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Beyond Input: Achieving Authentic Participation in School Reform

M. Elena Lopez and Holly Kreider of HFRP present a framework of authentic parent participation in school reform and its implications for evaluation.

Standards-based reform offers a vision of high-quality education for all students. Although educators closely scrutinize how this reform impacts students and teachers, they pay less attention to how it is changing the parameters of parent involvement. As parents and community members learn about school performance and achievement gaps among students, they seek greater participation in the basic decisions that affect their schools. Beyond providing input on school plans, they strive toward authentic participation.

Derived from the study of public administration, the concept of authentic participation refers to people's "deep and continuous involvement in administrative processes with the potential for all involved to have an effect on the situation" (King, Feltey & Susel, 1998, p. 320). In the context of school reform, authentic participation can be characterized by:

1. A community of parents committed to school improvement
2. Relationships of trust between parents and schools
3. Development of parent participation and leadership skills
4. Parent opportunity to influence the process and outcomes of an issue
5. Parent participation in a deliberation process where all participants are on an equal footing
6. New roles for school administrators and teachers as partners who listen to parent concerns, work with them on issues, and engage them in open dialogue
7. Changes in local administrative systems to support authentic participation

These seven elements offer a framework for developing a parent engagement strategy and evaluating it as well. Below we offer examples of parent and community efforts that reflect these elements of authentic participation.

A Community of Parents Committed to School Improvement

Relationships among parents open a space for the exchange of ideas and concerns, and reinforce the collective energy to make change happen. Parents become role models for each other in leadership development and connect with other parents to extend the circle of participation.

Through formal training and informal networking opportunities, the Parent Services Project (PSP) nurtures a core leadership group in several schools in Marin County, California. It focuses on building a sense of community among parents as a prerequisite to issue identification. PSP's Mauricio Palma notes, "The building of relationships between parents happens through an informal process of dinners and bagel breakfasts. During these times, issues begin to surface in conversations. Then we help people reflect on these issues, such as student safety, nutrition, and homework support." With confidence gained by their PSP experience, Latino parent leaders at one elementary school pressed the district to allow them to participate in hiring a new principal for their low-performing school. The candidate of their choice, a Latino who shared a similar immigrant experience with the parents, is now principal and has begun to improve the school's performance on state tests.

Relationships of Trust Between Parents and Schools

Trust exists when members of the schools and parents show respect and personal regard for one another and demonstrate competence and integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Trusting relationships do not preclude disagreement and conflict, but parents and school members work at negotiation and accommodation (Lewis & Forman, 2002).

Susan DeVenny, a parent leader from Parents for Public Schools (PPS), describes the group's approach in working with school administrators, "What I think works is building a relationship to the point where there is mutual respect and then saying, 'I care about your school and I want to support you, and for that reason, I'm bringing you these concerns in a thoughtful manner.'" A core group of PPS parents in her district in Lancaster County, South Carolina participate in policy decisions, reviews of new math textbooks, and a feasibility study on whether to set up a foundation for the schools. "The schools think of us getting involved at the front end. We're stakeholders in school decisions."

Development of Parent Participation and Leadership Skills

Authentic participation requires new roles for parents as advocates and decision makers. To accomplish these roles parents need help with understanding complex reform issues and how they can support and monitor the implementation of reforms.

Through the Prichard Committee's Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership (CIPL) parent leaders learn about Kentucky's standards and how to use school achievement data to initiate school projects that strengthen student achievement. Parent leader Chuck Matthews is implementing a project in which local churches offer parent and community support to a school with low student test scores. He convened pastors who committed their churches to "sponsoring" teams of students—by having congregation members support the students through activities such as mentoring, recognizing children's accomplishments during church services, and serving as advocates in the school when a student's parent is unable to do so.

Matthews explains that he gained principal and teacher buy-in by presenting a plan that could meet the school's family involvement goals, proposing clear measures of progress, and soliciting teacher participation in identifying the priority needs of each team of students. An evaluation of CIPL pointed to the importance of such skills among its parent leaders. Parents had to become "bilingual" to converse well, not only with parents, but with school personnel about important educational issues in order to effect change (Kroll, Sexton, Raimondo, Corbett & Wilson, 2001).

Parent Opportunity to Influence Process and Outcomes

In authentic participation, people are involved at the front end of the decision-making process and are not relegated to the back end of judging decisions previously made by public administrators (King, Feltey & Susel, 1998). Achieving this in an educational context often involves a concerted effort of parent groups to gain partnership status with schools or districts that do not share the expectation of joint decision making. Parent groups resort to both informal relationship building as well as organized collective action.

