Parent and Central Office Administrator Perceptions of Family Engagement

in an Urban School District

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Abstract

Building a more inclusive and expansive approach to family engagement is essential in our schools. Schools play a vital role in formulating and cultivating relationships with families. The changing landscape of diversity of schools requires a culturally responsive leader's ability to engage students, families, and communities to create equitable opportunities for all students and families. However, research illustrates that barriers can impede families' involvement while building effective partnerships between the family, school, and district. This perception is amplified in the urban public school setting.

This qualitative study investigated family, principal, and central office administrator perceptions of family engagement in the Tillman School district, an urban, high poverty, high minority district. Focus groups in four quadrants of the district were conducted with 20 parents representing families of elementary, middle, and high school students. Interviews were conducted with principals and central office administrators to garner leadership feelings at the building and district levels. Data was analyzed both within and across role-alike and non-alike groups of subjects.

Findings from the study demonstrated a close alignment among the themes brought forth by the families, principals, central office administrators and the literature surrounding: critical components of effective family and school relationships; family experiences with engagement; extant dynamics of family engagement; pathways to cultural awareness and equity opportunities; and action to improve family engagement with relationships. Family responses naturally tended toward the Six Types of Family Involvement (Epstein, 2019). Finally, the district's new equity policy was a common theme that added hope and promise for strengthening cultural responses in schools.

Recommendations from this study emphasize the need for a more proactive approach at both the district and building level to establish and enhance family engagement. These groups must each work cohesively and in concert with one another to establish and enact a mission, vision, and action plan for school, family, and community engagement. Utilizing the Epstein framework in every school is a good first step toward creating this holistic approach among all stakeholders.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate and express my sincere gratitude to the many people who made the completion of this dissertation and doctoral degree possible with their love, encouragement, and support. I wish to thank my parents, James and Catherine Green, who taught me the meaning of perseverance, dedication, and hard work. My amazing sisters, Danielle and Stephanie, my most prominent supporters of my educational endeavors, provided love and understanding as my time with them was limited to completing this work. To my nieces and nephews who will aspire to reach their highest academic potential. My friend, Jessica, thank you for your words of encouragement, wisdom, and guidance throughout this educational journey. Finally, my loving husband, Frank, I am incredibly grateful for going through this transformational journey with you. I am indebted to you for planting the seed, always believing in me, and for your relentless determination to get me through to the finish line.

Acknowledgements

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Thank you, Dr. Rhonda Bruner, for your willingness to serve on the committee and for sharing your wealth of expertise as a superintendent, which contributed to my academic and professional development to this study.

A special thank you to visionary leader Dr. Persida Himmele for helping me establish and empower the first Latnix parent group workshop that inspired parents to become advocates in the school and help them to be better leaders every day.

Thank you, Dr. Tiffany Wright, one of my biggest supporters. You were vital in starting me on the road to educational leadership and have always been in my corner. Your words of encouragement along the way are invaluable.

Finally, I would like to honor Dr. Joyce Epstein for agreeing to serve as a member of my dissertation committee. Your life-dedication to research and improvement of school, family, community partnerships has had a profound influence in schools. Your specific expertise and insight into my study improved my work immensely.

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Organization of This Dissertation

Chapter One of this dissertation introduces the frameworks and critical issues pertinent to understanding parental engagement and provides unique information about the setting of the study. The contribution of Epstein's three-sphere family, school, and community model suggests inclusiveness from all stakeholders through the decision-making capabilities of school-family partnerships. The gravitational push and pull of the spheres reflect, according to Epstein (1987, 1992), the age, grade level, and experience of the child. The overlapping spheres align to the degree to which all entities influence family engagement practices of schools and communities.

This literature review presents the effects of empirically based theories of practice and the change process of school-family partnerships. Chapter Two reviews the literature related to the historical perspectives of school-family partnerships and delves into the viewpoints of parents and school leaders, the terminology of school-family partnerships, and the research related to education policy. The analysis will illustrate the varying leadership strategies urban school leaders utilize to make culturally responsive connections and actionable changes in the school.

Chapter Three discusses the study's methodology, data collection, and analysis. Chapter Four reports the findings from each research participant, as derived from the semi-structured interviews, complete with themes and formulated concepts. Finally, Chapter 5 provides the conclusions drawn from the findings, the implications for the school, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Effective family engagement is an important aspect of successful K-12 schooling. Family engagement partnerships are seen as a powerful alliance "to improve academic performance for children, which directly and indirectly influences the organizational culture and conditions of schools" (Global Family Research Project, 2018, p.133). Additionally, positive family engagement in schools can shape and sustain critical elements of child development in a way that influences academic growth opportunities (Al-Matalka, 2014). This claim is especially valid in poor urban areas (Carlson & Christenson, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Serpell & Mashburn, 2012).

Parental engagement strongly correlates with children's academic and personal outcomes beyond adolescence. Research over the past 50 years reflects that family engagement is one of the most influential elements affecting student success, particularly, the roles families play in being models, advocates and supporters of learning (Mapp & Kutter, 2013). The school-family relationship is a solid pathway for closing achievement gaps for students (Dearing et al., date; Epstein et al., 2018; Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Jeynes, 2005; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). As families and schools work collaboratively, they can create a lasting impact throughout a child's life (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Culturally responsive leaders must strive for improved family collaboration and engagement in schools. To do this, educational leaders need to familiarize themselves with what families in their district are experiencing in their everyday lives. Creating a space where students and families feel safe, respected, heard, and challenged is essential. However, research shows that bias, and how it influences school-home collaboration, is widespread across every aspect of the public-school experience (The Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative, 2021).

School district leaders should search for strategies and solutions to strengthen their cultural awareness and create strong bonds with families, especially those in poverty.

Defining Parental Engagement

Historically, family engagement and parental involvement have had many definitions. Traditionally, communication from school has been one-directional, with schools involving parents by alerting to what happens in the school day (Auerbach, 2007; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Goldring & Hausman, 2001; Griffith, 1998). This type of communication tells families how to be involved through communication platforms such as newsletters, curriculum calendars, and school-based initiatives. This one-way narrative reflects school knowledge at best and, at worst, leads to misperceptions and assumptions about power imbalance (McKenna & Millen, 2013).

In contrast, parent engagement has a different connotation. Parent engagement is an expansion that welcomes parents as partners in two-way decision-making processes. Ferlazzo and Hammond (2009) suggested that this democratic approach advocates for parents to engage collaboratively for student success. Constantino (2021) believes family engagement empowers families in the educational and academic process to the degree in which schools and school districts support relationships to sustain the efficacy of parents in shaping their own child's academic future. Epstein (1987, 2001) has been the foremost research authority on how school–family partnerships are essential for students' learning and development. Understanding this collaborative approach with parents constitutes a significant factor in welcoming families to participate in children's educational success.

Although authors have used various terminology, the terms family engagement and family involvement frequently appear in the research. Epstein (2001) utilizes the term "involvement" to describe this process but acknowledges "involvement" and "engagement" are terms that are

interchangeable (according to Webster). Additionally, Epstein and others have favored the term "family-school partnerships" (Epstein, 2011; Miller, Lines, Sullivan, & Hermanutz, 2013). According to Yamauchi, Lau-Smith, and Luing (2008), family-school partnerships include grandparents, older siblings, or anyone playing a role in the child's education. This approach signals a more holistic type of approach to communicating with families.

Family engagement is not limited to parents but extends to any adult who cares for the child (Epstein, personal communication, January 31, 2019). For this dissertation, the researcher will use the term "family engagement" to examine school and district leaders' perceptions of family involvement or engagement, except where literature specifically prefers one term over the other. The researcher selected this term because it aligns with the Pennsylvania Department of Education language and the most recent reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), signed into law in 2015. The term partnership will be used interchangeably to support future language decisions.

Family Engagement in Policy and Law

Fostering authentic relationships with families (Auerbach, 2012) influences education outcomes for students. Family engagement policies ensure that school systems utilize resources to strengthen family partnerships (Amatea, 2009). School districts require schools to develop a system to engage parents, including frequency of engagement, communicating district initiatives, and activities that advance the school agenda, such as Title 1 and Title 3 requirements.

School systems face unprecedented demographic challenges, to support federal and state requirements to ensure opportunities for students and families. This disconnects with family engagement tactics can reflect a disjointed approach because of a lack of deep understanding of parental needs, such as building relationships or creating a welcoming environment to include all

family communications in multiple languages. In addition, according to Trayner (2016), schools have become self-serving, compliant, and tone-deaf with their agendas in engaging families. As a result, parent perspectives are ignored, and the nurturing relationship between school and families has taken a back seat to the school's priorities.

As a result of these problems, the federal government responded by addressing family engagement in their 6th reauthorization of ESSA through Every *Student Succeeds Act* of 2015, which advocates for parents as empowered decision-makers in schools. ESSA defines and requires that all public schools foster parental engagement and be able to provide evidence of doing so.

Despite the support of federal law, the implementation of family engagement looks different at all levels. The act outlines four principles:

1) Parent engagement programs must be inclusive to all families

2) Parental engagement is an extension of the school

3) Parent engagement programs must include a partnership with responsibilities   b between home and school

4) Parent and Family Engagement policy guidelines provide opportunities for parents to develop programs and activities with the school teams in a meaningful way. (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018).

Epstein's Theory of Family Involvement

Epstein's framework provides a research-based structure for family engagement, which illustrates the role of schools, community, and parents and can be useful in achieving the requirements of ESSA (2015). School-family partnerships have continued to be a thread that links to positive student outcomes. Creating supportive environments for families and students requires all stakeholders to have a broader understanding of the community they serve. Most importantly,

however, is creating a democratic space in schools to support family-school partnerships. Family engagement is considered an educational benefit for children excelling academically with higher test scores, having better school attendance, advancing graduation rates, and increasing enrollment in postsecondary education (Henderson & Birla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Epstein's Six Types of Involvement (2019) takes an integrated approach to defining the many ways and contexts in which families can engage with their child's education:

1. Parenting: Type 1 involvement occurs when family practices and home environments support "children as students" and when schools understand their children's families.

2. Communicating: Type 2 involvement occurs when educators, students, and families "design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications."

3. Volunteering: Type 3 involvement occurs when educators, students, and families "recruit and organize parent help and support" and count parents as an audience for student activities.

4. Learning at Home: Type 4 involvement includes families learning with their children, at home, while the school provides families with how they can "help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning."

5. Decision Making: Type 5 involvement occurs when schools "include parents in school decisions" and "develop parent leaders and representatives."

6. Collaborating with the Community: Type 6 involvement occurs when community services, resources, and partners are integrated into the educational process to "strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development" (p.22).

Epstein's model shows a comprehensive approach for how schools can build partnerships with families to make an enterprise multi-directional, (Epstein, personal communication, 2022) to extend partnership to families. Epstein suggests developing an Action Team at each school that

includes families, schools, and community members who can implement the six types of parental involvement. This team approach will influence the school system, and overall development and outcomes of students, while strengthening partnership with all stakeholders (Epstein, 2001).

Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence suggest students learn more when parents, educators, and community members come together to invest in a child's development (Epstein 1987, 2001). Epstein states that the spheres are "three major contexts in which students learn and grow" (Epstein et al., 2009 p. 151). The overlapping spheres of influence model involves interconnectedness of home, school, and community to support the child's development.

Figure 1 illustrates the three overlapping spheres of influence. Force A is the stage of development of the child. Force B demonstrates the family's influence on the children, social norms, and behaviors before entering school. Force C is the child's experience in school in combination with family values. Epstein's theory outlines two underlying structures, external and internal factors that influence school, family, and community partnerships. The external factor demonstrates the overlap of the three circles representing the context. The overlap occurs when the four forces push or pull due to the belief of the three partners: school, family, and the community. The circle represents context, economic factors, academic achievement, and community influences. The internal factors illustrate the flow of two-way communication between stakeholders, family, child, school, parent, and teacher. Epstein demonstrates that communication is multilevel and occurs at individual and institutional levels. The institutional level refers to contact sent to the mass group. The personal level is where communication is on a one-to-one basis.

Figure 1

Epstein's Model of the Overlapping Spheres of Influence 2009.
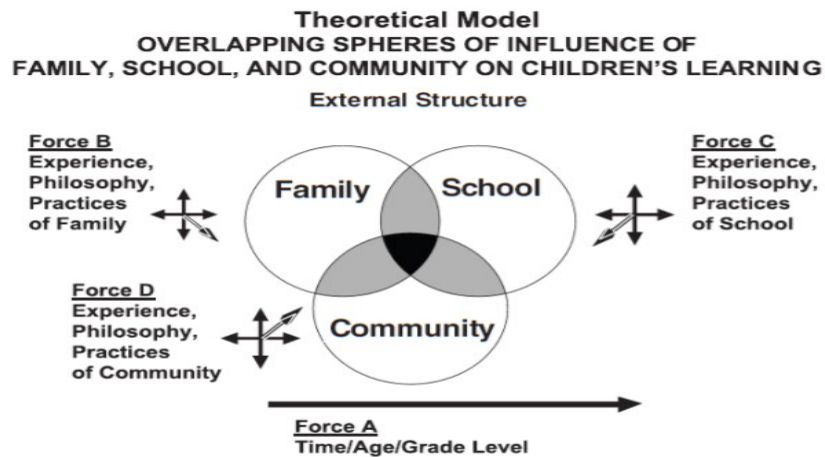
The overlapping spheres of educational, sociological, and psychological theories into an organized interdisciplinary relationship based on families, schools, and the community. Family and community partnership that emphasizes student development as its core will need to expand beyond the traditional notion of family engagement to include how each of the six types of Parental Involvement can be utilized in the school system (Epstein, 2001).

Barriers to Family Engagement

While schools often claim that there are barriers to families being engaged, it is important that they work cooperatively with families to reduce any barriers. Epstein proposes renaming the term "barriers" as "challenges" because there are conditions and constraints that families and schools must identify and resolve (Joyce Epstein, personal communication, May 3, 2022), (e.g.,

such as families living in poverty; schools without leaders for partnerships) to develop strong and sustainable partnership programs. Unfamiliarity with the education system, language, and cultural differences are challenges that families face in supporting their children's academic outcomes in schools. According to Tinker (2002), five categories can contribute to a lack of parent engagement in schools: environmental factors, psychological barriers, logistical barriers, language and culture, and educational level.

Environmental Factors

Shattering barriers to parental involvement and engagement begins with identifying school obstacles and planning to overcome them. Many schools have to implement structures and systems to engage parents (Carreon et al., 2005). Parent involvement structures are often divided into two categories: those systems and structures that occur inside and outside the school (Tinker, 2002). These structures include parents serving in the parent-teacher organization (PTO), which generates social capital for students' success while building trust and respect with staff. Other systems to engage parents include encouraging reading at home, fundraising to support school projects, attending parent-teacher conferences, or even volunteering at the school.

Environmental factors and structures such as parent work schedules, competing family activities or family structure of the one –parent household illustrate competing factors affecting families and school partnerships. Due to these hurdles, student achievement and the school family partnership may require a different approach to meet the needs of parents.

Psychological Barriers

Reframing the notion that barriers exist with engaging families' starts with examining family factors, which typically include parental beliefs and perceptions that school personnel do

not value, welcome, or encourage their involvement. (Hornby & Lafale, 2011). The perception of feeling judged by teachers also results in disengaged parents (Baker et al., 2016). Parents' emotional status is a barrier impeding parental engagement. A parent's own school experiences and low self-esteem can hinder school participation (Davis, 1989). Barriers can arise when parents have a negative school experience with an older child. Unattended feelings can fester, which can cause attitudes resulting in miscommunication between home and school (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lawson, 2003).

Logistic Barriers

Communication through technology presents new opportunities and challenges for parents, students, and teachers to communicate. Home and school communication are essential in building strong school partnerships (Epstein, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Many parents lack technological skills, which can hinder accessibility through the school's designated learning management system or parent portal intended for parents to monitor their child's academic progress. Palts and Kalmus (2015) assert that digital barriers could hinder involvement, including fear, attitudes, and digital knowledge toward technology and limited resources due to weak broadband and reliable internet. Moreover, Hoover- Dempsey (2002) and Hornby and Lafaele (2011) recognize that the school's responsibility is to create systems and strategies to increase the effectiveness of family-school communication learning and welcoming conditions for all.

Educational Barrier

Parents' educational levels can be a powerful reality that prevents school engagement. Parents who feel intimidated by the school and teachers and other school staff members may feel

negatively affected by school personnel and become less engaged. Parental education is a significant factor in parental involvement; the higher the parents' education levels the higher the involvement tends to be (Englund et al., 2004). However, Handmaker (2015) cited internal barriers including teacher vulnerability as a barrier. Teachers who are afraid of parent criticism shy away from engaging families. The school personnel's negative attitudes and perceptions of low-income working parents can be barriers. Families who perceive an imbalance of power between themselves and the teacher may hinder the family's communications experience (Dockett, Mason, & Perry, 2006).

Cultural Barrier

Language and cultural barriers also affect parent communication with the school (Graham-Clay, 2005). The school is responsible for creating a safe and welcoming school environment for its stakeholders. Grace and Trudgett (2012) stated that parents' home environments might be remarkably different from that of the students' school. Families may feel uncomfortable in an uninviting school and are less likely to communicate. Because communication methods are vital in sharing information, making families feel part of the school is critical in building relationships (Auerbach, 2012; Sanders & Shelton, 2009).

Findings show that while parents and staff agree on barriers associated with parent involvement and family engagement, resolutions between staff and parents are disconnected based on staff beliefs about family engagement (Barker, Wise, Kelley & Skiba, 2016, Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Schools are responsible for creating a safe and welcoming school environment for their stakeholders. That includes making families feel they are part of the school. Unfortunately, school can pose a barrier to families, hindering relationships. Poor communication tends to be less friendly and a barrier for families. Barriers can arise when parents negatively experience a school

from their personal experience with an older child. The negative experiences can create tension between home and school. (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lawson, 2003).

Defining Poverty

Despite the research indicating the importance of parental engagement, the challenge remains to increase the participation rate of families of lower socioeconomic statuses in urban schools (Griffith, 1998). Poverty and complex societal issues such as homelessness are the harsh realities of why school access for parents is challenging—furthermore, the more extreme the poverty, the greater the risk to the child and family. In the United States, one in 16 children lives in extreme poverty (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2020). The National Center for Children in Poverty (2020) defines extreme poverty as an annual income of less than half that of the basic poverty level ($25,000 annually for a family of four). A family living in extreme poverty would have a yearly income of $12,963, or lower, for a family of four with two children. That equates to an income equal to or below $1,080 a month, $249 a week, or $36 a day. According to the United States Census Bureau (2020), 11.6 million children (about twice the population of Arizona), 16% of all children nationwide, were living in poverty in 2020. Of these children, 28% are African American, 25% are Native American, 23% are Latinx, and 9% are Caucasian (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Locally, Pennsylvania ranked 26th out of all 50 states in poverty. Specifically, 24.8% of Tillman residents live in poverty, which mirrors the poverty rate of 24.9% of Philadelphia and exceeds that of Pittsburgh 21.4% and Baltimore 21.8%. (Community Action Association of Pennsylvania, 2017). Of these children, 32.7% are African American, 35.7% Latinx, and 17% are Caucasian. As can be seen, poverty disproportionately affects children of color.

Family engagement is timely in school districts where diversity and learning communities are challenged to ensure equity for all students. Although there is evidence that children living in poverty are likely to face challenges and obstacles academically, acknowledging the significance of family engagement coupled with culturally diverse partnerships in schools can help to improve student achievement. While school districts continue to fight through systematic constraints with building sustainably for school-family partnerships, the political climate regarding COVID restrictions and mandates have created these toxic conditions for schools to develop healthy families' partnerships. The increasingly fragile family-school relationships are the critical elements to a school's improvement outcomes for all.

Statement of the Problem

Schools play a vital role in formulating and cultivating relationships with families. The changing landscape of diversity of schools requires a culturally responsive leader's ability to engage diverse students, families, and communities (Auerbach, 2012; Khalifa, 2012; Matthew et al., 2016; Lopez et al; 2001). In 2024, public school students' demographics will reflect 56% diversity nationwide, according to the Center for Education Statistics (2018). The poverty rate of this same group of children under the age of 18 will rise. Although the exact percentage is unknown, historically, the United States Census Poverty data (2019) projected that African American and Hispanic children would experience the highest poverty rate, with 71% living in poverty in 2019. Central office (district) administrators will need to offer more than "perspectives" – We have found they must identify or designate a leader for partnerships and take actions that facilitate all schools to strengthen programs to engage all families in productive ways. (Personal communication Dr. Joyce Epstein, May 3, 2022). Serving in a diverse school population will

require varied resources in strengthening family engagement practices with parents to affirm students' culture and language are honored while empowering the families as decision-makers.

There is abundant evidence that effective school-family relationships create a learning environment that influences students' academic outcomes and community (Khalifa, 2012). While there is vital information on understanding and improving school and family partnerships in individual schools, this study looks to employ qualitative research to investigate the perspectives of families, principals, and central office administrators at the school district level surrounding school and family engagement.

Local Context

Understanding the setting and context in which this research project takes place is essential to understanding the study's scope, its chosen methodology, and reported findings and recommendations. This section looks to provide the reader with a clear portrayal of the area and events facing district employees and families.

The Tillman School District (pseudonym), the setting for this research study, is a mid-sized urban school district in south-central Pennsylvania. Established in 1836, it is the second oldest school district in the state (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020). Tillman SD, the metropolitan area, serves a diverse population of approximately 12,950 students. The district's 12 elementary schools, four middle schools, one K-8 school, one high school campus, a cyber-program, an alternative education program are home to approximately 930 teachers, 461 full-time and part-time support personnel, and 160 administrators. The central office team of Tillman SD has staff dedicated to family engagement. The group consists of the Coordinator of Parent Involvement and Families in Transition and The Coordinator of Family-School & Community Partners. The Coordinator for Family Engagement leads the school-wide Parent Advisory Council

(PAC) with a representative from each school. Successfully having a PAC representative at the school level reflects empowerment, supports leadership training, collaboration with schools, and parents leading workshops for families at their respective sites. The Pennsylvania Department of Education recognizes Tillman School as a Title 1 district. The Tillman SD has a Parent Advisory Council (PAC) at each school to represent the voice of parents in the decision-making process as required by federal law.

