



PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT:

A large, multi-story brick apartment building with many windows and fire escapes. In the center of the building, there is a white rectangular area containing the following text:

**WHAT COUNTS,
WHO COUNTS IT,
AND DOES IT HELP?¹**

When asked to explain why so many urban schools show unsatisfactory results on academic or social measures, principals routinely and quickly turn to descriptions of parents. In other words, when seeking to explain why work within a school is so difficult or why reform initiatives have been unsuccessful, many principals point outside the school. They say that what parents are *not* doing (providing the right kinds of support at home, attending school functions designed to meet school goals) is more important than what they or their staffs *are* doing. What principals in fact know about the parents and communities they serve is an open question. That too many rely on deficit conceptions of the parents and communities they serve is a discouraging finding that has been repeatedly demonstrated by educational researchers and parent organizers across a variety of contexts and generations.

Two quotes from some of my own research in schools with large populations of students of colour and students living in poverty can stand in for the kinds of descriptions that operate within many principals' practice. "These children," one principal of a middle school in California explained to me, "do not have cultural exposure to make them whole in the way that I think middle class families build wholeness into their children." Poor families, in this principal's view, build incomplete children; it's no wonder, this argument goes, that work in schools shows such limited impact. Another principal, this one in a Toronto elementary school, put it this way: "A challenge would be parents supporting their kids at home," he said. "And I don't know if they don't have the time because they're working weird shifts, or two jobs, or they're single parents or if they don't understand how to help their kids at home in a real way." In other words, working families, for whatever reasons, aren't supportive enough of schools.

It is true that different parents and communities have different access to the kinds of resources that align with the success that schools measure; inequality in community resources obviously influences inequality in schooling outcomes. Nevertheless, before drawing conclusions about patterns of parental involvement in urban schools, it is reasonable to ask whether attitudes of administrators and staff are an *effect* of low parental involvement or, potentially, a *cause*. Ideally, to better understand how schools are involving parents (and what attitudes and behaviours principals show in more effective schools), we would turn now to an examination of parental involvement data. What kinds of assessment and evaluation data have policymakers collected on schools' work with parents?

The short answer is, not much.

IS IT "POLICY" IF IT ISN'T ASSESSED?

Whether labeled "parental involvement," "parental engagement" or "school/community connections," government and school board policies have sought to increase schools' and administrators' contact with parents. We know quite a lot about the various forms that parental involvement may take and the different ways that students, schools or communities may benefit, and much has been published recommending different strategies and programmatic approaches schools can use to increase parental involvement. At the same time, an extensive body of literature describes the pitfalls of traditional approaches to parental

EN BREF Lorsqu'on leur demande d'expliquer pourquoi tant d'écoles en milieu urbain ont des résultats insatisfaisants sur les plans scolaires ou sociaux, les directeurs d'école ont tendance à recourir rapidement à la description des parents. Lorsqu'on leur demande pourquoi le travail au sein d'une école est si difficile ou pourquoi les réformes n'ont pas réussi, ils pointent du doigt l'extérieur de l'école. Mais dans quelle mesure les directeurs connaissent-ils les parents? Que savons-nous au sujet de ce qui fonctionne en matière de participation des parents? En fait, les différents modèles d'engagement parental et communautaire à l'école ont rarement été évalués, en partie parce qu'ils sont difficiles à circonscrire et à mesurer, et en partie parce qu'une telle évaluation soulèverait d'épineuses questions d'ordre politique. Les décideurs peuvent avoir conclu que la participation parentale constitue pour l'école une importante aspiration, mais tant qu'ils n'y affecteront pas de ressources et n'élaboreront pas de stratégies d'évaluation, ils continueront de créer des attentes tout en livrant des résultats relativement mineurs.

involvement and the obstacles to respectful school/parent collaboration inherent in most traditional forms of school administration. Given the expanse of this literature,² given the growing policy consensus that schools should encourage parental involvement, and given the context of increased accountability for public schools, surprisingly little has been published about the ways that parental engagement policy is, should be, or could be systematically evaluated and assessed.

