will. For example, all principals mentioned the frustration of having low parent turn out at activities. Some principals continued to hold workshops at school, regardless of the parents' non-response, and did not alter their practices. Others, such as Morningside's principal, Dr. Young, and West Side's principal, Mr. Feather, attempted to boost parent participation by conducting activities in the community as opposed to solely at school.

Employing strategies to involve a diverse group of parents, such as the example above, necessitates that principals have the will to develop strategies and take time to build parents' capacity. The principals who sought unique solutions to challenges were the same principals who collaborated with colleagues and accepted district support. Further investigation of the connections between macro- and micro-levels of building capacity and will, particularly with a larger sample, will strengthen these findings. I discuss suggestions for future studies at the end of this chapter.

Revisiting the Overarching Research Question

The relationship between congruence, capacity, and will influences the extent to which middle schools cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs. The congruence between district policy and school practice helps some of

NSSD's middle schools implement and sustain parent involvement initiatives. The extent of principals' capacity and will seem to determine whether parent involvement is comprehensive and inclusive. Below, I discuss findings that address the overarching research question of this study: *How can middle schools cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs?*

Cultivating Parent Involvement

I used the word *cultivate* very deliberately in my research question. Not only was I interested in knowing how middle schools implement parent involvement, I wanted to know how these programs grow. North Shore School District began placing more emphasis on parent involvement in 2005 and has been cultivating home-school collaboration for five years. Thus, I believed that NSSD would shed some light on how to cultivate comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement programs. I found that this district has many characteristics and mechanisms in place to develop home-school collaborations at the district level and in its schools.

One key element NSSD has in place to cultivate parent involvement is support from the superintendent and school board. These district leaders required that their staff in various departments conduct research to learn new directions in partnership program development and convene meetings with parents and community members prior to drafting the district's strategic plan for improving partnerships at the district and school levels. The resulting research-based plan serves as a guide for schools to follow when implementing parent involvement. Without the support of the superintendent and school board, parent involvement may not have been a priority in the district's strategic plan.

Along with the leadership and support of the superintendent and school board, NSSD has an office that oversees parent involvement implementation. The Office of Media and Communications supports schools with technical assistance and monetary resources. Though community involvement wasn't a focus of this study, many participants mentioned that they appreciated the Office of Media and Communications organizing their Partners in Education—business and community partners for schools.

Not only does this office provide fiscal and human support for school-level parent involvement, they also set an example. The district has high expectations for schools' parent involvement implementation and sets the standard by conducting various capacity-building activities to guide and groom school-level leaders. Every participant mentioned district support as a valuable resource for partnership program development.

NSSD district leaders also identify challenges to help middle schools cultivate parent involvement. This district faces home- and school-based challenges that most institutions across the country experience—parents' limited time for involvement, parents' poor experiences when they were in school, competing demands on time, lack of knowledge about how to become involved at the middle level, and more. However, instead of succumbing to the obstacles, NSSD recognizes them and searches for solutions through research and by collaborating with outside agencies.

NSSD's district administrators received feedback that secondary schools lacked promising partnership practices to implement. To respond, staff in the Office of Media and Communications developed a transition program for rising sixth graders and their families. The district also conducted secondary-specific breakout sessions at their annual Parent Connection conference. Even though challenges can often be a detriment to

partnership program development, they can also be the catalyst to improve home-school relationships if they are used to identify areas of weakness. Of course, once stakeholders identify barriers to their parent involvement programs, they must also take actions to ameliorate the obstacles.

A final element that NSSD has in place to cultivate parent involvement is the support from outside agencies and programs. In 2005, the district and many of its schools joined the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University. Through their membership in NNPS, NSSD networks with other schools and districts across the United States to gain and share successful partnership strategies. District and school representatives regularly attend NNPS conferences and submit activities to the annual collection of *Promising Partnership Practices.* Even though only some of NSSD's middle schools belong to NNPS, they all benefit from the district's membership. District administrators use the research-based strategies they gain from NNPS to better support their schools.

NSSD also participates in Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and PTA. Not all middle schools have AVID programs and services because of limited funding. However, the schools that do participate in AVID unanimously agree that it encourages collaboration through its mandatory parent involvement component.

All of the middle schools in NSSD have active PTAs, which assist in organizing volunteers and conduct fundraisers for their schools. The building principals work closely with their PTA presidents to create a welcoming climate for families and to plan activities that maximize middle school parent participation.

In sum, NSSD has multiple characteristics at the district level and in many schools that are helping their parent involvement program grow over time. They have superintendent and school board support. They have a policy in place guided by research and revised based on need. An appointed office oversees school-level implementation and assists its middle schools to meet challenges. Finally, the schools receive external support from various parent involvement agencies. All of these elements assist NSSD's cultivation of comprehensive and inclusive middle school parent involvement. As I will discuss below, the district still has areas that need to improve, but as I discussed above, they do have mechanisms in place to continue to develop positive home-school relationships.

