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What Are Factors of an Effective Parent and Family Involvement Program Within High School?

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ABSTRACT

According to the literature, parents or guardians of high school students will participate within the high school—though their participation is dependent on many factors. Parents with a higher social capital tend to be the most involved, while parents with lower social capital tend to be less involved. In other words, generally parents or guardians with high social capital would be much more likely to be involved in their child's school, whereas parents with low social capital would not be involved in their child's school at all (Goodwin, Rothon, Stansfeld, 2012). In this study, the researcher formulated and analyzed the following question: *What are factors of an effective parent and family involvement program within the high school?* By identifying which factors truly make an impact on parental involvement, the researcher will make suggestions for improving preexisting programs. She conducted a needs assessment survey in order to help Abilene High School improve its level of parental involvement. According to the results of the survey, social capital nor ethnicity have little to no effect on involvement. The research also presented factors of a successful involvement program.

What Are Factors of an Effective Parent and Family Involvement Program Within High

School?

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

In Social Work

By

Nicole Walsh

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement in school is as old as American education itself (Rury, 2002). In the 1990s and throughout the next decade, researchers placed increased attention on parental involvement to establish a link to academic success (Epstein, 1996). Parental involvement is crucial, even in today's high schools. Researchers have conducted studies to support the idea that if parents are involved, the child will have more academic and social success throughout school, as well as be more likely to graduate and go on to college. Many schools believe in a triangle effect in which parents, staff, and students occupy a point of the triangle (Jackson & Cooper, 1992). When one side of the triangle begins to fail, the school environment begins to stop working according to its design. A perfect example of a good triangle effect is in elementary schools where parents volunteer for class parties and field trips, among other school-related functions. Parents are an integral part of the elementary experience. Unfortunately, as children begin to grow up, the triangle begins to fall apart and parental involvement begins to diminish. Bloomstran's study (2002) found that:

> Parents of high school students most often see the final product of their children's
> work: They watch the fall play, chaperone the Homecoming dance, or hear about
> the successful blood drive. They are usually less often involved in the creation of
> projects. Getting parents involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation

of a project can create a special bond between parents and their children, allowing parents to see the entire process rather than just the final result. (p. 34)

According to research, a school's promotion of parent participation is vital from germination to completion. Bloomstran (2002) continues, arguing, "Parents who actively support their adolescents' high school education and academic skill development provide a foundation that frames the adolescents' academic motivation and success as he or she pursues a collegiate education" (p. 34). Teens spend such a large amount of each day in school; parental involvement can be crucial to a teen's home life. Before schools can grow and help involve parents in school-related programs, education administrators must meet the needs of the parents in order to ensure their involvement. According to Harris and Goodall, "There are many advantages associated with parental involvement in education. Students with actively involved parents are, by and large, more engaged in the classroom, more likely to enroll in advanced courses, and less likely to drop out" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mo & Singh, 2008; Rumberger, 1995, as cited in Harris & Goodall, 2008 p.278). In addition to the aforementioned literature, there is research that supports parental involvement correlated with higher grade point averages. This research suggests that the more the parent engages with their child, the higher likelihood he or she will be successful in school (Harris & Goodall, 2008). The more involved a parent might be with there child's academics the higher the grade point average tends to be because of the involvement.

Agencies, such as Communities in Schools of the Big Country, located in Abilene, Texas, fight to help their students achieve their maximum potential by connecting them with the resources and help they may need. Communities in Schools

(CIS) assists at-risk youth throughout their journey to graduation. CIS focuses mainly on anti-retention but has many other beneficial purposes, such as college and career readiness, social service needs, behavioral interventions, enrichment, life skills, and family engagement. The agency aids many schools across Abilene. CIS's mission is to integrate their services and have personal relationships with each of their students ("About Us," n.d.). CIS lists family engagement as a beneficial purpose on their website, yet it is one of the largest obstacles CIS's coordinators deal with in relation to their students' parents. The following literature review will explore the factors of an effective parent and family involvement program within the high school. It will also review and introduce the many flaws with schools and their attempts at engaging parents, as well as list examples of successful programs and what steps these programs took to increase engagement. The researcher found much of the literature using the EbscoHost site and the social work dissertation search engine. Some key terms or phrases she used to search for this literature were adolescence, parental involvement programs, at risk youth, academic success and parental involvement, student success, and organizing parental involvement.

Conceptual Framework

The idea of "*tabula rasa*," theorized by John Locke in 1690, means everyone is born as a "blank slate." This is a strong component in determining whether parents are involved in teaching their children to succeed academically. Based upon "*tabula rasa*," children are not born with hereditary traits, such as performing well in school; instead, those traits are learned. Researchers see this theory demonstrated in the nurture portion of the nature vs. nurture argument. School itself is not "natural"; school is not something humans biologically made. Instead, school is something that society created. Since school

is not something naturally created, it is not something humans are biologically wired to succeed in. Instead, children must have proper nurturing. According to Webster's dictionary, the definition of *nurture* is "to support and encourage, as during the period of training or development." Parents who are involved in their child's academic careers exemplify support and encouragement during an important period of growth and development. Some may argue that people are naturally curious, making them natural learners. The counter-argument would be that even though human beings may be naturally curious, they are not necessarily naturally eager to learn what the school system is teaching. Parents are there to guide their children in a direction that is positive and productive. In the "blank slate" or "nurture" view, parents who nurture their child and involve themselves with their child's schooling should see increased academic success from their children than parents who are not involved.

