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Impacting Student Learning Outcomes by Addressing Basic Needs of Students and Their

Families

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Northwestern College

A School Improvement Project Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education

August 11, 2019

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Abstract

The purpose of this school improvement project was to identify how an urban elementary school could impact student learning outcomes by addressing basic needs unmet for children and their families. This was accomplished by first identifying and researching areas of basic needs commonly lacking for families of an elementary school with a high density of need. Next, how to assist families in meeting these needs via community resources and programs was researched and discussed. An existing annual school community building event was expanded to address these needs in a low pressure, familiar environment for school families. Several local community organizations were present with booths at the event allowing families opportunity to learn about services and programs available to meet their basic needs. Families basic needs improving will allow for a more positive relationship with school as well as improvement of student learning outcomes.

Keywords: *basic needs, elementary, community resources, families, health*

Impacting Student Learning Outcomes by Addressing Basic Needs of Students and Their Families

In many Title I schools, there is a high density of need for not only the students, but also their families including young siblings not yet in school. Students living with hunger, fear, instability, and other trauma occurring outside of the school walls struggle to focus in school or see school work as having importance in their lives. Burlison and Thoron (2014) explain that when basic needs are not being met in a child's life, "other concerns will then take precedence over learning and achievement" (p. 1). While a teacher is providing an excellent and engaging lesson on patterning that aligns with state standards and meets the learning needs of all students, a student who is chronically hungry is still not able to engage in the learning because they are instead focused on where they are going to find food after school. The negative impact of unmet needs will occur no matter how safe, supportive, and experienced the child's teacher.

There is increasing pressure from states and the Department of Education for schools to improve student outcomes on testing and with common core standards. This research seeks to demonstrate the importance of a student's quality of life in early childhood years before even entering their schooling career as well as continued impact while school aged. A child's brain and body go through critical development and growth in the early years of life. Basic needs not being met, such as chronic hunger, can impact the development of a child physically and cognitively with lifelong consequences (Cook & Jeng, 2009). Meaning, what happens before a child enters school impacts their testing scores and learning greatly.

In alignment with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, students are not able to reach their full potential or come to school ready to learn when they and their families are concerned with getting what they need to survive and function. Learning falls in a higher level of the hierarchy

and the foundation or lower levels of the hierarchy (i.e. basic needs) need to be fulfilled before the higher levels can be achieved (Prince & Howard, 2002). Basic needs that are often unmet for these students and their families include food, shelter, sleep, clothing, safety, and health. These unmet needs are often a barrier to student learning and wellbeing. Schools are able to meet a fraction of these basic needs for students, but are not equipped with the expertise, funding, staffing, or time to provide programs or resources to a high density of students in need. Schools need to consider the importance of connecting families that are struggling to meet their basic needs to organizations and resources that can help them.

Family stressors and struggles can also impact student learning outcomes. Families struggling to provide food, shelter, health care and struggling with their own mental health and wellbeing can greatly affect the children in their care as well as the family unit as a whole (Prince & Howard, 2002; Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017; Cook & Jeng, 2009; Perez-Escamilla, & Pinheiro de Toledo Vianna, 2012). Unfortunately, many of these stressors are interrelated and while one need may be met temporarily, another may take its place causing the stress to become chronic. Chronic stress affects the caregiver's ability to function, the quality of life for the whole family, the occurrence of trauma in the household, and the ability to nurture a child's development and learning. (Duncan, Magnuson, & Votruba-Drzal, 2014; Sitler, 2009). This family stress effects the child and spreads into all parts of a child's life, including their ability to function in school (Sitler, 2009).

Urban communities often have many wonderful resources, but it is often difficult for families to access them due to transportation barriers, or not knowing that these resources exist. Until basic needs are met for these students and their families, learning outcomes cannot begin to improve. Therefore, it is critical student's families connect to the programs, supports and

resources available to help meet those basic needs. One way for an elementary school to increase awareness and break the transportation barrier is by leveraging previously built relationships and utilizing a safe and familiar environment at the school to create an opportunity for families to connect with organizations. Organizations, resources, and programs would need to be determined on an individual school basis to address the potentially unique needs of the school.

Review of the Literature

There are many factors that can impact a student's ability to learn. Basic needs such as food, shelter, and safety can impact not only a child's academic achievement, but also their cognitive and physical development (Prince & Howard, 2002; Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017). Children with unmet basic needs often come from an entire family grappling with meeting basic needs. Families who are over-stressed by struggling to provide food, maintain steady income, or caregivers who live with mental illness can also have an impact on a child's development and achievement in school (Duncan et al., 2014). The communities that a family lives in can offset or antagonize challenges depending on the lack of provision of support systems and resources available (Epstein, 2010). The school community can assist with connecting families in need to outside resources in the community, although there can be barriers in doing so.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is especially evident in a school environment where students are expected to come in prepared to function appropriately in relationships and to learn rigorous material. If needs are not met, the student cannot be ready to learn because their efforts and attention are focused on survival and meeting the lower level needs (Burlison & Thoron, 2014; Dryfoos, 2002). They may instead, "act out and cause disruptions or be insubordinate" (Burlison & Thoron, 2014, p.1). The five areas of need progressing from bottom to top are as follows, physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. Before progressing to higher levels in the hierarchy, all areas of need below them must first be met (Maslow, 1943; Harper, Harper, & Stills, 2003). This is a challenge for students living in poverty and/or with trauma struggling with fulfillment of their physiological and safety needs.

Physiological. The physiological level of the hierarchy contains the basic needs of food, clothing, sleep and shelter (Burleson & Thoron, 2014; Harper et al., 2003). The most basic level of the hierarchy should be the most easily fulfilled, but it is often difficult to consistently fulfill for those living in poverty (Prince & Howard, 2002). The lower level needs of the hierarchy need to be fulfilled before higher level needs such as self-actualization, such as student learning, can occur. “A person who is lacking in food, safety, love, and esteem would most probably hunger for food more strongly than anything else,” (Maslow, 1943, p. 373). However, teachers cannot meet the needs at the physiological level that mainly occur outside of school. Educators and schools can instead attempt to aid in bridging the gap of needs by helping students and their families connect to programs or resources that can fulfill their basic needs (Burleson & Thoron, 2014; Dryfoos, 2002).

