CHAPTER 2

Building Relationships With Parents

"The question is not what you look at—but how you look and whether you see."

—Thoreau (1851)

On the surface the idea of parental involvement and parental engagement may seem very similar. After all, a variety of research studies show that increasing both parental involvement in school and parental engagement with school can produce positive student academic achievement and motivation and even have a positive impact on students' social and emotional skills (e.g., Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Stanford, 2023).

But if we look a bit more closely, we will see that parental involvement is transactional whereas parental engagement has the power to be transformational. A transactional relationship involves telling and possibly some teaching. Whereas a transformational relationship focuses on involving parents, and when teaching happens it happens through involvement. Think back to Figure 1.1. The traditional approach puts schools in control of the power. Schools set the tone, choose the activities, and distribute important information, and then tell parents how they can volunteer and when they are supposed to show up on campus. Communication is typically one-way and can often take a disciplinary focus. This is parent involvement—how parents can contribute, volunteer, or donate money to what the school says is needed most. Although we certainly want many families to attend events or celebrations on campus, just because a lot of people show up doesn't necessarily mean that families are engaged with the school.

The community-based approach focuses more on relationship building and sharing power to build collective efficacy and affirm different cultural norms and practices. Thus, parent engagement becomes about listening, two-way

communication, collective decision-making and problem solving, and building parent capacity as leaders and organizers within the school, their families, and the greater community. The emphasis of parent and family engagement over parent involvement is now also part of federal legislation. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) calls for the sharing of power between families and those who educate their children with the term *engagement* preferred over parent *involvement* (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 [ESSA], 2015).

Author and educator Larry Ferlazzo paints a clear picture of the distinction between involvement and engagement. He says, "A school striving for family involvement often leads with its mouth—identifying projects, needs, and goals and then telling parents how they can contribute. A school striving for parent engagement, on the other hand, tends to lead with its ears—listening to what parents think, dream, and worry about. The goal of family engagement is not to serve clients but to gain partners" (Ferlazzo, 2011).

Heather Weiss (Walsh, 2015), director of the Harvard Family Research Project, furthers this idea. She explains that family engagement "is not a single event." Rather, "It is a shared responsibility in which regular two-way communication insures that the student is on track to meet grade-level requirements. It is founded on trust and mutual respect and acknowledges that all families have the goals, values, and skills to help their children succeed from preschool through high school, and beyond."

Thus, in order to create meaningful partnerships with parents, we must strive for engagement rather than involvement. To do that, we must more fully understand who the families are that we serve in our schools so that we can meet them where they are and walk alongside them.

UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S PARENTS

The diversity of students in today's classrooms reflects today's parents who are a heterogeneous mix of backgrounds, cultures, ages, and perspectives. In addition to the traditional image of a parent that may represent the majority of parents served in many schools, parents today also include the extended families who have stepped in to care for a child in need, teenagers who have children while in school as children themselves, foster parents, parents who are recent immigrants, and many more. But no matter the demographic at your schools, one thing that all of today's parents face is a world of unparalleled change.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and with prevalence of social media and other technologies, parenting today is very different than it was even twenty years ago. According to a Pew Research Center study (Minkin & Horowitz, 2023), 40 percent of parents with children under the age of eighteen are extremely or very worried that their children will struggle with anxiety or depression, followed by 35 percent who are similarly concerned

about their children being bullied. Parental worries also vary by race and ethnicity. For example, Black and Hispanic parents tend to worry most about their children getting in trouble with police; getting shot or attacked; being bullied; having problems with drugs or alcohol; or teen pregnancy. These concerns also overlap with parent's income levels, with lower-income parents sharing higher concern for their children in those areas than middle- or high-level income parents.

While parents of different income and racial groups may have different perspectives based on their cultural and socioeconomic experiences according to the Pew study, they largely share similar goals and aspirations for their children, with large majorities saying, "it's extremely or very important to them that their children be honest, ethical and hardworking as adults and that they be financially independent and have jobs or careers they enjoy" (Minkin & Horowitz, 2023). Further, 87 percent of parents say it's one of the most, if not the most important aspect of their lives.

Thus, as we consider how to best partner with parents and increase their collective capacity, we must examine how to lessen or alleviate the barriers that prevent parents from being engaged in their children's lives and schooling and walk alongside our parents to listen to them, build their capacity, and help them see their voice matters.