The question remains: "What are factors of an effective parent and family involvement program within the high school?" Moreover, what are some barriers that might affect parents' involvement in their child's education? In the following literature review, there is information provided from many different sources about successful and non-successful programs, parent motivation, and barriers to parental involvement.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Capital

Social capital consists of networks and connections (Turney & Kao, 2009). In other words, the higher number of connections to organizations and community based groups, the higher the social capital. According to research, social capital relates to parental involvement in many ways. For instance, parents who become involved gain social control; they get to know other parents, teachers, and administrators who may then discuss their child's performance. Also, involved parents tend to be better connected to information about their children, such as a failing grade, which helps the parent intervene much quicker (Domina, 2005). Mostly, researchers conceptualize parental involvement in their child's schooling as a form of social capital (Lee, 1993; McNeal, 1999; Yan & Lin, 2005). According to one article**,** "This implies that promoting family social support and building community social capital in more deprived communities may be one way in which educational outcomes could be improved" (Goodwin, Rothon, & Stansfeld, 2012 p. 698). In other words, social capital may play a large role in students' academic success, specifically in communities that have fewer resources.

The issue schools tend to face is that a parent with a lack of outside social capital tends to not understand how social capital works within the school system. This connection means that if the family has low social capital, the children tend to be less successful in school and the parents less involved. Some literature believes "social capital

is about relationships" (Goodwin et al., 2012), so for families that may be refugees, all of their relationships have been left behind. On the other hand, "strong relationships can have a number of potential negative outcomes as well as positive ones. Gang membership may often lead to high 'bonding' social capital" (Goodwin et al., 2012 p. 701).

Social capital is developed in many ways, starting with the family: "High levels of social capital in the form of the physical presence of parents and a high level of attention to their children was seen as the only way in which parents could transmit their human capital to their children" (Goodwin, Rothon, & Stansfeld, 2012). In addition, according to Goodwin, Rothon, and Stansfeld (2012), social capital helps families create a strong parental network. Parental networks have a positive impact on a child's education. If the parents know each other well, they are more likely to discuss their child's negative behavior, such as lying or truancy, and are able to determine if their childr exhibits similar behavioral patterns. According to one study, the research associates social support and community "social capital" with educational achievement in adolescence (Goodwin, Rothon, Stansfeld, 2012). Thus, if a community has strong social capital, families will unite in helping their kids achieve academic success.

Programs

According to Hilderbrand (1986), "Children cannot be educated apart from their families and have a high-quality program" (p. 502). However, according to Morris and Taylor's (1998) research, because of barriers that interrupt parental involvement in the school, "parents are feeling as if they have fewer opportunities to participate in their children's school" (Morris & Taylor, 1998 p. 220). Some obstacles parents tend to face, according to Moles (1993), include limited skills and knowledge of teachers and parents,

restricted opportunities for interaction, and psychological barriers. Each of these obstacles make it more difficult for a parent to get involved in a child's education.

One of the limits when looking at parent-teacher barriers is the lack of knowledge some teachers have in collaborating with parents. School districts and administration give little to no preparation in this area. When there are limited ways of learning "how-to"— mainly how to collaborate— the process of communication becomes increasingly difficult. According to Chavkin and Williams (1988 p. 258), "only 4% of teacher-training institutions in the southwest offer courses in parent teacher relations and 15% offer part courses." The irony of these statistics is that almost all educators, principals, and teachers agree that a course should be required for undergraduate students in elementary education (Chavkin & Williams, 1988). The parent-teacher relationship is important to a child's success, and when there are flaws in this relationship, the child's education tends to suffer.

In one study, the researchers were productive in creating a support group, with initial focus on needs and concerns of parents (Benson & Martin, 2003). In this program, they avoided forcing the parents to learn about school's programs right away or even drilling parents about any failure by their children. Instead, they allowed the parents to get to know one another and ask questions. After implementing this support group, the school saw an increase in the number of parents wanting to get involved. Sometimes institutions can be foreign and uncomfortable to the parents as much as they can be to the teens. Setting up support groups like this one allows parents to feel more comfortable within the institution itself.

In addition, this support group allows other parents to realize there are many parents just like them, struggling with how to handle the tough scenarios they encounter with their teens daily. When the parents begin to feel more comfortable within the school, they gain the comfort and motivation to participate in educational parental involvement programs in order to better their teen's academic performance. There is a reoccurring theme of parents being afraid to ask for administrative help because they perceive high schools as intimidating (Jacobson, 2003).

One principal took it to an extreme, implementing the opening of a fitness center in one high school in order for parents to feel more comfortable coming in and out of the school (Jacobson, 2003). Another school even implemented a grading period for the parents' performance and level of involvement (Jacobson, 2003). These implementations made a positive impact, leading to higher parental involvement score.

Unfortunately, there is "a problem familiar to many schools in the suburbs, where parents in two-career families commute long distances to demanding jobs—and where a quiet kind of educational neglect often breeds mediocrity" (Winters & August, 2001, p. 76). This problem in schools located in the suburbs, as well as schools in lower socioeconomic areas, seemed to render parental involvement almost nonexistent. Although these parents tried to ask questions and help their children by staying involved, it was difficult because the parents had no connection to the school except the information their children relayed to them. In response to this growing issue, a program called ParentLink was created to provide answers (Winters & August, 2001, p. 76). Through a website and a voice-mail system, parents could get up-to-date information about their child's grades, homework, attendance, and even the details of that day's

lessons. One parent believes "ParentLink fosters communication" with her daughter, saying "it gives me something specific to ask her about." Another parent, after checking ParentLink, stunned her son by asking why he had not made it back to class on time after a doctor's appointment (Winters & August, 2001, p. 76).

Other programs that seem to be helpful in the promotion of parental involvement are "parent booster clubs and parent clubs designed to support athletic teams" (Winters & August, 2001, p. 76). Other methods for improving parental involvement that have been proven effective are: parent visitation/observation day, parent volunteer programs, family special events, awards assemblies, mini-curriculum fairs or school curriculum fairs, parent computer day, grandparents day, coffee with the principal, parent education workshops, summer fun information fairs, parent homework, school homework programs, written communication, parent lending library, young authors day, international fairs, read-a-thon or math-a-thons, school committees, home phone calls, parent/teacher conferences, and field trips (Winters & August 2001, p.76).