Implementing Comprehensive Parent Involvement Practices

Another goal of this study was to uncover examples of comprehensive practices that middle schools were implementing to involve parents. For the purpose of this study, I used the Six-Types of Involvement framework—Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making, and Collaborating with the Community—from NNPS as the definition of comprehensive parent involvement. I did so because NSSD is a member of NNPS and uses this framework to develop its programs and activities to engage parents in different ways. For a time, the National PTA also used these Six Types of Involvement as their standards.

Parenting, the first type of involvement, requires schools to share information with families about developmentally appropriate practices and to provide resources that will help the families fulfill their basic needs such as housing, nutrition, and clothing for their children. NSSD conducts a district-wide bullying seminar for its secondary school

parents, which constitutes one example of a Parenting activity. As I mentioned above, the district also conducts a newly developed transition program and breakout sessions for middle school parents at the annual Parent Connection conference to help them help their children adjust to their move to middle school. The district also runs a food bank for financially-stressed families to ensure they have food over the weekend.

Based on the data I gathered, all of the Parenting activities occurred at the district-level. If schools conducted activities to help parents learn about developmentally appropriate practices for their middle school children, they did not mention it in the interviews.

All of the middle schools conducted an Open House and many held their own transition day (or week in the case of Salem Middle School), but those activities helped parents learn about school policy and procedures. In order to have a more comprehensive parent involvement programs, middle schools should conduct activities that enable parents to understand the development changes that characterize middle school students.

Communicating is the second type of involvement. As I outlined in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, NSSD district and school leaders have a good grasp on communication. Middle schools communicate with their parents through Parent Portal, Alert Now phone messages, weekly school newsletters, teacher websites, monthly district newsletters, email, phone calls, and conferences. Many of other school-level administrators confidently reported that their families had access to the technology necessary to receive school-to-home communication. Principals also mentioned that, although they rely heavily on technology to communicate with all families, they

encourage their teachers to make phone calls and have face-to-face meetings when necessary.

NSSD's middle schools still have some communication challenges, however. To begin, many of the parent leaders who were interviewed reported a disconnect between communication in elementary school versus middle school. They noted that elementary schools "spoon feed" information to their families, while in middle school, parents often must take the initiative to seek and receive communication. Another challenge in middle school is to encourage home-to-school communication. A small percentage of families see communications as a two-way process – that is, one in which families respond to the messages that they receive. Underserved families, however, seem to struggle in communicating back to the school. Even though the principals believed that all families have access to technology to check the Parent Portal and receive Alert Now messages, some families may not have easy access or may simply lack the time to read and respond to communications, even when they are invited to do so.

Volunteering is the third type of involvement. Based on the NNPS definition, parents can volunteer in three ways: in the school, for the school, and as audience members. In middle schools, parents commonly volunteered by being audience members at assemblies and sporting events. This finding is not surprising considering the number of parents who work during the day or report that their children do not want them volunteering in the classroom. It is not clear, however, that schools counted audience members as volunteers.

Some parents who have flexible work schedules or work in the home volunteer in the school in traditional ways such as making copies, serving as hall monitors, and selling

dance tickets. A small percentage of parents help teachers in classrooms, but most interviewees mentioned that these opportunities are few and far between. Though some study participants stated that parents can volunteer from home if they are employed during the day, no one was able to provide examples of this form of volunteering.

Learning at Home is the fourth type of involvement and includes parents helping students with homework and encouraging academic success. Currently, NSSD (neither the district nor its middle schools that I interviewed) does not provide many Learning at Home activities for their middle school families. While parents do receive information about their children's academic progress through Parent Portal, they are not guided on skills needed to help middle school students with homework. Some principals mentioned that they have various family nights in their buildings, but they seem to be more climate- as opposed to academic-focused. For example, middle schools in this study had a tailgating party, a skating party, or BINGO night. A few schools held reading nights, but did not go into detail about how those events guided parents in ways to support students' learning at home.

This form of parent involvement can be difficult in middle school because many teachers have different expectations about how parents should support learning at home.[6] Because the curriculum is more difficult in middle school than elementary school, many parents cannot assist their children without clear guidance and developmentally appropriate strategies. Rather than sitting with their children as they work each math problem or write spelling sentences, middle school parents may support their children by simply making sure their homework is complete. Or, they may ask students questions

[6] The Gap Analysis that NSSD conducted prior to drafting the Blueprint to 2015 strategic plan indicated that parents and teachers have varying perceptions of parents' levels of involvement.

about what they are learning in class. Middle school teachers and administrators could provide guidance for parents so that they know how to better support their children's academic and nonacademic success. Based on the data collected in this study, I cannot provide examples of this form of involvement taking place.