Demographically, the Tillman SD has a diverse student body with 60% Latinx, 17% African American, 13% White, and 10% Asian or other ethnicities. During the last five years, Tillman SD has experienced an influx in the number of families. Currently, the district serves 2,230 English Learners, representing 38 languages spoken with various dialects, and 452 refugee students. Tillman has a Refugee Center within the district to support the growing population. Tillman SD is preparing to receive an influx of Afghan refugees due to the change in the political structure of that country. The district collaborates with community church groups and agencies that sponsor families' transition into a new culture and educational system.

Another program the district offers is the "Families in Transition" Program (FIT). The Coordinator of School and Family Partners leads this work to provide resources to families. The FIT program identifies homeless students within the community. Students and families have housing, shelter, and transportation to ensure no disruption to the student's educational pathway. The FIT program includes access to meaningful learning opportunities and extracurricular activities for students. This is a barrier that is removed for families. The District's Parent Involvement Committee coordinates broad-based district-wide opportunities that provide family engagement, parent education, and resource opportunities for parents.

Research Perspective

     I have served in Tillman School District for 27 years as a practicum student, student teacher, teacher, principal and central office administrator. I have developed relationships, removed barriers, and modeled expectations for the new administration in this tenure. In serving the last 15 years as a building administrator in the Tillman School District, I participated in several phases of family engagement at the school level. I attended Dr. Joyce Epstein's workshops and led district professional development using her methods and frameworks with building school leaders. As a central office administrator, I supervise building leaders, including principals and assistant principals at elementary and middle schools.

     Additionally, I have observed family engagement at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Furthermore, I have extensive experience engaging with Dr. Joyce Epstein's Framework model for family engagement and participating in professional development at the district and university levels. I participated in a panel with Dr. Epstein at a conference surrounding poverty and education, and I have served as an adjunct professor at the university level, teaching a graduate School, Family, and Community Partnership course that aligns with Dr. Epstein's work on School Family Partnerships.

     While these experiences give me expertise in school leadership and the Epstein Framework, they could also be a source of bias as I investigate how parents, principals, and central office administrators perceive family engagement in the district. To help mitigate any bias, I will record thoughts and concerns in a journal and share them with the dissertation chairperson for further discussion. Additionally, I will use members checking with subjects to ensure the interpretation is exact.

The term family-school engagement is a term that Tillman School District has recently adopted for the collective responsibility and ownership of all stakeholders in a child's life. However, as an administrator in the school district, I have received informal comments from parents, school leaders, and central office staff about the many barriers and realities families endure surrounding family engagement. Families of Tillman have expressed the need for a more family-centered approach to family engagement, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. New school leaders have shared the need for professional development on family engagement. The central office administration team is restructuring an approach to support building leaders. At present, the Tillman School District is working towards establishing guiding principles encompassing leadership development among central staff, professional development with leaders, and a family-centered approach with shared responsibility between families, schools, and the community. Therefore, I hope this study will help provide key findings and meaningful recommendations that the district can implement to improve school, family, and community partnerships. Furthermore, I hope this investigation will add to the limited literature on how central office administrators and principals can improve the school, family, and community partnerships district-wide in prevalent poverty, high minority, and urban area.

Research Purpose and Questions

Schools play a vital role in formulating and cultivating relationships with families. The changing landscape of diversity of schools requires a culturally responsive leader's ability to engage students, families, and the communities to create equitable opportunities for all students and families. The purpose of this study is to investigate family, principal and central office administrators perceptions of family engagement in the Tillman School district, to compare and

contrast those perceptions, and develop recommendations. The following research questions will guide this study:

- What are the perceptions of families, principals and central office administrators regarding family engagement in the Tillman School District?

- What are the perceptions of families and central office administrators regarding the role of principals in family engagement in The Tillman School District?

- What accounts for the similarities and differences of family, principal, and central office administrator perceptions?

- What can the Tillman School District administrators do to improve school family engagement?

Overview of the Methodology

This qualitative study will investigate how school, family, and community engagement exists in the Tillman School District. First, I will conduct focus group interviews with parents, which will be opportunities for respondents to share their thoughts collectively, regarding the questions. Second, I will conduct a focus group interview with principals to investigate the school's current family engagement. Finally, I will conduct individual interviews with central office administrators tasked with family engagement. Interviews and focus group sessions will be audio-recorded with the consent of the twenty participants. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher will record and document the experiences and the impact of the research process. The interview and focus group data will be analyzed for emerging categories, similarities, and differences.

Limitations of the Study

Qualitative research methods are most effective when seeking to understand how the participants in a setting define and perceive their practice (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Ravitch & Riggins, 2012). The qualitative methodology approach offers advantages and disadvantages in the research field. The advantages of qualitative research include listening, recording the participants' lived experiences while asking questions as topics arise, and discovering sensitive topics to share. This includes capturing the perceptions of participants, including how and why they respond to quotes and documents, with the opportunity to clarify thinking to explore new learning (Creswell, 2014).

The disadvantage of qualitative research is that the researcher's experience may bias interpretation and a small sampling of subjects limits the results. Another disadvantage includes limited data collection results due to the COVID- 19 pandemic. Schools have reduced the number of events due to COVID restrictions. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced schools to institute guidelines for parent events and school building visitors. The school context of the instructional delivery model (face-to-face instruction, hybrid learning) may affect the researcher's ability to gather data. The findings may also reveal that the participants' reactions are fixed or non-fixed beliefs about school engagement practices. Furthermore, another disadvantage could include the bias of the researcher who was newly appointed at the central office level. The relationships of trust and rapport between families may be challenging due to the new job position of the researcher. The relationship may cause insufficient data (Creswell, 2014).

Definitions of Key Terms

The definitions of critical terms equip readers with a clear understanding of how these terms are used in this dissertation.

Culturally responsive leadership is the ability to understand the differences that make each student unique while celebrating the between-group variations that make our world a tapestry. Culturally responsive leaders need to continuously support minority students by examining assumptions about race and culture (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

Decision-making (Type 5) Include families as participants in school decisions and develop parent leaders and representatives.

· Active PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, advisory councils, or committees (e.g., curriculum, safety) for parent leadership and participation.

• District-level advisory councils and committees.

Family Engagement Family school partnerships and engagements are deemed necessary in the school context and the community environment surrounding the school and its families (Epstein, 2019).

Parent perceptions. Their perceptions are the ways parents view their role in their child's education (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Perceptions. One's thoughts, beliefs, and opinions of someone or something. The way a person or group of people understand or interpret something (Miller, Kuykendall, & Thomas, 2013).

School culture. The set of norms, values, educational beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols, and stories make up the school's "persona" (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Deal & Peterson, 2016).

Parent activism. Is a term to help to expand and empower parents to improve education for diverse learners (Jasis & Jasis-Ordonez, 2004; Warren, 2011),

Parent Leaders. Implies that stakeholders acknowledge parents' voices, ideas, and opinions. (National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement, 2019).

Title I Funding. Title I provide financial assistance to local educational agencies and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. The federal funds are disbursed through four statutory formulas based primarily on census poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Low Income. Children living in families with incomes below this level—$51,852 for a family of four with two children in 2019—are referred to as low income. (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2018).

Parent. A parent is defined as an individual over 17 who lives with a dependent child. Among children who do not live with at least one parent, parental characteristics are those of the householder and the householder's spouse (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2018).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research over the past four decades reflects that family engagement is one of the most influential elements of students' success in school. Researchers argue that the school-family relationship is a solid pathway toward closing achievement gaps for students (Dearing et al., Epstein et al., 2018; Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Jeynes, 2005; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). Research indicates that a positive school experience for students can have long-lasting effects (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Studies show that school systems with comprehensive

approaches linking families to school-wide initiatives increase school attendance, decrease office referrals, and create relationships that extend into the community (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein 2004).

According to family engagement leaders, the success of school-home relationships rests in partnerships among educators, school leaders, and parents. When a school develops family partnerships, the outcomes can enhance communication between home and school and support the children's overall social-emotional development (Cochran & Henderson, 1986; Eagle, 1989; Epstein, 1996; Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Gotts, 1989; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hewitt, 1978; Ho & Willms, 1996; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002; McDill, Rigby, & Meyers, 1969; Melnick & Fiene, 1990; Mowry, 1972; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1992). The challenge of strengthening family engagement is often compounded in urban settings.

Despite the research indicating the importance of parental involvement, engagement, and family-school partnerships, the challenge remains to increase participation rates of engagement with marginalized families of lower socioeconomic status (Griffith, 1998). Complex societal issues such as poverty and homelessness are often blended with the realities of transportation and school access to develop school-family partnerships. In addition, school-family partnerships in urban settings are misrepresented as lacking engagement (Burchinal et al., Lewis et al., 2008). Practices resulting from systemic oppression and racism contribute to trauma-informed experiences and mental health problems for marginalized students (Bryan, 2005). Society's impact on the school setting has transformed school leaders from establishing a culturally inviting environment for learning (Nieto, 2004; Cuyjet, 2006; Thompson, 2007; Bandura, 1997). The educational expectations require all stakeholders to put away their own neediness biases and everything that gets in the way of building relationships with students and appreciating who they are. Moreover,

schools must recalibrate and understand the sense of responsibility and affection for *every* student, which is a missing link in relationship building with the students and families (Nieto, 2020).

This analysis explores research about school-family relationships from the perspectives of central office leaders and parents. The examination will begin with a historical perspective of family engagement; and include an investigation of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies that reveal hardships and barriers for parents in urban schools. Urban schools are often characterized as impoverished in resources and lacking in community and parental involvement. This falsehood is the narrative some may believe. Urban schools and families all want the same education for all students. The literature review will illustrate the effects of empirically based theories of practice and the change process of school-family partnerships as well as explore the varying leadership strategies urban school leaders utilize to make culturally responsive connections and actionable changes in schools.

Historical Perspective

During the 17th century, parents influenced and controlled school governance, curriculum, religious choice, and teacher selection in the mid-nineteenth century. Throughout its brief history relative to other continents, parental involvement within the American education system has been complex. According to Massachusetts colony law, parental involvement began early in 1642 when parents provided education, religion, and trade instruction (Watson, Sanders-Lawson, & McNeal, 2012, p. 42). However, families were not teaching basic skills: reading, writing, religion, and trade. As a result, private schools were organized.

As the need for skilled and educated workers increased, American schools began requiring students to have basic skills to function in a democratic society. Private schools for the wealthy catered to parental autonomy over the curriculum, religion, and teachers, creating the social class

divide. Additionally, as the influx of immigration occurred across the country, children were used in the labor force. This practice was disrupted as unions protested the practices and safety conditions that put children at risk (Hiatt, 1994). This action left a large population of youth wandering the streets unattended since their parents were working.

Consequently, parental control in school raised questions. Since many believed that parents were low-skilled, uneducated, and unable to properly educate children enough to improve society (Hiatt, 1994), the formalization of public schools as the educational system became standardized and evolved. This public entity caused parents to lose influence and control over time and eventually detach from their children's education (Hiatt, 1994).

Development of bureaucracy to make schools equitable now controlled school governance. Politicians, businesses, and educators raised concerns about the outmoded parental influence on the education system, including religious choice. Thus, educational institutions usurp and supplant parental influence (Hiatt, 1994). The development of bureaucracy that emerged controlling the education system increased the separation of parental influence in school governance.

Industrialization, urbanization, growth in America's population, and scientific techniques in business required a shift in power governance in the schools (Hiatt, 1994). Schools pulled away from the community and leaned toward educational expertise; parental input was replaced with school-held control of curriculum and instruction (Michael, 1994). As educational ideas continued to evolve in the United States, the 1983 report of the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, titled, *A Nation at Risk,* highlighted the importance of connecting with students' home life (Davies, 1973).

Federal funded research programs highlighted school, family, and community partnerships to bridge the gap between school and home. They also expressed the need for parents to re-engage

in their children's academic lives. Parenting now needs to reflect values and commonly held work ethics for their children (Epstein, 2001).

This collaborative approach generated mutual support between the home and school. Educational policies studied impact, accountability, and approach to parents' school involvement (Michael, 1994). When schools build school-family partnerships, realities, such as diverse family backgrounds and limited resources, including personnel, cause barriers to full parent engagement (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). Since over 90% of a child's time is spent with a parent (Weinstein & Walberg, 1993; Peng & Wright, 1994), the parent/family concept is essential for a student's education. After all, many past studies indicate a significant link between student achievement and parental involvement from birth to early adulthood. This link leads to positive outcomes for students (Henderson, 2002 Mapp; Patrikakou, Weisberg, Redding, Walberg, 2005).

Researching parental involvement identified parallels between historical and contemporary school practices. The past perspective examined the roles and responsibilities of parents as society evolved to the changing demands of students' educational levels. The perception of family-school partnerships has changed how educators, leaders, and families think about these relationships. In the next section, the research will discuss the evolving language and the terminology of family engagement and parental involvement. The terms have a different meaning that can influence building school relationships over time.

Defining School-Family Partnerships

When families and schools work collaboratively, success can create a lasting impact throughout a child's life (Henderson & Berla, 1994). With the renewal of parent involvement over the last 30 years, researchers have documented a focus on school partnerships to support the child's development beyond academics, including students' social-emotional needs (Cochran &

Henderson, 1986; Eagle, 1989; Epstein, 1996; Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Gotts, 1989; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hewitt, 1978; Ho & Willms, 1996; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002, McDill, Rigby, & Meyers, 1969; Melnick & Fiene, 1990; Mowry, 1972; Schweinhart Weikart, 1992).

Typically, parent involvement activities focus on alerting parents to what happens in the school day (Auerbach, 2007; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Goldring & Hausman, 2001; Griffith). This type of involvement tells families how to be involved through newsletters, curriculum calendars, and school-based initiatives. At best, this narrative reflects school knowledge, leading to misperceptions and assumptions about a power imbalance (McKenna & Millen, 2013; Pushor, 2011). In contrast, parent engagement has a different connotation. *Parent engagement* is an expansion that welcomes parents as partners in decision-making processes. Ferlazzo and Hammond (2009) suggested that the democratic approach advocates for parents to engage in a shared collaborative, democratic approach for student success. Although researchers debate using the terminology of parent involvement versus parent engagement, there is a consensus that "family-school partnerships" describe a more comprehensive approach to supporting families and their school community (Epstein, 2011; Miller, Lines, Sullivan, & Hermanutz, 2013). Understanding this collaborative approach with parents constitutes a significant factor in welcoming families to participate in children's educational success. Research shows that students have measured academic gains when parents become more engaged in the educational process (Berger, 1995). The following section will discuss what researchers and educators have identified as quality school family partnership educational policies. Evidence presented in the following sections supports the linkage between school-family partnerships and policies.

Current Education Policy- School-Family Partnerships

Family engagement policies ensure that school systems utilize resources to strengthen school-family partnerships (Amatea, 2009). School systems face unprecedented demographic changes and will need the financial support of federal and state programs to ensure opportunities for students and families to thrive.

In this section, educational policies formed the foundation of family engagement guidance. School leaders apply the guidelines to adhere to state, local, and federal mandates to align with school family partnerships programs. In recent works, school leaders have an advantage and influence, strengthen and advance family-school partnerships (Donaldson, 2006; Hands, 2012).

The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), enacted under Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency, became a federal statute, part of the "War on Poverty." ESEA's federal program allocates funds to schools and communities. The act included provisions for parental involvement in schools. In 2001, the ESEA was reauthorized as the *No Child Left Behind Act* that expanded parental involvement expectations for parents, roles, and involvement, using federal funds (Webster, 2004). Parent involvement policies emerged under the *No Child Left behind Act* (NCLB) (2002). The policy increases parents' awareness of school performance and greater school accountability through mandated content-related assessments. Schools' accountability to inform parents about school academic standing provided parents with learning outcomes and academic performance.

Title I is the most extensive federal funding program for public schools (United States Department of Education, 2011). The schools designated as Title 1 federal funding have increased poverty levels. The intended funds help students at risk of falling behind academically.

55,906 public schools received Title I funds. Title 1, Section 1116, Parent and Family Engagement section of *Every Student Succeeds Act* aligns with parent involvement. The act outlined four principles:

1) Parent involvement programs must be inclusive to all families

2) Parental involvement is an extension of the school

3) Parent involvement programs must include a partnership with responsibilities between home and school.

4) The Parent and Family Engagement policies' guidelines provide opportunities for parents to develop programs and activities with the school teams in a meaningful way. (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018).

Parent funding formulas began to emerge, providing schools with specific funds for family activities. Like the NCLB Act, the ESSA requires school districts to set aside 1% of Title I funding to pay for parent engagement initiatives. The funds are spent at the discretion of families. In addition, Title 1 guidelines required schools to establish Parent Advisory Council educators to meet family engagement policy guidelines where educators and families must work collaboratively to support student outcomes.

Collaborative plans and compact agreements are developed to comply with federal law related to families and teachers working together toward the school's academic goals to foster increased student achievement. Contemporary concepts of parental involvement include systems, processes, policies, procedures, and practices that allow parents and families to be critical components in their children's academic lives. This includes the engagement of families in the instructional and non-instructional (co-curricular, extracurricular) lives of their children and the family's educational experiences and values about the importance of education. (Constantino,

2003, pp. 9-10). In this section, educational policies have formed the foundation of current family engagement guidance. School leaders apply the policies to adhere to state, local, and federal mandates to align with school family partnerships programs.

ESSA Policy-Every Student Succeeds Act

In 2015, under President Obama, the ESEA, Elementary, and Secondary Act reauthorization was transformed into Every *Student Succeeds Act (*ESSA), which advocates for parents as empowered decision-makers in schools. The parent and family engagement policies' guidelines allow parents to develop programs and activities with the school teams in a meaningful way. The policies provide schools to establish two-way communication with families. The policy states that all students, including historically marginalized students, have a world-class education. Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2015; Schwartz, 2017; Barr & Parrett, 2007 suggest school leaders should seize the opportunity to develop and collaborate with families to meet the policy mandates.

With the emergence of a new paradigm defining parental involvement and engagement and despite the challenges, the reauthorization of past policy guidelines, such as No Child Left Behind, Title 1, and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), educators must meet family engagement policy guidelines (Amatea, 2009). The research on parent involvement and engagement has challenges in removing barriers for parents, such as supporting diverse learning and addressing psychological safety nets for parents to feel welcome and supported (Howard, 2019). Educators and families must work collaboratively to help student outcomes (Lareau and Muñoz, 2012).

Parent Perspectives

Parr and Dussen (2017) concluded that understanding what it means to engage families in a school system is critical to the family partnership's overall success. As the school landscape

evolves, schools closely align equitable practices to help families feel invested in educating children. The most significant findings reveal that parents want the best for their children in addition to having a positive influence on improving their child's academic outcome. (Epstein, 2009; Funkhouser & Gonzalez, 1997; Hoover- Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010). Despite the economic, racial, and ethnic barriers in schools, families that experience a limited educational background and knowledge of the United States educational system can impede a learning curve that will not deter them from simply wanting the best for their children.

More recently, research has identified an approach to developing equality with a diverse school population of families (Auerbach, 2007; Delgado- Gatin, 2004; Jasis & Jasis-Ordonez, 2004 Lareau, 1994; Stanton-Salazar, 1990; Valdes, 1996). Parent activism is a term to help to expand and empower parents to improve education for diverse learners. (Jasis & Jasis-Ordonez, 2004; Warren, 2011). Perhaps the most notable finding in this qualitative research was how parents perceived their parental engagement level in their children's education (Epstein, 2009). The study explored Epstein's six types of involvement as the conceptual framework. When parents attempted to organize and coordinate family activities at the school, there was frustration. Lack of participation from other parents was one noted frustration. Parent perceptions describe parents' deep desire for their children to succeed academically; parents clearly understand their role in helping their children succeed in school. (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005; Ponza et al., 2014; Ratliffe, 2010; Valdes, 1996). The school's vision of family engagement is not congruent with the parents' viewpoint of home involvement (McKenna & Millen, 2013, Pushor 2011).

School Leaders' Perspectives

Not only is it essential to review the literature on parents' perspectives on family engagement, but it is also essential to review school leaders' perspectives. This next section will discuss leaders' perspectives to understand the school leader's roles and responsibilities.

School leaders are the linchpin in formulating lasting relationships and connections with families. Parent engagement is a critical factor in school reform (Auerbach 2007). The principal's complex role in school-family partnership requires the school leadership to advocate in building the school's capacity through resources and implementing a solid partnership that benefits all stakeholders (Auerbach, 2012; Sanders & Shelton, 2009). The conditions leaders create for families, such as making the school an inviting and welcoming place involves different layers of the school's organization system such as central office administration. Developing district partnerships in all schools can benefit students and families Epstein (2009), however these actions do not necessarily rest on the school leader's shoulders.

School leaders can engage with non-system actors like community members/leaders. Ishimaru (2019) defines non-system actors as advocates for families and staff. They serve as a bridge to the community by offering resources and collaborations to homes and schools. The most substantial opportunity to support leaders in their essential roles in creating equitable access for parents to engage in learning is the Educational Leadership Standards (2015), The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2008), in conjunction with the Pennsylvania Framework for Leadership (2012), developed professional standards that highlighted interconnected school-family partnerships. The standards are a model for the professional expectations of practitioners (Hanover Research, 2020). The school leadership's standards promote positive connections with families and community leaders and strive to build opportunities to impact the school's capacity to elevate

instructional strategies and equity while creating a positive culture and climate for all. In this section of the literature review, the perspectives of parents and school leaders align with the understanding of building the school-home relationship. Understanding a school system and developing a collaborative approach to family engagement is discussed in the literature.

Urban Education Family Engagement

The challenge of strengthening family engagement is often compounded by referencing urban education. Urban education disparities are associated with an absence of family-school partnerships, poverty and disproportionately represent "underperforming" students. (Burchinal et al.; Lewis et al., 2008). Practices resulting from systemic oppression and racism contribute to underperforming students' trauma-informed experiences and mental health problems. (Bryan, 2005). Society's impact on the school setting has transformed school leaders from establishing a culturally inviting environment for learning (Nieto, 2004; Cuyjet, 2006; Thompson, 2007; Bandura, 1997). Regarding changes in public schools, students' demographics will reflect the fifty-six percent diversity figures nationwide by 2024. However, the poverty rate of this same group of children under age eighteen is projected to rise, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018). This finding suggests that as schools strive for more family engagement and collaboration, educational leaders must familiarize themselves with families' experiences, including the physical and psychological stress associated with societal experiences that impact schools.