The aforementioned ideas require organization and proper planning. Parent visitation/observation day is a program that was able to increase the number of parents that decided to attend and become involved (Winters & August 2001, p. 76). Because of the numerous amounts of invitations sent to parents beforehand, this event allowed parents to sit with their children in the classroom and participate in all of the groups they may be a part of, such as reading groups and computer class.

Other successful activities schools may implement are award assemblies, mini-curriculum fairs or school curriculum fairs. Schools may hold fairs and invite parents to attend exhibitions of student work or class projects on a special day. Parent computer day

has proven effective as a day where schools invite parents to a lesson in computer use taught by their child. Parents and children learn more about online portals and grade monitoring systems available to check their child's classroom success, as well as providing an opportunity to meet other parents and bond with their child.

Chavkin (1993) proposes "multiethnic family-school-community collaboration." This program gathers the families and administration of the school with the hope that families of all ethnicities will show up to represent their population and collaborate on how to break down possible cultural barriers. This collaboration is one way to improve children's education, as well as a way of enhancing family involvement in academia (Morris and Taylor, 1998). According to Chavkin, "No single agency [or program] can provide for all the needs of all children and their families" (Morris and Taylor, 1998). Therefore, the only way collaboration can be successful is when everyone comes together, including community resources. The idea of bringing the community together helps teachers as well as administrators determine how they can support families and their children by connecting them to the community organizations they may need, especially when the needs cannot be met by the school itself.

Parent Motivation

According to extensive research, authors Benson and Martin (2003) list seven effective ways to motivate parents to become or stay involved in the school systems: one-on-one communication between parents, teachers, and others; available access for peers to call parents; representatives and volunteers; encouragement and recognition of involvement; providing a warm environment where parents feel welcome; holding one opportunity a month for parents to get comfortable within the school; and providing

parents helpful tools to help their kids while at home. These are all techniques that increased the number of parents that were involved with their child's academics. One of the main factors listed above was a parent feeling welcome. Parents who do not feel accepted tend to engage less with their child's schooling. This feeling of unacceptance was one of the more common reoccurring factors of the decision to become involved with the school. Parents are less willing to become involved when they feel unwelcome or uncomfortable.

Another organizational strategy researchers found to be successful was from the Buffalo Public School Study (Martin & Benson, 2003). This study focused on parents who felt burnt out, tired, intimidated, or turned off by the academic system. The researchers of this analysis reviewed seven different techniques at six chosen schools. The study lasted a total of seven years and found that schools that had implemented the seven steps of parental motivation retained highly successful parental involvement. The techniques consisted of focusing on student achievement, concentrating on children's extra-curricular activities, and putting on elaborate ceremonies drawing parents to the school. This ultimately led parents to the school more often. Parents found more opportunities to participate in sharing their children's accomplishments. Personalized invitations reminded parents of how much their participation and attendance would benefit their child. In addition, using the extended family to help support the child increased the number of people who became involved and interested in the child's success in the classroom. Extending frequent invitations gave parents numerous reasons to visit the school in order to familiarize themselves with the campus. Other amenities were also incorporated, including refreshments, nametags, reimbursement for cross-town

travels or babysitting, meeting in easily accessible alternative buildings, planning events at different dates and different times, providing babysitting service at the school, and many others. According to research, this seven-step approach was an effective parental involvement strategy, increasing overall involvement at the school.

Cross-Cultural Differences

Another barrier to social support and involvement within the high school is ethnic differences. Research suggests that there is a lack of ethnic minority parental involvement in teenage education, (Griffith, 1996; Ho, 2002) specifically a lack of African American parental involvement (Hayes, 2011). According to research, many efforts and programs designed to increase ethnic parental involvement have failed. One must not assume that ethnic parents are uninterested in their child's education but instead must consider all of the factors that may play an important role in this failure to increase participation. Parents of all ethnicities have obstacles, such as limited transportation, language or culture barriers, or feelings of incompetence.

In one study focusing on African Americans, six black parents did their best to dedicate their time over a four-month period, participating in education-related activities as well as helping students with school projects and homework. After the four-month period, they began to share their insight and concerns, such as the school's inability to meet ethnic minority children's needs, the staff's minimal expectations for black children, and the staff's unwillingness to test black children for learning disabilities or accelerated education programs. Instead of the school district recognizing and addressing their concerns, the parents felt silenced and criticized (Wallace, 2013). Although many are quick to assume parental involvement is due to a lack of motivation and low social

capital, the above example illustrates that institutional barriers can also lead to low ethnic minority parental involvement.

When looking directly into cultural differences, teenagers with Latino backgrounds have greatly different support and, therefore, tend to look at school in different ways. According to Syed, Azmitia, and Cooper, "the extent to which the parents can help an adolescent prepare for postsecondary admissions depends upon the extent to which they have access to information" (Syed, Azmitia, and Cooper). According to research, Latino families may not have the social capital to enable them to make any kind of decisions relating to their education, even if they value education. For example, parents may not have experience in navigating the college admissions process (Cooper, Chavira, & Mena, 2005). Most of these kids will be first-generation college students, so the world of education and, particularly, higher education, is completely foreign. Navigating the financial aid process is also daunting for Latino parents who often have no experience with the U.S. education system and are unsure of the role administrators expect them to play in their child's education. In addition, many Latino parents tend to be unfamiliar with the education system in general; they tend to face other barriers, such as uncomfortable interactions with school faculty because of their inability to communicate in English.

In contrast, parents of Asian-American adolescents are more likely than parents of Caucasian adolescents to attempt to provide resources to help their child excel in school (Coleman, 1988). Asian-American parents tend to be less involved in the day-to-day and extra-curricular activities of their child. Culturally, this independence gives immigrant youths a sense of self-obligation to get good grades rather than having their parents

pushing them to find a way to enroll in college preparatory classes (Crosnoe, 2011).