This scarcity of assessment or evaluation derives in part from the complexity of the endeavor. What questions should form the foundation of an evaluation? Significantly, there is no uniform agreement on what counts as parental engagement (does it happen at school or at home?), what its purpose is (to improve a child's learning, or to share governance?), or who is best positioned to assess whether or not parents are engaged (students? parents? teachers? principals? district or provincial officials?).

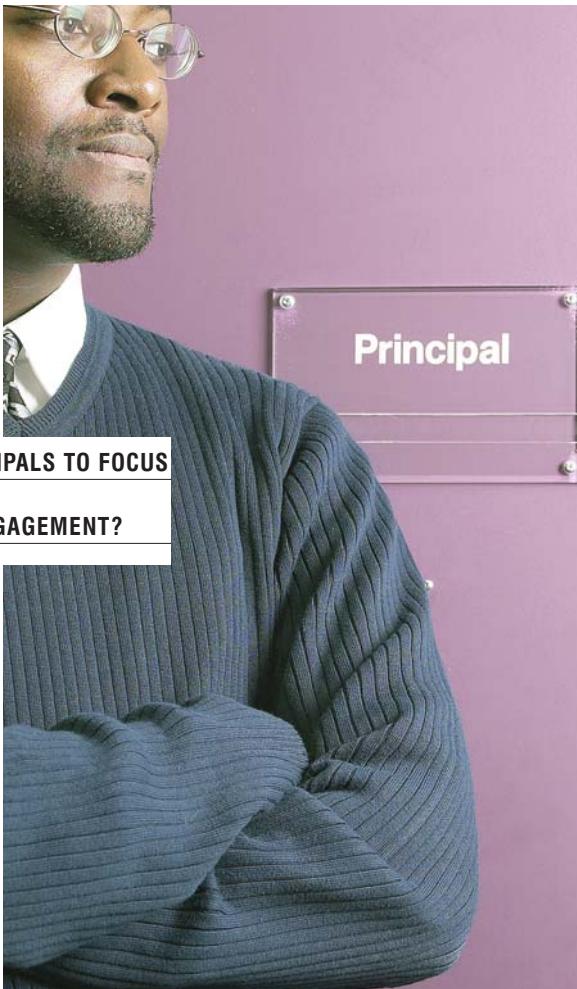


TO EVALUATE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN ANY WAY MORE SUBSTANTIAL THAN COUNTING FUNDRAISING BALANCE SHEETS OR ATTENDANCE AT A SCHOOL COUNCIL MEETING MEANS TO LAY BARE A DEFINITION OF GOOD SCHOOLING – AND GOOD PARENTING.

But the technical complexities, alone, do not explain why parental engagement policies are so rarely evaluated. The *political* nature of any assessment makes both bureaucrats and politicians (i.e. precisely those responsible for implementing evaluations) nervous. First, they must make judgments about what responsibilities schools and families have to one another; second, they must assess who is and who is not holding up their end of that obligation; third, they must decide, within public institutions, what to do with results that might show that those very public institutions are not doing enough.

To evaluate parental involvement in any way more substantial than counting fundraising balance sheets or attendance at a school council meeting means to lay bare a definition of good schooling – and good parenting. Interestingly, educators' analyses of school/community connections frequently rely more on assumptions about the community than about the school; in particular, educators' views of low income families or the families of racial, eth-

nic, and linguistic minorities are often derived from deficit frameworks that blame parents for low levels of engagement with their children's schools. This article asks readers to consider whether interventions at the policy level – particularly evaluation and assessment – might encourage educators to alter those deficit frameworks, to learn more about the parents and communities they serve, and to involve them more effectively in the schooling of their children.



WHAT INCENTIVES ENCOURAGE PRINCIPALS TO FOCUS ON PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT?

