

WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

Anderson authentically engages with parents unlike any educational leader we have known. She details her time-tested recipe for success to empower other educators to do this work. If you're ready to stop tinkering with parent engagement and want to build collaborations that transform the lives of your students and families, you must read this book.

—**William Parrett and Kathleen Budge**

Authors, *Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools* (ASCD, 2020) and *Disrupting Poverty: Five Powerful Classroom Practices* (ASCD, 2018)

Director Emeritus, Center for School Improvement, Boise State University
Professor Emerita, College of Education, Boise State University
Sebring, Florida

Many parents want to be, and should be, actively included in the universal village that raises their child. Anderson's vast set of experiences and impressive body of expertise provide an authentic, faithful road map to that end.

—**Beryl Ann New**

Retired, Director of Certified Personnel and Equity, Topeka Public Schools
Region 2 Commissioner, Kansas African American Affairs Commission
Topeka, Kansas

Anderson provides a powerful book, painting a picture rich with illustrations as to the importance of engaging families. Each chapter includes lived and learned experiences that will leave footprints as you envision integrated tiered systems of support with families at the forefront.

—**Kathleen Lynne Lane**

Distinguished Professor and Associate Vice Chancellor for Research
University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas

I am grateful to leaders like Anderson, who leverages strategies to improve the overall well-being of children and their families in the school districts she leads.

—**Constance Gully**

President and Chief Executive Officer
Parents as Teachers National Center
St. Louis, Missouri

Anderson's book is a testament to her transformational leadership. It serves as an inspirational resource for communities seeking to build stronger connections between schools and families, utilizing a public health approach to guide groundbreaking change.

—Cristi Cain

Director, Local Public Health Program
Kansas Department of Health and Environment
Topeka, Kansas

This book is a testament to Anderson's passion for empowering parents to become active partners in their children's education. Through practical strategies and personal anecdotes, she illustrates how to equip parents to engage meaningfully in their child's learning journey.

—Michelle Hubbard

2023 Kansas Superintendent of the Year Superintendent
Shawnee Mission School District
Shawnee, Kansas

Anderson provides lived experience and truly has walked the talk. Her writing exemplifies the profound understanding that meeting students and families where they are, without judgment, while maintaining an open mind is paramount. Her dedication to connecting with families and fostering community ties underscores her deep-seated passion and compassion for those she serves. It's truly remarkable writing.

—Ashley Goss

Deputy Secretary for Public Health
Kansas Department of Health and Environment
Topeka, Kansas

Building Parent Capacity in High-Poverty Schools

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In loving memory of Dr. Stanley Anderson, my incredible husband and a tremendous father to our two children, Whitney and Christopher, who inspire me daily to serve ALL children as if they are my own.

Building Parent Capacity in High-Poverty Schools

Actions for Authentic Impact

Tiffany C. Anderson

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Foreword

In this strikingly practical book, Tiffany C. Anderson explains what every teacher and school leader knows—we cannot do in six hours a day what families and community members are not doing the other 18 hours of the day. With a compelling sense of urgency, Dr. Anderson calls on all of us in education to recognize the imperative to build parent capacity. After years in which the communication between families and the school was largely ignored, the author encourages us to establish genuine relationships.

There are four essential transformations that educators, leaders, policymakers, and parents should embrace: (1) work with parents as partners, (2) prioritize clarity in all communications, (3) focus on real and practical solutions, and (4) budget for success. First, we must change from announcing policies to parents to genuine understanding of their needs and working with them as partners. I do not believe that any teacher or school leader intentionally alienates parents, but too often we alienate families with our archaic and punitive systems of feedback. When students and parents feel threatened, they are reluctant to collaborate with schools. The second transformation is from jargon to clarity. While educational professionals may understand precisely what “phonological awareness” or “critical thinking” means, not all parents are fluent in education-speak, especially parents for whom English is not their first language. On student report cards and curriculum documents, we must focus on clarity and, as Dr. Anderson encourages us, seek first to understand others before we ask them to understand us.

Third, we must move from rhetoric to reality. With powerful examples from her life as a leader, Dr. Anderson takes the building of parent capacity out of the shadows to very practical application. Particularly helpful are her questions for reflection that can be the subject of joint meetings with school staff members and parents. Fourth, we must move from bake sales to “BUDGET,” the acronym Dr. Anderson uses to explain the relationship between funding and meeting the needs of students and parents. While schools and communities always seem to find the funding to support students after they fail, the author makes the case that prevention offers the greatest return on investment.