Despite these disparaging myths about urban education, academic success's sole responsibilities cannot be placed on students and families but re-envisioning a collaborative approach from various school, district, and community stakeholders. Millan et al. (2015) conducted a study that re-envisioned a collaborative approach from various school and community

stakeholders and claimed that sole responsibility could not be placed on students and families. Collaboration and shared decision-making are the ingredients for successful family-school-community partnerships (Bryan & Henry, 2012). Developing partnerships within the school must start with mutual trust and a collective vision. This revision of the partnership needs to have a different approach from a top-down approach, in which the school dictated the mandates and their agenda. In a democratic approach, diverse families and the community actively engage with the school through collaboration and community partnerships that support all needs (Auerbach, 2009).

Leadership

"Research in prevalent poverty schools confirms that family engagement is one of the most powerful predictors of children's development, educational attainment, and success in school and life." (Global Family Research Project, 2018). As part of this work of raising academic expectations for all learners, leaders frame conversations with teachers and families to understand the need for a high-quality, aligned instructional design within a school setting. Stosich (2017) noted that the principal is pivotal in interpreting and communicating standards for teachers' practice and the families they serve. In a comparative case study, Stosich (2017) argues that principals who frame teachers' expectations to teach the standards and learn in new ways are more likely to close the gaps. The principal's leadership could also influence how teachers and schools interact with families. Researchers suggest that positive rippling effects can maximize teachers' relationships with families (Jung & Sheldon, 2020). The work of Donaldson (2006) and Hands (2020) suggested that school leaders are well-poised to control the type of family engagement in their schools.

Research shows that when principals promote or show a solid commitment to formulating family partnerships, their interpretation of the practices is perceived differently (Auerbach, 2007).

The case study discussed the importance of showing parents' support, such as welcoming families and allocating resources for family engagement. However, in these examples, principals could not describe specific examples of having a more active role in their school system (Auerbach, 2007). Jung and Sheldon (2020), incorporated the work of others who suggests this surface-level awareness demonstrated the gap in understanding how to strengthen or create vital programs for partnerships in their school. In other research studies such as (Clift et al., 1992; Griffith, 2004; Gronn, 2000; Hallinger, 2003; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane et al.; 2001), examine two leadership theories: collaborative leadership and transformational leadership, as it relates to family partnerships. The study examined the quality of the principal's family engagement compared to how teachers practice and influence a different aspect of school-partnership leadership. Strengthening a collective understanding of school and family partnerships while building authentic relationships with families is the essential role of the building leader.

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement investigated parental leadership and has emerged as a dominant factor in the family engagement framework in the United States (Cunningham et al., 2012; National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement, 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Parental leadership implies that stakeholders acknowledge parents' voices, ideas, and opinions. Policy development, decision-making, and organizing activities are examples of parental leadership. This new status in parental leadership has positioned parents with power and status within the school (Douglass, 2019). As a result of this change in leadership, the research identified the power shift between parents and teachers as essential for parent engagement research and practice (Douglass, 2011). The emergence of parental leadership is a new phenomenon. In a qualitative study, Bolivar and Chrispeels (2015) and Hepburn (2004) investigated what strategies parent leaders used to engage

families and how their leadership influenced diverse cultures, empowerment, and cultural competency. The research shows that when parents participate in leadership development, they are empowered to effect school change that influences their children's learning experience. Although the research on parental leadership is limited, community empowerment can strengthen the school community.

Despite the increasing importance of parental engagement in schools, researchers have indicated how schools marginalize under-resourced parents because of the school's competing priorities. This perspective puts parents in the position of outsiders (Auerbach, 2007). The instructional change in a school building needs trust and collaboration fostered by leadership (Global Family Research, 2018). In contrast, three decades of research synthesized leadership best practices to improve instruction, student learning, and family relationships (Epstein, 2011). The Wallace Foundation (2004) outlined four main points for best leadership practices: articulating clear educational goals, coordinating teaching and curriculum, promoting teaching-learning, and fostering organizational conditions for teacher's collaboration with families (Hallinger & Heck, 1998).

Culturally Responsive Leadership

Public schools are confronting the topic of equitable access to education for students as a path to improvement. As school leaders take integral steps creating a safe space where students and families feel safe, respected, heard, and challenged, culturally responsive leaders must increase self-awareness and better understand themselves to enhance effective behaviors that positively impact all stakeholders. Researchers such as Khalifa stated that school leaders across districts, cities, and countries search for strategies and solutions to strengthen their cultural knowledge and understanding of ethnically diverse students. Khalifa's research of culturally responsive school

leadership has three basic premises of a culturally responsive leader: First, the leader must have a deep understanding of what a cultural responsiveness leader by learning the historical impact of the school community. Second, the culturally responsive leader needs to develop educators and the curriculum that promotes cultural awareness and sustainability in the school. Third, the leader must have a core set of behaviors*: self-reflective, promoting the school's context, and engaging in the community with students and families.*   These are critical elements for a culturally responsive leader (Khalifa, 2018).

Principals must find ways to become advocates for students' and families in minoritized communities (Khalifa, 2018). Principals leading with a community perspective, to include home cultures, contexts, and languages are respected, valued, and utilized to improve academic achievement (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2001, 2009; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Culturally responsive leaders in education are increasingly socio-cultural (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Banks, 1996; Dunn, 2000; Gay, 2000; Erickson, 2001; Bennet, 2002). Ladson-Billings (1995) noted that culturally relevant pedagogy is centered on three primary ideologies:

1. Students must be academically successful.
2. Students must develop and maintain a sense of cultural competence.
3. Students must develop the ability to become critical thinkers.

Ladson-Billings (2014) amended her original Theory into culturally sustainable pedagogy. This remixed Theory promotes a fluid understanding of culture and encourages teaching practices that explicitly engage questions of equity and justice.

School leaders promote collaboration between the school and the community (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Cultural responsiveness is one success factor that is vital to the school leader's pathway of raising achievement and narrows the academic gaps for diverse families (Edwards et

al., 2019; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). One characteristic of the culturally responsive leader is strategically integrating school programs that reflect the diverse student population (Derderian-Aghajania & Cong, 2012). Creating programs that reflect the diversity of the student population demonstrates opportunities and engagement from all stakeholders for advancing student outcomes. In addition, when the meeting between school leaders and families involves blending culture into the curriculum, it increases parental support for student achievement (Aguilar, 2011).

Research has shown an explosion of inequalities with children in poverty and the need for sensitivity to cultural awareness in schools (Kea & Utley, 1998). When school leaders recognize that a culturally responsive approach combats poverty and inequalities, the entire school community is positively impacted within and beyond the school building. Culturally responsive school leaders align school and community partnerships with families' cultural backgrounds (Riehl, 2002). Students are most challenging to reach when facing barriers and obstacles such as poverty. Each student brings value to the group, thus strengthening the group. Students adapt quicker as learners when faced with a reinforced positive environment that builds their self-esteem and the confidence to take on increased learning opportunities (Steele & Vargas, 2013).

Horsford, Grossland, and Gunn (2011) stated:

> Efforts to demonstrate and engage culturally relevant leadership in schools will face challenges and resistance from those who prefer to keep things the way they are. Educational leaders must therefore become familiar with the guiding principles, continuum, and essential elements of cultural proficiency and the obstacles and the resistance they will face as they seek to dismantle oppression and reveal privilege and entitlement within their respective organizations. (p. 598)

Leaders must promote a meaningful learning environment conducive to a positive family-school partnership. Culturally responsive leaders display empathy, respect, and sensitivity to all stakeholders (Amatea & Dolan, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Culturally responsive leaders must engage and extend the school community's learning and cultural conditions. Leaders must create inclusive structures that racially and ethnically empower diverse students and parents (Johnson, 2012).

Building two-way communication creates partnerships, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness for families (Fruchter, 2007). When school leaders recognize that a culturally responsive approach combats poverty and inequalities, the entire school community is positively impacted within and beyond the school building. The culturally responsive leader creates high expectations for all students while embedding cultural context and languages into the school community's learning experiences (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). These practices go beyond grades and test scores. The leader establishes an awareness of the real concerns when school environments fail to nurture all students regardless of their cultural and linguistic background (Richards et al., 2006). Children do not benefit when educators seek to minimize the importance of race or discount the social facts of racial inequality (Pollack, 2004). It is the leader's sole responsibility to promote a meaningful learning experience for diverse learners (Khalifa, 2012). The culture of a school transcends relationships between school and home. Equity and excellence in education will remain elusive goals if educators are unable to bridge the cultural gaps between themselves and the students that they serve Ruffin & Simon, (2022).

Findings suggest cultural responsiveness in schools is a more prevalent need than before. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, NCES (2020), "Public schools in the United States have become more racially and ethnically diverse in the last decade". The percentage

of students who were Hispanic increased from 22% to 28%. White students enrolled in public schools has decreased between fall 2009 and fall 2020 to 54% to 46% while the percentage of Black students decreased from 17% to 15 % during the same time frame".

The cultural differences between school leadership, curricula, and diverse learning styles of students of color often fail to engage parents effectively. For example, Title III of *The Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) requires that school leaders adhere to policies that eliminate discrimination toward parents whose native language is not English. Huss Keeler's (1997) ethnographic study revealed teachers failed to share translated school documents with parents during the parent-teacher conference, even though they shared written reports for middle-class white and black parents. The teachers took advantage of parents not complaining (Kim, 2009). Reexamining the role of culturally responsive leadership builds and develops perceptions of educational equity for all students (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2019). Culturally responsive leaders who seek to add the history and cultural knowledge of students' home lives into the curriculum will successfully address the inequalities in the schools (Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2013). Embracing this cultural history promotes accessibility for parents to openly communicate their cultural and ethnic belief to improve student achievement.

Barriers or Challenges That Must Be Solved

Family and parent engagement strongly correlate with student achievement and effective schools (Epstein, 1990, 1995, Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002). This section intends to identify some of the barriers families may encounter that harm family-school partnerships.

Hornby and Lafaele (2011) categorized factors that impede parent engagement

 1) Individual parent and family factors - These factors typically include parental beliefs and parent involvement, perceptions of invitations from school leaders, current life circumstances, class, ethnicity, and gender.

2) Several child factors include age, learning difficulties and disabilities, gifts and talents, and behavioral problems.

3) Parent-teacher factors- differing goals and agendas, differing attitudes, and differing language used. Language is a barrier family's face—English is not the first language. The language barrier makes communicating with families complicated between home and school (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011, Smith et al.). Schools today have families and students who speak multiple languages. The school's responsibility is to create learning and welcoming conditions for all societal factors- historical and demographic, political, and economic factors that may produce unintended consequences.

Schools are responsible for creating a safe and welcoming school environment for their stakeholders. That includes making families feel they are part of the school. Unfortunately, school can pose a barrier to families, hindering relationships. Poor communication tends to be less friendly and a barrier for families. Barriers can arise when parents negatively experience a school from their personal experience with an older child. These feelings left unattended can fester, which can cause attitudes resulting in miscommunication between home and school. (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lawson, 2003).

Time is another barrier for families. School events such as attending conferences can interfere with work schedules, childcare, and lack of transportation. Baskin, Wampold, Quintana & Enright (2010) and Osterman (2000) identified the need for parents to feel a sense of belonging in school; the attitudes and school actions influence how parents perceive schools.

Tinker's Five Categories of Barriers to Parental Engagement

In developing authentic, trusting relationships with families, a preliminary review of research claims families faces barriers supporting their children's academic outcomes in schools. Shattering barriers to parental involvement and engagement begins with identifying school obstacles and making plans to overcome them. According to Tinker (2002), five categories can contribute to a lack of parent engagement in school: environmental factors, language, and culture, educational level, psychological, and logistics. Many schools must implement structures and systems to engage parent involvement (Carreron et al., 2005). These structures include parents serving in the parent-teacher organization (PTO), which generates social capital for students' success while building trust and respect with staff. Other systems to engage parents include encouraging reading at home, fundraising to support school projects, attending parent-teacher conferences, or even volunteering at the school.

Additionally, parental school involvement correlates with discipline reduction due to family-school collaboration (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Several studies show that when parents become more engaged in their children's education, students achieve more academically (Amatea & Dolan, 2009; Henderson, 1981, 1987; Tran, 2014). Some evidence from several correlational studies shows engaged parents hold educational aspirations for their children (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). There are two parent involvement structures categories; those systems and networks that occur inside the school and those structures outside the school (Tinker, 2002). Thus, family-school engagement strongly aligns with student achievement and positively influences school-family relationships (Epstein, 1990, 1995; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002).

Despite the benefit of families' interest in becoming more involved in school-family partnerships, schools unknowingly place hurdles on parents that prevent the partnership from occurring (Mapp, 2003; Warren, Hong, Rubin, Uy, 2009). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) have concluded that documented school barriers can impede parent involvement. Findings show that while parents and staff agree on barriers associated with parent involvement and family engagement, resolutions between staff and parents are disconnected based on teachers' beliefs about family engagement (Barker, Wise, Kelley & Skiba, 2016).

Language and Culture Barrier

The ability of multilingual families to communicate with schools is a paramount issue confronting the educational system. The changing demographics in rural and urban settings will require cultural sensitivity in our school communities. Today's schools have the multi-generational involvement of their parents and grandparents; this experience must provide the opportunity for all families to engage in their children's learning opportunities (Bauch, 2000). The socioeconomic obstacles to parent involvement confronted with linguistically diverse families are barriers encountered in our American school system. Addressing the language barrier may close gaps in academic achievement and strengthen parental relationships. "The principal is a culture-maker, intentionally or not" (McLaughlin &Talbert, 2006, p .80) that can remove this barrier in their schools.

Language and cultural barriers impact parent communication with the school personnel (Graham-Clay, 2005). School staff are responsible for creating a safe and welcoming school environment for their stakeholders. However, Grace and Trudgett (2012) stated that parents' home environment is remarkably different from school. Families may feel uncomfortable in an uninviting school and are less likely to communicate.

Multiple languages in schools: a lack of school resources, such as interpreters, may impede communication with families in their native language (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Smith et al., 2011; Ascher, 1988). Not understanding one another's languages can hinder relationships "between parents and school personnel" (Good et al., 1997; Lawson, 2003). Intimidated by language, parents may avoid communication and engagement with the school (Flynn, 2007). Students act as communicators regarding school programs, activities, and events. In some cases, taking home flyers, delivering information, and translating for their parents (Epstein, 1995), are ways families communicate with the school.

In summary, societal factors such as demographics, biases, feelings of inferiority, socioeconomic factors, and family instability may produce unintended consequences for schools and families (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Swap, 1993). The following section will discuss Bronfenbrenner, Epstein, Hoover-Dempsey, and Sandler's theoretical frameworks that illustrate the impact of the school, parents, and the community in this partnership (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1979, 1986, 1994, 2001; Epstein, 1987, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997).

Psychological Barriers

Schools can pose psychological barriers for parents. This unpleasant experience is a catalyst for change for parents and school personnel when bipartisan communication occurs. As the researchers illustrate, families are feeling vulnerability because of limited education (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lawson, 2003) may cause parents to feel inferior to school personnel (Barton, Drake, Perez, Louis, & George, 2004; Blue-Banning, summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). However, schools can improve the two-way communication relationship and remove the barrier between home and school communication

Reframing the notion that barriers exist with engaging families starts with examining the factors that typically include parental beliefs and feelings that school personnel do not value, welcome, or encourage their involvement. (Hornby & Lafale, 2011). In addition, the belief of feeling judged by teachers can result in disengaged parents (Baker et al., 2016).

Parents emotional status can also be a barrier impeding parental engagement. A parent's own school experiences and low self-esteem can hinder school participation (Davis, 1989). Greenwood & Hickman (1991) and Whitaker and Fiore (2001) suggest that parents' lack of educational background and confidence prevents parents from engaging with schools. Moreover, child factors include age, learning difficulties and disabilities, gifts and talents, and behavioral problems (Hornby & Lafale, 2011).

Barriers can also arise when parents have a negative school experience with an older child. (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lawson, 2003). This feeling can lead to further parent disengagement and make it more difficult to reverse their negative feelings towards the school.

Logistic Barriers

In developing a starting point to construct a solid partnership with families, schools must address systems that create barriers. For example, school partnerships have increased academic outcomes for students (Carlson & Christenson, 2005; Henderson, Mapp, 2002: Serpell & Mashburn, 2012). However, family participation has psychological aspects (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), such as limited community resources, social-emotional support, and access to technology.

Communication through technology presents new opportunities and challenges for parents, students, and teachers to communicate. Home and school communication are essential in building

strong school partnerships (Epstein, 2010, Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Many parents had data-capped mobile devices (Thorbecke, 2020) that hinder accessibility through the school's designated learning management system or parental portal intended for parents to monitor their child's academic progress. Plats and Kalmus (2015) asserted that digital barriers could hinder involvement. Poor communication is worsened when families do not have digital communication tools. Parental workshops focusing on the use of technology can help lessen the burden and improve digital communication between staff and parents (Plats & Kalmus, 2015), but only if parents have access to technology.

Research has shown that family structure can be a barrier to parental involvement (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). In addition, other researchers have examined barriers that include child custody agreements, work schedules, and childcare and transportation (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lawson, 2003; Smith et al., Wanders et al., 2007). Baskin et al. (2000) suggest that schools' parent-teacher conferences are particularly challenging and compete against the parents' schedules and work shifts, creating another barrier for families. Hoover- Dempsey (2002) and Hornby and Lafaele (2011) assert that the school's responsibility is to create systems and strategies to increase the effectiveness of family-school communication learning and welcoming conditions for all in ways that minimize these barriers.

Parent Educational Barriers

Family engagement is paramount to the success of students. School leaders must be the drivers in removing barriers parents face when encountering the school system. Helping parents believe in themselves and providing resources can create an equitable, welcoming environment. In addition, building relationships will create a platform for the parental voice needed for positive outcomes for students.

Parent educational factors are a powerful barrier. Parents who feel intimidated by the school may force parents to become less engaged. Parental education is a significant factor in parental involvement; the higher the parent's education level, the higher the involvement (Englund et al., 2004). However, Handmaker (2015) cited internal barriers indicating teacher vulnerability as a barrier. Teachers who are afraid of parent criticism and school administration are factors causing limited engagement. The school personnel's attitudes and perceptions of low-income working parents can be barriers. Teachers' misinterpretations about specific parents' motivation, interest, and intent can be a barrier (Cooper, Crosnoe, Suizzo, & Pituch, 2010; Turney & Kao, 2009; Zarate, 2007).

School events that do not align with parental needs are often non-relatable (Ascher, 1988), resulting in poor parent involvement. Families who perceive an imbalance of power between themselves and the teacher may hinder communications is a barrier to parental involvement (Dockett, Mason, & Perry, 2006). Life distractions and unexpected events such as homelessness and socioeconomic status are also barriers (Brandt, 1989).

Socioeconomic and Family Barriers

Positive family engagement in schools can shape and sustain one of the most critical elements of child development that creates academic growth opportunities (Al-Matalka, 2014). Parents are influential in their ability to impact their children's educational learning process. However, socioeconomic factors may impede families from engaging in the school setting. Housing security, food insecurities, and financial resources are barriers to families' lack of school engagement (Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005).

Family-school partnerships can have an impact on students' academic outcomes. Researchers have found that lower socioeconomic families are least likely to be involved in their

students' education (Turney & Kao, 2009; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007; Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005; Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006).

Increasingly, when families experience a structural change in resources, there is sometimes an economic shift in priorities with school involvement (De Vausbet al., 2014). Furthermore, family structure and instability can counter one another, negatively affecting parental involvement in schools. Families with higher income levels tend to be more involved in school when compared to lower-income families (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2008) associated several factors regarding the lack of parental involvement. These factors include transportation, knowledge about the educational process, multiple jobs, and work schedules. All these factors served as socioeconomic obstacles to parent involvement in schools. Regardless of income, ethnicity, or background, students with involved parents are likelier to earn higher grades and test scores, have better attitudes, behavior, and attendance, and graduate and continue to additional education. Higher parental involvement is associated with higher educational expectations, gifted and talented programs, enrollment, and positive perceptions of school" (Henderson, 1988, p. 149-53).

Theory

The components needed to optimize parent engagement to increase students' outcomes require school leaders to understand the conceptual framework of several prominent theorists: Bronfenbrenner, Epstein, and Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler. These theorists believe parental engagement is critical to their approach in strengthening school-family relationships. Schools need to understand the historical theorist's perspectives of how the evolution of society, environment, and schools impact student outcomes. Each theorist's research examines a unique perspective on the child, parent, and school. The approach to examining the family structure and relationships between families and school environments increases academic achievement beyond

the school walls according to three prominent researchers Bronfenbrenner, Epstein, and Hoover-Dempsey.

In addition, the work of Bronfenbrenner, Epstein, and Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler broadens conceptualization and deepens understanding of the family engagement models in their theoretical frameworks.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Theory explores the conceptualized factors that involve child development through multiple environments, called ecological systems. The systems examine the child's experience factors such as school, location, connections with relationships, indirect environment, societal values, and changes over time. Bronfenbrenner identifies the Ecological Theory, which conveys that environment directly impacts the child's emotional makeup (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1979, 1986, 1994, 2001). Bronfenbrenner's concentric circles model outlines how external factors influence child development within five layers. The microsystem is the child's environment and personal relationships with family, school, or caregivers of the five layers. This layer is composed of culture, environment, societal customs, and political factors. The mesosystem is a child's interactions between peer groups, family, and schools. The exosystem is the child's linkage between the environments, such as a parent's work environment or neighborhood. The impact of these environments may indirectly affect a child's development. The macrosystem has a major influence on children's development. Bronfenbrenner (2001) describes the macrosystem of a child's experiences in a war-affected country. The impact on the child's psychosocial and physical development will differ compared to those children who have not experienced this trauma in peaceful environments. Finally, the chronosystem addresses the

transformation of children's everyday life to include the aging process, changes in family structure, and neighborhood changes (Trudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009).

Bronfenbrenner's Theory reflects how children's daily life experiences influence their development over the lifespan. Families significantly impact children's development (Rosa & Trudge, 2013). Understanding the considerable barriers of social and contextual environments helps educators remove families' barriers to successful partnerships (Weiss, Lopez, Kreider, & Chatman-Nelson, 2013). Bronfenbrenner's Theory contains several limitations: traumatic environmental factors children encounter, food insecurities, poverty, and culturally disadvantaged families' experience. As a result, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (2005) research offers a different pathway to deepening researchers' understanding of why parent involvement is essential.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's research investigates the parental role in three areas: personal motivation, perception, and life variables. These elements focus on why parents engage with school. Examining the family structure and relationships between families and school environments increases academic achievement and builds partnerships beyond the school walls.

Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Theory of Engagement Influencer

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model takes a different approach by investigating why parents become involved in their child's education and its outcome effects. The five levels address the essential questions: who, what, where, why, and how families become involved and establish student outcomes. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model helps investigate parents' influences and processes because parents are engaged in school and at home (Walker et al., 2005).

According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, personal motivators involve the self-efficacy of parents' beliefs and childhood experiences about schooling, as level one. These experiences can impact parents' decisions to get involved and ensure their child has a positive school experience.

This model also includes the student's perception of parents' behaviors in encouragement, modeling, and reinforcing appropriate behavior in which school and parents are on the same path with the child's support. Level two describes home-based behaviors such as encouragement with homework, modeling, and reinforcement of academic expectations. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler explain life variables as the last factor to influence parents. Parents' solid understanding of their skills and knowledge influences their thinking about the kinds of involvement activities they take on. Level three explains how parents reinforce and construct appropriate behaviors for their children at home and school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997, 2005, 2010). Level four involves the parent's use of developmentally appropriate strategies and alignment to the school's expectations. Finally, level five contributions of Hoover Dempsey and Sandler's model (1995, 1997) of parent involvement is student outcome which includes a sense of self-efficacy in school success.

Epstein's Theory of Parent Involvement

Epstein's Framework, one of the most widely cited works in this field, along with Bronfenbrenner and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, family engagement, including the role of schools, community, and parents. School-family partnerships have continued to be a thread that links to positive student outcomes. Creating supporting environments for families and students requires all stakeholders to have a broad understanding of the community they serve. Most importantly, however, is creating a democratic space in schools to support family-school partnerships. Epstein (2019) identified Six Types of Involvement that are broad in perspective of how families can be engaged in their child's education (see explanation in Chapter 1)

The Epstein model entails shifting understanding of school engagement levels. Epstein (1987, 1992) combines educational, psychological, and sociological perspectives to describe the

inner working partnership schools and parents should foster in their institutions. According to Epstein, the partnership reflects the child's development, historical influences, school, family, and community practices. Epstein's work centered on types of family engagement and what schools and educators can do to create partnerships to benefit students' academic development. Epstein took Bronfenbrenner's concentric circle model to a sphere of influence as a trailblazer. The more the spheres overlap, the more collaboration occurs between family, school, and community (Dauber, Epstein, 1993; Epstein 1987, 1995; Epstein & Saunders, 2000). Research such as Braunger and Lewis (1997) and Hall and Shultz (2001) agree that community, family, and school collaboration impacts children's development.

Epstein, (1998) also suggested that school institutions should have an open-arms approach to all stakeholders who invest in children's welfare. In comparison, Costantino, (2013) stated "Engaging families in educational lives of children is culture changing." Research such as Price-Mitchell, (2009) suggest "parental involvement is clearly linked to children's academic, social, and emotional development, and building parent-school partnerships is one strategy for improving student success worldwide (e.g., Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Fan & Chen, 1999; Gonzalez, 2004; Henderson, 1987; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Schleicher, 1992)."

Epstein's work focused on collaboration between school, family, and community that coordinates and aligns with the six types of parent engagement. Epstein's research provides school and district leaders with a clear road map of how to engage families and sustain school partnerships. The framework empowers schools to creatively involve families to take an action team approach in schools to improve school climate and student success.

The research of Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory, and Epstein's Theory of Parental Involvement is clear that parental engagement can impact the educational experiences of students and families. While school districts continued to search for the perfect antidote to improve family engagement, many realize ESSA is the accountability measure to help schools identify barriers and build stronger connections that will result in meaningful opportunities for families to stay involved beyond elementary schools.

Summary and Implications of Literature Review

The research reviewed in this chapter shows that strong family-school partnerships positively impact students' achievement. The first section reviewed the historical perspective and supported the present family concepts essential for academic success. The second and third sections of research define school-family partnerships and subsequent educational policies that support school-family partnerships. The fourth and fifth sections of research delve into the parent and school leader's perspectives that not all students have equitable and optimal home-school experiences. The sixth and seventh sections of research capture beliefs and attitudes about family engagement, particularly in urban settings. The eighth research section discusses school leadership styles identified as critical to forming positive family-school relationships. Finally, the last section of the literature review concentrated on three prominent theorists who have pioneered the realm of family engagement.

Building respectful relationships while engaging in authentic activities will impact students, family, and school partnerships. Research demonstrates that student outcomes are more significant when strong partnerships with families and schools exist. The review revealed published recommendations from the literature asserting that families want the best for their children regardless of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. However, prior research

on how to improve the school, family, and community partnerships focuses primarily on the individual school level, with studies looking from the district perspective. Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011; Epstein & Sheldon, 2016; Epstein et al. 2019; Epstein & Boone, 2022; and Epstein, 2011, who has conducted historical paradigms research of parent-school relationships. This study will further this research on family engagement across an entire school district which identifies an investigation. This study aims to contribute to this important attention to leadership for partnership.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Despite the wealth of evidence endorsing the importance of family engagement, districts struggle to create a district-wide approach to supporting family-school partnerships. The central office in a school district is instrumental in developing resources and a learning environment for family engagement in all schools. This study seeks to add to the body of literature by investigating families, principals, and central office staff perceptions of family engagement and providing recommendations for improving parental engagement in the Tillman Area School District, a diverse, midsize, urban public school with 95% students in poverty.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

In the various roles I have held within the district, I have experienced family engagement perceptions from the viewpoint of informal comments from families, principals and central office staff. I undertook this study to formally understand family, principal, and central office administrators of how families are engaged at the building and district levels. The following research questions will guide the investigation:

1. What are the perceptions of families, principals, and central office administrators regarding family engagement in The Tillman School District?

2. What are the perceptions of families, principals and central office administrators regarding the role of administrators in family engagement in The Tillman School District?

3. What accounts for the similarities and differences of these family, principal, and central office administrator perceptions?

4. What can The Tillman School District administrators do to improve school family engagement?

These research questions were constructed in alignment with Epstein's Six Types of Parent Involvement so that the findings and recommendations could be presented through this.

Research Design Overview

Qualitative research is described as an educational issue exploration that includes observations, in-depth interviews, open-ended questions, and focus groups (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Qualitative research is used to understand people's experiences and perspectives (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The study will examine family engagement and explore ways to strengthen school leadership partnerships.

Next, 20 parent participants will be recruited. A demographic survey will be administered to the parent participants. The survey will only collect the demographic information about the parents, which can be used to disaggregate the qualitative data once it is collected (see Appendix A). Focus group interviews with parents will then be conducted to ascertain their perceptions surrounding the state of school and family engagement within the district as a whole and at their particular building level. Parents on the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) will be randomly selected from the school district's four geographical quadrants. This will include four groups of elementary parents (one per quadrant), two groups of middle school parents (two per district, each representing two neighboring quadrants), and a group of parents from one high school. The

quadrant characteristics include a diverse community, income disparity, and varied views and experiences in the conversation from families.

Next, principals will be recruited. A focus group will include three principals who reflect the three school levels within the district, including one elementary school principal, one middle school principal, and one high school principal. A demographic survey will be conducted among the principal participants. The survey will only collect demographic information about parents, which can be used to disaggregate the qualitative data once it is collected (see Appendix B). These principals will be chosen because they represent the range of grades K-12 in the district, and they are the only principals over whom I have no supervisory capacity.

Finally, two central office administrators who focus on school, family, and community engagement will be recruited. A demographic survey will be administered to the central office administrator participants. The survey will only collect the demographic information about the central office administrators which can be used to disaggregate the qualitative data once it is collected (see Appendix C). They will be interviewed individually to gain their perceptions on how the district is enacting family engagement.

All focus group and individual interview sessions will be audio recorded using the Audacity program on my laptop and transcribed using Rev.com.

In-person interviewing will be the preferred technique for this study to observe nonverbal behaviors among family members and principals, such as body language and facial expressions (Butin, 2010). However, these same descriptions can be a hurdle to ascertaining honest responses called the "response bias." Participants act in ways to influence the researcher. This may be especially true given my position as a central office administrator in the district. To keep this in

check, I will note behaviors and compare them with participants' verbal responses to determine if and when similarities and conflicts exist.

Finally, my goal will be to keep the inquiry disciplined (Eichelberger, 1989), the discussion focused on the subjects, and limit the possibility of my perceptions and bias affecting the conversation. The following sections discuss the disciplined inquiry and detailed procedures for each data collection form.

The Planned Use of the Focus Group

This research will utilize focus group interviews based on the constructs of Krueger and Casey (2015) to gain insight into the participants' perspectives, range of experiences, and feelings towards family engagement in the school district. Focus groups are: (1) "The participants (2) who possess characteristics and (3) qualitative data (4) in a focused discussion to (5) help understand the topic of interest" (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 6). Krueger and Casey further articulate that focus groups may be constructed to provide a range of opinions, perceptions, or ideas people have about a particular policy, practice, or program (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p.21). The clear focus is discovering insight on a particularly complicated issue or opinion or attitudes representing families from three school levels: elementary, middle, and high school.

I selected the focus-group methodology for a variety of reasons. First, I want to gain a full range of perceptions from the families' and principals' experiences of family engagement. Second, I want to examine family engagement and explore ways to strengthen school leadership on partnerships. Third, I want to examine family engagement across multiple grade level bands, elementary, middle, and high school to understand the differences. The experiences of central office staff perspectives would positively impact engagement compared with the families'

experiences of the three distinct groups. The focus groups will also provide insight into systematic or organizational concerns in the school district that could improve customer and service satisfaction with all stakeholders. Given my experience with family engagement across the school district at multiple levels, I was also interested in analyzing the collected wisdom of these experts to inform the Tillman School District's current leaders of how to develop innovative ideas and strengthen practices that will inform the school district.

Parent Focus Group Interview Procedure

The Tillman Families will be identified as representing the four boundaries of the school district, divided into four quadrants: four elementary schools, one middle school, and two high school campuses. Within each of these school groups, I will use snowball sampling, a nonprobability sampling technique, with parents recruiting other parents. I will contact the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) representative to recruit parents within PAC to participate in the focus groups interviews. The PAC president at each school will identify five or six people to include in the study (Creswell, 2013). Parent contact information for the parents will be obtained from the school student database, and I will reach out to parents by email, phone call, or both. The communication documents will be translated in Spanish. Each focus group session will have a parent translator. I plan to schedule the focus group interview before or after the established PAC school meeting time for the convenience of the parent participants. The Tillman district website calendar will be utilized to obtain parent meeting scheduled dates, times, and locations. After reviewing and obtaining informed consent from parent participants at the beginning of each focus group session, I will administer the demographic survey and pose the following questions to the group.

Each parent will be given a hard copy of the questions to follow along as I read them one at a time:

1. What are the critical components to building effective family engagement in the school?

2. How would you describe your experience with family engagement in the school?

3. Do you think some barriers prevent parents from being engaged in the school? If so, what barriers do you feel exist?

4. How or how does the school principal impact family engagement?

5. How or how does the central office administrators impact family engagement?

6. If you were in charge of the school, how would you engage more families?

7. What does the district do well to encourage family engagement?

8. What can the district do better to encourage family engagement?

9. Are there any questions I did not ask or topics you would like to address regarding parent engagement?

The parent focus group, principal focus group and central office administrator questions were crafted to align with one another and also help to answer the research questions. The table below depicts the alignment using the parent prompts which are similar to prompts across all groups.

Table 1

Alignment of Research Questions and Parent Focus Group Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
1. What are the perceptions of families and central office administrators regarding family engagement in The Tillman School District?	What are the critical components to building effective family engagement at the elementary, middle, and high school levels? How would you describe your experience with family engagement in the school? Do you believe school leaders/ central office staff impact establishing positive family and school relationships? What does the district do well to encourage family engagement?

2. What are the perceptions of families and central office administrators regarding the <u>role</u> of administrators in family engagement in The Tillman School District?	How would you describe your experience with family engagement in the school? Do you believe school leaders/ central office staff impact establishing positive family and school relationships? What does the district do well to encourage family engagement?
3. What accounts for the similarities and differences of these perceptions?	What are the critical components to building effective family engagement at the elementary, middle, and high school levels? How would you describe your experience with family engagement in the school? Do you think some barriers prevent parents from being involved at the elementary, middle, or high school levels? If so, what barriers do you feel exist?
4. What can The Tillman School District administrators do to improve school family engagement?	Do you believe school leaders/ central office staff establish a positive family and school relationships? Do you think some barriers prevent parents from being involved at the elementary, middle, or high school levels? If so, what barriers do you feel exist? Do you believe school leaders/ central office staff impact establishing positive family and school relationships? What does the district do well to encourage/ improve family engagement? If so, if you were in charge of leaders/ central office staff of the school, how would you involve more (elementary, middle, and high school), families, from the community?

Principal Interview Procedure

The three principals will be recruited by email. The principal focus group will follow the same disciplined inquiry (Eichelberger, 1989) procedure described above for the parent focus groups. After reviewing and obtaining informed consent from principal participants at the beginning of the focus group session, I will administer the demographic survey then pose the following questions to the group. Each principal will also be given a hard copy of the questions to follow along as I read them one at a time:

1. What are the critical components to building effective family engagement in the school?

2. How do you support family engagement in school?

3. Describe the state of family engagement in your school.

4. Do you think some barriers prevent parents from being engaged in school? If so, what barriers do you feel exist?

5. Are there barriers that prevent you as the principal from encouraging family engagement? If so, what are they?

6. How does or how doesn't the school principal impact family engagement?

7. How does or how doesn't the central office administrators impact family engagement?

8. What does the district do well to encourage family engagement?

9. What can the district do better to encourage family engagement?

10. Are there any questions I did not ask or topics you would like to address regarding parent engagement?

Central Office Administrators Interview Procedures

The Coordinator of Family Engagement and Coordinator of Community Relations both hold positions that are influential on the district's impacts on family engagement Tillman SD. The Coordinator of Family Engagement manages vertical K-12 alignment engagement opportunities within and between schools to support the district's priorities. The focus is on equity and access to family engagement for all families in the district with school age children, K-12. The Community Engagement Coordinator manages and provides leadership to leverage community resources to support family engagement initiatives and processes for families, school personnel, and organizations. These two central office administrators will be recruited by email.

The central office administrator interviews will follow the same disciplined inquiry procedure as applied in the parent and principal focus group interviews. After reviewing and

obtaining informed consent from central office participants at the beginning of the focus group session, I will administer the demographic survey then pose the following questions to the group. Each central office staff participant will also be given a hard copy of the questions to follow along as I read them one at a time.

1. What are the critical components to building effective family engagement in schools?

2. How do you support family engagement in schools?

3. Describe the state of family engagement in your schools.

4. Do you think some barriers prevent parents from being engaged in the school? If so, what barriers do you feel exist?

5. Are there barriers that prevent you as Central Office Administrator from encouraging family engagement? If so, what are they?

6. How does or how doesn't the school principal impact family engagement?

7. How does or how doesn't the central office administrators impact family engagement?

8. What does the district do well to encourage family engagement?

9. What can the district do better to encourage family engagement?

10. Are there any questions I did not ask or topics you would like to address regarding parent engagement?

Potential Risks to Participation

Within focus groups, participants present the contextual reality of the social experience as felt by the participant and how that participant makes sense of the social experience (Miller & Glassner, 2016). The interview methodology generates authentic insights into an individual's experience (Silverman, 2001). In this study, the researcher is the Director of Schools, a former Principal with a powerful position and could be perceived as a concern. I recognize the unique

role, and as a researcher, I am deeply committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of all subjects. For this reason, the following protective measures have been taken.

1. The researcher has support from an expert in focus group methodology including a faculty advisor, Dr. Ann Gaudino, who has conducted and published multiple studies utilizing focus group methodology.

2. The researcher will verbally re-iterate with subjects the desire for all subjects to feel secure in speaking honestly during the focus group sessions. The researcher will ensure confidentiality by reminding participants of their commitment to confidentiality and assurance that if, at any time, the participant feels uncomfortable, they may walk away from the study.

3. The informed consent form includes that participants agree to confidentiality and to not discuss their or others' comments once the focus group interview concludes.

Data Analysis Procedures

The purpose of this study, and the methodology used, is essential to my decision on how to code the data. I want the approach to be disciplined in its inquiry (Eichelberger, 1989) yet be flexible enough to capture the full range of ideas expressed by family members, and central office administrators. Qualitative data collection for focus group interviews requires the researcher to take extensive measures to capture an accurate and detailed narrative of the dialogues (Creswell, 2014). To accomplish this, I wanted data analysis and coding that were sequential, flexible, systematic, and consequential (Kruger & Casey, 2015).

While there are a variety of ways to analyze qualitative data (Saldaña, 2016), coding is recognized as a key skill to proficient qualitative analysis (Strauss, 1987). Coding is not synonymous with analysis, but it is a crucial technique for good analysis (Basit, 2003).

Additionally, coding is not simply labeling information (Richard & Morse, 2013). It is the treatment of data; dividing it, reorganizing it, and linking it to derive meaning and provide an explanation (Grbich, 2013).

Data analysis requires more than one attempt to code the data "Coding is a cyclical act" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 9). Coding progresses from the raw data to simultaneous codes which, through refinement, branch into subcategories. These subcategories then progress to major categories which transcend to themes and assertions. Saldaña (2016) warns against shortcutting from coding directly from raw data to themes, indicating a theme can be an outcome from the coding process but a theme is not coded. Through a concise graph of codifying data, Saldaña (2016) identifies a streamlined codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry as shown below. Figure 1 provides a description of how the data may be codified and the links between code results in identified categories. I will use the themes and concepts generated by qualitative analysis to support or refute asserted theories (Saldaña, 2016).

Figure 1

Saldaña's (2016, p.18) Streamlined Codes-to-Theory Model for Qualitative Inquiry
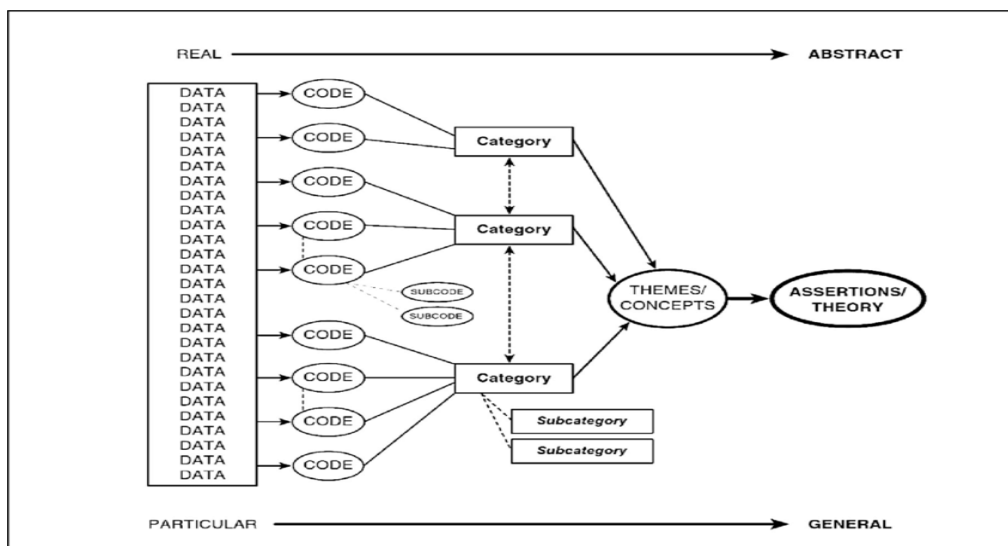
The number of codes used in each study appears to be subjective with some researchers recommending as many as 300 codes (Friese, 2014) while others recommend no more than 40 codes (MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Millstein, 2009). Likewise, the number of themes or concepts generated through the analysis process ranges from three to seven (Saldaña, 2016).

Although there are as many as 25 first-cycle code methods that can be selected to meet the needs of a given study (Saldaña, 2016), this study will employ two first-cycle codes in a simultaneous manner. The first coding method will be In Vivo. In Vivo is also referred to as verbatim coding or natural coding (Saldaña, 2016). Codes will be drawn from the actual terms used by the participants found directly in the written transcripts (Strauss, 1987).

According to Saldaña (2016), In Vivo coding is "appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data" (p. 106). Additionally, In Vivo coding "captures the meanings inherent in people's experiences" (Stringer, 2014, p. 140), which is important to this study seeking to understand the participants' perceptions. According to Strauss (1987), the root meaning of In Vivo is 'in that which is alive'. As such, In Vivo coding uses words or short phrases from the participant's own language in the data record as codes. In Vivo codes are action-oriented, and participant inspired rather than generated by the researcher and should be capitalized and placed in quotation marks (Saldaña, 2016; Strauss, 1987).

The second cycle coding method used in this research, simultaneously to the first cycle coding, will be structural coding. "A colloquial term for this method is *utilitarian coding*, referring to its categorization function' (p.130). It is the content base or conceptual phrase representing the topic, to segmentation of data, and then specific research questions used to frame the interview (MacQueen et al., 2008, Saldaña, 2016).

In this study, structural coding will be utilized as it "acts as a labeling and indexing device" to quickly access the data from the larger context. The prompts will identify and explore the perceptions held, including the differences, commonalities, and relationships to the topic from the interview questions. This process will allow the labeling and codes to be more easily identifiable and based on the purpose of the study, focusing on what the researcher was seeking to discover.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate parent, principal and central office administrator perceptions of family engagement, and how to strengthen relationships in the Tillman Area School District. This study was unique because it disaggregated the economic disparities and cultural backgrounds of families across the school district, family experiences with school family engagement, and building leaders and central administration perceptions of the family's role in schools. While there is abundant evidence that shows effective school-family relationships create a learning environment that influences students' academic outcomes and community relationships Khalifa, (2012), it is the culturally responsive leader who can leverage community advocacy in building relationships with marginalized, urban families that creates the building blocks for engagement.

This research most prominently demonstrated that families across the Tillman Area School District often feel and are perceived by school personnel as being less involved based on the socio-economic geographic location of the school in addition to how family engagement disappears after elementary school. Seven key themes emerged from the interviews including: critical components of effective family engagement, barriers that impede family engagement, communication,

dynamics of family engagement, pathways to cultural awareness/ equitable opportunities, action to improve family engagement with relationships, families experience with family engagement.

Study Participants

This study employed qualitative research to investigate the perspectives of families, principals, and central offices at the school district level surrounding school and family engagement. Data was collected through focus group interviews with parents and families, focus group interviews with school leaders, and individual interviews with central office administrators.