BUILDING PARENT CAPACITY THROUGH AN ASSET-BASED APPROACH

Given the research that indicates an overwhelming majority of adults say that being a parent is the most important aspect of their lives, we must focus on building parents up using their strengths and focusing on their intrinsic desires to see their children succeed and refrain from labeling or categorizing parents based on their deficits.

In order to build parent capacity, educators must embrace an asset-based mindset where we seek first to understand, focus on the strengths that parents and the community possess, and look at the challenges as opportunities for growth and change. Simply put, asset-based thinking unlocks potential while deficit mindset highlights inadequacies. And in the context of family engagement, this means understanding and truly believing that "all caregivers are capable of supporting student learning and development and engaging as equal partners in the education of their children and the improvement of schools" (Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Consider these alternative perspectives to some common deficit thinking:

Deficit mindset: Parents are combative.

Alternative perspective: Parents aren't naturally combative. Perhaps they had negative experiences with teachers or with the school system

and don't yet trust that educators have the best interest of their child at heart. And even more challenging, what if the school where they had these negative experiences is the same school their child is now attending? Or perhaps they are currently going through life experiences that are causing significant stress, which results in an aggressive attitude. Their frustration may be misplaced, but that doesn't mean they are always combative.

Deficit mindset: Parents don't want to help their children with their homework.

Alternative perspective: Parents may want to help their children with homework. But perhaps they aren't home in the afternoons and evenings because they are working or they have limited literacy or English skills, which prevents them from being involved or gaining assistance to avoid embarrassment.

Deficit mindset: Parents don't want to show up on campus.

Alternative perspective: Parents may want to be present at school, however the barriers of inflexible work hours or reliable transportation may impact their ability to support their child by being present. Even with offering what we may view as a resource to remove barriers, such as a free bus pass from the school, if the distance between walking to the bus and traveling to school and back requires more time than the event or school meeting, what educators intended to be a resource may not actually remove the barrier impacting parent engagement.

Our parents and students do not need saviors; they do not need heroes. They are the heroes in their own story.

When we seek to understand, we improve how we serve. We simply cannot serve needs we do not know and there's often more to the story than we originally may have thought. Our parents and students do not need saviors; they do not need heroes. They are the heroes in their own story. What parents do need, however, are partners who see the many gifts they bring as assets that strengthen and uplift the organization with an added diverse perspective. In the words of Thurgood Marshall, "None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We got here because somebody—a parent, a teacher, an Ivy League crony, or a few nuns—bent down and helped us pick up our boots." Our communities and our families are the biggest asset we have, but we need to know who they are and understand their cultures and backgrounds in order to be successful. We can't build parent capacity if we believe fundamental untruths about who our parents are, what they represent, or what is important to them. This is especially important for educators who serve families of different backgrounds or cultures than themselves. According to enrollment statistics from the 2020–2021 school year (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022), more than 80 percent of public school educators are white,

yet they serve an increasingly diverse student population. Nationwide, public schools serve nearly 50 million students, which include:

- 22.4 million white students;
- 14.1 million Hispanic students;
- 7.4 million Black students;
- 2.7 million Asian students;
- 2.3 million students of two or more races;
- 0.5 million American Indian and Alaska Native students; and
- 0.2 million Pacific Islander students.

In addition to using an asset-based approach with the thoughts and judgments we make about people and situations, an asset-based approach can positively affect the language we use. Imagine being a student who is only viewed through their deficits: as a student who is disruptive and noisy and can't sit still. Now consider how it would feel to be the same student but viewed through an asset-based lens instead: as a student who is full of energy and creativity and sees things differently than others. These questions, compiled by Mapp and Bergman (2021), provide a good lens through which to evaluate the language we use with and about our students and parents.

Does my language . . .