It is especially noteworthy that Dr. Anderson leads the educational system that was at the center of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case in the 1950's. Seventy years later the nation continues to struggle with the impact of inequities on student achievement and life-long success. These challenges must be met not merely by schools, but with a community-wide alliance that includes the voices of parents, students, teachers, leaders, and policymakers. I have watched as Dr. Anderson extends her impact from pre-kindergarten children to centenarians, who bring a sense of history, equity, and justice to future generations.

This is a book to be studied and discussed. If it provokes some debate, that is great, because as Dr. Anderson knows better than most people, respectful divergent thinking is the rocket fuel of thoughtful discussions and community building. The educational world is fortunate to learn from her insight, experience, and passion.

Douglas Reeves
Author of *Fearless Schools*
Boston, Massachusetts

Acknowledgments

I thank God for leading me in this project. I am forever grateful for the fearless parents who were the plaintiffs in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954 that opened the door for me to become the first Black woman superintendent in Topeka, Kansas.

A special thank you is extended to my family, which includes my parents, Rev. Larry Brown and Dr. Edna Montgomery, who taught me how to serve as a wife, a parent advocate, and an educator; to my late husband, Dr. Stanley Anderson; and my two children, Whitney and Christopher, whose tremendous capacity to love and serve others inspires me daily.

This book would not be possible without the Corwin staff that include, but are not limited to, Tanya Ghans, Sara Johnson, the editing and publishing staff, and the researchers, authors, and educational thought partners who I continue to learn from in education.

Serving in education is a privilege and a ministry of love. Thank you to the Methodist church I am a member of, Church of the Resurrection, and the many other churches and organizations for partnering with educators to care for and serve the whole family. I sincerely thank the many past and present educators, school boards, and school-district communities that I have had the privilege to serve alongside.

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About the Author



After serving as a teacher, principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent, in 2016 **Tiffany C. Anderson, EdD**, became the first Black woman superintendent for Topeka Public Schools in Topeka, Kansas, home of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court case that ended legal segregation. Dr. Anderson has served as a school administrator for twenty-six years and under her leadership, Topeka has earned multiple local, state, and national awards, including three Magna Awards from the National School Boards Association for innovative approaches impacting families

and the community. Additionally, she has served alongside educators and parents leading three districts in gaining full accreditation in Virginia, Missouri, and Kansas. Over her twenty years serving as a superintendent, Dr. Anderson's transformational leadership approach in addressing the needs of families in the community has been captured in articles, speaking engagements, a docuseries, and, in 2016, she was selected by *EdWeek* as one of the nation's sixteen Leaders to Learn From. In 2023, the American Association of School Administrators recognized Dr. Anderson with the national 2023 Women in School Leadership Award. Dr. Anderson attended Saint Louis University for her bachelor's degree, University of Missouri St. Louis for her master's, and Saint Louis University for her doctorate. In 2022, Dr. Anderson attended St. Paul School of Theology and Nazarene Theological Seminary where she received her master's in divinity. She is a professor of practice for Kansas State University, and she has served as adjunct faculty for multiple universities and for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Dr. Anderson is a public health advocate, and over the past decade she has championed initiatives in public schools and post-secondary settings on behalf of educators and families in Kansas as a parent, school superintendent, and board member on the Kansas Board of Regents for the Technical Education Authority.

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Introduction

“The capacity to learn is a gift, the ability to learn is a skill, and the willingness to learn is a choice.”

—Herbert (2000)

We have tremendous capacity to develop, learn, and grow. Through research and experience, I have witnessed the power to engage the collective school community with parents as a key lever to transformational change.

I am also a product of parents whose capacity was built through the school system over time, so I have a deeply rooted passion for this work. By sharing with you a little about my story, you can see the power that comes from building parent capacity.