The Tillman Area School District families were identified in the four school boundary quadrants: Each quadrant represented elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school campus. The following acronyms will be used to describe the various participants interviewed in this study:

Table 2

Quadrant One: Parent Focus Group Participant Acronyms

Quadrant One: Jackson	Acronyms
Quadrant 1 Parent 1 Middle School	Q1P1MS
Quadrant 1 Parent 2 Elementary School	Q1P2EL
Quadrant 1 Parent 3 Elementary School	Q1P3EL
Quadrant 1 Parent 4 Elementary School	Q1P4EL
Quadrant 1 Parent 5 High School School	Q1P5HS

Table 3

Quadrant Two: Parent Focus Group Participant Acronyms

Quadrant Two Lincoln	Acronyms
Quadrant 2 Parent 1 Middle School	Q2P1MS
Quadrant 2 Parent 2 Elementary School	Q2P2EL
Quadrant 2 Parent 3 Elementary School	Q2P3EL
Quadrant 2 Parent 4 Elementary School	Q2P4EL

Quadrant 2 Parent 5 Elementary& Middle School	Q2P5EL & MS

Table 4

Quadrant Three: Parent Focus Group Participant Acronyms

Quadrant Three Reynolds	**Acronyms**
Quadrant 3 Parent 1 Middle School & Elementary	3QP1MS & EL
Quadrant 3 Parent 2Elementary School	3QP2EL
Quadrant 3 Parent 3 Elementary School	3QP3EL
Quadrant 3 Parent 4 Middle School	3QP4MS
Quadrant 3 Parent 5 Elementary School	3QP5EL

Table 5

Quadrant Four: Parent Focus Group Participant Acronyms

Quadrant Four Wheatland	**Acronym**
Quadrant 4 Parent 1 Middle School & High School	4QP1MS & HS
Quadrant 4 Parent 2 Elementary School	4QP2EL
Quadrant 4 Parent 3 Elementary School	4QP3EL
Quadrant 4 Parent 4 Elementary School	4QP4EL
Quadrant 4 Parent 5 Elementary	4QP5EL

Table 6

Principal Focus Group Participants Acronyms

Principal Group 1 Principal	P1
Principal Group 2 Principal	P2
Principal Group 3 Principal	P3

Table 7

Central Office Administrator Focus Group Participant Acronyms

Central Office Coordinator Family Engagement	CF1

Central Office Coordinator Community Partnerships	CF2

Parent Focus Group Interview Procedure

The researcher conducted face-to-face focus group interviews and three phone interviews with 20 parents of students attending the Tillman School District. The purpose of conducting the interview by geographic locations and tracking the data by ethnicity, gender, and educational level was to ensure that all unique groups were represented and to determine if there were different perceptions among the families, building leaders, and central office staff.

The four focus group interviews were held face-to-face at the middle schools. The three parents who could not attend in person were interviewed individually by phone. The focus groups each convened for approximately one hour. Participants completed the demographic survey and responded orally to 10 questions on the perceptions of parent involvement in their child's education across socioeconomic groups. While data were examined based on participant demographics, there were no noticeable differences among individual responses. However, parent responses across the four quadrants showed some differences. The collegiality and friendliness of all participants made the interview environment comfortable and conducive to conversation. All participants thanked the primary investigator for inviting them to participate.

Principal Focus Group Interview Procedure

Next, the researcher conducted a face-to-face focus group interview with three principals at their school location. The rapport of participants appeared relaxed yet excited to speak about the topic of family engagement. The three principals were selected because they were the only principals the primary investigator does not supervise or have influence on their employment. The

principal focus group followed the same disciplined inquiry (Eichelberger, 1989) procedure as the parent focus groups as participants responded orally to 10 questions focused on opportunities for family engagement in their schools.

Central Office Administration Interview Procedure

The two central office administrators participated in phone interviews separately. The rapport of the participants was friendly and engaging. The central administration interviews followed the same disciplined inquiry (Eichelberger, 1989) procedure as the parent and administrator focus groups as responded orally to 10 questions focused on opportunities for parent engagement in the district with various socioeconomic groups.

Themes

Seven themes emerged from the focus group discussions (see Table 8). Two were broad themes and the other five themes were more specific. Themes included:

Theme One: Critical components effective family and school relationships

Theme Two: Barriers that impede family and school relationships

Theme Three: Communication

Theme Four: The Dynamics of Family Engagement

Theme Five: Pathway to cultural awareness /Equity opportunities

Theme Six: Action to improve family engagement with relationships

Theme Seven: Families' experience with family engagement.

The findings in this study reflect a close alignment with the three distinct groups across gender, racial and educational levels. The literature review and groups also aligned to the following themes: critical components of family engagement, communication, barriers that impeded family engagement, the dynamics of family units, pathways to equity opportunities,

family experiences with family engagement, and the school's role for improvement as a partner with family engagement.

The literature and subjects' responses differed in their beliefs surrounding urban education and how urban education disparities are associated with an absence of family-school engagement, poverty and disproportionately represent "underperforming" students. While the literature discussed the importance of schools creating a welcoming culture for families and the principal's role and responsibilities to ensure barriers are removed, all of the participants felt optimistic about the district's new equity policy as steps to bridge relationships and teacher and leadership training on how to engage families. Additionally, the participants addressed the specific idea of diversity and equity and the need to be aware when developing family engagement with an equity lens. The literature additionally had limited discussion on the impact of COVID-19 on family engagement from the district-level perspective. There were remarkable similarities in responses of parents, principals and central office administrators in that they all felt family engagement had slightly increased due to technology. "Technology has evolved and provided multiple methods of communication with schools with ease and accessibility." Despite the method students communicate with each other, families, principals and central office administrators can align and strengthen school and family relationships to ensure equity access to resources and tools are accessible to all.

Investigating parent, principal, and central office administrator perceptions of family engagement through open-ended focus groups and interviews created a space for voices to bring forth their unique perceptions. Each of the 20 parents in the randomly selected focus groups brought somewhat different perspectives on issues. While many parents shared common ideas, these ideas were nuanced among the four quadrants where demographics differ. The atmosphere in

all groups was comfortable and one of camaraderie. Participants thanked me as the researcher for this opportunity to voice their experiences with family engagement.

To preserve the integrity of the rich data collected, the findings are presented by groups (principals, central office administrators, and parents).   I chose this format to ensure that each group's perspective had its own space to be told. Many direct quotations from subjects are included because their words were more poignant and powerful than any I could have chosen. Within each group, themes that emerged are numbered and presented. At the end of each group (principal, central office administrator, and parent), there is a brief discussion of overall key points brought forth by that group. Finally, there is discussion at the end of the chapter comparing themes and ideas across all the groups. It is hoped that the unique perspectives of these subjects will inform the district and add to the body of literature.

Table 8 shows themes identified by the Parents, Principals, and Central Office Administrators and Table 9 shows the themes in the literature. A comparison of the presentation of themes is discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Table 8

Themes Identified by the Parents, Principals, and Central Office Administrators

Subjects	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7
Q1P1MS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Q1P2EL		x	x	x	x	x	x
Q1P4EL	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Q1P5HS	x	x	x	x			x
Q2P1MS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Q2P2EL	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Q2P3EL	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Q2P4EL	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Q2P5EL&MS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Q3P1MS	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Q3P2EL	x	x	x	x	x	x	

Q3P3EL	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Q3P4MS	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Q3P5MS	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Q3P5EL	x		x	x	x	x	x
Q4P1MS&HS		x	x	x	x	x	x
Q4P2EL	x	x	x	x	x		x
Q4P3EL	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Q4PEL		x	x	x	x	x	x
Q4P5EL	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
P1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
P2	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
P3	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
CF1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
CF2	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Note

T1 = Critical components of effective family engagement

T2 = Barriers that Impede Family Engagement

T3 = Communication

T4 = Dynamics of Family engagement

T5 = Pathways to cultural awareness/ Equitable opportunities

T6 = Action to improve family engagement with relationships

T7= Families experience with family engagement

Table 9

Themes Identified by the Literature

Authors	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7
Aurebach (2012); Khalifa &Matthew et al (2016); Lopez et al (2001).	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Burchinal et al; Lewis et al (2008).			x	x	x		
Chrspeels & Rivero (2001); Hornby &Lafaele (2011); Smith et al (2001); Ascher, (1988)		x	x	x	x		
Department of The Pennsylvania Family Engagement Birth through College, Career, Community Ready Framework (year)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Douglass (2001)	x		x	x	x	x	x
Epstein, J.L. (2001)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Epstein, J.L. (2009)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Epsrein, J.L. (2019)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7
Fruchter (2007)					x	x	
Hands (2020)	x		x	x	x		
Hoover-Dempsey (2011)		x	x	x	x		
Hornby & Lafaele (2011)		x	x	x	x		
Jasis,P.,& Ordonez-Jasis, R. (2012)			x	x	x	x	x
Jung & Sheldon, (2020)		x	x	x	x	x	x
Kea & Utley, (1998)				x	x		
Khalifa, M. (2012)		x	x	x	x	x	
Ladson-Billings, G. (2007)			x	x	x		
Leithwood & Jantzi, (1990)					x		
Mapp,K.L.(2003)		x	x	x			
Sanders & Shelton (2009)	x		x	x	x	x	x
Plats & Kalmus (2010)	x		x	x	x	x	x
Thorbecke, (2020)			x	x		x	x

T1 = Critical components of effective family engagement

T2 = Barriers that Impede Family Engagement

T3 = Communication

T4 = Dynamics of Family engagement

T5 = Pathways to cultural awareness/ Equitable opportunities

T6 = Action to improve family engagement with relationships

T7= Families experience with family engagement

   The next section of the dissertation presents the data from the principals and central office administrators surrounding the themes.

Theme One: Critical components of effective family and school relationships

Principals

   Strong connections with families, school climate, and designing programs that reflect diversity and collaboration between district coordinators are critical components for effective family engagement. Of these elements, building effective relationships and communication with families is the central element to promote strong family and school partnerships.

The principal focus group interviews provided insight beginning with one participant, P3, who stated, leaders must be "chief communicators" to have effective family engagement. The participant, continued the conversation by stating, "You cannot be afraid to communicate in different languages or challenge staff to engage in courageous conversation with families just because there is a language barrier or that the teacher is afraid of the parent." This comment led P1, to express "schools are the ideal place to cultivate family engagement." To this another participant suggested, "Establishing strong culture and climate through the principal actions that include consistent communication is another example of effective family engagement." The three principals said, "As leaders, we must ask tough questions of ourselves." According to another participant, "As principal we first must ask ourselves the tough question, 'Are we doing enough as leaders genuinely to meet the needs of all families? 'The conversation continued as P3 stated, "Artificial barriers-one size fits all", approach in our society does not work for family engagement. Collaboration between parents, teachers, and principals should be a fluid relationship.

All three participants suggested the principal is the one individual in the school who can promote and influence family and school relationships. In contrast, the three principals realized, it is easy to say the "right stuff", but in reality, it all depends on the effectiveness of the leader to engage families. In response to the initial question about what elements promote effective family engagement, overall principals stated effectively embedding cultural context into activities is an engagement strategy that could attract families.

The Tillman School District has an equity policy discussed in interviews with the principals, parents, and central office. When asked about critical components of how the equity policy can influence family engagement, principals commented that there needs to be a natural engagement touch point comfortable enough for parents to navigate and access people who can

help. One participant stated, "It's about time; school leaders need to be responsible for cultural awareness in an urban setting." There was alignment with all three leaders that cultural responsiveness leadership is the responsibility of everyone in the school system. In this case another leader stated, "Knowing your family's cultural background demonstrates mutual respect. It shows you care and that family matters." To this point, others aligned with the statement, "Leaders wear many hats, and it is tough trying to meet the needs of all stakeholders while valuing the importance of putting students and family needs front and center." In summary, all principal comments aligned to the literature, which emphasizes that shared responsibility is a significant part of effective parent engagement and makes making family engagement personal to each family.

Central Office Administrators

The coordinator of family engagement (CF) and coordinator for school partnership (CP) both shared similar ideas when posed the question: What are the compelling qualities of family engagement? Of these elements, relationships, family opportunities, and awareness appear to be the central themes. Overall, the group said more approachable options, making families feel special, and adding a personal touch to the relationship are the missing links with engaging families. While creating a welcoming environment will help the district as a whole to strengthen relationships, CP asserted:

> This is not a strong message across the district due to a lack of principal training over the years. Yes, everyone can give lip service about what is needed for family engagement, but is it really happening? I would say no. This is the root cause of the inconsistent customer service family's experience across the district.

To this point, CF provided an example of how the Welcome Center is a family's first engagement with the school district. "If we do not get it right, it has a negative impact on the family's experience." Effective family engagement is the collaboration between the school and district. This means the central office and principals working together to make actionable steps to support families. An example CF shared is "when possible, meet families in their home space... Yes, I suggest home visits, especially at the beginning of the year as you did." CF referenced the primary investigator's earlier actions as a formal principal.

Discussion

The key points from the interviews support how central office and the principals articulated the components of effective engagements but struggled with how they implemented ideas at the building site. Collaboration is another area that both groups identify as critical. Many variables make family engagement effective in a school system. The central administration staff stated," we need to do a better job coordinating resources and services from the community to support families. "The principals are having second thoughts about their actions to best support family-school partnership.

Theme Two: Barriers that Impede Family Engagement

Principals

The leaders identified barriers that impede family engagement at their respective schools. The responses aligned with several ideas, including the marginalization of financial resources for diverse families, which limits parents from being engaged, language barriers, the psychological burden of reluctant parents because of past negative experiences with school, and finally, a lack of a personalized approach from schools.

Surprisingly, leaders identified the individualized touch with families as a priority. Some comments principals shared during the interview included, parents are willing to do whatever is needed if asked by the principal. Another principal shared scheduling as another barrier for families. Several principals admitted to a designated day for parent events. As the interview continued, each principal quickly questioned if they were the barrier. P1 reflected, "How can I be more flexible? I cannot tell you that I have a language interpreter at every meeting. I am at fault for that?" Another principal shared, "Honestly, my school program lacks cultural sensitivity and collaboration with parents and central office." Another principal suggested, "We did not learn how to engage with parents…it was trial and error. I made a lot of mistakes. I am sure I offended some parents without realizing nit."

The principals also discussed the varied social media used for communication and how that was a barrier. The schools' overwhelming number of apps to communicate can be difficult for families. As the principals discussed their leadership, all three shared how they plan to adjust their practices for the upcoming school year. All the participants had an "A-ha" moment in answering the questions. Several principals identified their lack of training as a barrier to their engagement with families.

In this discovery, the leaders realized the question," Are we doing things to parents instead of asking what they need from us?" One principal asserted, "There is no playbook; as leaders, we need to know our family's background to be effective." Another reflected, "I may have the best intention but could simultaneously miss the opportunity to build a relationship over something that is a barrier…Wow, that's an awful feeling."

All groups aligned that time and scheduling were critical factors that impeded parents from engaging in school events. To this comment, all three principals recognized their current operating

system for engaging parents might need to be revamped to ensure inclusivity for all families with time, and opportunities, and cultural awareness. This profound attitude shift helped leaders focus on redeploying resources and support.

Central Office Administrators

The district group identified barriers as an essential component of effective family engagement. The barriers shared indicated how perception has an impact on the person. The CF commented on how parents are perceived when advocating for their children:

As a white middle-class female in my child's school, I can make demands and get results. If I do not speak the language, are families truly being treated the same even though we are both advocating for our children? Are parents being characterized as adversarial when making a request on behalf of their children? I question that a lot.

The primary investigator is cognizant of the vulnerability of the central office administration as they spoke of lived experience and recognize how their ethnicity and role in the central office administration differs from the principals. CF suggested:

The school system is a barrier, especially with all the demands we expect from parents with scheduling events, activities, and engaging online with the social platform, while families are barely holding it together with work schedules and daily life events. The question becomes, how can the school system help strengthen the relationship while addressing the needs of parents.

Interestingly, in some cases, the central office group expressed inconsistency among some principals' mind-set holding on to the traditional thinking of family engagement as a barrier. The central office heard principals complain about how many people would attend PTO meetings or school events. Both central office administrators align, "It is not about the number of attendees…It

is about families coming to the school for activity and getting their needs met." In some cases, CF stated, "principals measure their success on which parent shows up for school events based on attendance, which is the wrong mindset." The coordinators discussed "barriers occur when there is a disconnect between the parents and the school, and the central office staff is asked to step in to solve the problem."

The question is still how we repair those relationships between the school and parents. When presented with the question about barriers preventing families from involvement, central administrators aligned that, "We do not take the time to ask what parents need…We have a survey conducted by a local college… I questioned the expectation of leaders utilizing the data effectively to guide how parents feel about the district and schools." The school district is guilty of supplying resources without pausing to see if they fill the need. CP2 confirmed, "We have to stop doing things to people instead of with people."

This theme reflected the questions posed to the groups and their responses. The central administration reflected on their role and articulated the gaps between the school and families and central office. To equip students and parents for success, the school system must view parents as partners (Epstein, 2002). Leaders and parents and central office administrators will need to identify and remove barriers for families to engage with the schools to improve.

Throughout each theme that emerged from the literature and group interviews, the six types of parental involvement by (Epstein 2001) were shown across all three focus group participants. The six types of school partnerships could significantly impact efficacy to encourage and increase school-family partnerships in schools.

Discussion

The analysis of the findings identifies barriers that impede family engagement. The data shows that barriers such as work-life balance commitments, language, and time may impede families' ability to engage with schools. These barriers are more prevalent at the school level than among central office staff. However, central office staff believes some administrators have a fixed mindset regarding family engagement. Making this direct comparison about principals is difficult, especially when results strongly suggest the lack of professional development was revealed as one of many root causes of why principals struggle with family engagement.

Theme Three: Communication

Principals

The principals expressed concerns with the different social media modes of communication that inundate parents. The vast amount of communication styles presented to families was said to be a barrier that impedes communication. Some school principals felt that the elementary school uses Class Dojo, middle school and High school uses the Remind Apps, and the district central office uses all the above to communicate from the district perspective; this is way too much to ask our families to learn these different systems of communication. All groups aligned that communication is a barrier that still exists across the school system but did not offer any solutions to address the concerns shared among the group. P2 commented that we need "real talk" with parents or authentic conversation. P2 "Delivering unpleasant news to parents is challenging, which is a barrier. The researcher gained more insight into what compelled the principal groups to make this statement. When explained, the group referenced tough conversations or critical feedback to parents and teachers when a parent relationship is fractured. The principals also acknowledged that

communication at all levels is a struggle with no easy answers. One participant summarized the sentiments of all by stating:

> Technology has changed the face in the manner of how and when we communicate with
>
> families. Receiving a text message from the principal informing you of a lockdown drill,

using Remind App, informing you of school events, or just celebrating students is a 'time stamp' for families of what is happening at your fingertips. In this case, communication is effective in real-time.

In contrast, some principals viewed technology with family engagement as opening the door for courageous conversations with families in which parents were less satisfied when it involved student misconduct. With the 1:1 computer device that permits all students to have a device, parents experience a learning curve with learning the iPad operating system. Principal 2 commented that "having the devices has increased engagement due to changing the learning landscape. Technology forced parents and schools to come together to learn in a new way for the first time." The negative side is the increased number of social media behaviors families' schools are addressing.

Central Office Administrators

The central office administrators' perception of building communication with families took a different approach. In contrast to the principals, the central office group commented on the poor job the district did in reaching all families during the iPad distribution, specifically Wi-Fi spots. Both central office members commented, "What about individuals who do not have technology access? What are we doing about that at the district level? The central office people rely on buildings to conduct home visits."

Both central office team members identified that having a clear vision, accessibility, and creating a welcome space for families are essential to effective communication. Both participants believe being intentional about what families need is necessary. In this earlier statement, CP commented, "preparing families for school is comprehensive. This includes social, emotional, c, and behavioral mental health that is intentional with our family relationships."

Interestingly, both participants were eager to share the district's reorganization chart, which included the district moving the family engagement team into the communication department. This office transition aims to streamline communication and strengthen the district's perspective by improving communication at the district level. This strategic move reflected feedback received from parents in response to multiple school level terroristic threats made to the schools last year, hoping to strengthen the process of communicating with families effectively.

The central office group highlighted the effort to communicate positive news, which often gets overlooked. One central office participant summarized, "We don't do a good job celebrating the good stuff as much as we should, and we need a stronger voice to share the great things happening with family engagement…The first line of communication should not occur when something terrible happens. When parents are asking questions and holding schools accountable, we need to embrace it, and not see it as negative." The central office group emphasized "high visibility" for building leaders for the arrival and dismissal of parents is a "key factor" to strengthen communication and accessibility to meet parent needs. This approach is also proactive in engaging families in face-to-face communication. In summary, some of the central office administration team suggested over-communicating with families is an excellent strategy to keep families informed. Improving effective communication is the linchpin to strengthening family engagement.

Discussion

Communication is a barrier that exists across the school system. Both principal and central office administrators recommend that social apps, technology, and social media be consistent across the district, especially with the information shared with parents. Families need consistent communication balanced in what type of information is shared; highlighting positive news to parents is critically important as sharing negative news. Whether communicating at the building level or at the district enrollment office, the groups' aligned communication is a component of strengthening family engagement. The participants aligned that in-person communication with family is the highest leveraged form of communication parents wish there was more of, especially at the secondary level.

Theme Four: The Dynamics of Family Engagement

Principals

The principals expressed family dynamics are changing, and no one is leading the way on how schools should best support the change. Is it the role of the central office administrators to train principals about the dynamic shift to family engagement? Or is this an unspoken expectation of figuring it out? As the researcher, I posed the question, "how do you support family engagement in the school?" To describe the state of family engagement in the school, P1 commented, "I have more blended and non-traditional families than ever," which is exciting. The nucleus of families is dynamic, and it's the leader's role to understand the dynamics." Meanwhile P2 commented, "How can I better train the staff to pave the way for equity while understanding that transformational change with families is vital in building relationships?"

Continuing that thought process, P2 cited an example of how family dynamics can change quickly in a school semester. "One school semester, your teacher is holding a parent conference

with a family unit; later that same year, the family has a transformational structure change and its impact on the family's roles and responsibilities."

Leaders grappled with providing a clear vision to support families and teachers when the dynamics change for family engagement. Although all the principal participants align that equity must be at the forefront of decision-making, reaching equitable conditions remains a struggle.