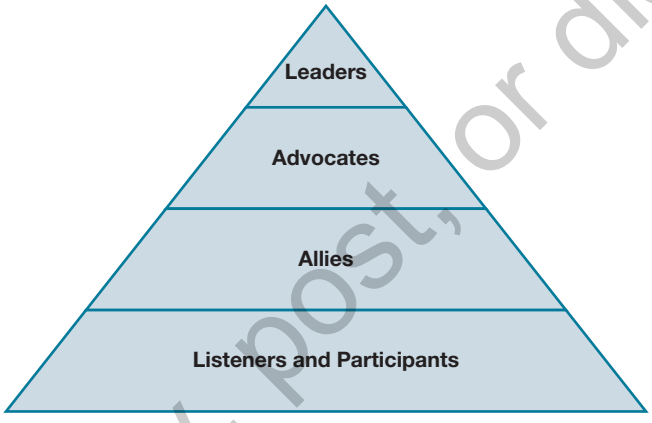
- Correct assumptions others may have about the person or group of people I am referring to?
- Avoid stereotypes about the people, places, and communities I am referencing?
- Assign responsibility for inequities to the system(s) that create and perpetuate those inequities, rather than assigning blame to individuals?
- Humanize the person or group of people, rather than defining them by one or several characteristics?
- Use descriptors of people or communities that are relevant and necessary for understanding what I am trying to convey?
- Contribute to a better or more holistic understanding of the people or communities I am discussing?

When we become intentional about our language and our mindset, asset-based thinking can transform how we teach and how we serve the families in our communities. But if we view capacity building as "someone else's problem" rather than through an asset-based lens of partnerships, we automatically create silos between those whom we have the privilege of serving and ourselves.

A PYRAMID OF PARENT ENGAGEMENT

From my experience, as we continue to employ an asset-based lens, there are a variety of ways in which parents typically demonstrate their engagement in schools. Some parents are leaders, while others act as allies or as advocates. Still others present themselves more as listeners and participators. All groups of parents are needed to encourage, support, and educate others to look from new perspectives. All parents can challenge us to develop new approaches and are needed to help us transform schools and communities. Some parents can hold multiple roles, but that isn't necessary for school or district success. In fact, I like to think of these roles as a pyramid, with fewer and fewer parents holding those roles the closer to the top of the pyramid we get.

FIGURE 2.1 The Pyramid of Parental Engagement



If we think back to Linda Brown and the parents who were involved in *Brown v. Board of Education*, those parents were courageous advocates for their children and communities, and the actions they took to lead the way in desegregating schools were a critical part of the Civil Rights Movement. They functioned as allies for each other as parents and listened to the needs of others as they brought forth examples of unfair education practices in their communities.

Parents as Listeners and Participants

Not all parents have the physical time or home stability to be able to be on campus or participate in school-day activities. However, that doesn't mean that they can't be engaged in the school and the school lives of their children. Research shows the primary motivation for parents to become involved is the belief that their actions will improve their children's learning and well-being

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Research further shows that students who have parents who are engaged in their education and school lives are more likely to have higher grades and test scores, better behavior, and enhanced social skills. Students are also less likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, become pregnant, be physically inactive, or be emotionally distressed (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

Two of the most important ways to engage parents is through consistent communication and listening. Parents will become engaged and stay engaged when they know they are informed about the happenings and the resources available at the school and that their voice is important—should they choose to use it. To learn about strategies for effective listening and communication, see Chapter 3.

You can recognize parent listeners and participants because they . . .

- Stay informed of things going on but may not take full advantage of available resources
- Limit participation to parent conferences, donating classroom items (snacks or school supplies), and giving to fundraising efforts
- Typically attend large events and activities for the social aspects

Parents as Allies

The word *ally* comes from the word *alliance*, meaning a bond or connection between people or groups. Parents who are allies are those prepared to walk alongside a mission and a vision they believe in and take action for that mission and vision when necessary. Parents who are allies also function as a support system for one another. Imagine if there were no alliance built between the parents who became the plaintiffs in the case for Linda Brown. Transforming the hearts and minds of a nation focused on school desegregation required those parents to work together and move forward with a common goal and purpose. It is important to note that parent allies may take different forms. Parent allies focused exclusively on academic outcomes outlined by the school would be engaged in a different way than parent allies who were focused on supporting the whole child, which may include mental health needs or social supports critical to school success.

You can recognize parent allies because they . . .

- Stand alongside the school staff and other parents
- Serve as critical friends available to assist with initiatives, projects, and activities in support of a larger vision
- Typically are highly involved in PTO/PTA meetings or other activities and frequently volunteer on campus

Parents as Advocates

Parent advocates are those who will support their child in gaining the services and supports needed to excel in school. Schools function best when families and educators are aligned and advocate together in the best interest of students. The issue at times can be determining what's best for the student at school, which can look very different from what's best for a child at home. If there are unmet student needs, we need parents to advocate by sharing those needs and helping schools identify the best ways to support those children. Parent advocates understand that the needs of their child are just as important as the needs of other children in the school and work toward the collective success and well-being.