Food. It is well known that food is a crucial component for the body’s survival, and without it the body will shut down and die. However, starvation is not commonly the issue in America. Children may have access to food, but lack of nutrition or the regularity of adequate access is the cause of this need not being met (Prince & Howard, 2002; Perez-Escamilla, & Pinheiro de Toledo Vianna, 2012). Burleson and Thoron (2014) explain, “if hunger is the issue, all other needs and desires will be suppressed in order to satisfy hunger” (p. 1). Malnutrition in the early childhood years can also lead to long-term ramifications of a child’s physical and mental health as well as developmental delays and compromised health and/or immune system (Prince & Howard, 2002; Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017). Clearly a deficit in this area can cause a large disruption to a child’s ability to function in the world, much less acquire new and challenging skills.

Safety. Safety needs to be present to aid in order for a child to grow and thrive. Safety can include a variety of factors around a child including shelter, crime, their health or the health of their family, access to health care, safe and consistent caregivers/family, caregiver's job stability (Prince & Howard, 2002). Mental health in caregivers can also negatively affect the safety of a child, and will be discussed further later in this paper. Children lacking in the area of safety often thrive on routine and consistency in their daily schedule. This gives them the ability to predict what will happen that day and the future days lessening the unknown (Maslow, 1943; Burleson & Thoron, 2014).

Security. Children need to feel safe in any environment they are in, in order to thrive. This includes their home, neighborhood, and school. If there is an unsafe environment such as abusive family member at home, dangerous crime in their neighborhood, or bullying at school, this can affect a child's ability to focus on other tasks or relationships. Their main focus instead is how to remain safe in unsafe situations or places (Burleson & Thoron, 2014; Maslow, 1943; Sitler, 2009). A child experiencing an unsafe environment or situation, will often act out and display signs of trauma in the environment they do feel safe in. Often this environment is their school, causing a disruption in their ability to learn, and if displayed in a disruptive way, this may disrupt their peer's ability to learn around them.

Health. A child's health is often dependent the adults caring for them, the environments they live in, and the resources that are available to their families. If a child's health is not cared for by the adults caring for them, chronic absence, sleeping in class, or lack of concentration can occur in school. "Many children reared in poverty live in environments that are both unsafe and unhealthy (Prince & Howard, 2002, p. 29). These environments can include the very home they live in whether it be lead paint exposure, or drugs and crime occurring around or even in their

home (Prince & Howard, 2002). These kinds of conditions can also affect their basic needs of a safe shelter and attainment of the amount and quality of sleep they need. Children living in poverty are often lacking in many supports for their health and as a result are living in chronic poor health throughout their lives. Unfortunately, this chronic poor health in their childhood can result in immediate difficulty in academic achievement as well as long lasting impacts into their adulthood (Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017).

Outside Impacts on Student Learning

Student learning is not only impacted by what happens in a school building, but also what happens at home and in the community. Children whose basic needs of nutrition, shelter, health care, safety are not being met, “are not coming to school physically, socially, emotionally, or cognitively ready to learn” (Prince & Howard, 2002, p. 28). Stressors on the caretakers or the family as a whole can greatly impact a student’s performance in school academically and socially. Even more impacting are trauma and chronic trauma. There are several different components and types of these outside impacts on student learning.

Family stressors. There are many stressors that can affect a family’s quality of life and nurturing of the children in their care. When caregivers are experiencing chronic stress due to lack of resources, health, or ability their availability, engagement, and care for their children can become less of a priority to the need for the family to survive. “Economically disadvantaged families experience more stress in their everyday lives than more affluent families do, and this stress may affect children’s development” (Duncan et al., 2014, p. 102). This stress may also affect caretaker’s and their child’s health and mental health (Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017). Support systems that usually help more affluent families cope with everyday stressors, are more

likely in families living in poverty who may not have support systems available due to single parenting, transportation, or immigration.

Health care. Families living in poverty often have to make difficult decisions on where to use their limited financial resources. Health care is often not affordable for families living in poverty (Prince & Howard, 2002). This can cause caregivers to wait longer to take a child into the doctor when sick or to ration out expensive medication. Families may even have to choose between rent, food, or medical care for monthly expenses (Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017). As a result, children growing up in poverty can result in poor health that impacts adulthood, causing higher spending in health care needs (Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017).

Mental health. Mental health of caretakers can impair a child's ability to access their full potential in school. The mental health of a caretaker impacts access to and retention of services supporting the welfare of a family. Mental illness such as depression may interfere with a caregiver's ability to keep up with required paperwork or appointments resulting in the loss of benefits that are critical in the development and survival of the student and their family (Cook & Jeng, 2009). A caretaker's ability to maintain supports for their household may affect a child's ability to access health care when they are sick, food and nutrition crucial for their growth and cognitive development, or shelter that ensures safety and ability to get enough sleep. Maternal mental health can also negatively impact the quality of child interactions, caretaking, and attachment with their children, affecting their development (Perez-Escamilla, & Pinheiro de Toledo Vianna, 2012), and later their performance at school. Thus, a caretaker's mental health may create basic needs and educational deficits for all children in their care.

Mental health of the student can also provide a barrier to accessing learning in school. Without proper management with therapy or medicine, a student with mental health needs may

become disruptive, defiant, withdrawn, or even aggressive. While schools can provide supports for a child with mental health needs, outside services and family support are crucial for a child's success. Transportation, keeping appointments, setting up initial appointments or evaluations, and communicating with mental health professionals can all be challenges for a caretaker, which impacts a child's access to mental health services. The caretaker's ability to follow through with the student's mental health care such as medicine, counseling, or therapy can greatly impact their ability to function in society and in school.