According to research, immigrant parents, depending on their ethnic descent, have vastly

different outlooks on school. For example, Latino adolescents have self-motivation to get

good grades, but due to their lack of social capital and experience with the college

process, they remain unable to understand the importance of a college education. In

comparison, the parents of Asian adolescents have the social capital but do not take the

time to attend their child's extracurricular activities, resulting in missed information the

school could provide in relation to the importance of college preparatory classes and

college education (Crosnoe, 2011).

According to Yao (1993), there are a number of ways to help Asian immigrant

parents and families. She notes, "If mutual respect and cooperation are valued, it is

essential for school personnel to learn about the local Asian community through such

activities as trips to Asian businesses and Asian festivities" (p. 150). This participation in

the Asian-American community gives school personnel an idea of the way Asian

immigrant families differ from other families; it may also provide insight into the ways in

which both children and families interact with the school. Yao also says that the school

can be successful when working with immigrant parents through the employment of

various actions:

> (1) Using the assistance of interpreters to conduct the seminars in parents'
>
> native tongue during open houses, (2) developing a school newsletter that
>
> can be translated into various languages, (3) hiring Asian parents as paid
>
> or volunteer aides at the school, and (4) encouraging immigrant parents to

participate in special events at school where they have opportunities to

share their heritage. (Yao, 1993 p. 155)

If institutions are able to implement these four tasks into the school system, research

shows that they will be successful when working with immigrant parents.

Types of Parental Involvement

Besides the programs school administrators encourage parents to attend, support

within the high school can manifest in many other forms, such as support of the child's

social development and monitoring of the child's peer support. Parents can implement

social support or parental support simply by discussing their child's school day. Other

examples of parental support include discussing educational plans, praise, and

encouragement for taking high-level courses and continuing one's education beyond high

school (Crosnoe, 2011). Also, friends can be a great source of information and support.

Friends can give the information needed to get to college. If a teen's friends are taking

college preparatory classes and applying for college, the teen may also take these same

classes as well as consider higher education. This juncture is where parental support and

involvement becomes important once again, because children tend to be friends with

others who share their ethnic backgrounds (Kandel, 1978; Way & Chen, 2000); therefore,

minority adolescents tend to not "come across" useful information about college

(Crosnoe, 2003). Students who are engaged and achievement-oriented are likely to share

that with their friends (e.g., Ryan, 2001). If parents are absent in the involvement process,

the child tends to not understand the process of competing for higher grades on their own

or enrolling in college prep classes regardless of their friendship groups. According to the

research, when parents pay close attention to their adolescent's choice of friends, the

child tends to find peers who are encouraging and able to challenge the teenager to do better. This peer support helps the teen take a step closer to continuing education. Nord and Griffin (1999) state that children with higher academic GPA's are able to be independent in school and, "in some cases, parents modify their involvement based on their child's performance and on the basis of their children's needs.

A Teacher's Role

The research has demonstrated that family or parental involvement is crucial to the student's success, with ample studies touching upon the parent's and the institution's roles as major topics of discussion. Nevertheless, when reading the numerous research studies conducted on parental involvement, there is, invariably, a section referring to the teacher's role in parental involvement. Teachers and student teachers go through college learning many fantastic skills they are able to apply to the classroom; yet they are still lacking one very important skill: how to collaborate with parents. There are no particular courses offered that help teachers learn how to work with parents and help them stay involved in their child's education. Many teachers, instead, attempt to collaborate with parents, as they would naturally, using life experiences (Morris & Taylor, 1998). Unfortunately, for the first majority of educators' lives, they were not teachers; instead, they were sons or daughters. In other words, although they learned how to react to situations as children of parents, they have never learned how to use those life experiences from a teacher's perspective when working with parents. If no one teaches a teacher how to collaborate in this role effectively, a break down in the relationship occurs. Morris and Taylor (1998) say, "Future teachers need to understand the importance of how to work with families". This collaboration is also critically important

when working with families with diverse backgrounds. Family involvement can mean different things to different people (Morris and Taylor, 1998). De Acosta (1996) states, "Family involvement practices should take into account that families, given their occupations, income, racial or ethnic background, and education, access resources and develop different dispositions toward becoming involved in their children's education" (p. 12). A teacher who successfully works with diverse families understands and accepts the different family structures and is proficient in knowing the methods they should take to improve and develop communication with the parents (Midkiff & Lawler-Prince, 1992)

Parents With Disabilities

Research conducted by Eccles and Harold (1993) has established a host of reasons parents have so much trouble engaging and being more active in their child's education and schooling. Researchers see these difficulties particularly with those parents who live in high-risk communities (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Harris and Goodall (2008) studied the effects of parents supporting a child's learning at home as opposed to becoming involved in activities at school in order to find more information on parents who may not be able to transport themselves to the school.

> Yet the studies concluded that inaccessible buildings or methods of communication and negative staff attitudes were the main obstacles to parental participation. Difficulties were reported relating to information provision, visiting schools, getting children to school, relationships with teachers, and helping children get the most out of their education (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p.279).

Research on parents with disabilities has solely focused upon the medical model and tended to pathologize them. Researchers have left out the impact on the children and paid less attention to the social environment and economic factors (Olsen & Wates, 2003). The theory behind this formula relies on people who see the disabled as the recipients of care and not the caregivers. Parents struggling with disabilities are categorized too broadly; someone who struggles with a social disorder, such as anxiety or bi-polar disorder, may be put in the same category with someone who is not able to walk. There is also a widespread assumption that disabled parents lack parenting skills; they often receive inadequate knowledge of polices and services, face patchy support, and find it hard to access information and advice (Olsen & Wates, 2003). In one study, researchers interviewed 83 disabled parents about their experiences with their child's education, and only two parents reported consistently having supportive interactions (Robinson et al., 2001). In another study, done by Morris (2004), parents reported good and bad experiences of schools promoting parental participation. Morris (2004) concluded that inaccessible buildings or methods of communication and negative staff attitudes were the main obstacles to parental participation.