Decision Making is the fifth, and arguably one of the most difficult type of involvement to implement well. NSSD requires that every school has parent representatives on the site-based School Planning Councils (SPC). All of the middle schools I interviewed except for Greenwich Middle also had parents as PTA presidents. While the middle schools complied with the district policy of having parents in leadership positions, most schools failed to include parents who were representative of the diverse school population. Most principals asked parents who already volunteered during the day to serve on the SPC. In most cases, these were White mothers. A parent from Salem Middle explained that the principal "transplanted" the parents from his PTA executive board onto the SPC. I will discuss this in further detail below, but in most schools parents involved in Decision Making were not inclusive.

Another challenge NSSD experiences with decision making is gathering and disseminating information from SPC meetings to the entire parent population. This is the main challenge that makes decision making difficult for most schools to implement well. Not only should parent leaders on decision making committees represent the school population, they should also have mechanisms to share information from the planning committee with the full parent population and gather input from the parent population for the SPC. In NSSD, I did not see or hear about any examples of this kind of two-way action to involve all parents along with parent leaders.

In order to have a more comprehensive middle school parent involvement program, schools will have to have more diversity in parent participation on their SPCs, disseminate information from SPC meetings to all parents, and encourage parent feedback.

The final type of involvement is Collaborating with the Community. Many middle schools mentioned that they have strong relationships with business partners, alumni, and other organizations. Each school has a Partner in Education coordinator who works with a district leader from the Office of Media and Communications to form relationships with external agencies. The middle school representatives that I interviewed mostly noted that their community partners provided monetary support, although some also held activities in the community to encourage higher parent attendance at events.

Community collaboration can be beneficial in middle and high schools because adolescents are increasingly testing their independence and do not necessarily want their parents as involved in the same ways they were in elementary school. Community partners represent other (non-parent) adults with valued resources and skills. Businesses may offer a space to conduct workshops or provide human resources to serve as experts for a curricular lesson or activity. In NSSD, many community partners subsidize costs for print materials or other resources, such as the flash drives that Townlanding Middle School received for their technology parent night.

In sum, the middle schools in North Shore School District shared examples for five of the six types of involvement. This suggests that, although they have much work to do, they are on a path to making their parent involvement program comprehensive.

Not surprisingly, the schools implement some types better than others. In general, NSSD's middle schools conduct Communicating, Volunteering, and Collaborating with the Community quite well, though they still neglect some underserved parents. Most middle schools struggled with Parenting, Learning at Home, and Decision Making. District leaders appeared to be aware of the obstacles their schools experienced as they worked to implement comprehensive parent involvement programs. As they continue to cultivate home-school relationships, these three types of involvement represent areas with continuing challenges.

Implementing Inclusive Parent Involvement Practices

This study also explored whether and how middle schools were inclusive of all parents. NSSD still struggles to involve all middle school families in their children's education. I discussed some examples of this above, including the fact that, in many schools, parents from diverse groups served by the schools were not represented on the School Planning Council and did not volunteer because of their work schedules or because they did not feel comfortable becoming involved in at-school events. Interviewees at all of the schools recognized the need to have more inclusive opportunities for parents to become involved, and they were aware that they are struggling to accomplish this goal.

NSSD district leaders focused one of the eight key strategies on their parent involvement strategic plan about inclusion. This strategy states that the district will "Continue to develop and implement outreach to under-served families." The key measure of this strategy is "Increased participation in the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS)." Clearly inclusion is on the district's and schools' radars in

terms of improving their parent involvement programs, but many lack strategies or examples of how to involve all parents in middle school.

Some middle schools do a better job than others of involving under-served families. Townlanding Middle School has a diverse group of parents by gender and race on its School Planning Council. The principal at Townlanding deliberately invited parents to serve on the committee who would represent the school population. While the school may still struggle with disseminating SPC information and decisions to all parents, the school made a start to include diverse parents on the SPC.

Other middle schools held activities in the community to encourage greater parent participation. Morningside's principal recognized that some parents did not attend school-based events because they had poor past educational experiences. These parents did not seem comfortable coming to the school for any activity or conference. As a result, Morningside held a Community Outreach and Empowerment Dinner in the parents' apartment complexes as a way of showing the families that the school understood their feelings and wanted them involved regardless of the obstacles.

Still other middle schools, such as Draper, conduct family nights specific to various populations, such as English Language Learners. Targeting specific populations for workshops can help to ensure inclusion.

Having an inclusive parent involvement program in middle school requires that administrators allocate time, money, and energy to ensure that all parents become involved in their children's education. Inclusion is a particularly challenging task in middle school because so much parent involvement occurs outside of the school building. In other words, it is difficult for schools to measure the nature or amount of parent

involvement that takes place because they cannot see it and cannot easily measure actions and attitudes that occur at home. Although parents may not seem actively engaged in their children's education, they may, in fact, be very involved and simply not able to attend school functions.