Food. Food can be a source of stress on all family members including the student. Families living with food insecurity may be forced to opt for cheaper, processed food lacking in nutrition instead of fresh and healthier options that are often more costly (Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017; Perez-Escamilla, & Pinheiro de Toledo Vianna, 2012). Struggles with attaining enough food for themselves and their family can lead to depression especially in mothers. This maternal depression can then impact the relationship and attachment between mother and child, as well as neglect and/or abuse or decrease in capability of caring for children in the family unit (Cook & Jeng, 2009). Lack of food can also result in a child becoming aggressive, experiencing anxiety or depression, school attendance issues, challenges getting along with peers, and trouble focusing on classwork (Cook & Jeng, 2009). Long term impacts of chronic hunger can occur as early as an experience with food insecurity in kindergarten resulting in reading and math scores in third grade that are lower than peers without food instability experiences (Cook & Jeng, 2009).

The impact and disadvantage for students is happening before they even set foot in the classroom. Lack of sufficient nutrition also negatively impacts the cognitive development of young children from birth to three years old. This impact on cognitive development can lead to

students entering their first school experience already at a disadvantage with their developmental ability far behind that of their peers. Malnutrition in young children can have ramifications that last a child's lifetime (Cook & Jeng, 2009; Prince & Howard, 2002; Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017). For example, the possibility of a child with food instability being identified for special education services increases, with services often lasting throughout their educational careers (Cook & Jeng, 2009).

Family or neighborhood support system. Parents often need to rely on family or neighbors for support in childcare, social support, or safety, especially single parents. "When neighborhood-based relationships are lacking, evidence suggests that positive parenting practices are diminished" (Riina, Lippert, & Brooks-Gunn, 2016, p. 858). Frequently changing households in neighborhoods can also cause caregivers to be extra cautious for the safety of their children due to not knowing or trusting their neighbors. This can result in limited outdoors play and socialization as well as limited connections with neighbors. A lack in neighborhood support can be offset instead by family support. However, without neighborhood or family support systems, caregivers can become stressed resulting in negative impacts on their mental health, parenting, and child relationships (Riina et al., 2016).

Trauma. Children may experience trauma in many different ways such as abuse and/or neglect, loss of family members, food or housing instability, community violence, or even a catastrophic event. Trauma can produce consequences for a child and their development or well-being that continue to impact over the course of a child's life (Prince & Howard, 2002). Chronic trauma can negatively affect a child's brain development causing weakening in areas critical for learning. The repeated trauma causes strengthening of the amygdala in functioning for survival or fight or flight, which does not allow for growth in the prefrontal cortex where learning can

occur (Prince & Howard, 2002). Trauma may present in the classroom with a student who has, “no interest in looking at the long-term or even at tomorrow, inability to concentrate, and lashing out verbally or physically are common behavioral effects of trauma” (Sitler, 2009, p. 120).

Abuse/Neglect. One form of trauma a child may experiences is abuse and/or neglect. This can occur with children of any age, however children in early childhood are particularly vulnerable. “Forty percent of all victims of child abuse and neglect are under the age of 6” (Prince & Howard, 2002, p. 29). This means that early identification, intervention, and assistance is often needed before a child enters compulsory school age. Also, to consider is abuse of others witnessed by a child. According to Prince and Howard (2002), 3.3 to 10 million of children have witnessed domestic violence against their mother; a number that has likely increased since this statistic.

Food instability. Food instability has a long-lasting impact on a child’s cognitive emotional, mental and physical well-being. When a child is chronically hungry or affected by the unpredictability of adequate food availability, they can have challenges in the school setting. Challenges may include concentrating, navigating social situations and regulating themselves in emotional situations. Children with food instability are also retained a grade more frequently than their peers with stable and nutritional food supplies in their homes. Students are less adept in handling stressors at school (Cook & Jeng, 2009), as their brains and bodies are focused on the food and nutrition they need for survival.

Housing instability. There are several situations that would demonstrate housing instability, not just homelessness. According to King (2018), it can include, “missing rent or mortgage payments, doubling-up or overcrowding, moving more than once per year, having been evicted, or being homeless” (p. 2). A child experiencing any of these living situations may have

difficulty accessing resources, space, or adult support at home to complete homework, read a book, or get enough quality sleep to support their development. This may also affect a child's sense of safety as lack of a stable home may introduce unsafe environments or situations. It may also create disruptions in routines, causing a child to experience anxiety (Burlison & Thoron, 2014). Housing instability can negatively impact the physical and mental health of adults and children in the family, as well as their ability to access employment or education (King, 2018).

Homelessness increases the risk for student challenges in the areas of social, emotional, behavioral, and academic performance. Homeless students are more likely to struggle with attendance and 75% will test below grade level in the area of reading (Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008). Homelessness and housing instability are often linked with food insecurity. Families who have experienced homelessness are more likely to have food insecurity (King, 2018). As discussed earlier, food insecurity can greatly impact student achievement, but compounded with homelessness, it is only more difficult to improve a student's achievement.

Community violence. Violence in a neighborhood can negatively affect the children and families living there. Children living in a neighborhood with a higher incidence of violence are more likely to be exposed to violence by witnessing violence against others, or being victims of violence themselves (Prince & Howard, 2002). There is greater incidence of violence in low socioeconomic status neighborhoods, therefore often impacting that neighborhood school negatively. The children who attend that neighborhood school who have witnessed or experienced violence are more likely to not feel safe at school, underperform, and exhibit aggressive behavior. (Ruiz et al., 2018). The child's aggressive behavior is then bringing violence into the school walls and in turn causing their classmates and school staff to witness or experience violence and feel unsafe in their classroom, school, or workplace.

