Disrupting the Narrative: Parent Engagement and Urban Families

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In a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day event hosted by the National Action Network, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan advanced, "education is the civil rights issue of our generation"[1] and "if we want our young people to have a chance to enter the mainstream of society and pursue the American Dream, they can only do that through education."[2]

In America, schools are essential vehicles that equip citizens with skills. They are perceived by the populace as a tool that extols the virtues of civic responsibility.[3] Education provides a means by which to level the achievement playing field and mitigate educational inequalities.[4] Through education, schools provide means to make the American Dream not only possible but attainable.

Furthermore, not only does education provide a vehicle that promotes individual success, education also provides an avenue to both revitalize and develop our nation's most impoverished communities. However, for all students to attain this goal, a comprehensive and systemic approach to academic success is needed.

A popular Nigerian proverb asserts, "It takes a village to raise a child." When it comes to parental engagement, this statement could not be more appropriate.[5] Research has shown that parental involvement in schools influence school outcomes in a positive and beneficial way for children.[6] As a result of the correlation between parent involvement and positive school outcomes, cross-sectional studies[7] as well as longitudinal case studies have indicated that higher levels of parental involvement equal greater academic success for students.[8]

Parental involvement continues to be listed as the main factor that directly correlates to student academic success.[9] Students have better attendance and experience greater success socially.[10] Parent engagement at an early age is directly linked to students experiencing in-

[1] Ballasy, N. (2011). U.S. Secretary of education: Education is 'the civil rights issue of our generation.' Retrieved from http://cbsnews.com/news/article/us-secretary-education-education-civil-rights-issue-our-generation.

[2] Dahl, R. A. (1998). *On democracy.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. de Carvalho, M. E. (2001). *Rethinking family school relations: A critique of parental involvement in schooling.* New York, NY: Teacher's College Press

[3] Ravitch, D. (2000). *Left back: A century of battles over school reform.* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

[4] Noguera, P. A. (2001). Transforming urban schools through investments in the social capital of parents. In S. Saegert, J. P. Thompson, & M. R, Warren (Eds.), *Social capital and poor communities* (pp. 189-214). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

[5] Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1991). Involving parents in the schools: A process of empowerment. *American Journal of Education, 100*(1), 20-46.

[6] Grolnick W. S, & Slowiaczek, M. L. (1994). Parents' involvement in children's schooling: A multidimensional conceptualization and motivational model. *Child Development, 65,* 237–252.

[7] Miedel, W. T., & Reynolds, A. J. (1999). Parental Involvement in early intervention for disadvantage children. Does it matter? *Journal of School Psychology, 36*(4), 379-402.

[8] Epstein, J. L. (1996) Advances in family, community, and school partnerships. *New Schools, New Communities, 12,* 5-13.

[9] Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on student achievement.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

[10] Hill, N. E., & Taylor, L. C. (2004). Parental school engagement and children's academic achievement: Pragmatics and issues. *Current Directions in Psychological Science 13*(2), 161-164.

creased social competence and language skills.[11] The importance of student school achievement is a chief contributing factor to their future status in society. It speaks to the ability for a student and their family to have social mobility.

All this said, educational research also shows that traditional avenues to engagement in schools are not open to every parent.[12] Barriers are created because traditional forms of engagement require time, awareness, and resources that are often not available to all parent groups. While nontraditional forms of engagement are available and have helped families to come together to build relationships between schools and parents, other, non-traditional forms of engagement are often not accounted for or recognized by schools and administrators.

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The Problem

Decades of research have revealed the need for, and benefit of, parental engagement in the educational lives of children and young adults.[13]

Aside from improving student test scores and grades, parental engagement has been shown to have positive effects on students' overall lives.[14] When congruency exists between home and school, students have a greater chance of academic success.

Thus, parents who are "in-tune" with their child's school and educational needs are in the position to be better advocates for their child. In-tune parents are typically connected with key players within the school—key players who have the ability to supply a child with resources, such as tutoring or extra help, if requested by the parent.

When parents are aware of the happenings within their child's school and classroom, congruency between home and school occurs. This congruency becomes synonymous with parental engagement and leads to parent-school collaboration. The level of congruency and the ability to aid in children's developmental and school success is often stymied when it comes to schools that serve urban populations. Such parents may lack the social capital and knowledge required to gain access to school administrators.[15] As a result, urban parents have been categorized as having low or non-existent parent engagement levels.[16]

Furthermore, various barriers and hindrances confront efforts to involve urban parents in home and school collaborative efforts. Challenges to home and school collaboration

[11] Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
[12] Bermudez, A. B., & Marquez, J. A. (1996). An examination of a four-way collaborative to increase parental involvement in the schools. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, 16,* 1-16. Van Voorhis, F. L. (2003). Interactive homework in middle school: Effects on family involvement and science achievement. *Journal of Educational Research, 96*(6), 323-338.