Boston Parent Organizing Network (BPON), a network of community-based organizations in Boston, Massachusetts, helps build the capacity of its member organizations to help parents take action around educational policy. Director Michele Brooks' past relationships with the school district and BPON's

credibility and respect have facilitated entry into conversations with the school superintendent and mayor.

When the superintendent planned to restructure the family and community engagement component of the system by moving it several levels down the bureaucracy, BPON opposed the change. Brooks recounts, "We felt it would muffle the voice of parents. We wanted them to have a direct line to the superintendent who after all works for parents ... We really fought and came up with an alternative plan that included having a Deputy Superintendent for Family and Community Engagement ... We now have this plan in place ... and we can push for the way we want things to happen."

Parent Participation in a Deliberation Process

The boundaries between expert and layperson are blurred in authentic participation. Participants acknowledge the value of the diverse perspectives and engage in a mutual learning experience. In a school context with sharp divisions between professional and layperson, parents gain credibility as partners through the actions that demonstrate their roles as champions of public education.

As communities have access to school data and find out their schools are failing, Parents for Public Schools has noted a growing rift between parents and schools. In Lancaster County, PPS parents were not satisfied with how the state reported school performance. Labels such as "satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory" did not capture the strengths and weaknesses of schools. Parents conducted their own research on the schools and developed a report card that gave a multi-dimensional assessment of each school. Susan DeVenny comments, "Our goal is to help schools improve where there are problems, but the assessment has to be fair and you have to look at multiple factors."

PPS has formed partnerships with school leaders at the administrative and elective levels to ensure that parent voices are counted at the levels where decisions are made. They meet with principals every other month to have a "candid dialogue" about school issues and to advocate for changes that parents want to see in schools.

More Information About the Parent Organizations

Boston Parent Organizing Network
www.bpon.org

Parents for Public Schools
www.parents4publicschools.com

Parent Services Project
www.parentservices.org

Parents United for Responsible Education
www.pureparents.org

Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence
www.prichardcommittee.org

New Roles for School Administrators and Teachers

It is not only parents whose roles must change to achieve authentic participation, but also school administrators and teachers. Administrators need to move from protecting their power to grounding it in the needs of the communities they serve. Both administrators and teachers need to transform their roles as experts to that of partners in their relationships with families.

The Parent Services Project combines the principles of family support with community organizing approaches. A key challenge and task is to have schools develop an awareness of family support principles and make them an integral part of the ways schools relate to families. Mauricio Palma describes these principles in the following manner:

- Families must be engaged in making decisions that affect the lives of their children.
- Families have ideas and concerns and can contribute to decision making.
- Family leadership must be defined not as just attending a 30-minute meeting to sign documents that need to be sent to the state, but a range of experiences that allow them to put their dreams into practice and help shape what happens in the school.
- Schools must create a dialogue with parents about what's needed to support children's school success.
- Schools should "do with" families rather than "do for" families.
- A relational culture must be established that transforms parent-parent and parent-teacher "connection" to "communion."

Local Administration Supporting Authentic Participation

Parents and local school administrators can seize the opportunity to promote authentic participation in the context of changing structural reforms in education. Whether the initial system changes are borne out of school district partnerships or agitation by local parent organizations, such changes can elevate parents' voices in school reform.

Parent representation on local school councils in Chicago, Illinois is a powerful example. Chicago's School Reform Act of 1987 requires elected local school councils with a majority of parents on each council. Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE) had a key role in passing the act, and now offers training to parents serving on local school councils (LSCs).

Julie Woestehoff, PURE Director, explains the many impacts of these changes. Schools are now very closely scrutinized in Chicago. Monthly local school council meetings which are parent-chaired provide a place and people to whom parents can bring concerns and have them addressed. Chicago now has a special environment, a formalized process, and political machinery for parents to hold schools accountable. Parents elected to LSCs have also caused changes in the educational leadership to better reflect diversity of the community.

Adourthus McDowell, a PURE parent and LSC member, invests considerable time holding the system accountable to parents. He explains that even though funds have been earmarked

for public participation and support, the system tends to monopolize the process and use rhetoric. School systems need pressure to reform, and parents must be prepared for the "long haul" for real changes in the system to occur.

Implications for Evaluation

In the context of standards-based reform and the new roles parents are assuming, evaluations must adopt broader conceptions of participation and use new methods to capture what parents are actually doing. Evaluations of parent involvement programs typically assess activities such as helping parents support student learning at home and improving parenting skills (Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez & Kayzar, 2002). Yet the above framework suggests that authentic participation by parents takes other forms, such as advocacy, decision making, and leadership. Evaluations need to capture the expanded roles of parents as well as changes in school roles and systems. The richness of transformations in parent leadership and school change resulting from such authentic participation in education reform also call for assessment approaches, such as mixed methods, that afford a greater understanding of both the processes and outcomes of authentic participation.

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