Importance of Community

Children live in several communities simultaneously that have the power to positively or negatively impact their wellbeing and achievement. A child is typically a member of a cultural community that can be based on race, ethnicity, language, religion, or way of living, a neighborhood community where a child lives, and a school community where a child learns. These various types of communities “can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents’ skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work” (Epstein, 2010, p. 81-82). These connections and supports from communities can address all of the areas of need in Maslow’s hierarchy from connecting to resources to address physiological needs, provide afterschool programming that addresses safety and self-actualization needs, building family connections that address esteem and belonging and love needs. When all the communities in a child’s life work together to deliver a common message, children can feel more loved and supported by the caring adults in their lives, allowing them to have a greater likelihood of school success (Epstein, 2010).

Cultural. A child’s cultural background is an integral part of their identity and self-esteem and can be an important factor in how they interact with others and learn. Students who exhibit behaviors, language, and dress that is different from the dominant white culture that many educators were raised in, often struggle to succeed (Khalifa, 2010). Educators need to honor and celebrate the cultural backgrounds that children come from in their instruction in order to increase learning and engagement in their classrooms. “Culturally responsive pedagogy incorporates student’s home culture into the learning process” (Wiggan & Watson, 2016, p. 770). Population predictions show that minority students and students multi-racial students is

increasing to the point of eventually exceeding white students. Although the students being served in our schools are becoming increasingly diverse, the curricula in our schools remains not (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). It is important that educators become more inclusive of children from diverse cultures that influence their identity as well as teach content that reflects all perspectives of history and culture through culturally responsive teaching.

Neighborhood. The neighborhood community that a child grows up in can greatly impact them and their family in a positive or negative way. Neighborhoods with organizations or religious institutions that are part of neighborhoods are able to network and connect resources to families in need (Bryk, 2010; Cohen-Vogel, Goldring, & Smrekar, 2010). This can allow for families to build a support network that they may not have with in their family as well as connect to resources that meet their basic needs. However, “the quality of education available to children has become increasingly dependent on the social and economic demographics of neighborhoods in which the children live” (Ruiz, McMahon, & Jason, 2018 p. 296). Lower income neighborhoods are often less connected as a community, have higher incidents of violence and/or crime, which in turn often results in lower academic performance by students living there (Ruiz, McMahon, & Jason, 2018). This often translates into higher performing schools represented in wealthier neighborhoods and lower performing schools in poorer neighborhoods. Improvement of the social network with in a neighborhood can provide positive change for families, children, and schools in that neighborhood.

School. The community and climate within a school is one of the few pieces of a child’s life that are within the control of school and district leadership. “A strongly positive school climate has been shown to be predictive of academic success, violence prevention, healthy child development, and teacher retention” (Ruiz et al., 2018, p. 298-299). Staff retention is crucial in

commitment and sustainability of a positive school climate when working with high density of need student populations. Staff quality is impacted by professional development, building trust, and teamwork capacities- all of which enable educators to tackle challenges. (Bryk, 2010).

Unfortunately, transient staffing can create additional challenges to creating a team mentality, building upon professional development background from past years, trust that is not yet grown between strangers, and constant reteaching of staff, instructional, and student norms. It can also pose a challenge or delay to building trust and community with staff, students, and families each year. These relationships and trust are paramount to improving learning outcomes in schools serving students with a high density of need (Bryk, 2010).

In an attempt to foster stronger school connections to better address family and neighborhood needs, some schools are turning into community schools. A community school is “a place where programs and services for students, parents, and others are offered before, during, and after the regular school day” (Epstein, 2010, p.83). Often a concern with such a large service is the cost, staffing, and coordination. However, “the goal is to take some of the burden for rearing and nourishing children off of the school system (Dryfoos, 2002, p. 396), not add more. This can be achieved by connecting the school community with the surrounding neighborhood community as well as outside agencies that are already attempting to provide these services to the school’s families (Walker & Hackmann, 1999). Developing these partnerships with the school building as the hub for all that is needed by families can be impactful on student achievement and wellbeing.

This can look different depending on the unique needs at each building, but often includes programs addressing food assistance, parenting skills, connecting to outside resources, employment skills, health services, and childcare through after or before school programming

(Dryfoos, 2002; Walker & Hackmann, 1999; Cohen-Vogel et al., 2010). The burden of staffing, providing, and funding these services is not on the district or school itself. Often outside agencies are invited into the school or housed in one central location in the building such as an extra classroom, or resource room. One example of such support that Dryfoos (2002) gives, is of a local college or university. University staff and students could provide staffing and planning of activities or instruction for programming that better the lives of the school's students and their families, while alleviating the potential cost of extra staffing needed to sustain a community school.

Importance of Connecting Families to Resources

Families experiencing gaps in meeting basic needs have options for connecting to community resources, but may not know where to start or that such resources exist. Teachers often either notice an area of need, or are confided in by a student's family about struggles, and may attempt to assist families in where to find resources to meet their needs. However, this work cannot be done by one person in a school (Burleson & Thoron, 2014; Epstein, 2010; Sitler, 2009). Instead schools working to serve a population with a high density of need may develop and maintain an Action Team involving a school's administrator, teachers, parents, community members, and counselor in building and sustaining relationships and partnerships to overlap the communities that are impacting in a child's life (Epstein, 2010). One result of the Action Team is that they can then identify and organize events or systems in which families can be connected to what they need. Such a team would alleviate the work load of connecting several families from classroom teachers and other school staff.

Impact of current students. It is important to connect families to resources in order to improve the learning and development of current students (Epstein, 2010). "School success is a

strong predictor of future education, employment, and earning potential, early discrepancies in academic achievement are likely to have long-term consequences for the future trajectory of individual students” (Ruiz et al., 2018 p. 297). Thus, emphasizing how important it is for educators to aid students in meeting their basic needs in order to improve children in need’s ability to function and thrive in their educational career (Harper et al., 2003). Connecting families to resources they need can also help improve attendance. Improving student attendance can result in stronger family and community relationships resulting in a better sense of safety in the school culture (Bryk, 2010).