When asked the second question, "Describe the state of family engagement in your school," the responses varied across school levels. P3 commented, "The status of family engagement is at an all-time low, but I see a resurgence happening for when we return to school in the fall, hoping it will catapult and continue to grow." P2 stated, "The elementary level could not wait to reengage with families at pre-pandemic levels of involvement." When asked about the resurgence of family engagement at the secondary level, P1 responded, "while family engagement may appear limited or non-existent at the secondary level, our families care deeply about student success." P1 continues, "Our families show up when we need them and that's okay." P3 expressed, "when people talk about the misconception of urban families not being involved, I get upset." The myth as P3 continued to talk, "that is untrue; families have competing priories with home and work-life balance. They are readily available if or when I need to call. They are very much in tune with the school."

In summary, the principals believe that continuing to improve family engagement expectations is paramount for leaders. Creating the culture and climate to accept all types of family dynamics is paramount to the school and community. Establishing positive relationships is the key. We need to be solution-oriented to meet the family's needs as the dynamics change with the family structure.

Central Office Administrators

The central office administrators were asked, "What is the current state of family engagement in the district?" This question provided the comprehensive point of view of what the district sees as the underlying problem or disconnect with family engagement. It was remarkable to listen to the responses and to observe a sense of some complacency when discussing the central office administrator's limited influence and impact on building leaders, but also recognizing the urgency to change the status quo. To address the concerns shared in supporting schools and families, the central administrators spoke to the changes they see with family structure. CF express how her position has extended to now support foster families and coordinating community events in the district, stating:

> I am always on call for a school in need. It's hard to predict at times when an emergency arises, but I am responsible for ensuring families have the resources needed. In many cases I work closely with CP, and we really try to connect the partnership work at the school level.

> CP commented, adding her role in community with churches and retirement living, "I am responsible for forming community partnership between the school such as the afterschool programs, and local organizations.

As noted, CF shared the state of family engagement is at an influx nationally with changing the term from parental involvement to family engagement. This mind shift is more than just a name change, stated CF "it's empowering and inclusive for all." During the interview CF shared the plan to share the name change with leaders during the summer professional development which will give leaders more clarity on the work and level of support the district needed to provide.

I asked the Coordinator for Family Engagement how her role directly impacts schools. CF stated:

We want to embrace the school with a comprehensive approach by supporting families, but

we have gaps with competing district priorities. We can all agree that the needs of our

families are changing, and I am concerned with the capacity we must support everyone. I

oversee foster care to ensure families are supported. As a family's dynamic changes, it

impacts school resources and support.

Discussion

Family dynamics are paramount to the school and community. Creating the culture and

climate to accept all types of family dynamics is paramount to the school leaders, central

administration staff and the community. Establishing positive relationships is the key.

Despite the misconceptions about the low participation rate of families at the secondary

level, the principals see a resurge of the family's engagement in school, which debunks the myth

that families do not care.

In contrast, the central office approach to family dynamics is prevalent in communicating

with local community agencies for resources at a moment's notice; foster care and homelessness

are just a few dynamic situations families experience in the district.

Both principals and central administration support and cultivate relations of trust with

families that stretch to the broader community.

Theme Five: Pathways to Cultural Awareness/ Equitable Opportunities

Principals

The term 'culturally responsive leadership' was not posed directly to the principal

participants but did surface in their many responses. When asked what changes they would make if

they oversaw the district, P3 stated, "In a school system with 60% of the school population being Latino and 20% African American, we have to do a better job to ensure cultural awareness is part of our DNA." P3 continued to say:

> I would look at what type of program is offered to parents or perhaps look at the survey parents complete yearly from F&M (Franklin & Marshall) to see how I can include equity into my approach. I wonder if the parent survey is offered in multiple languages that would be a huge indicator of a change that will need to occur in the future.

This response generalizes the approaches that avoid the conversation of why only a specific group of families attend PTO or school events could also include survey results.

In response to the question, P2 commented, "I think if I would take the approach of asking parents to describe their 'future state' of what they want from schools in the district and ask the question how we can be more culturally relevant in our family engagement practices." It was interesting to listen to the principals' centralized approach to family engagement to provide consistency to ensure a wide variety of needs are met. In summary, the principal participants said they are chief messengers again to families, and they burden the responsibility to ensure opportunities for different racial and socioeconomic groups is the goal of the schools to achieve for all families.

Central Office Administrators

The Central Office's perspective of developing a cultural pathway for families is building consistency to providing equitable opportunities from the district level to engage parents. The group participant CF commented, "Developing partnerships within the school first needs to start with mutual trust and a collective vision." She continued the conversation by adding, "This movement of involvement to engagement partnership needs to have a different vision from a top-

down approach, in which the school leaders and central office must collaborate with strategies and skills to include more families at the school level." In a democratic approach, diverse families and the community actively engage with the school through collaboration and community partnerships that support all needs (Auerbach, 2009).

Remarkably, because of both central office interviews, participants shared perspectives that looked at the district holistically in their approach to family engagement. Central administration will be a supportive partner helping with conducting more instruction types of workshops to increase engagement and deeper learning for families. When asked what this looks like with the new equity policy at the district level, CF commented, "We must move away from using the educational jargon to create equitable opportunities for families. This means speaking in understandable terms. Standards-based assessments or equitable reading conferences, what does that mean to our families?" The CP expressed that at the central office level, we need to "hold more workshops that bring leaders and parents together to help bridge the gaps". What is the gap, I asked? CP "the gap is you're not alone, and you're feeling your voice is not being heard." In summary, the frequency of "real talk" conversation, more collaboration in a meeting with families, and hosting events in the community would help the parents, central office and school principals.

Discussion

The data suggests that leaders are responsible for ensuring families are provided equitable school opportunities. School leaders and the central office need to recruit families strategically recruit families who can offer broad perspectives in developing equitable pathways for families. Furthermore, the central office anticipated that the equity work would help leaders to grow in implementing district initiatives. It is interesting to note that the central office believes that the

development of a vision at the school level must occur first with the leaders, and then the central office will collaborate. This disconnected thinking has a rippling impact across the district.

Theme Six: Action to improve family engagement with relationships

Principals

The principals expressed how leaders can no longer inadvertently communicate the problems of family engagement without taking actions steps for improvement. School leaders were asked to reflect on ways to improve family engagement and to share ideas or action steps to improve family engagement in the daily lives of families while highlighting what is going well with family engagement. P1 commented, "We must be more relatable in our interactions with families." She continued to further explain, "I mean, we have to fully embrace the cultural piece with our school climate and the growth mindset of the staff." When asked who is responsible for these action steps, P1 commented, "the building leader must be in a shared partnership with the central office administration." This remark generated discussion with additional comments from participants P2 and P3, "how can we improve family engagement if we don't know where to start?" I thought what an interesting point. The researcher continued to probe by asking the participants to clarify their statements. P1 said, "Without additional training beyond my college days, I have no idea what strategies I can use for improvement or what data I can use to see areas of growth besides the Franklin & Marshall Data survey the districts shared every two years."

P3 offered several suggestions ..." providing training with the school leadership team to ensure parents receive consistent treatment across the district. Another tip was working with the district PAC- Parent Advisory Council to develop a plan to support families." Finally, it was suggested that the superintendent attend the PTO meetings at each school." P2 stated, "how about attending Open House at the schools as a signal to parents we are here for you." The conversation

switched with the leaders when asked what the district does well to encourage family engagement. The P1 participant commented, "Well, the district resource is the central office team. Still, honestly, I am unclear about their specific role in supporting building leaders. I know I can call if someone may be homeless." P3 stated, "Well, my role is to provide community support, but I am unsure what is needed unless the central office can provide the resources to ask." Based on the responses from the leading group, it appears the Tillman School district leaders identified some leadership action steps that can play an important role in the improvement of adaptive changes within the school ne adaptive change is specific strategy all schools should adopt to strengthen facility engagement. Currently, leaders are asked to attend one district PAC dinner once a year. There should be expectations and accountability to engage parents through different events.

Central Office Administrators

The Central Office Administrators responded to the same question regarding improving action steps for school-family partnerships. They identified developing a cohesive plan for building leaders to follow and the professional development of school leaders as an action step to bring alignment across the district. CF1 asserted, "We have to be careful not to take a top-down approach when communicating with principals because they are the school experts and know their families best." We always want to keep our "Ears on the ground." But, CP2 commented, "We look at the district holistically and provide guidance and support. Yes, I concur that professional development to support building leaders is vital for improvement." The researcher asked if leaders seek help from the central office administration team in professional development and how this can happen. "Great question," commented CF1, "this is part of the work we are doing with the consultant; how can we better prepare school leaders to support families with training." The researcher discovered the central office team is working on a plan to support leaders by gathering

family engagement in the Tillman School District, and it will be shared next school year. They recommended that district-wide professionals include an outside consultant providing school leaders with a Menu of Options to guide and support leaders. This plan would only work if the principals and staff were equally committed to the workshops and oversight by the central office team at the building levels.

Discussion

The participants shared recommendations based on action steps to improve family engagement. First, the district adopts an integrated approach, supplying guidelines and establishing clear and consistent expectations for schools to build, strengthen and implement family engagement. Another is adopting a framework that supports the district's Theory of Action and equity policy. These activities align with professional development for the leader and coaching support from the central office will create a more collaborative culture within the schools and with families.

Theme Seven: Families Experience with Family Engagement

Principals

As with so many adaptive challenges families, school leaders and central office encountered during the pandemic, experiences with family engagement in the school setting, was a topic in which voices were lively with discussion. The principals were asked to reflect on an experience that was a learning opportunity. The answers range from positive to negative. One principal opened the conversation by commenting:

…A growing pains experience as a new principal… I was awful with family engagements. As a first-year principal, I ed my school as the governing body of rules and policy. I had the mindset that I had all the answers, and it was my job to inform parents of how the school operated. I thought the principal ran the building and made all the decisions. There was no two-way communication. As a result, I had a lot of unlearning to do. To help me to conquer this perceived barrier, I quickly learned early in year two that I was wrong. I engaged in unpleasant anger from parents who said rules are made to be broken; these children will make mistakes. It took several complaints for me to realize I was wrong. In the parent survey, the results indicated I was a poor communicator and lacked path with making decisions. Using data to inform my practice was the game changer in my leadership practice.

Another principal from the same focus group added:

I had no training in learning about family engagement as a school leader except in my Master's Degree class I had to do a family engagement project. I used my experience as a former social worker to engage with families. I knew what questions to ask. My firsthand experiences with families was my approach to high-level engagement.

As a former teacher, P3 commented:

I relied on past relationships with parents to build my experience with family engagement. I recalled always being attentive and using the phrase authentic talk with parents to help them navigate the school system. That goes a long way, and families always remember how you made them feel. It's vital that, as leaders, we must make each experience with family engagement as positive as possible. This approach of building relationships as a teacher was my 'playbook' with families that I have now expanded to the principal role.

Central Office

The Central office administration had the same opportunity to respond to the question of sharing their experience for engaging families in the Tillman School District.

The responses were not favorable that all families had equitable opportunities for involvement. CF1 commented, "it's again the loudest parent who gets the most attention in our district; why?" She said it's all about the pinned-up frustration or lack of communication at the different levels in our school system. Occasionally, the blunt interactions from parents can have a negative impact on the school especially when "we as a school are falling short in responding to needs."

CP wholeheartedly believes we can improve our customer service to ensure everyone receives the best experience. CP summarized this question by sharing an experience going to Urgent Care, and the receptionist:

> Noticed my Tillman logo. The receptionist immediately started asking questions about her children's school I could not answer because it was building-level questions I did not know. The receptionist looked surprised, especially after I shared my position. At the same time, listening to her frustration about the school's lack of communication I felt terrible. I gave her my card and took her information to share with the building leader, who was grateful to hear about my encounter. The principal made sure to follow up with the parents.

This exchange made me reflect on my perspective at the central office level and role in the district." CP told the researcher, "I am sure the parents provided an ear full of areas where we dropped the ball. However, it was this parent comment that formulated me to respond to her in a positive way, showing compassion and a listening ear."

Regardless of socioeconomic status and not having a similar experience as the families we served, both central office administrators were cautiously optimistic that the district was on the right path to creating better family engagement pathways.

Discussion

This study provides new insight into the principal struggles with developing parents' relationships earlier in their careers and lessons learned. The findings indicated that the lack of training in family engagement could be a detriment if leaders do not receive professional development. The data also showed the lack of training at the graduate school level and in the school district. Feedback on improving family engagement was another discovery the leaders struggle with while building authentic relationships with families. In contrast, the central office administration did not experience this pathway because they have not served nor earned credentials as a principal.

Summary of Principal and Central Administrator Responses

Principals and central administrators concurred that when they work collaboratively, it can profoundly impact families and the community. The responses from the principals and central administration continue to echo that establishing a strong, trusting relationship with families increases school engagement. Seven themes emerged from the interview data collectively. Foremost, principals and central office administrators strongly align with the idea that communication between school and family needs improvement. Barriers that impede family engagement exacerbated the situation. These barriers included

- Communication
- Time
- Psychological
- Environmental Barriers.

Furthermore, principals recognized that there were sometimes barriers because of a lack of formal training in how to build family relationships. As a new leader in the school organization, you do not receive formal training to engage families. Several of the principals in this interview relied on past classroom practice to develop their skills with family engagement. At the same time, the central office heavily relied on the principals to communicate with families. In examining the difference between solid components of family engagement, there was a contrast in how the central office believes schools should have a vision for family engagement to establish programming and meet parents' needs. In contrast, principals have a school vision that is part of their culture and climate—addressing these issues allowed for both groups to move in a different direction of support for families.

The next section of this dissertation presents the data collected from focus group interviews with parents.

Parent Focus Group Quadrant 1

The Quadrant 1 focus group consisted of five parents: three had elementary age children (Q1P2EL, Q1P3EL, and Q1P4EL), one had a middle school child (Q1P1MS), and one had a high school child (Q1P5HS). The group had an instant camaraderie throughout the interview. The group expressed pride coupled with ownership of the community's negative reputation for increased crime, underperforming schools and being a poor community. Despite the high impoverishment of this quadrant, the group expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share their experience with family engagement.

Theme One: Critical Components of Effective Family and School Relationships

Introducing transparency as an element in moving the work forward in building school family partnerships to support families must begin with a cultural shift. The families in Quadrant 1

were asked a series of questions in the focus group discussion about what components make an effective family engagement. The group's response to effective engagement includes cross two-way communication, and being approachable, the items that are deemed most important. Every participant stated leaders should be equipped with skills and strategies to engage with families. Q1P1MS stated, "Urgency for highly-family engagement for principals and assistant principals is key since they are working on improving the climate and culture of the school." Q1P2EL commented, "Leaders must have the readiness skills and social-emotional development to support parents…As parents, we are going through a lot and lot, and we need help too."

When asked to clarify by the researcher, Q1P5 HS said, "having a conceptual understanding and in-depth knowledge of what students need." Q1P4 EL, commented, "Every school has some examples of family engagement, but how do we make sure there is a clear focus on equity, and schools stop making the assumption of what parents need." The discussion continued with Q1P2EL stating that "families can help support the culture and climate of the school if asked." Q1P2EL commented, "Schools should have activities at. "Schools should have activities that are based on parents' needs on requirements. Q1P5 HS commented, "Having my students in the school system makes me proud, but I had to be my own advocate." The participants felt there was no expectation of what leaders should do with parents. Q1P2EL commented, "I believe strong, effective are the key to quality family engagement, and principals are the key to quality family engagement." There was a consensus in the up that and real relationship with parents. When the researcher asked the question among the group, several heads were shaking, and the group's body language felt strongly with the strongly with statement that was made.

Theme Two: Barriers That Impede Family and School Relationships

Several group members strongly believed barriers impede families from school activities but said it takes both the parent and school to remove the barriers. Q1P4 EL commented, "Language, barriers mean more than Spanish." You cannot use this as an excuse not to communicate with families." Q1P2EL said, "Schools must understand us parents have multiple things going on like keeping a job and supporting my family, "No offense, but I cannot come to a meeting in the morning or after school. Q1P4 EL admitted "I feel like the school does not try to offer event times to accommodate my schedule." Another participant interjected, Q1P1 MS, "Let talk about parent conferences, flexibility, and out-of-the-box thinking like holding a zoom meeting was great." Some participants felt the rent teacher conference schedule is an afterthought when planning events, while many agreed with the statement, others realized there is no real solution to scheduling this district event. Resources such as transportation to school events did not appear to be barriers for the parent participants because of the walking district of the schools and how the district provides transportation.

The reoccurring theme of relationships surfaced again as participant, Q1P4 EL commented, "If parents do feel there is an honest attempt to move the school from a place of inclusion to belonging, establishing a relationship and understanding the needs of families will be challenging." In closing the conversation on this topic, many participants just said we want to be asked, "families what do you need? And here is how the school can support you and your child. This is what we want as parents in a collaborative partnership."

Theme Three: Communication

Zoom, Class Dojo, and Remind Apps are just a few social media platforms parents shared during the lively interview discussion of communication. Participant Q1P5 HS said, "Communication is critical and is the lifeline between the parents and the school." Many

participants nodded in alignment, while Q1P3EL shared, "using monthly newsletters and social media, Class Dojo to communicate with families was a positive move for the schools, and it is overwhelming." The only concern the group shared was the number of social platforms used at the various levels- elementary uses web application while middle school and high school use something different.

The groups, through shared experiences, discovered differences between the types of information being communicated from the schools with the communication apps. Q1P1 MS switched the conversation to principals. One participant referenced, "The administration struggles with communicating the good stuff that happens with my child. Communication is nonexistent in middle school." Q1P1MS continues the discussion by stating, "This school does not have a parent engagement focus in middle school." That response prompted participants to nod their heads in alignment, signaling similar experiences of how the communication appears to "drop off" at the intermediate school level. This pattern of the lack of communication at the secondary level appears to be a trend. The question is, why? The group stated that school perceptions can be a barrier. "The school thinks we do not care, but we do Q1P1 MS, stated. I expect homework, and the same level of communication as the elementary. Just because my child is older does not mean I stop asking questions about school and coursework"

Another point of contention with many parents is shared about communication of a school threat. Q1P5 HS commented, the lockdown announcements drive me insane because of the lack of clarity. The children know more than the adults in those situation…maybe it's a good thing that family engagement is now housed under the communication department." In addition to the lack of communication, there was discussion about who gets the school's attention. As with so many challenges in a school it seems as Q1P2 EL discussed, "the loudest parent seems to get the

attention, especially when a lawyer is involved. How does it ever get to the point when parents are threatening legal action that the school is now attentive to the needs of individuals that's not right?"

In closing, the focus group expressed concern with parents who don't speak Spanish from other counties are being left out of the conversation at meetings. Q1P4 EL said, "I know how to translate but not in Swahili. When I find myself in that situation with parents who don't understand I get upset with the school because more should be done to help all parents. "That's equity, right?"

Theme Four: The Dynamics of Family Engagement

Family engagement is no longer a status quo. The structure of family involvement has evolved into family engagement. Changing the name does not mean you see significant changes in family relationships. When asked about the lack of collaboration between school and families from a previous question Q1P2 EL said:

> Schools have not recognized the dynamic of family engagement and what it means for the entire family to be involved with the school. Families understand FERPA and its legalities of educational rights confidently, but schools have to understand when families rally around a situation involving a student, it means we want to support full force and be a united front for students, not the adversarial.

Understanding the dynamics of families and building healthy relationships is critical. Leaders will need to find creative ways to engage in building relationships with families that is authentic and respect the historical context of past relationships. Community relationships must be built on collaboration, tone, and trust to effectively lead a school, community relationships must be built on collaboration, tone, and trust.

Theme Five: Pathways to Cultural Awareness/ Equitable Opportunities

Striving for cultural awareness and equitable family opportunities are challenging tasks for the Tillman School District. Parents shared they do not have a voice in decision-making despite the Title 1 guidelines. The parents discussed the new equity policy being proposed to the school board and seemed excited to have a document that will address the inequities in the district. When the researcher asked how district coordinators of family engagement and coordinators for school partnership influence in the schools, the interviewing team was unaware of the central office position role and said there was little to no impact on their school. Q1P1MS, stated, "How we can have two district parent advocates, and no one knew these folks exist in our school district?" The question regarding the coordinators was a shock of surprise for the group.

In the discussion about the equity policy and hints of an equity report card, Q1P4EL discussed the struggle of developing a consistent school system that is culturally responsive to all needs is essential, it is my hope this equity policy is the start of the conversation." As the conversation continued Q1P2EL shared, "It is our job as parents to help schools who are struggling with cultural awareness to call it in instead of calling it out. Calling something "in" makes the person aware of the concern while providing a safe space to address the problem. Calling something "Out" is sometimes bringing negative attention.

Theme Six: Action to Improve Family Engagement

When the question was asked about action steps to improve family engagement, parents' suggestions to the group created a sense of unity, possibilities and accountability for the future. The researcher was amazed by the collected big ideas shared. The first collection of thoughts was communicated by Q1P4 EL who commented, "If we want consistency with the outcome from schools with family engagement, why not provide a standard expectation with all leaders to strengthen expectations. It's like customer service." The statement of training offered a sense of

unity in which all participants aligned. Q1P3EL continued the conversation mentioning that it would be nice to receive a "personal invitation from the school principal, to make me feel like they care."

In closing, the researcher asked the group to share advice they would offer new families who want to be engaged in the school. The parents shared that parents should:

- First call the school and make an appointment with the principal to get a tour of the school
- Connect with your new neighbors to get the inside scoop on the school
- Do your homework by searching for information of the school's website
- Finally, connect with the building secretary who can help you to navigate the school district education lingo, policy and procedures.

Theme Seven: Family Experience with Family Engagement

Parental experience with family engagement can perpetuate current practices and realities. Each participant shared a profoundly personal encounter that impacted their perspective as parents. The Q1P5HS shared how the school provided social services in her time of need. Another participant, Q1P3EL, grappled with the lack of communication, specifically the notification of events. "How can the school offer equitable opportunities for parents working two jobs to attend events as the shared experience continues?" Q1P4 articulated that the focus group conversation "changed my perception because I thought I was the only one struggling with trying to be a parent and while engaging with the school". There was a sign of relief she was not alone in the struggle. The researcher could see smiles and hear comforting words exchanged in the group. Established relationships with educators of the school was an essential component for the group throughout their children's careers. The school needs to recognize that parents are balancing life and that the end goal in any relationship is staff caring about the desired outcome for their children.