At-Risk Parents

In addition to parents with disabilities, there are parents with other barriers in their lives. For example, parents who have been incarcerated all of their lives do not know where to begin to ask for help, and parents who are refugees and may not speak enough English to be able to ask for help. Some parents may be struggling with being in and out of rehabilitation centers for various addictions; then, when finally healthy enough to begin parenting, these parents have no idea where to begin. These are all untouched areas

of research, which are in need of attention in order to better address the lack of parental involvement within school systems.

According to research, socioeconomic status also plays an important role in parental involvement. Parents with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to participate and get involved. The exception to this fact: teachers develop a productive way of communicating with parents of at-risk youth, thus eliminating the socioeconomic factor (Morris 2004, as cited in Harris & Goodall, 2008). The conversation between teacher and parent, no matter what the economic status, allows the teacher to relay the expectations he or she may have for their students, helping parents understand what the educators need from them. The differences in involvement among ethnic and socioeconomic groups may be because minority and low-socioeconomic parents are commonly less educated, making it difficult for them to help their children and stay involved within their higher education. According to Morris, teacher-to-parent communication will help eliminate this discrepancy (2004, as cited in Harris & Goodall, p. 288)

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

After IRB approval, the descriptive study addressed the question: *What are factors of an effective parental involvement program?* A researcher-constructed questionnaire conducted within Communities in Schools at Abilene High School was able to help CIS learn about parents and their teens in order to help parents get more involved. In addition, the researcher asked the following questions: *What would help you to be more involved? What would make you want to volunteer at the school next year? If free classes were offered to parents/families, which would you attend? How can we be more open? What would you like to see on the website? What would be your form of transportation to Abilene High School?* The needs assessment is a tool that aids in the process for determining needs or possible gaps between what is currently happening and what is desirable. Existing scholarship supports the idea that parental involvement does make a difference. It was difficult to conclude which parental involvement program was the most beneficial to the parents at Abilene High School. The questionnaire did however identify factors that contributed to parental involvement or lack thereof. The questionnaire was also a needs assessment, and it helped identify the possible weaknesses within the school system that may explain the low amount of parental participation. This needs assessment shared what is necessary to be improved upon in order to implement positive factors for parental involvement at Abilene High School. The researcher used a social capital scale to assess whether social capital plays a role in parental involvement or

not. Social capital measures one's social networks— the number of people one knows— and how beneficial these networks are for the individual.

Sample

In this study, the researcher targeted the guardians or parents of students at Abilene High School. She had a caseload of approximately 30 students at the time of the study, who were enrolled in CIS. There were no exclusions in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, or race. The students who qualified for Communities In Schools must meet one of the following to be eligible: be a parent, failed a STAAR test, failed a class, be classified as special education, have chronic absences, and eligible for free lunch.

Variables

The main variable to consider is the current level and type of involvement the guardian is already exhibiting, this was a dependent variable and based upon the factors and barriers the guardian may be facing. Another variable was the guardian's relationship to the student, which the study classified as an independent variable. Notably, parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles may all have different views and experiences on parental participation.

The researcher also considered barriers to involvement such as transportation, ability, and language as independent variables. These barriers will all affect the needs assessment answers. The researcher measured social capital using a social capital scale. Independent, demographic variables included age, race, and grade of the student; the researcher determined these factors using the survey answers.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher is a social work graduate student at Abilene Christian University, concurrently interning at Communities in Schools located in Abilene High School.

This research study was a quantitative, non-experimental study, using a purposive sample. The study states the inclusion criterion as follows: "In order to be included in this study one must be labeled legally as a guardian or parent of a child in Communities in Schools (CIS)."

The procedure was a needs assessment, because the researcher was able to see the students every day. The researcher simultaneously distributed the surveys containing the questionnaire, needs assessment, and social capital scale to all of the students for their guardians to read and complete. The students themselves were not involved in the responses—only the guardians. The needs assessment had questions in relation to the ways Abilene High School can promote and improve parental involvement. After the collection of the needs assessment results, the next step was to design a program that will be beneficial to promoting parental participation.

The researcher collected data as descriptive statistics. The researcher also used the analysis of reliability and analysis of correlation in order to gather her findings. Comparisons between involvement and socioeconomic status in relation to their child and parental involvement formulate the results. The researcher based the surveys and findings of this study upon self-reporting and helped determine the possible barriers guardians face at Abilene High School in relation to parental involvement. The hope for the data was to find a productive outcome, giving specific feedback of weaknesses at Abilene High School that will be useful in implementing stronger programs in which more

parents will want to be involved. The use of this data and parental involvement programs will ultimately lead to an increase in the level of success of students in the classrooms at Abilene High School.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

What are factors of an effective parental involvement program in the high school? Does social capital have any influence on parental involvement? In order to conduct this study, the researcher distributed questionnaires to guardians of CIS students. With the completed surveys, she ran statistics, obtaining a clearer picture of the findings. The researcher analyzed these statistics and the self-reporting from the guardians. She based the guardians' involvement level upon his or her "familiarity" with the school; the more familiar a guardian is the more they have involved themselves with the high school.

Demographic Findings

There were nine questionnaires returned. Of those returned, 89% were from female guardians and 11% were from male guardians. The children of those guardians were 56% female and 44% male. The grade level of the children that were a part of the research was 9th - 12th grade. The ninth graders had the same amount of participation as the 12th graders at 33%, while the 11th graders accounted for 22%, and the 10th graders accounted for 11%. The most frequent age of the child was 18 at 33%, while ages 15, 16, and 17 all accounted for 22% of the surveys answered.

The majority of families that participated (75%) were Hispanic, while the other 25% were white. With this said the *English only* speakers made up 78% while the *English and Spanish* speakers accounted for only 22%. Additionally, 56% of guardians reported as biological parents, while the other guardians were extended family (44%).