There is a divide between parents with firsthand experience of US schools and the rest of the country that has gotten worse since the onset of the pandemic and rise in political polarization. Despite downward trends in academic performance, according to polling, 76 percent of parents believe their K–12 students are receiving a quality education. However, just 36 percent of adults overall say they are satisfied with K–12 education (Rubin, 2023). Advocacy is needed to change this perception gap. To begin this journey, schools need to provide messaging to families as well as across the community. The messaging should define advocacy and explain the many ways that schools are educational advocates for children and families, including sharing resources and providing needed services.

Building trust and respect between parents and educators is the foundation from which to grow a strong parent and school advocacy relationship. When parents see educators as their child's advocate, their willingness to share information with the school (be it positive or critical), to accept needed services, and to further participate in the educational process occurs at much higher levels. When parents feel they have to advocate for their children in protection from the school, everything the school does may be viewed as suspicious and the school is not viewed as a partner. To avoid this, schools can provide advocacy workshops, family handbooks, and information to families as partners with the joint goal of supporting all children. The ultimate goal is for parents to not only advocate *with* the school on behalf of children and families but *independent* of the school on behalf of children and families to bring others alongside the work of collective success. As we give more parents a voice, the more they spread the word among other parents and community organizations that the school is a trusted partner and a resource for the community.

You can recognize parent advocates because they . . .

- Are prepared to take a position on an issue or topic and will share their reasons for their stance

- Engage in broader issues that affect the school/students and that they care about (e.g., special education resources, gun legislation, equitable teaching practices)
- Willingly attend meetings, gather information as a contributor, or advocate for a cause or issue but won't take the lead role in organization or speaking out publicly

Parents as Leaders

In order for true school transformation to exist, parent voices must be given power and be present in decision-making. For example, rather than being passive participants at parent workshops, parent leaders should be able to influence the types of topics that are presented and other programming that exists for parents at the school. Parent leaders not only galvanize other parents but can also serve as relational bridges to help close the gap that may exist between teachers and the greater parent population. Parent leaders are likely to naturally show themselves on campus, because they tend to incorporate the qualities of parent allies and parent advocates, but with a seemingly innate ability to bring others along with them and to convince others to join as allies for initiatives, programs, or other school activities. However, it is also possible to train parents through specific programs or initiatives to build their capacity and leadership abilities.

You can recognize parent leaders because they . . .

- Willingly lead a group
- Share the collective voices as one united voice with themselves as the spokesperson
- Feel empowered to take action alongside others or independently if the situation or issue requires and make decisions
- Serve typically as PTO/PTA presidents, community organizers, or group leaders
- Are outspoken on issues of growth and change for the betterment of families, the community, and students
- Will be disruptors of progress should they not be given positive and productive ways to use their leadership skills for the betterment of others and the school

LIVED AND LEARNED

Let Parents Lead

▶ The idea of having a District Parent Advisory Committee is nothing new. These types of committees typically comprise of a group of involved parents who meet with superintendents and other district leaders to learn about what's going on in the district and then take that information back to disseminate at their own school. This is all well and good, but don't just limit your parent advisory group to acting as goodwill ambassadors. As invested parents, they can do so much more.

In the districts I have led, the Parent Advisory Committee functions in the traditional sense but also chooses an area of focus each year. In Topeka, at the beginning of the year, the group meets and selects a topic of interest for the committee. The topic is truly a reflection of something parents think is important for our schools to pay attention to. Recently the topic was restorative practices, but other topics through the years have been classroom technology, after-school enrichment, and mental health resources. Once the topic is selected, the group does extensive research to better understand it. They often look at different schools or districts to get examples of what others do, as well as conduct surveys and gather information in order to get ideas about what should be done in our district. At the end of the year, they present their findings and recommendations to the school board and then we act on those recommendations. Through this process, parents are given voice and choice, and are empowered to truly influence how our district approaches important topics in education. Parents also become more invested in their schools, as they see the results of their recommendations enacted. It's this type of work that transforms parents into leaders not only at their schools but also in their families and their communities, and as their capacity and self-efficacy grows through this work they have the confidence to take on new leadership roles in the community, as well. In fact, several of the parents who served on our Parent Advisory Council in Topeka have since gone on to sit on the school board and some have even served as school board president.