[13] Smith, J., & Wohlstetter, P. (2009). Parent engagement in urban charter schools: A new paradigm or the status quo? Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University, National

Center on School Choice. Retrieved from
http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/papers/Smith%20-Wohlstetter_COMPLETE.pdf.
[14] Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1991). Involving parents in the schools: A process of empowerment. *American Journal of Education 100*(1), 20-46.
[15] Osterling, J. P., Violand-Sanchez, E., & von Vacano, M. (1999). Latino families learning together. *Education Leadership, 57*(2), 64-68.
[16] Horvart, E. M., Weininger, E. B., & Lareau, A. (2003). From social ties to social capital: Class differences in the relations between schools and parent networks. *American Educational Research Journal, 40*(2), 319-351.

include divergent goals and motivations between parents and educators. They also include varying capacities of parents to understand schools and interface with them.[17] Some parents lack the time to be actively involved. Finally, cultural and class barriers may deter urban parent populations from participation.

Teachers often fear that talking about the role parents need to play in their children's education will sound like they are passing the buck. But the fact is, parents' contribution to the education of their children is essential. Parents are their children's first and, in many ways, their most valuable teachers.[18]

Scholars such Brantlinger have noted that parental-involvement approaches are often based on middle-class paradigms of how parents should interface with schools, making it more comfortable for middle- and upper-class parents to interact with schools than urban parents who lack access and social capital. For example, middle- and upper-class parents understand how schools function, are more at ease in interfacing with school personnel, and have the ability to secure information that can help them support their children.[19] Impediments to the inclusion of all parent voices hinder attempts to mobilize urban parents and thus deter the full engagement of parents from underrepresented groups.

Given the importance and benefits of parent-school engagement and the often-noted lack of such engagement among urban parents, K-12 schools that serve urban communities need to employ a framework that cultivates and encourages parent engagement.[20]

Hansen held that social class differences in the way parents relate to schools result from different values held by middle-class families compared to their urban counterparts.[21] Furthermore, in defining parental engagement, current literature mainly captures engagement practices that are reflective of parents who have higher levels of social capital and are from the middle class.

It is fair to conclude that a parental engagement framework that cultivates, encourages, and recognizes parental engagement within urban parent populations is needed.

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Lessons from Camden: Understanding Urban Parent Engagement Patterns

I conducted a study that examines urban parental experiences and engagement activities. I focused on those parents whose children attend LEAP Academy University Charter School in Camden, New Jersey.

The City. The area where the study took place is a clearly defined geographic area within

[17] Swap, S. M. (1990). *Developing home-school partnerships.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

[18] Brantlinger, E. A. (2003). *Dividing classes: How the middle class negotiates and justifies advantage.* New York, NY: Routledge/Palmer.

[19] Lee, J., & Bowen, N. (2006). Parent involvement, cultural capital, and the achievement gap among elementary school children. *American Educational Research Journal, 43,* 193-218.

[20] Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1991). Involving parents in the schools: A process of empowerment. *American Journal of Education, 100*(1), 20-46.

[21] Hansen, D. (1988). Schooling, stress, and family development: Rethinking the social role metaphor. In D. M. Klein & J. Aldous (Eds.), *Social stress and family development* (pp. 133-156.) New York, NY: Guilford.

Camden, New Jersey.[22] The area is an island of concentrated poverty that is slightly less than 11 miles long and is composed of more than 20 contiguous neighborhoods. The city is isolated, being cut off from Philadelphia, which is situated across the Delaware River.[23] Living in this area are hundreds of extremely poor families, many coping with an array of challenges: extreme poverty rates, a preponderance of single-family households, high unemployment rates, low educational attainment, teen pregnancy, high rates of violent crime, and a lack of resources and services.[24]

Over the past fifty years, a dramatic change in urban demographics has occurred as the middle class vacated urban centers like Camden in what is often referred to as white flight. By 1990, approximately 86% of Camden's residents were racial minorities. With the loss of the middle class, small businesses, and major manufacturing companies, Camden experienced a sudden and significant shift, resulting in tremendous environmental pressure on the city's ability to successfully function.