Impact of future students. Connecting families to the resources and programs they need will ensure that infants and toddlers have their basic needs met, impacting their development and growth. For instance, let’s examine the impact of the basic need of food. The negative impact of chronic hunger and malnutrition on a child’s physical and cognitive development can be avoided if a family has access and utilizes programs that provide means to attain healthy food (Prince & Howard, 2002, Cook & Jeng, 2009). A mother who has access to nutritious food while pregnant can positively impact her baby’s birth weight and lower the risk for developmental concerns (Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017). Healthy brains and bodies give these children who will enter preschool and elementary buildings in the future a better chance at reaching their full academic potential.

Family involvement. Involving families in their child’s education and school community can greatly impact student achievement currently as well as in their future (Epstein, 2010; McDonald, Miller, & Sandler, 2015). Schools need to also strive to support parents in supporting their child’s learning. Involving families in a child’s education can increase communication, positively impact parent and child’s attitudes towards school, build relationships

and trust between the parent and the school, and improve caregiver confidence in supporting their child's education and development (Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008; Cohen-Vogel et al., 2010). However, there can be challenges to getting families to participate in school activities and become involved in their child's education. Participation in school activities is less likely from families who are low income, single parents, or a minority potentially as a result from work schedules and transportation challenges (McDonald et al., 2015). If increased family involvement is desired, it is important to connect families to resources that can alleviate these barriers to being active partners in their child's school community.

The Question

The literature discussed demonstrates the importance of basic needs being met for not only students, but their families as well. The needs of a caregiver being met can result in improved home life and relationships for a child, improving their learning outcomes. A child's needs being met can improve their developmental ability to learn as well as their ability to focus and their want to learn, improving their learning outcomes. A child and their families being supported by the various communities a child grows in can provide opportunities that result in improving their learning outcomes. The question now is: how can an urban elementary school impact student learning outcomes by addressing basic needs unmet for children and their families?

Analysis

Basic needs must be met before we can begin working on increasing student achievement in our building. Unmet basic needs can negatively affect a child's development, especially at an early age when development of the brain and body are occurring. This can result in consequences lasting for the rest of the child's life. Family stressors outside of school can also greatly impact a child's development, learning and wellbeing (Duncan et al., 2014; Perez-Escamilla, & Pinheiro de Toledo Vianna, 2012; Cook & Jeng, 2009; Prince & Howard, 2002; Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017). Community is an important component in a school community. Connecting families to resources to meet these basic needs can positively impact the current students, future students, their families, and in turn, the school neighborhood.

The communities that child lives in are of great importance and influence in their development and academic success. A child's school, neighborhood, and cultural background can impact their social capital and in turn their learning potential (Epstein, 2010; Cohen-Vogel et al., 2010). Often these communities exist separately in a child's life. There is great importance for opportunity for all three of these communities to instead merge in a child's life with common messages. When all of these communities are able to communicate and join together, the healthy development of a child can increase (Wiggan & Watson, 2016).

Neighborhood community violence does not merely stay kept at bay at the school threshold. A child who witnesses or experiences violence will often act aggressively (Ruiz et al., 2018), thus bringing the violence into the school building. The unpredictability of their behavior in the classroom can also negatively impact their peer's routine and stress levels creating conditions where their basic need of safety is not being met (Maslow, 1943; Burlison & Thoron,

2014). This impacts not only the child's achievement, but also the sense of safety of their peers and caring adults in their proximity.

Connecting families to resources is an important strategy for meeting a child and their family's basic needs. Although partnerships between families, community organizations and school personnel can be challenging, it is important to work together as a team. Building relationships and trust between all three groups of caring adults is key. These groups of caring adults working together can positively impact student well-being and academic achievement. When families are connected to the resources they need, barriers to their involvement can be broken down, resulting in drastically improved family involvement in the school community. (McDonald et al., 2015).

We need to somehow help our students before they are our students. Reaching future students by helping their families when they are toddlers, infants, or before they are even born. "The most important gratifications come in the first two years of life. That is to say, people who have been made secure and strong in the earliest years, tend to remain secure and strong thereafter in the face of whatever threatens" (Maslow, 1943, p. 387). If not, children entering our doors having already experienced 3-4 years of chronic hunger, or other unmet needs will be ill prepared to learn and succeed (Dryfoos, 2002; Cook & Jeng, 2009). Meeting the family's basic needs will result in better early development, which will result in improved school readiness, which will result in improved student achievement.

Application

Prescott Elementary is one of thirteen elementary schools in the Dubuque Community School District in Dubuque, Iowa. The building serves around 280 PK-5 students. The demographics of students at Prescott are comprised of 41.3% White, 30.5% Black/African American, 7.7% Hispanic, 8.1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 12.4% Multi-Racial. Ten percent of the students are English Language Learners, 26.6% of the students are entitled for special education. Of the students at Prescott, 20.7% are chronically absent, missing 10% or more of the school year (Iowa Department of Education, 2018).

Prescott is located in the downtown area and is a designated Title I school. In 2018, 36.9% of the students in the district qualified for free and reduced lunch, while 62.5% of the students at Prescott qualified for free and reduced lunch (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). In April 2019, 44.4% of the students in the district qualified for free and reduced lunch, while 91.2% of the students at Prescott qualified for free and reduced lunch. Free and reduced lunch qualifications are based on family income and is therefore reflective of the socioeconomic status of student households. The numbers discussed earlier demonstrate an increasing disproportionate representation of low income and high density of need in one building.

Each year Prescott Elementary has a back to school ice cream social to build community and welcome our families back before school starts. This is an opportunity for this event to be further utilized by adding a resource fair portion to it. A resource fair would consist of several tables or booths of community resources and programs that could inform and connect families to things they need. Having a variety of resources available in a neutral and familiar location would allow families to potentially feel more comfortable learning in a casual and informal setting what supports are available. The stigma of asking for help could potentially be lessened

as they see others around them accessing those supports for themselves, those in their neighborhood, or their extended family. Families receiving supports to meet their needs such as food, shelter, clothing, safety, or health would directly impact present and future students of Prescott Elementary, which in turn could impact current student learning outcomes as well as incoming preschoolers and kindergarteners before they set foot into a classroom.