BUILDING PARENT CAPACITY THROUGH THE THREE Rs

Regardless of whether a parent acts as a leader, ally, advocate, or listener, developing rapport, relationship, and respect is necessary in order to impact and engage any parent in school. Dr. Hollie (2017) references these as the three Rs in his work related to culturally responsive teaching practices. And while his focus is on students, this approach is just as impactful and important when working with parents.

Rapport is the special connection between the teacher and the parent and student. When rapport is present, both parties can understand each other's feelings and effectively communicate with one another.

Relationship is all about trust. When a teacher has taken time to build a relationship with a parent and student, they will respond differently to the teacher. Parents and students respond differently to adults they know and trust. To help educators check their beliefs and assumptions about how they go about building trust with all families, Mapp and Bergman (2021) offer the questions below, rooted in the four key elements for relational trust—respect, integrity, competence, and personal regard.

- Am I seeking input from, and do I listen to and value, what all families have to say? (Respect)
- Am I demonstrating to all families that I am competent and that I see them as competent and valuable caretakers? (Competence)
- Do I keep my word with families? (Integrity)
- Do I show families that I value and care about them as people? (Personal Regard)

Respect must be in place. Parents and students need to see educators as capable of delivering knowledge to all students. Educators need to recognize that all parents and students are capable of high achievement.

"When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns, honor their contributions, and share their power, they succeed in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement" (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2004). Here are some organizations that can help schools develop the three Rs and build strong partnerships with parents.

Parents as Teachers (PAT): This is a national evidence-based program focused on empowering parents by partnering with them to "build strong communities, thriving families and children who are healthy, safe, and learning" so they are ready for school (Parents as Teachers, 2024). PAT provides free services to families with children prenatal through kindergarten, and PAT Educators support, teach, and connect with families to help them understand and build their role as a child's first educator. As these goals are realized and parent capacity increases, Topeka's National Blue Ribbon PAT Educators are often seen as allies and advocates among parents within the school.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): NAMI is a national program focused on mental health. Most cities have a NAMI organization that can provide free resources and training. One way they do this is through their Parents & Teachers as Allies program, which is an in-service training focused on helping school professionals and families better understand mental illness early warning signs in children and adolescents (National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI], 2014). As parents become better informed of the early

Suicide is the third leading cause of death in teens. Recognizing this statistic, in Topeka, we use resources from organizations that offer free services to the community, such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI Kansas). This national organization provides resources and services across the community for families and is an immediate network to other parents who may have similar needs.

warning signs of mental illness, they are better prepared to act as advocates for new or improved programs, resources, or services within their schools or districts. In Topeka, our district coordinator of social work collaborates with NAMI as a free resource to our families.

State and Locally Driven Programs: Some states have invested in their own parent engagement programs, such as Parents as Allies in Pennsylvania. In this program, twenty-two school districts partnered with HundrEd (an independent organization that seeks to identify impactful and scalable education innovations and help education providers to implement them worldwide) and used Parents as Allies, a family engagement program focused on developing parents who are trusted partners. They share, "Based on the Brookings Institution research, schools that have strong relational trust are ten times more likely to have really good educational outcomes" (HundrEd, 2023). They teach the school how to build trust with parents and share various strategies that can be used. These types of programs can be highly effective when used within a system that will remain long term.

LIVED AND LEARNED

When Families Can't, We MUST

▶ No matter the income or social status, not every child has an adult at home who wants to be or has the capacity to be fully engaged in schools. And with the growing number of homeless families, extended family members serving as guardians, and foster parents, schools have to be ready to meet any parent (or adult functioning as a parent) where they are and serve the family to the best of their ability. It is also important to make sure that staff are trained to know the signs of children whose parents may suffer from addiction or struggle with mental health. In those instances, we have the opportunity—and I would argue the obligation—to step in and be the parent in lieu of the parent and to provide when parents can't or don't or won't.

On any given day, that means that if a child comes to school with poor hygiene or in need of clothing, we provide that resource as a safe haven for them. It they're hungry, we provide nourishment and extra resources for home. Educators and schools must step in daily to serve those social service needs that must be addressed in order for learning to occur. And in extreme cases where tragic events impact a child or their family—like in the case of Rodney McAllister—we may even need to attend memorial services or create opportunities for remembrance to enable the community to grieve and begin the healing process together, because our schools are at the center of the communities in which we serve and are impacted by everything that surrounds them.