Research Findings

The researcher analyzed correlation and comparison statistics in order to answer the question: *What are factors of an effective parental involvement program in the high school?* According to this sample, a correlation test revealed there was no significant correlation between *parental involvement* and *social capital* ($p < .05$). However, many questions directly correlated with a parent's involvement with the high school (see Table 1). The factors of parental involvement included the familiarity of the guardian with the school in general ($p = .034$), the child's administrators ($p = .01$), the child's teachers ($p = .03$), the unlisted personnel ($p = .02$), and the school's website ($p = .02$). It also included how positive the guardian felt about the level of school spirit ($p = .02$). According to these findings, each of these factors played a role in a parent's involvement.

Table 1

Parental Involvement

	Parental Involvement
How familiar are you with the school?	.034*
How familiar are you with your children's administrators?	.010*
How familiar are you with your child's teachers?	.025*
How familiar are you with other unlisted personnel at your child's school?	.020*
How often do you use the school's website	.024*
How positive is the school spirit at this school?	.015*

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

In addition to quantitative data, open-ended questions sought to discover guardians' specific needs in school involvement. In response to needs assessment questions, participants provided the following answers:

- *What would help you to be more involved?* Four surveys reported more opportunities at different times. Three surveys reported better advertising of programs. One reported "incentives," and one responded "other," writing "more time."

- *What would make you want to volunteer at the school next year?* Most reported not being able to volunteer because of work. While other responses said, "finding out what I can volunteer with," "just being asked," "being able to quit my job," "N/A I am a teacher at AHS," "N/A," "None," and "nothing because I work everyday." One was left blank.

- *If free classes were offered to parents/families, which would you attend?* The majority of the parents said they would NOT attend. Their responses said, "I don't know," "math," "parenting, understanding teenagers, open forum-several topics," and "depending on time and my availability, but I am interested." In addition, three responded with "No," while one responded, "Yes." One was left blank.

- *How can we be more open?* Two participants did not answer, while two others said, "none" and "IDK." Other responses said, "involving everyone whether poor, white, black, rich, or Mexican," "lower judgment depending on ethnicity," "more on website, emails," and "get nicer teacher, admin, nurses." There was one random answer that responded, "mega lunch."

- *What would you like to see on the website?* The most common answer was important dates and events categorized by grade level or updated information. Two participants left this question blank. One participant said, "No" and one said, "N/A." Other answers said, "frontrunner," "more updated information," and "grades – pictures – events."

- *What would be your form of transportation to Abilene High School?* Three responses stated, "walking." Three responses stated, "driving," while one stated, both "driving and walking." One response stated, "taking the bus," while one left his or her response blank.

Other Findings

A test of reliability revealed the survey had 89% internal consistency for this sample. Elimination of any single question would not significantly change these findings. Although *English only* speakers had better levels of involvement, a *t*-test comparing parental involvement revealed there was no significant difference between *English only* speakers and *English-Spanish* speakers. In addition, the surveys showed that *Hispanic parents* had higher involvement; however, there was no significant difference between *White parents* and *Hispanic parents*. *Parents* and *extended family* were equal in their parental involvement scores and had no significant difference.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Discussion of Findings

The researcher based outcomes on data gathered for this sample. According to the

literature (McNeal, 1999), the social capital scores should have had a strong correlation

with parental involvement. However, due to the survey itself and a number of blank

social capital surveys, it is possible that the social capital scale did not provide robust

data. There were three blank social capital scales, but all of the surveys contained

completed questionnaires. With the exception of one or two questionnaires that left one

of the open ended questions blank. The statistic that proved *Hispanic parents* more

involved than *White parents* was an interesting one and conflicted with the literature

(Coleman, 1988). The reason for this result is assumed to be due to the lack of surveys

brought back; because of the majority of the submitted questionnaires being *Hispanic*, the

data's outcome gave a number that made the *Hispanic* population look more involved

then the *White* population of parents. Many of the participants mentioned a perceivable

difference in treatment; these parents had highly different involvement levels in regards

to how they perceived their own involvement. Most of these parents discerned

themselves as having low involvement when answering the questionnaire, but after

analyzing the data, the results showed their actual involvement to be much higher. The

short answer questions presented interesting, open-ended responses. For example, in

reference to the high school, the survey asked, "How can we be more open?" Many

participants decided not to answer this question; however, the few answers participants provided proved notably interesting.

Various responses to this question commented on the perceived attitude of the high school towards minority students. One participant responded, "lower judgment depending on ethnicity." Similarly, another participant responded, "involving everyone whether poor, white, black, rich, or Mexican." A Hispanic participant who answered this question, stated, "getting nicer teacher, admin, nurses, etc." According to many short answer replies, the parents believed school administrators treated them differently because of their race. The researcher believed this is due to the school system's cultural insensitivity due to the teachers' lack of knowledge and understanding of diversity. In the previous literature, there was mention of teacher collaboration and possible classes and preparatory courses for teachers the school can employ to help with these issues (Morris and Taylor, 1998). Abilene High School needs these classes. The idea of workshops or classes that would be required once a year before school began would be an implication for policy as well as practice.

Limitations and Strengths

There were substantial limitations to this study. One of the most influential limitations was the lack of surveys that the researcher received; although the number received was not the predicted amount, nine was still a good return number. Due to the population of the sample study, and the group of at-risk families that the study targeted, receiving nine surveys was better then expected. Unfortunately, the less data collected the less data to analyze. Thus, the easier some outcomes may have been distorted. The researcher collected data late in the school year giving her little time to gather

information. She also had difficulty-contacting parents over the telephone and relied solely on a third party to give out and collect the data (the student).

Another limitation stemmed from the fact that the researcher created the survey; thus, she was unable to test for reliability prior to this study. If there had been a survey that the researcher had previously used and tested with a set outcome and high reliability as well as validity with a standard measure, the outcome of this study may have been more informative. Moreover, there was also possible bias, because the researcher created the questionnaire; therefore, she could have created the questions in a way to produce the wanted outcomes. Another limitation caused because the researcher created the survey is the possibility that the participants may not have easily understood the survey, causing respondents to leave questions blank or give irrelevant answers.