Identifying Needs

After analyzing the areas of need and barriers for our students to fully access their education at school, I met with the Prescott Community Organization (PCO) to propose adding a resource fair element to the ice cream social. Our PCO consists of families, staff, and our principal and is the group who organizes the ice cream social each year. I spoke about the high density of need and the amazing impact the on-site food pantry had on so many families this school year, but there is more than just hunger affecting the students in our building. After a discussion about the areas of needs, a preliminary list of possible organizations and resources to invite was made. Areas such as mental health, childcare, health care, food, attendance, and community representatives such as police, fire, and a translator for our Marshallese population were also discussed.

Due to the preliminary list's large size, assistance in pairing it down was needed. I consulted with the building's Student Services team members asking for their top five out of the list. The responses had a lot of overlap with many of the same resources named on everyone's top five. Many of the team members based their choices on the organizations they most frequently attempt to connect families to throughout the school year. Through this prioritizing of organizations resources, we were able to focus in on seven organizations encompassing a variety of services and resources.

Contacting Organizations

The chosen organizations were contacted by email and phone to invite hosting a booth at the event (See Appendix A for more information about the initial contact through email). Information about the event as well as areas of need we were looking to provide access to our families was given, and organizations were able to determine if they were able to serve one or multiple areas. As responses were given for accepting or declining, a table was kept with contact information, response, booth needs, needs addressing, and programs/resources represented (See Appendix B for more information about the table). Communication with the custodial staff and principal occurred as organizations responded. Organizations attending were updated on the event on the school's internal Google calendar to assist in the communication.

Of the organizations contacted, many were excited to attend and provide information and resources to our families. More information about each attending organization is included later. Although determined by the Student Services team as an area of need for our families, after school childcare will not be represented in this resource fair. Three after school programming organizations were contacted in attempts for representation of this area of need. Of the organizations contacted, one declined due to conflict of schedule and two did not return calls or emails.

Crescent Community Health Center. Crescent is a local health clinic that provides health and dental care for both insured and uninsured patients. Uninsured patients are able to pay according to a sliding fee scale. What one pays is on the sliding fee scale is determined by their income and size of family. Programs and resources Crescent's booth will have are health care, dental care, and the Dubuque Pacific Islander Health Project. The Dubuque Pacific Islander Health Project consists of a team of a health worker, nurse, and social worker that aids

in removing barriers for Compact of Free Association migrants in accessing healthcare, medicine, housing, and translation (Crescent Community Health Clinic, n.d.).

Hillcrest Family Services. Hillcrest is a local non-profit organization that provides a variety of programs for the community for children, adults, and families. The programs have a focus on human services in hopes of improving the lives of members in the community. Hillcrest's programs include an adolescent residential treatment program, homelessness prevention, assisting with adoptions, professional health clinic, tobacco prevention program, mental health counseling and treatment, and mentoring youth. Programs and resources Hillcrest's booth will have are Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Mental Health, Health Clinic, Integrated Health Home (IHH) program. The Integrated Health Home program assists families in coordinating health care providers, treatment of mental illness, provides referrals for other services, and family support services (Hillcrest Family Services, n.d.).

Visiting Nursing Association. The Visiting Nursing Association (VNA) is a subsidiary of Unity Point Health- Finley Hospital. While there are other locations serving many communities in Northeast Iowa, the Dubuque County location was accessed for the event. The Visiting Nursing Association provides services and resources to children, adults, and families. Programs for children and families include immunization clinics, oral health services, Hawk-I health care, preventative protective home visits, lead poisoning prevention, care coordination and management, and 1st Five Healthy Development. Programs and resources the Visiting Nursing Association's booth will have are immunizations, oral health, and child health (Unity Point Health, n.d.).

Child Health Specialty Clinic. Child Health Specialty Clinic provides many programs and services to support children with special health care needs. While the clinics are overseen by

the University of Iowa Health Care, clinics are community based and spread throughout the state of Iowa. One of the clinics is located in Dubuque, Iowa. The programs they offer address areas such as developmental screening and identification, supports for children with behavioral and mental health needs, trainings for caregivers, health and disability waivers, treatment services, peer support for serious mental illness, nutrition, and autism diagnosis and supports. Programs and resources Child Health Specialty Clinic's booth will have are the Health and Disability Waiver, Iowa Pediatric Mental Health Collaborative, Pediatric Integrated Health, Regional Autism Assistance Program (Child Health Specialty Clinics, n.d.).

Prescott Elementary. Prescott Elementary is a school serving students in preschool through fifth grade. Programs and resources Prescott Elementary's booth will have are school registration, attendance, the school food bank. Three office staff will be available during the event to assist families with completing online registration inside the building's computer lab. The School Connections Liaison and School Counselor will be available to assist families in signing up for the school food bank and with any questions they may have for the upcoming school year. These two staff will also be able to utilize previously formed relationships to guide families to the organizations present at the event. They would also be resources for connecting families to any organizations or resources not present that would assist in meeting their needs.

Collaboration with PCO and Principal

Collaboration between the PCO members working on the event, school principal, and this researcher was key to the success in planning this event. Two weeks before the event, a meeting with the PCO members working on the event, school principal, and myself was held to discuss final details and check in on where everyone was at on acquiring materials and ideas for activities. The list of organizations attending the event was shared with the PCO members. It

was determined to add a booth for the PCO to attempt to build awareness of the organization and involve more Prescott families and community members. Tables and chairs needed for each station were determined as well as who would be bringing materials for each activity.

Annually at the Ice Cream Social, students, families, and staff participate in creating a large collaborative art project to be displayed in the building for the entirety of the school year. The goals behind this project are to build the school community, connections for families with other school families, strengthen school and family relationships, and displaying it in the building in hopes of reminding students of positive school experience with their families. The PCO members proposed an idea for the collaborative art project. Students, their families and staff members will decorate an outline of a feather on paper. They will then cut out their feather and turn it into the adult leading the activity. Later the feathers will be displayed together to create wings with a gap for a child to stand in front of them to create the illusion that they have wings. The phrase, "But what is if you fly?" will be displayed above. A goal was set to have this displayed in time for the school's open house in order to allow opportunity for families and students to see their completed project and take pictures with it.