BUILDING PARENT CAPACITY THROUGH EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

Researcher Hattie (2008) describes visible learning as the process of becoming an evaluator of your own practice to enhance what you do. As we build rapport, relationship, and respect with parents, growing their capacity also requires educators to help parents think critically and assess their own parenting practices. In a 2012 edition of *Educational Leadership*, Hattie and other leading educators described proven ways to provide feedback to students. If we replace students with parents in those key takeaways, we can see simple ways to help parents become visible learners in their own parenting practices.

1. **Feedback is not advice, praise, or evaluation. Feedback is about how we are doing.**

   Parents do not necessarily have a measure of effective parenting, and it's important to remember that they generally compare themselves to what they have seen or what they experienced in their own childhoods. Therefore, in order to build parent capacity, we must focus on giving parents feedback and provide opportunities for them to build their capacity as parents and as members of their school and community. One way to do this is to provide parents with an opportunity for reflection after attending parent workshops. As an "exit ticket," consider having parents write a brief personal reflection comparing their practices to what they viewed and learned about, and then set a personal goal relating to a practice they want to stop doing or start doing as a result. This type of self-assessment often brings about a greater sense of self-awareness and opens the door to seek assistance or support, if needed.

2. **When parents know the school and classroom is a safe space to make mistakes, they are more likely to use the feedback for learning.**

   In order for families to share, ask questions, and feel free from judgment, the school and the classroom must be seen as a safe space. This allows for families to become vulnerable with the school and grow as parents. When fear is removed, true freedom to learn and grow fills the space. To assess whether a safe environment exists at your school, it is a good idea to administer a school climate survey. This can be done every year or every other year depending on student turnover rates at your school. Figure 2.2 shows an example of a school climate survey—you can also find a full-size version in Appendix A.

FIGURE 2.2 Sample School Climate Survey

SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY

Dear Families,

We want our school to be the best it can be. Please complete this survey and tell us what you think are the school's strong points and where we can improve. Your honest comments and ideas are very welcome. If you would like to help tally and analyze the results, please let us know.

The Family and Community Involvement Action Team

No	SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT				
1	The people make me feel welcome when I walk into this school.	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
2	The school environment makes me feel welcome when I walk into this school.	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
3	I am treated with respect at the school.	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
4	I see my cultural heritage reflected in aspects of the building/campus itself.	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
5	Students at the school are treated fairly no matter what their race or cultural background.	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
6	I feel welcome at school-related activities or functions.	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
No	**PROBLEM SOLVING**				
7	I have a good working relationship with my child/children's teacher(s).	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
8	I can talk to the school principal or other administrators when I need to.	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
9	I know who to go to when I have specific questions.	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never

No	PROBLEM SOLVING (CONT.)
10	**The school has a clear process for addressing my concerns.** Always ○ Almost Always ○ Sometimes ○ Rarely ○ Never ○
11	**If the school can't help me, I know they will refer me to someone who can.** Always ○ Almost Always ○ Sometimes ○ Rarely ○ Never ○
12	**I feel welcomed and encouraged to make suggestions for improvement or share new ideas.** Always ○ Almost Always ○ Sometimes ○ Rarely ○ Never ○
No	**COMMUNICATION**
13	**I feel informed about available resources at school.** Always ○ Almost Always ○ Sometimes ○ Rarely ○ Never ○
14	**I feel informed about events and activities happening at school.** Always ○ Almost Always ○ Sometimes ○ Rarely ○ Never ○
15	**I feel informed about ways to get involved/volunteer at school.** Always ○ Almost Always ○ Sometimes ○ Rarely ○ Never ○
16	**A translator is available easily, if needed.** Always ○ Almost Always ○ Sometimes ○ Rarely ○ Never ○
17	**Communication is regular and timely.** Always ○ Almost Always ○ Sometimes ○ Rarely ○ Never ○
18	**Staff at the school consult me and other families before making important decisions.** Always ○ Almost Always ○ Sometimes ○ Rarely ○ Never ○
19	**I understand the school rules and expectations around student behavior, academics, and dress.** Always ○ Almost Always ○ Sometimes ○ Rarely ○ Never ○

(Continued)

(Continued)

No	SATISFACTION
20	**I am satisfied with the quality of the school.** Always / Almost Always / Sometimes / Rarely / Never
21	**I would recommend this school to other families and friends.** Always / Almost Always / Sometimes / Rarely / Never
No	**OPEN RESPONSE**
22	**What is the school doing that is most helpful to you as a parent?**
23	**What changes would you like to see at the school?**

Thank you for your participation!