I believe that an important step to a more inclusive involvement program would be to have greater diversity in parent participation on the School Planning Council. That initial step could help more parents feel that their interests were represented at the school and that their opinions mattered. Many schools' SPCs were not inclusive. For example, Draper Middle School's SPC focused most on decreasing the achievement gap between White male students and African American and Latino male students, yet only White mothers served as parent representatives. Principals could be more purposeful in their selections, as the Townlanding Middle School principal was, in recruiting parents to serve on the SPC. This may take more planning and time, but is one example of how school leadership can play a pivotal role in cultivating inclusive parent involvement.

In sum, NSSD's middle schools struggle to have inclusive parent involvement programs. As the PTA president at Southport Middle School stated,

> "The movers and shakers from elementary school are the same movers and shakers in middle school and will probably be the same movers and shakers in high school."

Some parents will become actively engaged partners in their children's education regardless of practices the school implements. Other parents require middle schools to reach out to them with guidance on how they can better support their children's current schooling and future success. Although NSSD has policies and staff to help schools

develop comprehensive parent involvement programs, its middle schools, like many middle schools, have much to do to involve under-served families in their efforts to help all students succeed.

Contributions to the Literature

This study is grounded in both parent involvement and policy implementation literature. In Chapter One, I outlined the micro and macro perspectives through which I analyzed NSSD's district-level and school-based implementations of parent involvement policy. Specifically, I explored factors that affect the capacity and will of district's assistance to schools and principals' parent involvement practices at the school level. At the beginning of this chapter, I revised Figure 1 to recognize that schools must accept district support and if they did, they may affect the capacity (knowledge and skills) and will (attitudes and resulting actions) of district leaders in a reciprocal process.

In Chapter One, I also explained the Six Types of Involvement framework I used to examine comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement. It is important to see how the findings in Chapters Four, Five, and Six add new knowledge to the existing literature.

Contribution to Policy Implementation Literature

Several studies explored factors that impact policy implementation. Cohen, Moffit, and Goldin (2007) defined interactions between policymakers and practitioners at different levels of an organization. McLaughlin (1987) defined those interactions as macro- and micro-entities. My study built on both of these frameworks and defined policymakers (macro) as district-level administrators in NSSD and practitioners (micro) as principals in middle school. Using these frameworks, I identified various interactions

between leaders at the district and school levels that influenced the implementation of district policy on parental involvement in schools.

North Shore School District provides an unusually broad range of district leaders' capacity building opportunities for principals and other school-level implementers of the district's parent involvement policy. The extent to which principals participated in capacity building activities depended mainly on their individual will (i.e., attitudes and resulting actions), influenced, in part, by the strength of the social and professional networks in which principals participated. To date, studies address the specific actions that districts take to support school-level practices (Epstein, Galindo & Sheldon, 2011; Honig, 2008), but they do not examine how these actions might be influenced across organizational levels by social factors that might enhance the willingness of leaders at different levels to engage in capacity building and take action.

My study suggests that principals' interactions with each other and with district leaders influenced whether they participated in capacity building activities to increase their knowledge and skills on partnerships and affected their will to take actions to improve their schools' partnership programs.

NSSD district leaders for partnerships offer the same opportunities and support to every building principal, but it is up to school leaders to request and accept district guidance and support. Findings indicate that principals who are friends with district leaders are more likely to ask them for assistance and advice on parent involvement than are principals who are not close to district administrators. Also, some of the principals who participated in this study formed their own professional social networks to share newsletters, activity ideas, and tips to involve under-served families with each other.

This study adds to the literature on policy implementation by indicating not only what districts leaders can do to build capacity at the school-level, but also how social and professional interactions within and across organizational levels strengthen leaders' capacities and will to develop their partnership programs.

This study also contributes to policy implementation literature by considering the effectiveness of mandates versus inducements. As I read related literature, I realized that my study revisited aspects of some classic questions on policy implementation. McLaughlin and Shields (1987) addressed the role of policy in involving low-income parents and concluded that:

> "Mandates have proved unable to generate parent involvement to any great extent. Norm-based pressures—those that are tied to the incentives, values, and priorities that influence the behavior of teachers and administrators—may prove more effective in encouraging parent involvement." (p. 159)

North Shore School District does have a policy but not many *mandates* for parent involvement in middle school. Rather, principals have autonomy to decide how and to what extent they will involve parents. Although social and professional networks created "norm-based pressures" to promote and improve parental involvement, these did not affect all school administrators to make parent involvement a priority in their schools. Thus, less formal inducements may not be enough to ensure that all middle schools strengthen and sustain comprehensive and inclusive programs of parent involvement, especially where will is weak among principals, teachers, and parents. Currently, in NSSD, capacity building is left entirely up to the will of principals to participate, and resulting actions are up to the will of principals to enact. It may be that a balance of

mandates *and* inducements are needed to encourage all middle school principals within a district to participate in capacity building activities and increase their will to put new knowledge and skills into action to improve their partnership programs.

