

What Does Parent Empowerment Look Like?

The State Education Department recognizes families and communities as essential stakeholders in school districts. This is made explicit by the inclusion of Family and Community Engagement (Tenet 6) as a pillar of the Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness or DTSDE rubric. The state encourages schools to “develop a systematic approach to Family and Community Engagement to empower parents to effectively advocate for their child’s learning and for the improvement of the school.” The DTSDE framework references both “Systems of Engagement” and Systems of Empowerment” (Tenet 6B). Tenet 6D demands that districts ensure that staff members “make purposeful efforts to avoid perpetuating stereotypes of any fashion, including cultural, linguistic, racial, and gender stereotypes” and “staff are mindful of implicit and unconscious bias, and staff reflect on how their responses may be informed by their own experiences and upbringing” (Tenet 6D). This language situates district’s family and community engagement efforts as a means of promoting in-school improvement efforts.

So, what does this look like?

In “Rewriting the Rules of Engagement,” University of Washington scholar Ann M. Ishimaru writes that “an underlying assumption that characterizes traditional partnership approaches is that expertise resides in educators and other professionals, not in parents, families and community members.” This approach is characterized by goals that “tend to focus on providing discrete supports through special projects or interventions at the expense of coordinated ongoing efforts to transform systems. In many of these instances, the problem of educational disparities is framed in terms of individual students or families, which can obscure the systemic roots of inequities” (Ishimaru, 2014). In order to shift away from the deficit-driven, superficial paradigm of traditional parent involvement strategies, Ishimaru develops a theoretical frame utilizing research on civic capacity (Stone, 2001) and community organizing for education reform (Mediratta et al., 2009) that aims to “illuminate the multi-level processes and mechanisms through which a district-community collaboration may be enacted” (Ishimaru, p. 192).

Her study focused on the work of the Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality, “a community based-organization (comprising primarily of members of the Latino community) dedicated to equity and social justice for children in the Salem-Keizer district and throughout Oregon” (Ishimaru, p. 196). The Coalition was founded against a backdrop of a significant increase in Spanish-speaking immigrants in Salem that “increased the number of ELLs tenfold” in local schools. Reflecting on the demographic changes, one district administrator said, “the community at large has not really recognized or embraced that image.” This “demographic denial,” combined with inadequate academic supports for Spanish speaking ELLs “converged with parents’ experiences of alienation in their children’s schools” that moved beyond “benign neglect or ignorance,” but constituted “outright racism.” District leaders “felt they had neither the technical expertise nor sufficient relational trust from members of the Latino community to effectively educate ELL students” (p. 197).

The Coalition’s initial efforts focused on public-facing, “top-down advocacy in high places” that consisted of “heated testimony at school board meetings” in which they demanded “cultural competency training for staff, a review of disciplinary practices, and an accounting of how the district spent designated federal funds to support ELL students.” While this called attention to important issues, it did not mobilize parents and families collectively or capitalize on their capacity to support their children. The Coalition then explored a “bottom-up approach” rooted in Freirean dialogue that “actively validated the parents’ own ways of knowing, engaged them in active learning from one another and improved their capacity to advocate for themselves and their children” (p. 198).

This was achieved through several trainings presented in Spanish “to help parents build their individual capacities and relationships...understand their rights and the public education system, as well as strengthen their relationships with other parents and educators” (p. 198). The trainings and networking built a sense of collective efficacy and helped develop skills to help parents navigate the institutional space of the school district that

had previously left them feeling alienated. The Coalition's Parent Organizing Project (POP) was especially fruitful in empowering parents and overcoming the traditional dynamics of district-family engagement initiatives:

In particular, involvement in the POP led to a new sense of empowerment for many parents, particularly women, and a core group of volunteer parent leaders emerged. Among them were two women who had been timid and afraid to talk in the group prior to the training programs. These women were from indigenous Mexican communities where Spanish was their second language and they had little formal education. After participating in the workshops and the POP sessions over several years, they began facilitating workshops for other parents, and several of the POP parents talked about them as being among the most confident facilitators in the group and particularly skilled at encouraging other parents to find their voices. The POP parents outside the core leadership team also noticed that the group of parent leaders, including but not limited to these women had become more active and prominent in the Coalition.

Empowering more parents to “find their voices” “played a key role in addressing the power imbalances that typically prevent parents from being ‘at the table’ with school personnel with formal authority” (p. 199).

This formal authority was operative in the hiring process for a new Superintendent, during which both Coalition leadership and parent advocates expressed the need for a Superintendent who would be responsive to the needs of ELLs and the Latino community. A board member stated, “I think that the positive attitude of the Coalition and the kinds of cooperative strands that we'd developed helped create an environment that allowed us to get a superintendent like Sandy [Husk]” (p. 201). For her part, Ms. Husk ‘assembled a leadership team that included more Latino/a administrators and educators experienced with working ELL populations, crafted a strategic plan that explicitly highlighted ELL instructional improvement, and shifted resources to the department focused on ELL support’” (p. 202).

With responsive leadership in place, “both the district and the Coalition sought to cultivate a culture of shared responsibility within which to enact systemic change work” in which “each stakeholder leveraged its own strengths and resources to enact capacity and relationship-building strategies” that would lead to more equitable educational experiences and outcomes for Latinx students in Salem-Keizer. The success of this initiative hinged upon the “district’s approach to parents as an internal, rather than external, constituency” (p. 210). Reframing parents as “internal” to the system allowed stakeholders to “shift relationships among parents, educators, elected officials, unions, higher educators, and business leaders to enable them to move from outsiders to key players in the process of educational transformation” (p. 211).

Ishimaru’s case study demonstrates how Tenet 6’s Systems of Engagement and Systems of Empowerment can be realized in service of school improvement. However, it is important to emphasize that systemic change was only possible when parents were viewed as “internal constituents” by the district. In order to create the conditions for meaningful, equitable collaboration between parents, communities, and schools, educational institutions must overcome deficit-driven, technocratic conceptions of parent engagement that create barriers rather than bridges.

Further Reading:

“Ecologies of Collective Parent Engagement in Urban Education” - Tania Alameda-Lawson and Michael A. Lawson

“From Family Engagement to Equitable Collaboration” - Ann M. Ishimaru