THE BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF A POLITICS OF COUNTING

The principal's job, never easy, is getting more difficult. Principals are meant to be "strong leaders" as well as to encourage collegial "professional learning communities" with their teachers; they are expected to demonstrate responsive cultural competence with pluralist communities and to implement centrally-mandated literacy and numeracy curriculum; they are expected simultaneously to be entrepreneurial, managerial, and visionary in their approach. In other words, the job is over-described, and the educators who take on this important role of necessity decide to focus on some areas more than others. All of us respond to incentives, explicitly or implicitly, when we make choices about how to spend limited resources like time. What incentives encourage principals to focus on parental involvement and engagement? Or what disincentives discourage them?

One line of argument would suggest that principals aren't attending to parents now because new accountability pressures focus their daily work on what gets tested – and there's no test for parental involvement. However much sense this argument makes, it requires us to think of instruction and parental involvement as either/ors, not as potentially intertwined. It also suggests that before the current generation of testing, principals were engaging parents more than they do now; the evidence for this assertion is not straightforward.

Parental involvement is typically assessed informally in schools; what are the tradeoffs associated with more external and formalized approaches to assessing parental involvement? What measures or points of comparison are fair and provide the most accurate answer to the question of whether schools are doing enough to involve parents, or are involving them in the right ways? Evaluations, by definition, require some kind of counting and comparison; they equip evaluators with tools to measure compliance but not commitment, and may be necessary but insufficient tools for schools to use when considering how they do and

should work with the parents they serve. As the following vignette from Gloria Ladson-Billings so vividly illustrates, when thinking about parental involvement numbers matter, but so do purposes.

Teachers from a suburban school invite me to talk with them about a "problem" they are experiencing. They cannot get the African American and Hmong parents to come to school. I arrive at the meeting and begin with this question: "Suppose you arrive at school tomorrow morning and every African American and Hmong parent in this school is here. What would you have them do?" The teachers sit in stunned silence.³

Following conversations with more than 40 stakeholders (researchers, parent activists, policymakers, and school district officials) from 30 different organizations in Canada and the United States, and following the collection of empirical, practical, and critical literature on parental engagement as well as resources and policy documents from every Canadian province and territory, a research team that I led at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) sought to understand the different approaches and divergent purposes of evaluating parental engagement. We identified three prevalent ways in which parental engagement is assessed; all have pros and cons and none deals directly with educators' attitudes or beliefs about parents.

1. Focus on school councils

Central policymakers assess parental engagement by auditing school councils' membership, meeting frequency, and influence over agenda setting. Required by law, school councils are in place across all types of schools, making comparison, at least on the surface, straightforward. Problems with this type of assessment include the limitations of using parental council involvement as a proxy for all kinds of parental involvement (and by extension, at-school involvement for all involvement), the equation of school governance with parental involvement, and the fact that voluntary participation in school committees is more likely (and easier) in some socioeconomic and geographic settings than others and among some parents than others.

2. Focus on specific outreach programs

Parental engagement is assessed through school- or district-based program evaluations of specific outreach initiatives, often using a "logic model" that works backwards from outcomes to purposes. The flexibility of program evaluations to assess local needs makes them attractive to many educators. Limitations include the fact that such evaluations by definition assess only school-based parental involvement and they entrust schools

and districts – even those with demonstrable histories of antagonism with parents or communities – with the responsibility to assess their own effectiveness, with shifting targets or definitions of success making it potentially difficult to determine how significant involvement is.

3. Focus on parent satisfaction

Parental engagement is assessed via satisfaction surveys. There are a multitude of measures that assess parents' attitudes towards schools. Such surveys can be centrally administered to facilitate comparisons, but because parents can be highly involved but unsatisfied, or not involved at all and quite satisfied, the relationship between parent satisfaction and what schools do to engage parents is ambiguous. This fact complicates conclusions about what high or low levels of satisfaction mean and what directions for program improvement are indicated by different results.

The assessment landscape shows some interesting practices as well as limitations. And the question to consider before we make pronouncements about parental involvement is how do we know what we know? Common assessment approaches answer some questions but leave other important ones unexamined.