Finally, my study addresses the importance of policy language. It is known that a policy must be vague enough to reach and meet the needs of large and diverse populations, yet specific enough to provide general guidelines that all practitioners can implement (Cohen, Moffitt, & Golding, 2007; Hill, 2006). This study provides a concrete example of one district's efforts to write and implement a parent involvement policy that is both comprehensive and inclusive. NSSD's policy states that schools should involve under-served families, yet most schools still involve mainly "easy-to-reach" populations. This is particularly true for parent involvement in decision making activities, where traditionally under-served populations remain disconnected from decision making input and leadership. Data from district leaders, principals, and parents in this study suggest that more work is needed to align the district's policy intent and schools' outreach to and involvement of underserved parents.

Contribution to Parent Involvement Literature

This study also contributes new knowledge to the current research base on parental involvement. My findings support research on the benefit of schools being nested within districts that support all schools' parent involvement initiatives (Epstein, Galindo & Sheldon, 2011). My study indicates, however, that a supportive district is necessary but not sufficient to promote comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement in all schools. Successful parent involvement program development is contingent upon

school leaders taking advantage of districts' support, guidance, and capacity building opportunities

My study also adds to the literature on the importance of principal's leadership on parental involvement (Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). Parent interviewees and assistant principals indicated that principals are, indeed, the driving force behind the success or failure of parent involvement. Principals set low or high expectations for how all teachers should work with parents. Typically, the principals who received the most favorable remarks from parents were those who participated in district-led capacity building activities, had large social and professional networks, and were active in developing positive parental involvement programs. Principal-to-principal collaboration seemed particularly valuable for whether a middle school was taking strong steps to involve under-served families. Principals who formed professional learning communities and shared ideas with other principals were more likely to conduct activities to reach out to and engage under-served families. The study strongly suggests that principal leadership encourages or discourages parent involvement based on the level of communication and collaboration of principals with other principals and with district colleagues.

Finally, this study contributes to the limited literature on parental involvement in middle school. Extant studies document that parent involvement declines when children enter secondary schools (e.g. Brandon, 2007; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Ferguson & Rodriguez, 2005). Not many studies delineate successful ways to involve parents of middle school children, but see Van Voorhis on studies affecting middle grade students' achievement in language arts and science (2011).

My study identifies ways in which middle schools might involve parents to positively influence their children's academic and nonacademic success. While I did not study the transportability of these activities, several findings are worth noting. At-home involvement activities, such as how to help with homework and talking with children about postsecondary plans, are some ways in which parents can remain or become involved in their children's education. Parents of middle school children can stay informed and involved by using such resources as the Parent Portal and the Alert Now automated phone system. Connecting academic-based activities with highly attended events, such as plays or football games, may be another way that middle schools can encourage increased parent engagement.

As research on middle school parental involvement policy implementation continues, scholars may consider focusing attention on the nature of leadership and the interactions of leaders at macros and micro levels. This study confirms that principals are crucial influences on the extent to which parent involvement is implemented in their schools. Further, their interactions with district leaders and other school-level colleagues may be particularly important in the extent to which they encourage faculty and staff to work with families.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

While this study added to the body of literature about middle school parent involvement, further investigations are needed to continue moving the field forward and improving policy and program implementation. In an "ideal parent involvement world," school districts use research to inform policy that guides practice to involve all families in their children's education. In reality, this rarely occurs. Below I outline suggestions for

further research, policy, and practice in hopes of improving parent involvement programs in middle schools.

Research

The methodological design of this study allowed me to gain in-depth insights into one school district's implementation of middle school parent involvement. The weakness of case study methodology is that it does not allow for broad generalizations, even when it is helpful in forming theories. Researchers who wish to further study this topic may elect to conduct a quantitative study in order to generalize the findings of this investigation to a broader population of schools. While I believe that my conclusions are reliable and valid because they reflect cross-checks and confirmations across interviewees, future studies will confirm and extend these findings to additional schools and social contexts.

Future research should involve a wider participant population from middle schools. This study is limited because I interviewed parents whom the principals referred to me. Most of the parents were white already-active mothers and none would be considered "under-served." It was clear that NSSD faced the common challenge of developing inclusive parent involvement programs that reach out to all families, including those not typically involved in the schools and in their children's education. In order to better target and assist under-served parents, future studies should include their voices in the interviews. Researchers may ask parents how they are currently involved, how they would like to be involved, and what support from schools would be useful.

Another limitation of this study is the number of middle schools that participated. Eight of NSSD's 14 middle schools agreed to take part in this study. While I cannot

speak to the parent involvement practices that occurred at the other six schools, I question why the principals declined to participate. Perhaps they did not believe that parent involvement is as important as did the participants, or that they have solved collaboration challenges and had nothing to gain from participating in this study. The non-participating principals may simply have lacked the time to participate. Whatever the reason, the results of this study would have been stronger had all 14 middle schools participated. More complete data would have provided better insights into how the district's efforts to provide capacity building opportunities to its schools affected principals' will to take action to improve their schools' parent involvement programs.