Please return this survey to:

SOURCE: Adapted from School Climate Survey from Henderson et al. (2007).

Once school climate surveys are collected and responses are analyzed, it is important to consider changes that respond to the feedback. Changes I have seen as a result of climate surveys include providing additional parent workshops on requested topics (money management, early literacy, etc.) and adding family centers around campus. "Special places

in schools where family members can meet, plan, and implement programs, family centers are also places where school staff and community volunteers are invited to collaborate in support of children's academic and social development. Particularly important to participants in the family center was the *designation* of a special place in schools for families. . . . 'A place of their own' for parents in schools . . . which represents a significant symbolic and structural change in a school's relationship with families" (Henderson et al., 2007).

3. **The feedback parents give teachers can be more valuable than what teachers give parents.**

   Listening to learn and adjusting based on feedback is important. Schools often collect parent feedback through school climate surveys or welcome surveys, but this is typically only once or twice a year. In order for parents to share feedback throughout the year, provide additional, ongoing collection methods so the school can address challenges or concerns that arise. Possible solutions include a physical suggestion box in a central location, an online feedback portal, or a feedback form on the district or school web page.

   It is also important to be open and welcoming for parent feedback to come to the school and teachers through nontraditional routes, such as through leaders at local community-based organizations (church leaders, after-school program coordinators, neighborhood association leaders, etc.). If a school has not yet gained full trust or buy-in with parents or doesn't have an established method to gather feedback and ideas from parents, utilizing those community leaders who parents *do* communicate with regularly can go a long way in establishing deeper rapport and relationship in the community so that gradually parents see the school as a trusted partner where their voice and opinions matter and will be acted on in a positive way.

4. **When we immediately share grades as part of our feedback, parents read as far as the grade.**

   During conversations or conferences with parents, it is important for educators to focus on student growth and share evidence of learning and progress through work samples, observational checklists, or anecdotal notes. Labels matter, and once a parent feels their child is labeled as struggling or failing, defenses come up and discussion often minimizes. Depending on parents' experiences with school, they could even shut down completely assuming that there isn't a road toward success or that the teacher isn't really interested in helping their child. Ultimately, parents want their child to succeed, and before sharing a grade, growth information and artifacts of learning should be the starting point for the conversation. A conference checklist can be used to encourage teachers to adequately prepare and reflect on parent conferences. See a sample in Figure 2.3 as well as a larger checklist in Appendix B.

FIGURE 2.3 Sample Conference Checklist

Conference Checklist

Before the Conference

1. **Notify parents about the following:**
   - Purpose
   - Time and location options
   - Length of time
   - Childcare or transportation options
2. **Prepare:**
   - Gather official necessary documents (report card, progress report, etc.)
   - Gather student work samples
   - Gather other materials (observational checklists/rubrics, anecdotal notes, etc.)
   - Gather input from student (if appropriate)
   - Schedule additional conference participants, if appropriate (translator, administrator, etc.)
   - Plan what to say and questions to ask (avoid specialized educational terms)
3. **Plan agenda:**
   - Create plan for the flow of the conference
   - Emphasize cooperation (what can we do together?)
4. **Arrange environment:**
   - Place seating away from desk
   - Make sure seating space is clear from clutter or other school materials
   - Make sure all materials are easily accessible and easily seen/discussed together
   - Make sure there is privacy
   - Make sure room feels welcoming and inviting

During the Conference

1. **Welcome.** Establish rapport and open opportunity to share.
2. **Set terms.** State the purpose of the conference, remind of time limits, encourage note taking and questions, and mention options for follow-up after the conference.
3. **Lead with the positive.** Share the child's major strengths, both academic and social. Share what you enjoy most and what makes child unique.
4. **Open the floor.** Ask parents to share any comments, information, or observations they see or ask any initial questions.
5. **Show.** Share evidence of child's academic and/or social growth.
6. **Listen.** Ask for feedback from parents. Look for verbal and nonverbal clues about how things are going and invite additional questions.

7. **Share opportunities for growth and develop action plan.** Share areas for academic or social growth. Be specific. Develop an action plan focusing on one or two areas with action items for both parents and teacher(s).
8. **Summarize.** Summarize the conversation and plan next meeting time to check in on action plan.
9. **End with the positive.** Express confidence in the child's ability to meet goals and continue growth. Share excitement and appreciation for parent-teacher partnership to support child's growth.