Today, roughly 77,344 people call Camden home. Of that population, 95% are African American or Hispanic, 45% live in poverty, 27% depend upon public assistance, one-third of infants receive routine prenatal care, more than two-thirds of households are single-parent households, homicide is the number one cause of death for people ages 15 to 24, and 49% of residents' experience food insecurity.[25]

Camden's public education system has also faced its share of woes. In 2000, the average amount of money spent on additional educational supports for classrooms in Camden was $82 per student, with the average extracurricular expenditure being $74 per a student.[26] Comparable figures for schools in the county were $127 and $238 per student, respectively. At the time of this study, only half of all Camden residents, age 25 and older, had a high school education, and seven percent had a college degree or higher.

The School. In the early 1990s, when Dr. Gloria Bonilla-Santiago, the founder of LEAP Academy University Charter School, created a strategic plan for the school, the first step in the planning agenda was the identification of stakeholders and creation of a partnership that would have the widest possible representation and participation of community interests.

Born out of the community's dissatisfaction with the Camden school system and the desire to provide all children with quality education, Project LEAP was created to reform not only the Camden school system, but also the larger Camden community. Participation in the creation of Project LEAP included Camden residents; Rutgers University administrators, faculty, and students; Camden public school superintendents, board members, central administrators, principals, teachers, parents, and students; the Camden mayor's office and social service agencies; public and private community organizations; members of the Camden clergy; the Camden business community; and the Delaware River Port Authority.

Today, the LEAP (Leadership, Education, and Partnership) Academy University Charter School is a K-12 public charter school that serves Camden, New Jersey.[27] It boasts one fundamental belief: "all children and families deserve access to a quality public education." LEAP Academy charter school was one of the first charter schools that opened in New Jersey

[22] City of Camden. (2015). *City of Camden history*. Retrieved from http://www.ci.camden.nj.us/history.

[24] Bonilla, S. G. (2014). *The miracle on Copper Street: Lessons from an inner city*. Richmond. B.C., Canada: Archway.
[25] City of Camden. (2015). *City of Camden history*. Retrieved from http://www.ci.camden.nj.us/history.

[27] LEAP Academy. (2009). LEAP Academy University Charter School Strategic Plan. Community Leadership Center, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ.

and the first in the city of Camden. The school serves 1,705 students.

The school provides a college preparatory education with an emphasis on the content areas of science, technology, education, and mathematics, as well as specialized career academies in business, liberal studies, and social sciences at the high school level. Attached to the school, there is a subsidiary Early Learning Research Academy (ELRA), which caters to students from the age of eight weeks to five years. Females account for 55% of students. 90% of students are eligible for free and reduced breakfast and lunch. The majority of students at LEAP are of Latino or African American ethnicity.

The Study. Using the Epstein Framework of Parent Involvement [28] as the theoretical framework for research, I sought to examine how social class shapes parental engagement. Using theories of social capital, I describe the formation of social networks between LEAP Academy parents and the way this was turned into valuable social capital.

Urban parents as a group are an understudied population in the United States. This unique group possesses its own organizational patterns and needs. Given this knowledge, I considered the following questions:

- In what ways do urban parents engage in the academic lives of their children?

- What innovative strategies does LEAP Academy University Charter School utilize to garner high levels of parental engagement?

- How should the definition of parental engagement be modified to take into account variant levels of social capital?

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[28] Epstein, J. L., & Dauber, S. L. (1991).School programs and teacher practices of parent involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools. *Elementary School Journal, 91*(3), 289-305.

Data for this study was collected through formal and informal interviews, documents review, and analysis of archival documents, participant observation, and survey analysis.

Empowering Parents

Our nation's school system is a direct reflection of the citizens that make up our society, necessitating strategies and programmatic efforts that are reflective and inclusive of each citizen.

In my study, I found that the school taught parents how to lobby lawmakers, how to protest, how to dress for success, and how to speak in public, as well as when to make noise and when to be quiet. Parents were enrolled in a training institute within the school that had a curriculum centered on advocacy, self-awareness, and pride in their community. The founder of the school utilized the Saul Alinsky method of empowerment to organize parents and provide them with a community school model.[29]

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The training institute built capacity in parents by graduating leaders. When parents graduated from the program, these parents then trained a new group of parents. According to an October 27, 1994 *Courier Post* article by David Gilmore,

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[29] Alinsky, S. (1971). *Rules for radicals*. New York, NY: Random House

Camden parents have always suffered from breakdown in communication…by giving parents the tools and trainings they need to communicate, [LEAP] is changing the whole paradigm for parental engagement in the city's education. The Parent Leader-to-Leader Institute program not only trained leaders, but also created new parent leaders to transform community and school. Urban parents, who for the most part have been told all their lives what to do and what they need, now have the opportunity to teach other parents the importance of getting involved in their children's education. This new ability is because of the skills provided to them by Project LEAP. [30]

The parents who had been recruited and organized to support LEAP Academy were adamantly opposed to a shared governance option. They threatened to withdraw from the training program if "their" new school was given back to the failed Camden school system that they were desperately trying to get away from.