Other investigations about the implementation of middle school parent involvement also should include teacher interviews. I did not include teachers in this study because I wanted to focus on the role of school- and district-level leadership, specifically principals at the school level, in parent involvement program implementation. However, teachers' views would add valuable insights into the development of successful middle school parent involvement practices, especially how principals cultivate (or fail to cultivate) teachers' engagement in these practices. Teachers would shed further light on the impact that principals have on middle school parent involvement and why successful implementation is so challenging.

Policy

Although this is a case study of a single school district, it has potential implications for policy development and implementation. One implication of this study is that district leaders develop stronger policies for parental involvement if they do preparatory research to learn the needs and interests of parents at all school levels. One

positive feature of NSSD's parent involvement policy was that it stemmed from the district's preparatory research. The district conducted studies of parents' perceptions of involvement and held focus groups and forums to identify under-served parents. They involved multiple stakeholders in drafting the policy. NSSD leaders reported that the district routinely revises its parent involvement policy based on newly identified needs of their population.

Another aspect of policy that must be addressed involves oversight. Having a policy is helpful to guide practice, but evaluating its implementation is critical and challenging. As reported in Chapter Six, NSSD's middle schools complied with the requirements for Title I schools listed in NCLB Section 1118. However, only a small percentage of parents actually became involved in capacity building activities. Although the district's goal is to ensure that all parents are actively engaged partners in their children's education, NSSD still has work to do to solve this challenge, as do other districts across the United States.

My study points out that there is a disconnect between federal and local policy mandates, inducements and capacity building opportunities, and oversight for ensuring that all middle schools are working to improve their partnership programs. The language of policy should be broad enough to guide districts and schools serving various populations, yet specific enough to ensure that groups of parents are not excluded. Accomplishing this task is not easy. It requires that multiple stakeholders work together to provide feedback about the policy. It necessitates that knowledgeable workers evaluate policy implementation and recognize the challenges that schools encounter when conducting parent involvement activities. Finally, drafting useful policy requires that

policymakers use research and practice to provide adequate inducements and oversight to help districts encourage comprehensive and inclusive parent involvement in middle school.

Practice

Middle schools need examples of successful parent involvement practices in order to understand that they, like other schools, could improve their partnership programs. This study provided some insights into what middle schools could do to better involve parents. Many forms of parent involvement take place outside of the school, such as following academic progress on Parent Portal, driving children to various extracurricular events, and having informal conversations about academic and nonacademic subjects. The school-based forms of parent involvement are typically not academic in nature, such as making copies and attending sporting events.

Middle school parents also mentioned that they are more likely to become actively engaged, particularly at the school, if it directly involves their children. This is a challenge because many children desire increased freedom from their parents, especially as they approach high school. The paradox of parents getting involved when it directly relates to their children and students wanting more autonomy create unique challenges for middle school parent involvement practices.

Secondary schools may struggle with parent involvement because many districts have a one-size-fits-all approach to it. Most positive parent involvement practices are elementary in nature, such as Dr. Seuss Family Night and skating parties. Middle schools need more examples of successful strategies to involve parents. However, most schools

do not know how this should look. As the principal at West Side Middle School stated, "I know I want more parent involvement. I just don't know what that is."

Middle schools may not need more parent involvement as much as they need *productive* parent involvement. For example, if schools struggle to have parents attend academic workshops but always have stellar attendance at band concerts, then middle schools could distribute academic or other information to parents or gather their ideas at the band concerts. Of course, schools also need to ensure that parents who cannot attend school events also receive the information, whether through newsletters, websites, or phone messages. Middle schools may also encourage more involvement at home by sharing strategies and instructional expectations for parents to use while helping their children with homework.

This study produced new knowledge and revealed the need for further research. This study informs the field of the role that district leaders and school principals play and the challenges they face in cultivating comprehensive and inclusive middle school parent involvement. The study sets a base for future investigations that include a larger sample of parents and a broader sample that includes teachers. By addressing research questions on district and school leadership, this study informs policy and practice and should improve parent involvement programs in middle schools so that every parent can become an actively engaged partner in supporting student achievement and outcomes for student success.