The other issue that the researcher came across was the language differences. Because of language barriers, many parents of different nationalities were not able to be included in the study. This barrier resulted in bias, because only hearing from particular nationalities undermines the data's ability to show a clear picture of the entire school. Instead, this barrier left only the nationalities that participated to say how they felt.

The researcher also found many resources on the topic of parental involvement, and the idea of what a family dynamic "should" look like; the limitation here was the amount of resources used from ten years or older. The family dynamic is constantly changing as well as the definition of family. This definition in particular has changed numerous times in the past ten years. Because of these fluctuations, the literature has a greater chance of being incorrect or presenting out of date information.

Some strengths came from this study, such as the information obtained from these surveys and the detail provided into some sensitive topics. In addition, the detailed information given explains complex topics such as social capital and the subsequent impact. This information may be used in the high school as well as the organization CIS. CIS of the Big Country, located on the Abilene High's campus, has not had a chance to conduct this type of study prior to this one. With this information, it is possible that CIS can find ways to improve parental involvement.

Implications

Current literature implies that social capital is a difficult barrier in the involvement level of parents, but after gathering the data, it is safe to assume that social capital is more of a factor that correlates with a high level of involvement— not a true influencer. Therefore, researchers should not use social capital when assuming a parent's involvement level, especially before an accurate measurement. Some thoughts for further research relating to social capital: "What is the value of ones social capital? How does one truly measure social capital when dealing with people of different backgrounds and socioeconomics? Does social capital truly have an impact on parental involvement or is the correlation found amongst research a coincidence?" All of these answers would be productive in future research of parental involvement. In addition, implications researchers might make with the information gathered may be policies such as having every teacher and administrator employed with Abilene High participate in a workshop before starting the school year. This workshop will inform and educate the teachers about how to interact with families from diverse backgrounds.

According to literature from Chavkin (1993), workshops that focus on diversity have proven to benefit teachers and show them the way they should deal and meet with the parents or guardians of their students. This type of workshop will also give administrators insight into the improvement of after-school activities that involve parents. Programs that can improve the advertisement of meetings or events at the high school would also increase parental involvement. According to the literature, programs such as school websites, automated email systems, and automated telephone calls home may be helpful; many high schools are already utilizing these forms of communication (Winters & August, 2001, p. 76).

In addition to the aforementioned programs, take home flyers, as well as Facebook pages, would also be great advertisements to ensure parents are aware of events. Many parents complained about their form of transportation or lack thereof in the surveys, so the implementation of virtual events could greatly help. For example, many universities use webinars to allow their out-of-state students to participate in classes. A webinar for parents is an opportunity for those who may not be able to make it to the school; in this case, they can watch the school events from their cell phones or computers. The parents that work late hours would also benefit from these virtual programs, because they could tune in while at work, if needed.

Current literature largely supports the improvement of Americans with Disabilities Act's requirements— or ADA. According to one study, inaccessible buildings, methods of communication, and negative staff attitudes were the main obstacles undermining parental participation (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p.279). If schools are still failing to keep up with adequate buildings, they cannot expect physically disabled

parents to attend— let alone participate. Schools need to have a better understanding of how to communicate with people affected by different disabilities. Just like a collaborative training for teachers, there must be a training to help teachers learn how to communicate properly with disabled parents. Literature would imply that the following programs successfully increased parental involvement: support groups, fitness centers on the campus, grading periods for parents, Booster clubs, Math-a-thons, and international committees (Jacobson, 2003). Implications that could be made, would also consider programs that focus on getting parents to participate as volunteers and representatives; providing encouragement and recognition of involvement; providing a warm environment where parents feel welcome; holding one opportunity a month for parents to get comfortable within the school; and providing parents helpful tools to help their kids while at home, all were successful. Therefore, when creating a program, in order for it to be successful, it should focus on the listed criteria above (Benson and Martin 2003).

The information gathered from this thesis could influence many changes in policy; there must be a standard for high schools to meet all of ADA's requirements—not only for their students, but also for their parents. In addition, schools must implement unique ways of communicating with parents who may have hearing, speaking, or seeing disabilities in order to improve and help adequately meet these disabilities in a way that makes both parties feel comfortable.

There is also a critical need to insure that every parent feels treated equally. In this case, social workers are helpful as advocates for this particular population of parents. As a social worker, he or she has the possibility to educate schools about these communication techniques, making sure schools do not oppress parents due to ignorance.

There are also further areas not yet researched, such as the impact of transportation on parental involvement. Additionally, one must ask, "Would improvement in parental involvement truly increase the academic success of the students as well?" Lastly, how would a study similar to this one look with international students involved? These are all areas of research that would help improve parental involvement in high school. Although the researcher omitted questions relating to disabled parents due to the sensitivity that goes along with these sorts of questions, it is believed that this particular subject will need these questions researched and answered. Once schools represent parents with disabilities along with international students, this study will be much closer to painting a clearer and fairly represented picture with its findings. Another implication that many believe has a large impact on this study is the data gathered from students who are not part of the CIS program. Would these students impact or influence the findings? How would they have compared to the students at CIS? Is their social capital score higher? Are they more successful academically? Would they have felt the same way about the treatment of staff and teachers at the school?

Conclusion

If one could establish the contributing factors, he or she could determine what truly made an impact on a parent's level of involvement and what schools could do to improve the programs already implemented. According to this research study, an effective parental involvement program is open to anyone without any restrictions or oppression infringed upon a particular group. It is one that schools should profusely advertise, utilizing all resources such as the website, email, flyers, phone calls home, and announcements. These programs must also be reoccurring for the busy parents that may

not be able to make it to the first few meetings. The program must also be one that many can connect to virtually along with a recapitulation after it is over. Most importantly, an effective program allows parents and teachers to find a way to collaborate in order to help their child have the most successful experience. Parental involvement is a hot commodity amongst schools and school districts, but before anyone can increase the involvement with successful programs, everyone must first find ways to break down the various barriers.