Discussion

The data collected from parents in Quadrant One shows a strong commitment and pride in supporting the schools. The satisfaction of parents wanting to have more ownership in strengthening communication, building relationships, and addressing parent need is significant. The desire to be involved with creating equitable opportunities mentioned by parents was a powerful statement for the groups. Parents in Quadrant One, despite the economic conditions of that quadrant, exemplify the importance of family engagement and emphasizing it's a predictor in helping students to reach desired outcomes.

Parent Focus Group Quadrant 2

The Quadrant 2 focus group consisted of five parents: three had elementary age children (Q2P2EL, Q2P3EL, Q2P4EL), one had a middle school child (Q2P1MS), and one elementary school child (Q2P5EL). The participants were equally excited to share their experience with family engagement in the backdrop of a newly renovated middle school. The school was the point of pride for the parents. The members shared their personal school experiences and recognized the difficulties children and families faced during the pandemic.

Theme One: Critical Components of Effective Family and School Relationships

Overall, the majority of parents stated creating an environment for families to have a clear line of communication is a critical component for building family engagement. However, positive relationships with the school's administration team, including trusting relationships, includes school leaders seeking to build effective family engagement in our schools by extending themselves beyond school hours. Establishing relationships, in and of itself, is difficult. Participant, Q2P1 MS said, "knowing the staff is critical, and having a voice to show the school you want the best." Q2P5EL & MSS expressed, "having two students at different levels,

elementary and middle school, makes me a fierce advocate for my children…which is a critical component to family engagement. It holds everyone accountable." The group shared a resounding "yes" to the parent statement.

Theme Two: Barriers That Impede Family and School Relationships

Barriers to family engagement opened the communication line with the group. Everyone appeared to have an opinion on the topic. In most cases, parents stated the following areas of challenge: language, parent work schedule, time, lack of interest and custody alignment, were the top barriers that impede family engagement. As the parents discussed the topics interchangeably, Q2P4 EL commented, "Diversity is an area of concern." She continued to reference rumors of an equity policy and wanted to know if that would improve family engagement. I shared that no one policy can do that, as parents, you can read it and see what the district is pledging to do about improving equity practices in our schools. More specifically, each member discussed navigating the school's expectations is a barrier. The participants referenced that new families who enter the school system need guidance and support from the school to access information.

The group commented that it is a big assumption on the part of schools to think that parents know how to navigate the school system such as grades, school activities, and levels of support, when nothing is communicated. Many parents shared the frustration with school activities and school programs that lack cultural sensitivity. Q2P3 EL questioned, "why schools are hesitant to reach out about cultural stuff" Asking parents to share or participate in cultural events would empower parents and communicate a sense of pride. The conversation switched along with the tone of the meeting when Q2P2 EL, firmly stated, "schools need to stop being antagonist with parents," stated, Q2P3. "Schools need to understand we are all human; a little grace on the school side can go a long way." In most cases, parents make the best choices for families but just want to

be heard and recognized. Another perspective of how schools can address barriers was heard from

parent 2P5EL&MS; in taking a closer look, "schools need to create the condition to help parents

feel welcome." The development of a trusting, caring and loving environment is our number one

focus for the parents."

Theme Three: Communication

It is vital to establish clear and concise communication when building relationships with

parents. Highlighting communication, all the parents agreed that, "The school's advocating on

behalf of students, the parents are advocating for the students, communication must be concise and

coherent especially because of the different perspectives students are experiencing." When there is

no clear communication, and a lack of historical awareness of the community between school and

families the breakdown of trust can impact school.

Theme Four: The Dynamics of Family Engagement

Each district focus group identified family dynamics as multi faceted. Several parents from

this quadrant were adamant about the importance of being inclusive of all families. Teachers,

principals, and the central office in their communication all families must be dynamic in providing

families options for how they can communicate. Furthermore, access to information, technology,

and family structure such as LBGTQ+, must have a sense of belonging to the school. If we want to

implement a new practice or strategy to strengthen family engagement, we must establish

procedures and be willing to take risk to change school culture and climate. Another parent from

the same group added:

> Parents are preoccupied with their children and everything and their lives are busy, so even
>
> when they are not present at events, they care about school needs. Parents are engaged in a
>
> lot of ways that are invisible to schools. This is why schools should offer many options to

be involved. There is a perception schools have about parent lack of involvement. Schools need to meet the needs of families. I attend only events that pertain to my child. But schools see this as a negative. Why? I don't understand that?

Theme Five: Pathways to Cultural Awareness/ Equitable Opportunities

As the Tillman School District works to improve family engagement, parents realize the importance of creating the conditions for parents to feel welcome. To create the cultural conditions for families to feel welcome, the group believed schools must create pathways for families to engage respectfully by ensuring multilingual translations are readily available for families upon entering the school. The Tillman District equity policy was referenced again in the parent discussion about injustices felt with student's behaviors this school year. One parent from the Q2P2 EL parent acknowledged principals need to demonstrate they care about students; "some don't even know students' names, that's a significant cultural barrier for me, and you want me to be engaged? Well, at least know my kid who will be spending the next three years in middle school." The same opinions resonated from Q2P4 EL parent who stated, "Schools need to make an effort to address diversity and ask parents for help. We just need to be asked." Q2P5EL&MS answered the question differently. Rather than focusing on cultural awareness, she wanted to discuss the academic disparities in state testing data with the subgroup and wondered what the district is doing to close the academics divide amongst our white and black and Hispanic students. Q2P3 EL responded, "If we can get parents focused on our student academics, the behavior will fix itself." She continued, "if parents demand more of our teachers and say student failure rate is not an option, that would shift the conversation and level of involvement drastically." Many parents were intrigued with the discussion topic of equity in education. It was the group perception that the new

policy will provide some context to how schools are being held accountable for academic outcomes and the disparities of minority children.

Theme Six: Action to Improve Family Engagement

When asked the question, 'What action is needed to improve family engagement?'Parents commented that school must understand that the traditional role of family engagement has evolved because the needs of families are vastly different. Parents are not readily available to attend school activities. The Q2P1 MS parent said, "Schools must change their thinking about parent involvement. I am involved in ways the school doesn't see. I guess you can call my involvement invisible." Another parent in the same group interjected " Q2P3 EL I agree there is a perception that if you are not visible in the school, you don't care." "The action I would take," Q2P2 EL said "is help the school to recruit families to change this deficient way of thinking about family engagement." Q2P5EL & MS stated, "teachers don't see that I am using the parent view app to check assignments of my students' projects and monitor their attendance."

Theme Seven: Family Experience

Many participants had a wide range of experience with family engagement. Q2P1 MS, said "I think if parents had a negative school experience it's difficult to repair that relationship." She continued to say, "I developed a mistrust when a staff member refuse to apologize for making a mistake." Despite this experience, some parents may find it challenging to repair this type of relationship. "I forgave the teacher in order to maintain healthy relationship for my children's sake." Some parents find it's difficult to fully trust the school. Q2P3 EL commented, by stating, "We need to recognize that both schools and families need to come to the table to repair the relationship. It should be a two-way conversation."

In the closing remark, all parents discussed the importance of academics which seems to spark more communication around engaging with the school on multiple levels and with all stakeholders. One participant suggested, as an action step, to keep a communication book so you can track the teachers you communicate with monthly. "Personally," Q2P5EL &MS commented, "I must communicate and let teachers know I am an involved parent. When you do this, the relationship is stronger, and it holds the principal and educator accountable."

Discussion

The data for Quadrant Two supports the families' big assumption that schools think parents know how to navigate the school system such as grades, school activities and levels of support when nothing is communicated. It was interesting to hear how one parent keeps a detail log of how she communicates with every teacher. This is a great example of bi-directional communication from home to school.

Parent Focus Group Quadrant 3

The Quadrant three focus group consisted of five parents: three had elementary age children (Q3P2EL, Q3P3EL, and Q3P5EL), and two had a middle school child (Q3P1MS, Q3P4MS). Inspired by talking about family engagement, the focus group reminisced about school experiences they want their children to have in school. Quadrant three is a mixture of aging and wealthier persons who live in a college neighborhood.

Theme One: Critical Components Effective Family and School Relationships

In this group interview setting, several ideas were shared when parents were asked about building practical components for family engagement. The participants agreed educational leaders

have two responsibilities: first, to create a positive, welcoming environment for parents and second, there needs to be a high level of accountability for staff to communicate with families across all levels. The Q3P1MS participant stated, "Family do not want to be ignored, and want to be asked about our needs." The Q3P2EL participant stated, "There needs to be flexibility for childcare when meetings are held, and a process focused on parent concerns." As the discussion continued there was a tone and trust moment in which the participant shared openly that they want leaders who can speak Spanish, for starters, and are willing to reach out and help families. The group shared accessibility and willingness to listen as components. This topic discussion ended with the fact that for some families, this was the first time they thought about the possibility of changing the perception of family engagement because of being interviewed and having the autonomy to speak freely.

Theme Two: Barriers That Impede Family and School Relationships

Barriers that impede family and school relationship begins with the type of climate and culture set by the leader, stated Q3P2EL who said:

> "Barriers exist when there is no relationship. My son has my former teacher. That teacher greatly impacted me as a young student, and I know she will do the same for my son. This only occurs when parents remove the barriers by being involved. My mom was involved, and now I get to be involved as a parent myself."

Another participant listed time as a barrier. Q3P3EL stated that certain dates of the week are not feasible for her to participate in school activities. The interview discussion switched to diversity, as Q3P4MS said, "For me, diversity of languages for translation is a huge barrier. How do you encourage families to speak up to ensure all voices are heard?" Q3P2EL interjected by commenting, "Well, parents must feel comfortable and safe to do that. In my opinion, the

challenge is to remove the language barriers so we can communicate freely and comfortably with each other." There were several heads nodding in agreement to the comment. The group summarized that over the last two years, when the district provided virtual instruction, communication was a concerted effort by the district to increase student's engagement. Both verbal and written communication had improved, and families felt connected via computer. I asked the group what has changed that the barrier is resurging. Q3P2EL, replied "Hectic work schedule and cell phone apps that can connect families instead of a phone call or face to face meetings."

Theme Three: Communication

Communication, when unclear and inconsistent, can impact the building of effective family relationships with schools. Despite the deep issues facing schools, the focus group, despite the deep issues facing schools, agreed that schools and family must change the traditional way of communicating through flyers and word of mouth. One participant Q3P5EL, shared that communicating in multiple languages and using social media has been a positive way to strengthen communication. 'Cultural responsiveness' was used in the focus group to discuss the district equity policy. Another parent made a statement about how the school should respond to students and families with diverse backgrounds and how the policy could serve as a shared road map for everyone. The group indicated that, while communicating with parents is vital to a school and leader's success, communication must be fluid between home and school. However, two-way constant communication between home and school must occur, and parents must have the opportunities to understand and act on information provided by the school.

Theme Four: The Dynamics of Family Engagement

The focus group made it clear that family dynamics have changed. Over time, families realize the needs for families to get involved and engaged at school have competing interests. In

this current climate, families have had alternative ways to engage due to the pandemic. Some creative solutions, such as zoom volunteers reading with students, class adoption of projects for teachers, and connecting teachers with community resources, are ways families can support schools. Groups of parents working outside of schools on projects to support the school and communicating with the community to help support school were all solutions shared by the entire group, as they shared innovative ways to included families to support schools.

One participant summarized by stating, "it all starts with attitudes and honest communication with teachers and school administration of how to build a sustainable family engagement model that is inclusive for all members of the school community."

Theme Five: Pathways to Cultural Awareness/ Equitable Opportunities

Family engagement through the equity lens is an important initiative for school leaders as the Tillman School District launches a new equity policy. As mentioned throughout each quadrant interview, there is interest in the district's new equity policy. It has peaked participant interest in learning more details about the impact on schools. The group seemed excited and intrigued with the new policy and wondered what incremental changes they should expect to promote cultural awareness. The group did not feel that the equity policy is an add-on, but it's an important step to begin the conversation.

In this context, it is significant that one participant shared their perspective on equity. Q3P1MS stated:

> I just want to say, so my wife and I are well-educated white people. We attended
> schools that were 98% white. We did not want that experience for our child. We
> want our child to be able to navigate relationships with people from other
> sociocultural and economic backgrounds. We wanted him in a beautiful salad bowl

of democracy and not isolated. My point is, what we do here in the school district

matters, and is building our future schools. Children had such a rich experience

when they have the chance to engage and live in a school district so diverse. Thus

improving students' opportunities for the future matters. It matters that your kid and

mine kid are in the same class, for the future of our country.

The intentionality of the comment brought silence among participants until several clapped

in solidarity followed by laughter and smiles. It was an opportunity for parents who experienced a

diverse educational background and to hear and listen to other parents whose educational

experience did not include diversity. Most of the participants attended the Tillman School District

and have always experienced diversity of culture in schools.

Theme: Six Action to Improve Family Engagement

As the work with family engagement aims to improve, the participants shared ideas of what

improvement can look like in Tillman School District. Some suggested schools take a more

collegial and supportive approach to provide families with resources within the community that

best fit family needs. Another suggestion was that schools take an inquiry- based approach rather

than being directive or judgmental with engaging with families.

One participant said that before this focus group interview process, they were unaware of

the Coordinator of Community Engagement role in the school. She stated, "I wonder how we can

best advertise this resource to ensure all families are informed of the services this person

provides?" Engaging families with school district support can sustain strong communication across

the district.

Theme: Seven Experience Improvement with Family Engagement

The focus group was excited to share a wonderful experience with family engagement at the elementary level. Q3P2EL felt the elementary school communicated enough to satisfy his needs. Another participant agreed that her best experience was at the elementary level because the elementary teachers were more accessible before and after school. At its best, all participants shared feedback that mutual trust was established with children, educators and leaders at the elementary level. Q3P4EL stated:

> I have nothing but positive accolades for the teaching staff at my elementary school, but I have a friend whose experience was different and disappointing. Constant communication must be ongoing between school and home; when this relationship is established, there can be a shared understanding between school and family.

Discussion

One participant in Quadrant Three looked at the surrounding communities and decided to move to the area to create a different outcome for their children, the opposite from their own school experience. Notably in this discussion, this participant focused on changing the educational experiences by ensuring their child received an education that was rich in culture by attending a public school. The parent reminisced on their school experience and was determined to change the trajectory by ensuring culture and diversity was embedded in his educational pathway. This was intriguing to other participants because it was something they had never experienced, attend an all-white school.

Parent Focus Group Quadrant 4

The Quadrant 4 focus group consisted of 5 parents: 4 had elementary age children (Q4P2EL, Q4P3EL, and Q4P4EL Q4P5EL), 1 had a middle school child (Q4P1MS), and 1 had a high school child (Q4P1HS). Quadrant Four is in a more suburban district setting. The

participants' camaraderie could be felt as families realized the efforts in bettering the school community.

Theme One: Critical Components of Effective Family and School Relationships

One type of effective family engagement the group shared is open communication. Several families agreed with the statement, "it's better to over-communicate than to under-communicate and strong communication with the school can yield positive academic outcomes for students." Parent Q4P4EL commented, "The pre-planning for effective family engagement is crucial, you have to communicate, so reciprocal sharing of information is shared in order to seek understanding at the school level." The climate and culture of school was mentioned, which led parents into brief discussions about the school leader. One solution from a parent, Q4P2EL, was that the school leader must be highly visible and accessible in the school. All parents stated they hold staff accessibility as a major component for effective family communication.

Theme Two: Barriers That Impede Family and School Relationships

When the question was asked about what barriers impede family engagement, parents identified the lack of advocacy for families as a barrier. Q4P1MS& HS parent said:

> I mean how the school communicate with parents in multiple languages and in different modes of communication such as social media with smartphone and technology… but who is teaching the parents about these new ways to communicate? There is just an assumption, by the school that parents will figure things out. Another barrier is time and respect for blended families. The school must understand family households are not the same.

Another barrier highlighted by parents is the timeliness of when communication is shared with families. Again, families have dynamic household situations in which the information from the school gets lost because of work schedules and other pending family events.

Theme Three: Communication

As some suggested, developing a communication model for schools and families is ideal. Families interviewed see that electronic communication has allowed parents easy access to what is happening at school, with 24/7 access to information regarding academics or school events. Several participants mentioned the school administration uses different apps to communicate with families. Despite the technology to communicate, Q4P5EL believed, "You have to know how to navigate the system, who to call, or partner with other parents to understand what is happening in the school." Another example shared by a parent, , was "I want customer service to be like Giant or McDonald's. There is a certain level of service you expect. That's not the case in all schools." Another parent shared, "We must learn to speak each other's languages. Just because I need to hear it one way doesn't mean you do."

Theme Four: The Dynamics of Family Engagement

Collaboration between parents and teachers were highlighted by the group as a vital element to learn significant ways to promote family and school partnerships. The implications of these elements by groups attributed to the dynamics of family engagement and how we design opportunities for schools and parents to reflect on feedback. Comments Q4P4EL summarized the thoughts of all five groups that, "we need to establish relationships with trusted educators who are approachable, friendly, and aspire to communicate clearly and create environment with home or at school to support learning and success." Overall, parents also expressed the need to always align with these aspirations of the school. Several parents expressed their appreciation of how schools create a positive and welcoming climate, citing how teachers and administrators reach out to parents, more specifically at the elementary level.

In contrast, families are struggling with work-life balance as a secondary solution for resources and engagement. This feedback is an invitation to the intentionality of bridging home

and school where we can measure effective outcomes to support the secondary parents to feel the same connection as their elementary experience. Parents don't always feel welcome at middle school. Another parent commented, "My child is transferring school buildings, from elementary to middle school, so the expectations and warm welcome should be the same across the district, and t's not. It's frustration when enthusiasm from parents is not equally met by the middle school teams."

Theme Five: Pathways to Cultural Awareness/ Equitable Opportunities

The focus groups identified that collaboration between the central office and building equitable parental involvement opportunities are unclear. All groups agreed there was a significant disconnect with district resources as they were not aware of two central office positions supporting families. This lack of awareness generated much discussion. One parent commented, "How can we have cultural awareness and equitable opportunities if we do not know we have district resources for parents?"

Responses from the equity policy discussion questioned what the implication for the district will look like. Several focus group members shared that accessing the information on the website about the new policy would be helpful to keep families informed. All the parents in the focus group felt that having a policy about equity is a positive step for the district. The awareness and effectiveness of what it means for schools are yet to be seen as the policy will be implemented in the 2022 school year.

Theme Six: Action to Improve Family Engagement

Parents have multiple experiences in terms of race, gender and experience, and other identity markers. These identities impact how families experience family engagement. When families provide feedback, it is a powerful opportunity to gain a different perspective of the school

district. The Q4P1MS & HS parent shared positive remarks regarding action steps schools can take to support parental engagement. The parent mentioned the Parent Advisory Council as an example. The parent reflected on the consistent great framework led by Title 1 with the structure of the meetings, information shared, and level of accountability. Another parent Q4P5EL agreed that" the district had held the school accountable by establishing PAC leaders who serve at the district level to provide feedback on what is happening at the schools." The Q4P3 EL added that we need to adopt a "welcome wagon" approach in which schools have family ambassadors as another layer of school for families. The action steps may look different for every family, as every family does not experience the same situation. The focus group summarized the need for a clear protocol and procedures for schools across the Tillman School District when families need parent support.

Theme Seven: Experience Role for Improvement with Family Engagement

Parents from each of the distinct focus groups expressed how their experience with family engagement takes many forms; communication, persistence, and relationships are elements of creating a positive experience. Like the other focus groups, parents stated that the elementary school experience with family engagement is favorable compared to the secondary experience. When asked to share their experiences, some suggested that improving family engagement at the secondary level is a need. A parent described her opinion on the difference between high school and elementary, stating, "At the elementary level, building climate is open, friendly and are the schools are recruiting volunteers."

Next, each member expressed that reaching out to parents is critical to recruiting families into our schools. One parent added:

My elementary experience as a parent volunteer was wonderful. I was able to work with the school to match my skill set, time commitment, and the school's need. I felt the

contributions I committed to the school were welcome and honored because I am a

working parent. At the secondary level, the middle, and now high school level, parent

volunteers are almost non-existence unless I have students in band or the musical.

Currently, my schedule does not align with high school, but I can still volunteer in some

capacity.

Another parent commented on the "mindset of middle and high school educators and

building leaders who think parents do not want to be involved." Several parents agreed that more

outreach is needed to recruit parent volunteers to support the schools. Both Q4P2EL and Q4P3EL

group shared that central office administration leadership should have more of a presence at the

secondary level to continue the momentum elementary school stating:

> If we want families to have a fantastic experience with family engagement, the school
>
> district needs to set clear expectations for buildings and at the district level of what the
>
> experience should look like. That is the only way to establish expectations and consistency.

Discussion

This study reflects family voices concerning the disparities of family engagement between

elementary school, middle and high schools. The focus group data show gaps in communication

and equitable opportunities, parents discovering there are two central administration staff members

whose roles support families, and that the district has underutilized resources. The feeling of being

connected at the secondary level was a salient point parents discussed.

The next section of this dissertation presents a summary and discussion of themes across

the literature and all participants' groups: Parents, Principals, and Central Office Administrators.

Summary Parents, Principal and Central Administration and Literature Themes

Theme One: Effective Qualities of Family Engagement

Parent, principal and central office groups expressed practical and effective qualities that foster a learning community for family engagement. The discussion included developing open communication that begins with creating a welcoming school environment. The literature and parents aligned that greater connectedness to school with a welcoming environment can create strong bonds with families (Epstein et al., 2009; Ferguson, 2005; Leithwood & Riehl (2003). Another effective practice the literature and parents align is ensuring engagement continues across school levels from elementary, to middle, and high school. This continuation of support in a child's academic life will also set the conditions for success. As families and schools work collaboratively, families are empowered to lead and become advocates which can influence a family's educational journey experience in a school system. Parent activism is a term to help to expand and empower parents to improve education for diverse learners. (Jasis & Jasis-Ordonez, 2004; Warren 2011). The parent group asserted the opportunity to help a fellow parent to navigate the school system is helping and supporting the school community. To this point, the parent group said schools create more opportunities for families to collaborate.

To change beliefs and attitudes about engaging families, principals suggest there needs to be a deliberate effort toward collaboration between central administration and principals with resources and support. Principals also said accountability by modeling active staff listening and removing barriers for parents is essential. Finally, engaging in "Real Talk" with families to develop authentic conversation is a critical building block in developing relationships with families. The central office's holistic approach to effective family engagement considers the whole child's social, emotional, academic, and mental health, is critical when supporting the needs of the family. Families, principals, and school administrators know parents love their children 100%, and all must strive for improved collaboration within the school system.