The activism seen in parents was an early sign that LEAP had not only mobilized parents, but had effectively built capacity with their parents. Parents who at one point felt hopeless and powerless were banding together in opposition of an entire school system—the Camden school system. Parents, most of whom had no formal education, and some of whom barely spoke English, were now becoming empowered. "Parents talk about the school as if it were something belonging to them, and indeed it does…. LEAP lets parents help make decisions, and they are an integral part of what the school stands for."[31]

According to a *Courier Post* article, the mission of LEAP Academy is not only to provide seven hours of academic programming to stu-dents, but to become a place they consider home.

Parent engagement to me means getting involved in the school that our children are in. And it doesn't have to be my children because I consider LEAP to be my home—LEAP is my family and all the kids at LEAP are my kids. Even when my last child graduates four years from now, I think I'm still going to stay engaged in the school because of the community, the kids that come here…parent engagement to me is, us getting involved and making sure that the school is going to do the right thing. To make sure that the school is teaching. To make sure that our kids are not, I guess, wasting their time.[32]

Social capital at LEAP Academy is not about the individual, but an attribute of the collective community.[33] When LEAP planted the seeds of liberation, it empowered parents to become advocates in changing the academic landscape for their children.

Despite the socioeconomic status of the parents, LEAP wanted parents to be involved in the design, creation, and development of the school.[34] Allowing urban parents to play a role in their liberation created social ties and networks among LEAP parents, thereby increasing their social capital. The creation of social networks and social capital served as the catalyst for LEAP parents to understand the importance of becoming engaged in the academic life of their children.[35]

LEAP Academy was intentional during the planning and development phase of its exist-

[30] Gilmore, D. (1994, October 27). *Courier Post.*
[31] Interview, LEAP Employee, February 18, 2016.

[32] Ibid.
[33] LEAP Academy. (1993). LEAP Academy University Charter School Memoranda. Community Leadership Center, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ.
[34] Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York, NY: Seabury Press.
[35] Interview, LEAP Board Member, February 18, 2016.

ence. This level of intentionality triggered a positive chain of reactions that remains a part of the current school culture today. Parents are the pillars of LEAP Academy. Through comprehensive social services and programs, LEAP Academy is able to empower families, give hope to children and parents, and transform the lives of Camden families.

As a result of delivering these benefits to LEAP parents and children, LEAP Academy has managed to achieve high levels of parental engagement from its urban parent population. The efforts of LEAP Academy have not gone unnoticed from its parent population, as 69% of parents who completed the 2015 LEAP Parent Engagement Survey were satisfied with the parent programs at LEAP Academy, and 72% of parents reported overall satisfaction with the school.

Based on interviews conducted and documents reviewed, LEAP Academy provides parents with various points for engagement. LEAP meets parents at their level by not assuming that all parents know how to engage in the academic lives of their children. It empowers. It builds the capacity and social capital of parents through numerous parent-training programs. It allows parents the opportunity to be a part of the school's governance structure. It uses various forms of communication—both in English and Spanish. It enters into an agreement with parents through parental compacts. It is successful in its educational mission—as seen from the 100% graduation rate. The LEAP Family Engagement Model is a holistic model with the parent engaged with the school, the school engaged in the home.

This school challenges the dominant parental engagement paradigm. For Epstein's Framework of Parent Involvement is a lockstep method of parental involvement. Epstein's framework minimizes individuality and adheres to a one-size-fits-all approach to parenting. This approach alienates urban parents as it does not account for non-traditional ways that urban parents engage. Nor does it account for the need to build social capital and advocacy skills in parents prior to schools asking for urban parents to engage in the academic lives of their children.

The LEAP Family Engagement Model is an interactive model that forges collaboration and communication between the school and parents at all levels. LEAP's interactive approach to engaging parents gives birth to nontraditional forms of parent engagement, fosters innovative strategies for parental engagement, and lays the groundwork to augment the current definition of parental engagement.