Appendix A
Table of District Administrators Who Participated in the Study

District Administrator Name	Title	Parent Involvement Responsibility
Mrs. Gardner	Assistant Superintendent for Media and Communications Development	Oversees implementation for district-wide parent and community strategic plan
Ms. Lockhart	Director of Community Relations	Supervises programs related to parent and community engagement
Ms. McKay	Title I Specialist	Works directly with Title I elementary schools and indirectly with secondary schools through the National Network of Partnership Schools
Mr. O'Neill	Director of Custodial Services	Oversees implementation for district-wide parent and community strategic plan
Ms. Phillips	Title I Specialist	Works directly with Title I elementary schools and indirectly with secondary schools through the National Network of Partnership Schools
Mrs. Raddon	Title I Specialist	Works directly with Title I elementary schools and indirectly with secondary schools through the National Network of Partnership Schools
Ms. Sommer	Partners in Education Coordinator	Works with Partners in Education and each school and coordinates school-community partnerships

Appendix B
Table of Middle School Principals Who Participated in the Study

Principal Name	School Name	Tenure as Principal
Mr. Caldwell	Brier Hill Middle School	3 Years at Brier Hill MS
Mrs. Johnson	Draper Middle School	3 Years at Draper MS
Mrs. Daily	Greenwich Middle School	3 Years at Greenwich MS 39 Years as Principal in NSSD
Dr. Young	Morningside Middle School	2 Years at Morningside MS 7 Years as Principal in NSSD
Dr. Olsen	Southport Middle School	4 Years at Southport MS
Dr. Simpson	Thorne Middle School	6 Years at Thorne MS 10 Years as Principal in NSSD
Mr. Goodman	Townlanding Middle School	First Year at Townlanding MS
Mr. Feather	West Side Middle School	First Year at West Side MS 8 Years as Principal in NSSD

Appendix C
Table of Middle School Assistant Principals Who Participated in the Study

Assistant Principal Name	School Name	Tenure as Assistant Principal
Ms. Davis	Brier Hill Middle School	7 Years AP at Brier Hill MS
Mr. Bishop	Draper Middle School	3 Years AP at Draper MS
Mr. Jones	Draper Middle School	6 Years AP at Draper MS
Mrs. Nelson	Draper Middle School	4 Years AP at Draper MS
Mrs. Edwards	Greenwich Middle School	1 Year AP at Greenwich MS
Mr. Atkinson	Morningside Middle School	3 Years AP at Morningside MS
Mr. Pearson	Southport Middle School	3 Years AP at Southport MS
Ms. Quinn	Southport Middle School	5 Years AP at Southport MS
Mrs. Tompson	Thorne Middle School	10 Years AP at Thorne MS
Mr. Hunt	Townlanding Middle School	6 Years AP at Townlanding MS
Ms. Irving	Townlanding Middle School	6 Years AP at Townlanding MS
Ms. Kaplan	Townlanding Middle School	1 Year AP at Townlanding MS
Ms. Gillespie	West Side Middle School	8 Years AP at West Side MS
Mrs. Hamilton	West Side Middle School	2 Years AP at West Side MS

Appendix D
Table of Middle School Parents Who Participated in the Study

Name of Parent	Name of School	Grade of Middle School Child	Role in Middle School
Mrs. Ebert	Brier Hill Middle School	7th Grade	PTA President and serves on School Planning Council
Mrs. Franklin	Brier Hill Middle School	7th Grade	Volunteer in Education Coordinator and serves on School Planning Council
Mrs. Hicks	Draper Middle School	7th Grade	PTA President and serves on School Planning Council
Mrs. Armstrong	Draper Middle School	7th and 8th Grade	Serves on School Planning Council
Mrs. Barnett	Morningside Middle School	7th Grade	Serves on School Planning Council
Ms. Campbell	Morningside Middle School	7th Grade	PTA President and serves on School Planning Council
Mr. Reese	Southport Middle School	6th Grade and 8th Grade	PTA President and serves on School Planning Council
Ms. Vogler	Thorne Middle School	6th Grade	Requested to serve on School Planning Council but did not receive follow-up from school
Mrs. Walsh	Thorne Middle School	No children currently at Thorne, children in high school and college	PTA President and serves on School Planning Council
Mrs. Lowell	Townlanding Middle School	7th Grade	PTA President and serves on School Planning Council
Mrs. Miller	Townlanding Middle School	6th Grade	Serves on School Planning Council
Mrs. Nissen	Townlanding Middle School	6th Grade	Serves on School Planning Council
Mrs. Jackson	West Side Middle School	8th Grade	Serves on School Planning Council
Mrs. Kimball	West Side Middle School	7th Grade	Serves on School Planning Council

Appendix E
District Protocol

1. How long have you been working on parent involvement in the school district?
2. How much of a priority does the district place on parent involvement? How and why?
3. How much of a priority do you believe middle schools place on parent involvement?
4. What role do you believe middle school parents should play in their children's education?
5. What factors do you believe influence the extent to which schools promote parent involvement?
6. The district's parent involvement component of Blueprint to 2015 states that parents should be "actively engaged partners" in their children's education. How do you define "actively engaged partners?"
7. What factors do you believe influence the extent to which schools promote parent involvement?
8. In general, how well do you think middle schools are currently promoting parent involvement?
9. Are some middle schools better than others at promoting parent involvement? If so, what do you think makes those schools more successful?
10. How do you help middle schools promote parent involvement?
11. What challenges do you encounter when helping middle schools involve all parents?
12. What would you like to change about the schools'/district's parent involvement initiatives? Why?
13. Is there anything else about the school's parent involvement initiatives that you would like to tell me?