Theme Two: Barriers

Shattering barriers to parental involvement and engagement begins with identifying school obstacles and making plans to overcome them. The literature and parents align that unfamiliarity with the education system and language barriers is challenging for many families. Findings and literature aligned to show that while parents and staff align on barriers associated with parent involvement and family engagement, resolutions between parents and schools are disconnected based on staff beliefs about family engagement (Barker, Wise, Kelley & Skiba, 2016, Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Families in this study stated that barriers only exist when no relationships exist between the school and families. Additional information from the principals and parents in this study demonstrated that making incremental changes to school schedule events and providing resources such as language interpreters to support families are positive steps in valuing diversity in the school.

In contrast, the central office administrators believe that one contributing factor to the school barrier is the lack of school level vision and the absence of data to measure what is needed for effective family engagement; such as monitoring of the effectiveness of engagement transiency, homelessness, and foster care. Based on information from the central office administration, many school barriers that impact family engagement can be removed if principals are cognizant of them and the impact on families. All participant groups agreed barriers that impede family engagement is a continuous struggle and will require all stakeholders to work together for student outcomes.

Theme Three: Communication

Schools play a vital role in formulating and cultivating relationships with families. Communication takes effort, but the rewards are invaluable. Parents, principal and central office

administration and the literature align that communicating by sharing family experiences or learning at home presents new opportunities to building a partnership (Epstein, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Based on the information gathered from principals, families, and central office administrators, and the literature, the schools have a level of expectation of students and want the best but, finding common ground through communication to get that shared understanding is a problem at both the district and school levels. A common barrier of concern for parents is how to work together with administrators to reach the same goal. The parent comments align with the literature and illustrate that building effective relationships requires a blend of both one and two-way communication whether it is by email, in person, text, social media platforms or a phone call. As language and cultural barriers impact parent communication with the school personnel (Graham-Clay, 2005), the families and principals desperately want improvement in communication, language, and a sense of authentic relationships with one another. The principals view themselves as their school's chief communicators and they take ownership when information is not shared to the community.

On the other hand, the central office administrators are in a quandary because they rely heavily upon building leaders to communicate with families and are often not included in the communication chain. All participants in the study referenced the new equity policy that is believed to have a potential positive influence across the district. Many hope the policy will generally strengthen communication and expectations with families as it relates to students and that it will encourage staff to become more culturally responsive.

Theme Four: Dynamics of Family Engagement

Parents recommended that schools can unknowingly pose psychological barriers for parents. The perception of feeling judged by teachers can result in disengaged parents which is a barrier (Baker et al., 2016). Both the literature and parents asserted that a parent's own school experiences and low self-esteem can hinder school participation (Davis, 1989). Greenwood and Hickman (1991) and Whitaker and Fiore (2001) suggest that parents' lack of educational background and confidence prevents parents from engaging with schools. This finding was evident through the quantity of conversation and ideas expressed by the parents, principals, and central administration

This unpleasant experience is a catalyst for parents and school personnel to change when bidirectional communication occurs. However, schools must recognize and honor the changing dynamics of family engagement. The pandemic has made zoom accessible for parents to attend meetings more frequently. Over time, families and principals have come to realize the challenge getting involved in school events causes conflict with other competing interests. The term 'work-life balance' has forced parents and principals to use alternative ways to engage due to time constraints.

Currently, principals and the central office administrators in this study have admitted to reverting to the traditional model of holding school events in person without much flexibility because of the struggle with finding a common solution to meet the needs of families. Live streaming events and Zoom PTO and PAC meetings have served as a middle ground for families until a better solution can be brought forth. To address this concern, the district held back to school nights on designated days for each school level to provide flexibility for families. This was the first time in 10 years that families could attend events on different days of the week. The collaboration of building leaders developed the schedule with central office administrators as an action step to

provide families access to schools. This illustrates that building effective relationships with principals and central office administrators yielded positive results on behalf of families across the district.

Theme Five: Pathways to Cultural Awareness/Equitable Opportunities

The Pennsylvania Family Engagement Birth through College, Career, and Community Ready Framework (2019) suggests that as an educational community seeks to examine its strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to equity, it is critical to involve the family and the local community. Parents suggested that it is arguably false that school personnel do not value, welcome, or encourage their involvement (Hornby & Lafale, 2011). Both principals and central office administrators emphatically expressed their deep conviction for supporting families throughout this study. The study outlined a collaborative approach from parents, leaders, and the central office that included a shared-decision-making approach beginning with clear and concise communication centered on the new equity policy. Based on information gathered from parents and the literature, the equity policy unveiled by the district was launched in a democratic approach, which included diverse families and the community actively engaging with the school through collaboration and community partnerships that support all needs (Auerbach, 2009).

The literature and principals aligned that culturally responsive leaders create high expectations for all students while embedding cultural context and languages into the school community's learning experiences (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). Principal and parents align that the launch of the equity policy will frame the conversation of raising academic expectations while engaging families in interpreting the school system's instructional design.

Theme 6: Action to Improve Family Engagement with Relationships

As stated earlier, the parent focus groups and the literature both align with issues of balancing school events and parents' lives. Despite the increasing importance of parental engagement in schools, researchers have indicated how schools marginalize under-resourced parents because of the school's competing priorities. This perspective puts parents in the position of outsiders because of limited involvement with decision making. (Auerbach, 2007).

The action steps suggested more flexibility and consideration of families working when scheduling school events. The second action step acknowledges that central office has a communication gap. Families were unaware of the services provided by the Coordinator of Family Engagement. This was a big 'Aha' moment discovered from the interviews for both parents and myself. Given the wide range of feelings and emotions surrounding action steps, many parents were excited to share the following list of suggestions with their principal: Designate parent ambassadors for new families; create multiple times during the day for each event; use a survey to ask parents to weigh-in on scheduling events.

Theme Seven: Families' Experiences with Family Engagement

The literature asserts that societal factors such as demographics, biases, feelings of inferiority, socioeconomic factors, and family instability may produce unintended consequences for schools and families (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Swap, 1993). However, the findings in this study suggest that parents, principals, and the central office staff emphatically voiced that societal factors were not contributing to their belief in the decline of family engagement in some schools. In contrast, all participants in this study expressed gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to share their experiences. In the study, parents expressed the idea of how schools should have a welcoming experience for parents and how schools can stop the decline of family engagement at the secondary level. The parent participants had a powerful desire to show pride and ownership when telling their stories about family engagement in this research study.

Chapter Five: Recommendations

School family engagement has been proven to increase student academic performance and social and emotional outcomes. Within the past 40 years, prominent researchers in the field of family engagement demonstrated that effective partnerships require three main strategies: intentionality of building and fostering authentic relationships, bi-directional communication, and a culturally responsive approach. These core strategies were also identified by the participants in this study as necessary components for effective family-school partnerships.

The recommendations are presented here by themes are based on participants responses and the literature.

Theme One: Critical Components of Effective Family and School Relationships

Family involvement and family engagement are terms used throughout the focus group interviews between families, principals, and school administrations across the district. Epstein (2001) utilizes the term "involvement" to describe this process but acknowledges "involvement" and "engagement" are terms that are interchangeable (Joyce Epstein, personal communication, January 31, 2019). All participants suggested that building authentic relationships was a critical component of family and school relationships. This could be implemented by ensuring principals are providing professional development for all professionals and support staff with specific training on how to engage families.

Visibility and accessibility of the principals and district resources are other critical components of effective family and school relationships identified by the parent groups. Most parents felt unaware of the central administration staff parental resources. One recommendation was to make the district parent engagement personnel and tools more accessible in schools through social platforms, flyers in multiple languages, and websites.

Finally, collaboration is another area that all groups identify as critical. Parents would like to see more of an effort from the school principal in seeking out help and support with school initiatives. Principals expressed having second thoughts about their actions to best support family-school partnerships and are now analyzing how their practice of being welcoming is shared throughout the staff.

Many variables make family engagement effective in a school system. The central administration staff stated, "we need to do a better job coordinating resources and services from the community to support families by making the information more public and aligned to the school building."

Theme Two: Barriers That Impede Family and School Relationships

Based on the information from the participants and literature, communication, time, and work-life balance, such as parents' work schedules or conflicts with other events, are all areas for improvement. Additionally, principals and parents in this study suggest making incremental changes to school schedule events and providing resources such as language interpreters to support families are positive steps in valuing diversity in the school.

In contrast, the central office administrators believe that one contributing factor to the school barrier is the lack of school-level vision and the absence of data to measure what is needed for effective family engagement, such as monitoring the effectiveness of engagement transiency, homelessness, and foster care. While resources are provided to families, the district needs to establish how to monitor and assess the effectiveness of its efforts.

Despite the benefit of families' interest in becoming more involved in school-family partnerships, schools unknowingly place hurdles on parents that prevent the partnership from occurring (Mapp, 2003; Warren, Hong, Rubin, Uy, 2009). Situational awareness is key to understanding how parents are being treated in schools. Organizing parent meetings without interpreters is just one example of a barrier that a school can avoid by simply providing translators. However, central office staff believes that some school administrators have a fixed mindset regarding family engagement. According to Trayner, (2016), schools have become self-serving, compliant, and tone-deaf with their agendas in engaging families. As a result, parent perspectives are ignored, and the nurturing relationship between school and families has taken a back seat to the school's priorities. Making this direct comparison about all leaders is difficult, especially when results strongly suggest the lack of professional development was revealed by principals as one of many root causes of why they struggle with family engagement. Therefore, providing more professional development to all principals based on the expressed needs of the principals may be a

solution. Finally, the district should consider reexamining data that is collected from the local college survey of parents to develop a data tracking system to measure parental services.

Theme Three: Communication

A barrier that emerged from the literature and the focus group is the lack of cultural responsiveness in communication and specific accessibility to language age interpreters in schools. The parents, principals, and central office administrators all recognize that changing demographics and cultural climate in the community will require increased cultural sensitivity, especially in different quadrants of the school district. Of these elements, the blend of both one and two-way communication, whether it is by email, in person, by text, social media platforms or a phone call, while using multiple languages to communicate, is essential for families. The principal is a culture-maker, intentionally or not (McLaughlin &Talbert, 2006), ho can remove this barrier in their schools. In the study, principals viewed themselves as their school's "chief communicators", and they take ownership when information is not shared with the community. This powerful statement suggests opportunities for improvement, including teachers and administrators reaching out to families central staff administration sees the communication misalignment to the schools as a weakness that needs strengthening.

Theme Four: The Dynamics of Family Engagement

Family dynamics is paramount to the school and community. Today's schools have the multi-generational involvement of parents and grandparents and must provide opportunity for all families to engage in their children's learning opportunities (Bauch, 2000). Several parents from Quadrant Two were adamant about the importance of teachers, principals, and central office administrators being inclusive of all families in their communication by using multiple languages, not just Spanish. Parents also stated that family structure, including LBGTQ+, is important in

"how we engage families with different dynamic structures. Communication absolutely has a direct impact on the level of engagement." If we want to implement a new practice or strategy to strengthen family engagement, we must establish procedures, and be willing to take risk to change school culture and climate. Principal and central officer administrators believe creating the culture and climate to accept all types of family dynamics is paramount to the school and community. Establishing positive relationships is the key. We need to be solution-oriented to meet the family needs as the dynamics change with the family structure.

The research on parent involvement and engagement has challenges in removing barriers for parents, such as supporting diverse learning and addressing psychological safety nets for parents to feel welcome and supported (Howard, 2019). To address this concern, the district's new equity policy will include strategic planning on how to provide the tools for the school and community to have a conversation and develop actions steps that will include training for school personnel.

Theme Five: Pathway to Cultural Awareness /Equity Opportunities

Parents expressed satisfaction in realizing that the district has developed a new equity policy. There was excitement and hopefulness that positive relations with families will strengthen in the school and community. One characteristic of the culturally responsive leader is strategically integrating school programs that reflect the diverse student population (Derderian-Aghajania & Cong, 2012). Creating programs that reflect the diversity of the student population demonstrates opportunities and engagement from all stakeholders for advancing student outcomes. All three principals aligned that culturally responsive leadership is the responsibility of everyone in the

school system. As one principal stated, "Knowing your families' cultural background demonstrates mutual respect. It shows you care and that family matters." Additionally, principals and central administration are working with the district equity team to have frequent informal gatherings with parents and various stakeholders to build rapport and garner ideas. As the school district continues to create pathways, societal factors such as demographics, biases, feelings of inferiority, socioeconomic factors, and family instability may produce unintended consequences for schools and families (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Swap, 1993). Despite the surrounding controversy with cultural awareness, parents, principals and central staff, through their feedback during the interviews, will enhance student's outcomes through an equity lens.

Theme Six: Action to Improve Family Engagement with Relationships

Parents, principals and central office administrators expressed the critical need for improved action steps, such as consistency with a clear focus on what family engagement should look like across the district. Leadership training for school staff is a recommended action step shared by all participants. Such measures would require the district to adopt a family engagement curriculum aligned to best practices and devote time to launch the program. Given the wide range of school levels represented in the study, parent emotions surrounding the decline in family engagement between elementary, middle, and high school continues to be a point of contention. One way to bridge elementary and secondary families is ether is by creating a transition. The transition meeting will include parents and principals from the elementary and secondary levels to address the communication and engagement opportunities for families to support schools. Such gatherings will help satisfy parents' feelings of connectedness with the schools and principals on a more personal level. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2008) and the Pennsylvania Framework for Leadership (2012) developed professional standards highlighting

interconnected school-family partnerships. The Pennsylvania Framework allows school leaders the option to focus on domain 4A: Maximizes Professional Responsibilities through Family/Caregiver Involvement and Community Engagement. The domain outlines the school leader/supervisor designs inclusive structures and processes, creating a culture that results in family/caregiver involvement and community engagement and support and ownership for the school.

The district should consider planning to adopt the research practice of Joyce Epstein as it serves as a model of what parents, principals and central office administrators expressed throughout this study as an integrated approach to family engagement. Parents subjects, likely unknowingly, provided recommendations that align with Epstein's Six Types of Involvement (2019). Their suggestions proposed an integrated approach to defining the many ways and contexts in which families can engage with their child's education. The district should consider how to help staff more fully understand and implement opportunities for the Six Types of Involvement:

1. Parenting: Type 1 involvement occurs when family practices and home environments support "children as students" and when schools understand their children's families.

2. Communicating: Type 2 involvement occurs when educators, students, and families "design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications."

3. Volunteering: Type 3 involvement occurs when educators, students, and families "recruit and organize parent help and support" and count parents as an audience for student activities.

4. Learning at Home: Type 4 involvement includes families learning with their children at home, while the school provides families with how they can "help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning."

5. Decision Making: Type 5 involvement occurs when schools "include parents in school decisions" and "develop parent leaders and representatives."

6. Collaborating with the Community: Type 6 involvement occurs when community services, resources, and partners are integrated into the educational process to "strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development" (p.22).

Theme Seven: Families' Experience with Family Engagement

As stated earlier, there is abundant evidence that effective school-family relationships create a learning environment that influences students' academic outcomes and community (Khalifa, 2012). Like the other focus groups, parents stated that the elementary school experience with family engagement is favorable compared to the secondary experience.

One participant stated, "I think if parents had a negative school experience it's difficult to repair that relationship." She continued to say, "I developed a mistrust when a staff member refuses to apologize for making a mistake." Given these circumstances, some parents may find it challenging to repair a relationship. Utilizing Epstein's Six Types of Involvement (2019) may help as they take an integrated approach to defining the many ways and contexts in which families can engage with their child's education.

The school leader has a pivotal role in creating culture and climate in the school community. The work of Jung and Sheldon (2020) argue that the principal's leadership could also influence how teachers and schools interact with families. Researchers suggest that positive rippling effects can maximize teachers' relationships with families. This case study discussed the importance of welcoming families and allocating resources for family engagement. Additionally, all three focus groups offered solutions, reiterating the necessity of why family engagement offers

opportunities to empower and effect school change that influences their children's learning experience.

Implications for Future Research

School-family relationships create a learning environment that influences students' academic outcomes and community (Khalifa, 2012). While there is vital information on understanding and improving school and family partnerships in individual schools, this study seeks to employ qualitative research to investigate the perspectives of families, principals, and central office administrators at the school district level surrounding school and family engagement.

As principals strive for continuous school improvement in academic growth and achievement, the district should explore how the Pennsylvania Framework for Leadership Domain 4 (Professional and Community Leadership) can be used to leveraged support for adhering to the expectations of the local and state guidelines for Title 1. Family engagement should shape the identity of school leaders to be culturally responsive and reflect spontaneously on new changes in the educational field. Changing the dynamic landscape to ensure inclusivity for family structures can now begin to look at the formal salutation on district letters as one specific example of change. The district's changing the language from parent and guardian to family and guardian will now address families who have foster care children. Additionally, the change of the PTO now being called Family Teacher Organization (FTO) broads appeal.

Another recommendation made in the study was a tool to evaluate school, family, community partnership data. This study included Epstein's work centered on types of family engagement and what parents, principals, and central office administration can do to create partnerships to benefit the students' academic desired outcome. I look forward to collaborating with the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at John Hopkins University to support

leaders and practitioners as the Tillman School District continues to mobilize a culturally responsive leadership and school team to scaled-up level of support and training across the district.

Research Reflections

Conducting this research has been a lifelong interest in helping me redefine perceptions of my engagement with parents as a teacher, principal, and now, in my role as Director of Schools through which I supervise and coach principals. This research journey revealed several elements such as how parents want to be empowered, included in the decision-making process, and their misconceptions with central office administration about family engagement opportunities.

As a district employee serving as the primary investigator, I understand that my role may have positively impacted the participants' responses. Serving in this dual role as an agent of the district provided participants with a safe and comfortable space to share experiences. The question of cultural responsiveness and the equity policy generated high interest and more of an inquiry stance compared to anyone feeling uncomfortable in the discussion. The participants in the groups were open and honest with their thoughts and truly believed in their school's leadership approach to improved family engagement. Grace and patience were evident in responses. The research participants identified new learnings and self-discoveries. P revealed self-reflection as the driver and voice of change. Principals recognized their role as chief communicator of messaging with families. Finally, central office administrators acknowledged the need to assist all schools and identified misconceptions about family engagement across the district. All participants exhibited a sense of relief to share their stories and were intrigued to learn about resources at the district level.

As a district administrator, I plan to utilize the findings to make recommendations to make the communication social platforms uniform across the district. Additionally, I plan to engage principals in enacting Domain 4 of the PA Leadership Framework to engage families and continue

to serve as a liaison for the District PAC to evaluate the school climate to ensure all families feel welcomed in our schools. Moreover, I will collaborate with both Coordinators of Family Engagement and Partnerships to align resources across the district by investigating how the Tillman School District can adopt The Epstein Framework model to provide consistent professional development that is aligned with academic outcomes. This study affirms the research of Joyce Epstein's work in the research-based, district-level leadership structures and processes presented in Chapter 7 of her *Handbook for Action, 4th Edition*. It is my hope adopting the framework of Epstein will mobilize the district changes that can be brought forth by this qualitative research study.

Finally, the power of family engagement can have a tremendous impact on a school system, especially when the message comes from United States Secretary of Education, Dr. Miguel Cardona. The opportunity of having Dr. Cardona visit the school where I was formerly the principal to greet parents at a PTO meeting was an incredible experience as I completed this research project. Dr. Cardona's message served as the pivotal moment as I completed this chapter of the dissertation. His words conveyed a deep commitment, humbleness, and authentic messaging to family and education. He captured the essence of the research, by making families feel welcome, providing them a multilingual voice and the expressing the relationship that "I am one of you."

The sentiment echoed by Dr. Cardona's stance, "parent's matter," energized families brought forth in his remarks about the importance of family engagement. He shared his experience as a parent sitting at monthly PTO meetings and how he was able to influence the decision-making process in schools. He uplifted families in valuing their gifts as he spoke in Spanish telling parents that even though schools are in unprecedented times, "It matters that you are here tonight. Parents

play a pivotal role in our children's lives." (Personal communication, U.S. Secretary of Education

September 14, 2022).

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Appendix A: Parent Demographic Survey Questions

1. How are you related to the children?
    A. Parent
    B. Step parent
    C. Guardian
    D. Foster parent.
    F. Grandparent,
    G. Other please specify. _____

2. What school level/s do your children attend? Check all that apply
    A. Elementary
    B. Middle
    C. High School

3. What gender do you identify as?
    A. Male
    B. Female
    C. _____ (Short Answer Space)
    D. Prefer not to answer.

4. Please specify your ethnicity.
    A. Caucasian
    B. African American
    C. Latino or Hispanic
    D. Asian
    E. Native American
    F. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    G. Two or More
    H. Other/Unknown
    I. Prefer not to say

4. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
    A. Some High School
    B. High school GED
    C. Bachelor's Degree
    D. Master's Degree
    E. Ph.D. or higher
    F. Trade School
    G. Prefer not to say

5. Which languages are you capable of speaking fluently? (Check all that apply)"
    A. English
    B. Spanish
    C. Portuguese
    D. French

E. Mandarin
F. Arabic
G. Other
H. Prefer not to say

Appendix B: Principal Demographic Survey Questions

1. How long have you served as principal of this building?
    A. 0-2 years
    B. 3-5 years
    C. 5-10 years
    D. 10 +years

2. What gender do you identify as?
    A. Male
    B. Female
    C. _____ (Short Answer Space)
    D. Prefer not to answer.

3. Please specify your ethnicity.
    A. Caucasian
    B. African American
    C. Latino or Hispanic
    D. Asian
    E. Native American
    F. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    G. Two or More
    H. Other/Unknown
    I. Prefer not to say

4. What training have you received in areas Family School Engagement?
    A. Some in college
    B. None at College
    C. Some at the school district
    D.   None at the school district

5. Do you have a PTO at your school?
    A. Yes.
     B. No

Appendix C: Central Office Demographic Questions

1. How many years have you worked in your current position?
    A. 0-2 years
    B. 3-5 years
    C. 5-10 years
    D. 10 +years

2. What gender do you identify as?
    A. Male
    B. Female
    C. _____ (Short Answer Space)
    D. Prefer not to answer.

3. Please specify your ethnicity.
    A. Caucasian
    B. African American
    C. Latino or Hispanic
    D. Asian
    E. Native American
    F. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    G. Two or More
    H. Other/Unknown
    I. Prefer not to say

4. What training have you received in areas Family School Engagement?
    A. Some in college
    B. None at College
    C. Some at the school district
    D. None at the school district