Action Research Team Brief

INTRODUCTION

Family engagement and empowerment are an important priority for SFUSD to enhance students' educational experiences by involving their families in the schooling process. This memo serves as a brief literature review to inform parental engagement strategies and empowerment components of the district strategic plan. To help frame this review, I will focus on two guiding questions:

- *What is the importance of family engagement in the schooling process?*
- *What are "nontraditional" notions of parental engagement based on differing cultural beliefs?*

The importance of family engagement and involvement in the schooling process:

Anthony Bryk et al. (2010) suggests schools that fully embrace this work, especially when done with a system of strong supports, tend to outperform their peers. Key support systems include coherent instructional guidance, building professional capacity, establishing strong parent-community-school ties, promoting a student-centered learning climate, and strengthening leaders to drive change. Scholars like Michelle Fine (1993) also support this approach and particularly argue that schools should create shared governance structures that incorporates parental voice in the decision-making process. She also cautions against the focus on "improving" perceived family deficits, and suggests that schools recognize the valuable insight parents can bring to the school improvement process.

To engage in redesigning and improving family engagement within the district, all stakeholders should first recognize the importance of this strategic goal. Doing so, requires that various departments and personnel develop trust and relational factors within the school district and translate that rapport to interactions with parents to support empowerment and engagement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Alternative notions of family engagement, particularly concerning families from diverse backgrounds and cultural beliefs:

Recognizing the value of family and community engagement only represents another piece of the puzzle. To engage all parental and community stakeholders, district personnel should recognize the wealth of cultural beliefs and diversity that parents bring to the educative process. Put plainly, it is time to identify and welcome nontraditional notions of parental involvement. Gerardo López (2001) provides a poignant case-study of a Latinx migrant family that school staff perceived as being uninterested in the schooling process. School staff came to this conclusion because the parents rarely attended parent-teacher conferences or school performances, and they took their children to work with them in the fields during some school days. What school personnel failed to realize was that they had strong partners with these parents.

The parents did not attend school functions because of their demanding and extensive traveling work schedule that provided the necessary income for them to survive. Because of cultural beliefs and practices, the parents also saw their role as encouraging their students to work hard in school to further their education. This is the reason their children joined them in the fields to

experience the hard labor performed by those without a strong educational background. In short, **the parents strongly believed that their presence at school would offend and infringe upon the expertise of school personnel and thus saw their role as behind-the-scene external actors.** This nontraditional example of parental involvement with schooling resulted in all the children in this family graduating from high school and pursuing higher education.

In the context of African American families, Annette Lareau and Erin Horvat (1999) point to social factors perpetuated by schools that discourage the involvement of this community in the educative process. First, these two scholars recognize that too many African American families had negative experiences with the schooling process as students. Next, Lareau and Horvat point to societal norms perpetuated in schools that serve as barriers to involving African American families in the schooling processes. **These societal norms privilege involvement from parents that exhibit certain levels of cultural, social, and economic capital.**

In the realities of schooling, examples of these forms of capital include the ways individuals communicate, the social networks or communities in which individuals operate, the financial means of parents, the ability to navigate a multifaceted and complex schooling infrastructure, and the wherewithal to interact within an environment that may not have been welcoming to certain families in the past. Finally, these scholars suggest that schools rethink traditional approaches and beliefs about engaging parents and embrace alternative notions that encourage often-excluded communities to become partners in the schooling process. Doing so, as the scholars write, can allow schools to support both students and families.

CONCLUSION
Respected educational researchers suggest that schools and districts contextualize their family engagement approaches to the needs of their local community. However, school reformers must also recognize *structural barriers, within the school district, that may impede family engagement*. SFUSD's Office of Family Empowerment has highlighted Dr. Joyce L. Epstein's *Framework of Six Types of Involvement* on the Family Partnership Resource website as a guide to address these structural challenges (Epstein et al., 2005). Suggestions to break down these structural barriers include: rethinking the way school officials communicate with parents, supporting parents to establish a positive home environment, helping parents become their child's first teacher by engaging in learning activities at home, involving parents in school governance, creating diverse ways to encourage parental volunteerism, and meaningfully interacting with communities outside of school walls. These represent actions the district can take to break down structural barriers.

As the district engages in this reform process, key personnel should recognize that "schools are complex organizations consisting of multiple interacting systems" with focus on coordinating the "multiple interacting systems" (Bryk et al., 2010; Smith & O'Day, 1991). Despite the complexity of schooling, the district might also develop a mindset that it can use its organizational capacity and resources as a resource to enhance the role and lives of families in the educative process.

References

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