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APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

Dear Parent,

My name is Nicole Walsh, I am a graduate level social work student at Abilene Christian University conducting thesis research in the Abilene Independent School District. I am seeking a sample of guardians of the students in Communities In Schools at Abilene High School, examining the barriers parents may face when trying to involve themselves in their students' academics.

The benefits of the research will be that the assessment will give a clearer picture of the reasons for the amount of parents that are engaged in their students' academics. This study will ultimately lead to the growth of a new program, and will also help open up the opportunity for faculty members to make accommodations for guardians willing to increase involvement. The potential risks for the participants are minimal. The risks in this research are minimal. As with all confidential information, security is always an issue. To reduce the risk of a confidentiality breach, all data will be de-identified before it is stored on a secure computer. Participants are asked to complete a questionnaire that should take about twenty minutes from start to finish.

This is a voluntary study: **You are not required to participate,** and you may withdraw at any time.

If you are willing to participate, please sign below and return this form with the attached survey filled out.

I hope you will consider participating in this research. If you have any questions or concerns you may contact the researcher Nicole Walsh at 714-726-3767 or by email NDW15a@acu.edu, and/or your campus principal. As well as the Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at:
(325) 674-2885
megan.roth@acu.edu
320 Hardin Administration Bldg, ACU Box 29103
Abilene, TX 79699

This is not a school-sponsored study, but I do have permission of the school district to conduct the survey among willing participants with authorized consent.

Best regards,

ACU Graduate School of Social Work

Guardian printed name:

Voluntary guardian signature:

APPENDIX B

IRB APPROVAL

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

4/27/2016

Nicole Walsh

Department of Social Work

ACU Box 27866

Abilene Christian University

Dear Ms. Walsh,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled Assessing Guardian Involvement in the high school

was approved by expedited review (46.110(b)(1) category 7) on 4/26/2016 for a period of one year (IRB # 16-025). The expiration date for this study is 4/26/2017 . If you intend to continue the study beyond this date, please submit the Continuing Review Form at least 30 days, but no more than 45 days, prior to the expiration date. Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Request Form within 30 days of study completion.

If you wish to make **any** changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Study Amendment Request Form.

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Unanticipated Events/Noncompliance Form.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

APPENDIX C

SURVEY PROTOCOL

1. What is your gender?
   Male

   Female

   Trans

2. What is your child's gender?
   Male

   Female

   Trans

3. What is your age?

4. What grade level is you child in?

5. How old is your child?

6. What is your ethnicity?

7. What is your child's ethnicity?

8. What is your home language?

9. What is your relation to the child attending Abilene High School?

10. How involved would you say you are?
Very

Slightly

Somewhat

Not very

11. What would help you to be more involved?
More opportunities at different times

Better advertising of programs

Incentives (money, prizes, etc)

Other:

12. How familiar are you with the school?
Very

Slightly

Somewhat

Not very

13. How familiar are you with your children's administrators?
Very

Slightly

Somewhat

Not very

14. How familiar are you with your child's teachers?
Very

Slightly

Somewhat

Not very

15. How familiar are you with the other unlisted personnel at your child's school?
Very

Slightly

Somewhat

Not very

16. Would you be interested in participating in a monthly social? (This social would meet other parents, would also be facilitated by only parents)
Very

Slightly

Somewhat

Not very

17. Do extracurricular activities at this school start too early, too late, or at about the right time?

Too early

Somewhat too early

About the right time

Too late

18. What would be the best time for extracurricular activities?
   Before School
   During school
   After school
   Weekends

19. If free classes were offered to parents/families, which would you attend?

20. How likely are you to volunteer at this school next month?

Very

Somewhat

Slightly

Not at all

21. What would make you want to volunteer at the school next year?

22. How respectful is this school to students' families?

    Very

    Slightly

    Somewhat

    Not very

22. How open is this school to students' families?

Very

Slightly

somewhat

Not at all

24. How can we be more open?

25. How often do you use the school's website?

Very

Slightly

Somewhat

Not at all

26. What would you like to see on website?

27. How useful is the information this school gives you about the academic growth of your child?

Very

Slightly

Somewhat

Not at all

Additional Comments:

28. How positive is the school spirit at this school?

Very

Slightly

Somewhat

Not at all

29. How comfortable do you feel talking to teachers at this school about problems your child is having?

Extremely comfortable

Very

Slightly

Somewhat

Not at all

Suggestions?

30. Do you have a reliable form of transportation?

Very reliable

Slightly reliable

Somewhat reliable

Not at all reliable

31. What would be your form of transportation to Abilene high school?
Fill in blank:

not available

APPENDIX D

SOCIAL CAPITAL SCALE

This scale will be on a scale of 1-5+, for each of these questions please list one of the following answers: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5+.

1. How do you rate the number of your friends?

2. Among your coworkers/fellows, how many you can trust?

3. Among your relatives, how many you can trust?

4. Among all your relatives, neighbors, friends, co-workers, and classmates, how many have connections with others?

6. Among all your family members, relatives, neighbors, friends, co-workers, and old classmates, how many are with a professional job?

7. How many of your coworkers/fellows will definitely help you upon your request?

8. How many of your friends will definitely help you upon your request?

9. How do you rate the number of cultural, recreational and leisure groups/organizations in your community?

10. How do you rate the number of governmental, political, economic and social groups/organizations in your community?

11. How many of these groups and organizations possess social connections?

12. How many of these groups and organizations possess great social influence?

13. How many of the cultural, recreational and leisure groups/organizations represent your interests?

14. How many of the governmental, political, economic and social groups/organizations represent your interests?

15. How many of the governmental, political, economic and social groups/organizations will help you upon your request?

16. How many of the cultural, recreational and leisure groups/organizations will help you upon your request?