> ***Parents were able to engage in all aspects of their children's lives at school***

Engaging Academically

The findings of the study showed that parents engage in the lives of their children in diverse ways, including volunteering at school, serving as a member of the governance structure, working as an employee of the school, and helping sew outfits for the school play.

Parents were able to engage in all aspects of their children's lives at school by advocating for the charter school bill, lobbying lawmakers, being present at school functions, visiting their children's classrooms, attending parent-training workshops, serving as parent chaperones for LEAP events, participating in social and networking events at LEAP, being a part of the teacher-hiring process, and playing an active role in the Parent Council.

At home, parents engaged in the academic lives of their children by serving as tutors, being present at extracurricular activities, helping with homework, purchasing school uniforms, serving as role models for their children, providing a stable home environment, making sure their

child was healthy enough to attend school, and assisting in the completion of school work.

The ways in which parents engage at LEAP eschew the traditional typologies set forth by Epstein's Framework of Parent Involvement. LEAP creates increased avenues for engagement to both reflect and include its urban parent population. Epstein often touted the importance of PTA meetings and school events (e.g., bake sales and car washes), but she failed to make concessions for urban parents whose lifestyles do not fit into the demographic of traditional notions of engagement.[36]

Due to overreliance on such frameworks, the ways by which urban parents engage have been left out of parental engagement conversations.

Redefining Engagement

Given the ways these urban parents engage, and the innovative strategies used to produce such high levels of engagement, how should the definition of parental engagement be modified?

Parental engagement as it is currently defined focuses on parent-child interaction and the use of investment and resources in the schooling of a child. Rather than positing a new definition, I identified five practices that should be incorporated into parental engagement to augment current definitions and present-day practices.

- We must first begin by replacing the word "involvement" with "engagement."
- All parental engagement strategies should include a component that develops parents as co-creators in the educational endeavor and builds their capacity.

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[36] Epstein, J. L. (1996) Advances in family, community, and school partnerships. *New Schools, New Communities, 12,* 5-13.

- Schools and parents should work together to co-create a shared vision and a code of conduct.
- Schools should take a comprehensive approach to engagement that includes services to support families: health centers, GED classes, college access, job creation, legal services, and overall wellness.
- The goal of the school should be to serve as a community for students and their families.

These practices, unlike the traditional definitions used today, do not assume that parents (a) know how to engage in the academic life of their child, (b) are knowledgeable about their role in the academic life of their child, and (c) are aware that their engagement in their child's life will be beneficial.

When these three assumptions are removed, we are able to take a more holistic and bottom-up approach to parental engagement that would be of benefit to and inclusive of all parents.

Urban families face a great deal of instability at home and need to be stabilized before they can be effective co-educators in their children's lives. These five suggested practices for parental engagement account for the possibility that parents are not aware and do not know the benefit of parental engagement. Furthermore, these practices speak to the creation of social and human capital within the lives of parents. As reflected in the LEAP Parent Engagement Model, these are all elements that are needed to effectively engage urban parent populations.

Final Thoughts

Through the study of a single public school that uses innovative approaches for parental engagement, this study aimed to re-examine accepted views, add new findings to the current

literature on parental engagement, and analyze how institutional arrangements can either facilitate or block engagement among urban parents.

The findings of this study indicate that urban parents engage in the academic lives of their children when schools implement a parental engagement framework that trains, cultivates, facilitates, and encourages myriad ways of engaging. My scholarship deepens our understanding of critically responsive parental engagement practices in a K-12 schooling.

> *… these practices speak to the creation of social and human capital within the lives of parents.*

Schools with substantial populations of students from urban families should work towards creating robust relationships and partnerships with parents and community members. When these authentic relationships are formed between schools and parents, they aid in the development of effective parent-education training programs, inclusive engagement practices and strategies, increased communication between the home environment and school, and increased student academic success. As affirmed by a LEAP Academy parent, "When a participatory process is sincere and inclusive, parents believe they are listened to and respected. You will have gone a long way in building parent ownership, support, and legitimacy."[37]

As a nation, we can no longer use a one-size-fits-all method to engage parents in their children's education. We must begin to change the narrative of how we define effective parental engagement strategies. Otherwise, we risk alienating vulnerable parent groups. Until we, as a nation, discontinue our overreliance on traditional notions of parental engagement, we will continue to alienate and fail our urban parents, whose desire is to be treated with the same respect and dignity as everyone else.

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[37] Interview, LEAP Parent, February 18, 2016