Appendix F
School Leader Protocol (Principal and Assistant Principal)

1. What is your position in the school?
2. What role do you play in implementing parent involvement in your school?
3. How much of a priority does the school place on parent involvement? How and why?
4. What role do you believe middle school parents should play in their children's education?
5. The district's parent involvement component of Blueprint to 2015 states that parents should be "actively engaged partners" in their children's education. How do you define "actively engaged partners?"
6. What factors do you believe influence the extent to which parents get involved?
7. Are some parents more involved than others? How and why?
8. What factors do you believe influence the extent to which schools promote parent involvement?
9. How well implemented are the parent involvement initiatives conducted in the school? Are some implemented better than others? If so, how and why?
10. Are some middle schools better than others at promoting parent involvement? If so, what do you think makes those schools more successful?
11. What challenges do you encounter when trying to promote parent involvement? What do you believe is the reason for these challenges?
12. What support do you receive from the district regarding parent involvement?
13. What support do you receive from other teachers and administrators regarding parent involvement?
14. How would you like to improve the school's parent involvement initiatives? Why? How?
15. Is there anything else about the school's parent involvement initiatives that you would like to tell me?

Appendix G
Parent Protocol

1. How long have you been on the School Planning Council?
2. How did you become a member of the School Planning Council?
3. How much of a priority does the school place on parent involvement? How and why?
4. What role do you believe middle school parents should play in their children's education?
5. In what ways are you involved in your child's education?
6. The district's parent involvement component of Blueprint to 2015 states that parents should be "actively engaged partners" in their children's education. How do you define "actively engaged partners?"
7. What factors impact the extent to which you/other parents become involved?
8. Are some parents more involved than others? How and why?
9. What factors do you believe influence the extent to which schools promote parent involvement?
10. How well implemented are the parent involvement initiatives conducted in the school? Are some implemented better than others? If so, how and why?
11. Are some middle schools better than others at promoting parent involvement? If so, what do you think makes those schools more successful?
12. What challenges do you encounter when trying to promote parent involvement both on the School Planning Council and in your own child's education?
13. What would you like to change about the school's parent involvement initiatives? Why?
14. Is there anything you would like to change about your own parent involvement practices?
15. Is there anything else about the school's parent involvement initiatives that you would like to tell me?

Appendix H

Initials _____ Date _____

CONSENT FORM

Project Title	**The Sustainability of Parent Involvement in Middle Schools: The Role of District and School Leaders**
Why is this research being done?	This is a research project being conducted by Darcy Hutchins under the guidance of Dr. Robert Croninger (Principal Investigator) at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because of your leadership role in the school or district and because of your work with parents and teachers. The purpose of this research project is to understand how principals and district leaders impact the sustainability of middle school parent involvement programs.
What will I be asked to do?	You would participate in at least one interview about middle school parent involvement. Each interview should not take more than one hour and will be completed within the school or district building. The name and location of the school will not be revealed in any of the resulting documents and your name will never be used. The project will last from September 2009 through May 2010.
What about confidentiality?	We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, the following will occur: 1) No names of participants will be used and the location (city, state, school name, district name) of the study will not be revealed nor any information that could lead to the specific identity of the school (2) You will be referred to using a pseudonym and no clearly distinguishing information will be revealed in resulting documents (3) through the use of an identification key, the researcher will be able to link information to your identity; and (4) only the researcher will have access to the identification key. **During each interview, the researcher will ask you if it is okay if she records the conversation only for the purposes of clearly remember what you say. In any recordings we will only use your pseudonym.** Your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

What are the risks of this research?	There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.
What are the benefits of this research?	This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about how middle schools can develop and sustain positive parent involvement practices. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the important role of principals and district leaders in the development and sustainability of parent involvement at the middle school level.
Do I have to be in this research? May I stop participating at any time?	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

What if I have questions?	This research is being conducted by Darcy Hutchins under the guidance of Dr. Robert Croninger at the University of Maryland, College Park. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Dr. Robert Croninger at: 2110D Benjamin Building, College of Education, Department of Education Policy Studies, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742. Dr. Croninger's email is croninge@umd.edu. **Darcy Hutchins' contact information is** dhutchins@csos.jhu.edu **and her phone number is 410-516-8893.** If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: **Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail)** irb@deans.umd.edu**; (telephone) 301-405-0678** This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.	
Statement of Age of Subject and Consent	*Your signature indicates that:* • *you are at least 18 years of age;,* • *the research has been explained to you;* • *your questions have been fully answered; and* • *you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.*	
Signature and Date	**NAME OF SUBJECT**	
	SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT	
	DATE	

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