After the Conference

1. **Review** the action plan and make sure you strategically integrate agreed-on steps into instruction.
2. **Share** action plan information with other school staff, resource teachers, etc., if needed, especially if other teachers support the child outside your classroom.
3. **Send** a follow-up thank you note or email to the parents.
4. **Mark calendar** with the planned follow-up date/timeline.

SOURCE: Adapted from Henderson et al. (2007).

5. **Effective feedback on learning comes while the learning is still occurring.**

To give a simple view of what learning by doing looks like, think about things you have learned, such as riding a bike or cooking. I can recall learning the most about cooking when my mother could guide me while making the dish itself. Parents and students are the same way (Ruelle, 2019). There's a quote by Aristotle that says, "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them" (Aristotle, 350 BCE). Connections in the brain grow and multiply as it experiences learning, and the more experiences parents can get with activities that result in them practicing what's being learned the more their capacity to apply those skills or engage in those activities outside of the school setting becomes. Learning is strengthened even further when parents set measurable goals for themselves that can be obtained throughout the course of the school year. Ways to involve families in learning while doing include but are not limited to:

- Involving parents as volunteers who engage in the true classroom learning process. This gives parents new techniques or strategies they can use at home.
- Providing classes or workshops based on parents' suggestions taught in a hands-on learning approach, such as creating meals on a budget or activities to support early language development. These classes or

workshops can be taught by other parents or local experts on the workshop topic (e.g., a high school cooking teacher or a local restaurant partner).

- Creating parent and child stations in classrooms and throughout the school, which allows parents to read to children, engage in math and literacy stations, and other learning experiences.

POWERFUL PARENTS IN ACTION

The experiences and resilience of parents is an asset that can provide a new perspective to educators and can increase the committment of the parent to advocate in various ways.

One inspirational parent whose resilience and strenth empowered and fueled her committment to the school and community is Former Mayor Michelle De La Isla. She served as an ally, advocate, and leader partnering with schools and community-focused organizations as a single mother who became Topeka's first Afro-Latina mayor, opening the door for the second Latino mayor elected after her.

Her story of resilence leaving her home in Puerto Rico at age seventeen and becoming a new mother at twenty is a story that many young mothers and limited English proficient parents could relate to. The future Mayor De La Isla began attending college at Wichita State because the school offered financial assistance and vocational training, both of which Michelle knew she would need in order to succeed. After graduation, she began working with Upward Bound, which "provides limited-income and potential first-generation college students with the opportunity to improve their academic, social and personal skills while preparing for a post-secondary education" (Upward Bound Wichita Prep, 2024). The program specifically partnered with high school students attending Wichita Prep, and Michelle's story allowed for others in her similar situation to see hope. Soon after, she moved to Topeka and through a human reources job, she gave other first-generation college graduates a chance. As a parent, Mayor De La Isla told her story of resilience and opportunity, making her an ally, a true friend to many parents who could relate to her story. She used every opportunity to build her own capacity or have it built by others so the opportunities could serve as a stairway to a brighter future. Mayor De La Isla was a leader who helped organize parents and showed through her own story and her visibility in schools what an ally, advocate, and leader looked like. As a result, she inspired trust and was elected as the first Latina to serve as mayor, which forever changed the history of Topeka.

POWERFUL PARENTS REFLECTION

Think back to what you read throughout this chapter. Use these reflection questions to consider your own school or district and the role you play in building parent capacity.

1. Does your school or district place a priority on parents as partners? Why or why not?
2. What do you want everyone to be able to say about the relationships between your school/district and your parents?
3. Do parents see themselves as partners in education to meet the needs of the students who you serve? If yes, what are you doing well that enables parents to see themselves this way. If not, why do you think that is and what could be done differently?
4. Does the school create a positive climate for parents? If not, why do you think that is and what could be done differently?
5. Are there partnerships with parents that are not occurring that could be? If yes, what are they and how could those move forward?

Take some time to reflect on your learning and plan for action in your next steps.

WHAT?

Summarize your learning and key takeaways from this chapter.

SO WHAT?

Record ideas about how your key takeaways apply to you, your school, and/or your district.

NOW WHAT?

Based on your key takeaways, plan your next steps for moving forward in this area.