I was raised by two educators who grew up and were in school during the 1940s and 1950s, the years in which *Brown v. Board of Education* occurred. Following the court decision, my mother and her sister became two of the first Black women to integrate Soldan High School in St. Louis, Missouri. My mother’s parents, Edna and Obia Montgomery, wanted my mother and her sister to have equal access and opportunities to the educational resources their white neighbors had access to in the city of St. Louis. Their advocacy for their children and their willingness to remain engaged with public schools changed the future of my mother’s life and later mine.

My father, who was raised by his aunt and uncle during that same period, had a very different experience. While he had the loving, strict upbringing of extended family, they lived in a segregated part of St. Louis. His aunt was a teacher in the city in all-Black schools, which led him to remain in all-Black schools through his high school graduation, near his home in St. Louis. He and his extended family were deeply involved in the all-Black schools and community, which shaped the spirit of advocacy and service of my father.

As a married couple, my parents participated in the Civil Rights Movement, and they ultimately moved into an integrated neighborhood in the suburbs of St. Louis County, Missouri, where they enrolled me in an elementary school that ensured I learned alongside students of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds.

My parents participated in parent organizations in formal and informal ways. My mother volunteered as often as she could, both of my parents participated in the PTO/PTA organizations, they encouraged other parents to get involved, and they used every opportunity they could find to serve as a room parent and to meet with teachers. My mother even taught for the school system they placed me in for my elementary education. Through their involvement, I learned how the power of collective impact from parents in one neighborhood could make a difference. I was afforded every opportunity I could have dreamed of in public and private school because of my parent's capacity to engage and organize with other parents as advocates for the success of all children.

Just as my mother was one of the first Black students to integrate Soldan High School in the 1950s, my father later became one of the first Black stockbrokers at Merrill Lynch. Through their examples, I learned that you have to be willing to take the first steps so that others can take steps behind you. Without having a first, you will not have a second. If you do not open the door, it may stay closed forever. My parents paved the way for me to become the assistant superintendent and director of desegregation in one of the largest and highest performing districts in St. Louis County, the first Black and first woman superintendent in Montgomery County (Blacksburg, Virginia), and the first Black woman superintendent of Topeka Public Schools in Kansas. Parents have the power to change a generation, and that generation has the power to change the next generation. This is how we change the educational system into a system of hope, opportunity, and prosperity.

When parents engage to create experiences (in some cases, first experiences) for students, or to be the first to volunteer to partner and develop new systems and build them into ones that truly work, it creates sustainable school and neighborhood communities engineered by those who live in the community. Witnessing my parents in their efforts to galvanize communities as educators, and later as local pastors, set the example for me to build bridges with parents and schools in communities as the key lever to making schools work well for children. When parents have a strong capacity as the blueprint from which to build outcomes, their children have a solid framework and foundation to be the architects of their own destiny, crafting a future of hope for the generations that follow. Parental engagement today changes the future of education for the students and parents of tomorrow. Building parent capacity is about something bigger than us. It is about building a future of hope.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book brings together research and lived experiences to share practical tools, methods, and ideas that school leaders and educators can use to engage parents and build their capacity. The Lived and Learned sections feature

stories from the various school districts in which I have worked or from other schools around the country doing great things in support of families and students. Each chapter also has an In Action section to show what it looks like when an element of this work is applied in different contexts. And each chapter ends with a Reflection and a full-page What?-So What?-Now What? section to help you apply the chapter ideas to your own contexts.

Chapter 1 defines parent capacity and makes the case for the urgency of engaging families in schools and establishing schools as the center of the community.

Chapter 2 looks at the difference between involvement and engagement. The chapter also brings to light the importance of an asset-based mindset when working with parents and how to build their capacity in the various roles that parents often take within a school.

Chapter 3 focuses on authenticity and what it means to be a good leader. It shares practical ways that leaders can walk the talk and truly affect change by understanding parents' needs, removing barriers of engagement, and building efficacy.

Chapter 4 examines the role of community partnerships. We can't do this work alone, and partnerships are key to removing barriers and building parents' capacity.

Chapter 5 discusses the elephant in the room—funding. The chapter sheds light on school funding and shares ideas for using dollars wisely and creatively in order to accomplish your vision.

Schools have tremendous capacity to shape the future. However, in order to shape the future, the relationship and connections that create systems have to be built, reinforced, and supported. This resource serves as one tool for educators, parents, and community members to gain new strategies that inspire, educate, and train others to make the dreams of our parents and those who came before us a reality.

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