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Like all of us, the parents of schoolchildren behave in contradictory ways. Parents come to schools generous and positive as well as difficult and short sighted; sometimes parents are quite reasonably unconcerned with priorities other than their own. That working with parents is challenging does not disqualify them from reasonable accommodation, polite reception, or humane interaction in the public institutions that exist to educate their children. This important work is very difficult to assess. Considering honestly what meaningful roles exist for parents in schools and what ways schools provide parents with opportunities to work both together and independently on common goals requires more from evaluators than a compliance mentality. But how does one assess *commitment* to greater collaboration between schools and families? Much of the well-intentioned literature on the topic assumes that, once obstacles are removed, parents and schools will work together on a common agenda. This normative stance ignores the reality that conflict is an inevitable part of collaboration,⁴ that to work in community does not mean to work without conflict and difficulty and that indeed, conflict may be a greater sign of care and serious engagement with parents than its absence. It is certainly possible, ironically, that complaints from parents might go up not down, at least at first, in schools committing to parental involvement. Commitment, in other words, might make the work schools do with parents more difficult, not smoother. What evaluation scheme, designed to measure compliance, can recognize – and thereby create the incentives to gain more skill with – conflict as potentially generative of school growth and improvement?

Working together in schools requires time that is scarce and resources that may not be provided by boards or provinces that would rather see results for free. Policy-makers have concluded that parental involvement is an important aspiration for schools; they have also reached

this conclusion about many other policies, and the expectations we place on schools and principals are growing. Absent sufficient resources to support parental involvement or systems to assess it, skeptics might wonder just how real or feasible a priority it can be. Nor do we know what it costs, in lost chances for parents and educators to work together, to continue to raise expectations rhetorically but to deliver comparatively minor results. Policy assessments, and the incentives they create, matter; for them to matter in the ways we most want in terms of parental involvement will require us to develop new tools. Counting parents at a meeting, evaluating outreach programs, and surveying parental satisfaction all tell us something about parents' interactions with schools. But if they also divert our attention from the ways that deficit orientations shape schools' willingness to extend themselves to parents and children, or if they encourage educators to gloss over the disagreements that might arise when public schools take the public seriously, then we've developed a technical tool that works at cross purposes to the goal of involving and engaging parents more authentically. |

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Notes

1 This paper has benefited from conversation and collaboration with OISE colleagues Kari Dehli, Diane Farmer, Jeffrey Kugler, Lance McCready, and Dominique Riviere, with whom I worked on an investigation of different jurisdictions' parental involvement assessment policies; from conversation with Hélène Grégoire, Senior Policy Adviser, Parent Engagement Office, Ontario Ministry of Education; and from the editorial advice of Amy Ryken at the University of Puget Sound. My colleagues are not to blame for any errors or omissions in my writing, nor do they necessarily share my perspective.

2 Parental involvement in public schools is mandated by U.S. federal law (Section 1118 of The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). As a result, a large body of work identifying strategies for involving parents (and emphasizing compliance to policies such as the requirement for schools to have a parental involvement policy) has emerged this decade in the United States. Canadian policy contexts are quite different, but boards and ministries here also have demonstrated an appetite for work that describes what works for involving parents. See for example D. Pushor and C. Ruitenberg (with co-researchers at Princess Alexandra Community School), *Parent Engagement and Leadership* (Saskatoon, SK: Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation, 2005) or *Parent and Education Engagement Partnership Project: A Discussion Paper* (prepared by Malatest & Associates, Ltd. Victoria, BC: Aboriginal Education Enhancements Branch, Ministry of Education of British Columbia, 2002).

3 Gloria Ladson-Billings, "It's Not the Culture of Poverty, It's the Poverty of Culture: The Problem with Teacher Education," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 37, no.2 (2006): 104-109.

4 Thank you to OISE doctoral student Kelly Gallagher-Mackay for drawing my attention to this gap in the literature.