Remaining tasks and materials needed were discussed, recorded and divided between the four of us. Emails to all staff were sent out asking to borrow water jugs and a class set of scissors. Supplies for face painting, a banner for advertising, and balloon animal balloons were purchased shortly after the meeting. The flavor of ice cream and toppings were determined to be Neapolitan ice cream and chocolate syrup to aid in simplicity and speed of service. Freeze pops were discussed as a back-up for if a larger than anticipated attendance occurred as well as for those with dietary restrictions. Plans to create the banner for the playground fence were made with another staff member and myself.

Advertising to the School Community

For this event to be successful, families need to be invited and informed of the details. Multiple attempts in a variety of methods were made in hopes of reaching all Prescott families. A flyer (See Appendix C for the flyer) was also created to aid in advertising of the event. The creation of the flyer was carefully considered, with consideration for limited reading levels of some families the flyer was minimalized to shorter phrases and simple vocabulary. For families where English may not be a strength, key words were bolded to aid in translation attempts and clear, simple information. This flyer was sent out with each child's back to school packet from the office. A total of 216 flyers were mailed out with packets. Door to door passing out of flyers were discussed as an option, but decided not to do this route due to lack of manpower as well as scheduling.

Another colorful event flyer (See Appendix D for the colorful flyer) was created for electronic advertising use such as Facebook, Seesaw, and emails. An event was created on Facebook, which was then shared on the school Facebook page. In this event, the responses were 16 going, 13 interested, and 26 invited. On the Prescott Facebook page, a post sharing the colorful flyer for the event received 5 reactions, and 2 shares. Seesaw was also utilized to reach families. Classroom teachers sent out announcements regarding the Ice Cream Social and Resource Fair through either a class Facebook group, or through family messaging on Seesaw.

The Monday of the week of the event, an automated-email reminder was sent out to all Prescott Elementary families. The automated system emails all email addresses associated with families and staff of the designated school building. The message sent out consisted of the colorful event flyer that provided all important information regarding the event, inviting families and staff to attend. The automated-email system emailed 305 email addresses of Prescott family

members and staff. Out of the 305, there were 291 emails successfully delivered. This can be due to incorrect email addresses or outdated information from families.

A three feet by ten feet vinyl banner (See Appendix E for a photograph of the banner) was created by myself and another teacher. With the goal of creating something that could be reused from year to year, homemade vinyl letters were created using a die-cutting machine for crafting. Careful consideration was given towards sizing and colors of letters with emphasis given to key phrases to both catch attention and convey important information. It was then hung on the playground fence facing the busy street where there is also often a lot of foot traffic. One-inch L shaped wind slits were cut into the banner throughout to allow for stronger gusts of wind to pass through and hopefully not rip the banner.

A few days before the event, a robo-call reminder was sent out to all Prescott Elementary families. The automated system calls all phone numbers associated with families and staff of the designated school building. It then plays a pre-recorded message from the principal detailing the event, times, and encouragement to attend with the whole family. If not answered, the automated system leaves a voicemail with the same message. The robo-call system called 382 phones of Prescott family members and staff. Out of the 382, there were 350 messages successfully delivered. This can be due to incorrect information, hang ups, or phones blocking the system. Another robo call was made out to families thirty minutes before the event.

Week of Event

An email was sent to the building's custodial staff regarding the event set up. The email detailed the final count of tables and chairs needed per booth or activity. The arrangement of tables as a horseshoe shape and which way to face it was explained. The time to have the tables and chairs set-up finished was determined to be twenty minutes prior to the event start time.

This allowed time for the organizations to set up their booths as well as the PCO and staff volunteers to set up the activities. The school principal was also included in this email to be aware of the set-up plans and have any information needed should questions suddenly arise.

The day before the event, individual emails were sent to each organization reminding and reinforcing event information regarding date, time, and location. Information about how many tables and chairs would be designated for their booth was also shared. The email also explained that the weather was predicted to be sunny and warm, and that they were welcome to bring a canopy tent to provide shade for their booth. It was shared that the tables and chairs for each booth would be ready for them to set up their materials by twenty minutes prior to the event start time. My contact information was again shared with them in case of any questions or concerns leading up to the event.

Materials for the event were being gathered by many different people. Materials were brought in by staff, PCO, and community members over a period of time leading up to the event. Due to this, there was a need to keep track of the materials in one area. However, the building was in use for summer programming as well as being deep cleaned by custodial staff, limiting the areas such items could be stored. It was determined that the principal's office was the best area for the storage of items.

Event

Prescott's Ice Cream Social and Resource Fair began with coordination of set-up with the custodial staff. Tables and chairs were set up outside on the blacktop for each organization in accordance with their requests. The tables were set up in a horseshoe arrangement with the open area facing the gate where families would enter. A discussion regarding the locking playground doors and access to restrooms during the event occurred resulting in a plan of action that met the

individual building needs. Materials for activities and the food table were collected on a table and in a freezer near the playground doors. An informal inventory of the materials was done to determine what else needed to be gathered.

Shortly before the event, pieces of paper with organization names or activities written on them were taped to tables to designate where organizations and activities would be located. It was decided to place resource tables next to activities as much as possible to encourage interaction from families and children. A canopy tent was put up to provide shade for the ice cream table. Stations were also set up for face painting, balloon animals, music, collaborative art project, and ice cream and water. Materials for each station were also set out on designated tables and prepped for use.

As families began to arrive, they were greeted by staff members at the registration table and tallied onto the recording sheet (See Appendix F for the recording sheet). Families and children were then able to self-select booths or stations they wished to attend, as well as play on the playground equipment and connect with the school community. Pictures of activities and families as they were participating were taken by a staff member. During the event, 20 families were able to complete electronic registration forms during the event with the assistance of the three office staff available. Due to the event being well attended, all of the ice cream was used as well as most of the freeze pops that were on hand as a back-up to the ice cream

In conversations with staff and volunteers after the event, many enthusiastically commented on the attendance and resources available to families. The multiple modes of communication to families aided in a significantly larger turn out than the 2018 Ice Cream Social. The event's 2019 attendance consisted of roughly 59 families and 125 children (under

the age of 18). It was difficult to determine the most attended resource as there was such a large crowd. All booths and activities appeared to be very well attended.

An unanticipated effect of the event were incidental conversations and questions from current and future families. Topics such as the need to register each year, how to complete registration, how to find out who their child's classroom teacher will be, concerns with their child's performance, and access to speech services before a child was preschool age were discussed with various school staff. Due to this event, families were able to not only communicate with staff about their concerns or questions, but also gain access to a plan of action, information, or resources available before the start of the school year. These types of conversations align with the goals of the event to meet the needs of current and future Prescott families and build relationships between families, students, and school staff. These small but impactful positive interactions with school staff on school grounds are equally important in the future success of Prescott students.

Post Event

In the days after such a large event, it is important to follow up and thank those involved in its success. First, a post containing the pictures taken during the event and a message thanking all the families and volunteers for attending was created that evening by the school principal. A few days later, emails were sent to each organization thanking them for their participation and support to make the event a success. Feedback was also welcomed in hopes of making this a continued part of the annual Ice Cream Social event. Finally, thank you cards were given to all staff involved in the planning and volunteering of the event activities. Without all of these people coming together, this event would not have been possible.

Conclusion

Research has shown there are factors outside the classroom walls that impact student learning. These negative experiences and situations impact not only current students, but children who are toddlers and younger who will become future students of any given school building. This cannot be ignored if educators hope to improve student learning and outcomes on state mandated testing. In order to change the trajectory of a child's learning, we must first change the trajectory of they and their family's well-being. Basic needs of students and their families must be improved, and schools can assist with this.

Through the use of the Ice Cream Social, we were able to add a resource fair element with community resources addressing the basic needs of our students and their families. Advertising in several different modes was one portion of the work that was key to the success or failure of this endeavor. The attendance level of families in the community at such an event can determine the potential level of impact on families and as a result, students. Due to advertisement producing successful attendance at the event, organizations were able to build relationships with families and connect those in need with programs or resources they would benefit from. School staff were also able to provide positive interactions and experiences for students and their families that can build relationships and a sense of community to further their ability to successfully teach the students in their care.

After the completion of this event, it was determined that a resource fair in conjunction with the ice cream social needs to continue annually. Expanding the event to include additional resources and organizations will be considered. Logistical elements will need to be adjusted such as allowing more space between booths, shaded areas for attendees, a prepared playlist of songs, and forming a committee or designated list of volunteers to delegate tasks. A digital

notebook was created to store information from this research in order to allow others to replicate and build upon this work for upcoming years. This notebook and the event will need to be revisited before the conclusion of the school year in order to allow for ample time for contacts and advertisement that does not impose on staff's summer break or place additional work-load on the school principal.

Outside of this one school event, there are other options for expanding this work that could be considered. Creating an action team for the building could better guide partnerships and build relationships between school, family, and communities. This action team should consist of not only specialized positions within the school, but also teachers, paraprofessionals, guardians, and community members. The action team would be able to determine other ways throughout the school year to connect families to what they need. Becoming a full service or community school would be another way to expand this work to impact a larger portion of the school and neighborhood community. However, this would be a much larger scale project with funding, resources, and staffing needed to coordinate with the district as well as community organizations.

This work was important and beneficial for the students, families, and staff of Prescott Elementary. Families were able to connect with each other, community resources, and school staff in a positive and relaxed atmosphere. Students were able to have a positive experience with the caring adults in their lives and build the sense of safety at their place of learning. It is hoped that this school improvement project also will positively impact the staff of Prescott Elementary as well as the learning outcomes of the students in the upcoming school year and beyond. This one event is not enough in isolation, and this work needs to be continued if student learning outcomes are expected to improve.

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Appendix A

Good Afternoon,

My name is Nicole Gossling and I am a teacher at Prescott Elementary. Our school is having its annual ice cream social and we are looking to add a resource fair to this event. We would like to invite you to have a booth at our event providing information about your programs and services for our families. We are looking to provide access and information for our families, new and returning, to resources frequently needed to meet their basic needs such as: health care, dental care, mental health care, insurance or waiver information, immunizations, developmental concerns, food, child care, and family support systems.

Prescott's Ice Cream Social and Resource Fair

August 8th (Thursday)

5:00-7:00pm

Prescott Playground (rain backup is indoors)

If someone from your organization is able to attend and run a booth, please contact me to confirm and with any questions or needs. We can provide tables and chairs and access to electricity or water if needed. If any of your services are able to be provided or scheduled with families at this event, or you have an interactive activity for families/students, that would be an added bonus.

Thank you for your consideration,

Nicole Gossling

Appendix C

PRESCOTT'S ICE CREAM SOCIAL



To kick off the new school year, the Prescott PCO would like to invite Prescott PK-5 families come enjoy some free **ice cream**, **face painting**, and **fun** with your Prescott community! Prescott staff will also be available to assist with **online registration**.

August 8, 5:00-7:00 pm

At the Prescott Playground

Thank you to Child Health Specialty Clinic, Crescent Community Health Center, Hillcrest Family Services, Girl Scouts, Prescott Elementary and the Visiting Nurses Association for having **booths with program information!**

*****If there is inclement weather, the event will be held indoors, in the cafeteria.*****

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Appendix D

PRESCOTT'S ICE CREAM SOCIAL

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Appendix E



Appendix F

| Event Total | |
|-------------|--------------|
| Families | All Children |
| | |
| Total: | Total: |