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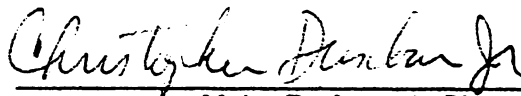
THE ALLEGED INVISIBLE PARENT: EXAMINING  
PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN-  
AMERICAN PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN TITLE I SCHOOLS

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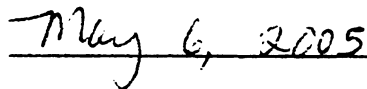
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**THE ALLEGED INVISIBLE PARENT: EXAMINING PRACTICES AND  
PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN TITLE I  
SCHOOLS**

**By**

**Felix Simieou III**

**A DISSERTATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE ALLEGED INVISIBLE PARENT: EXAMINING PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN TITLE I SCHOOLS**

**By**

**Felix Simieou III**

**This study focused on the experiences of African-American parent involvement in two Title I schools in an urban southeastern school district. It specifically sought to understand the role of parent involvement as practiced in two schools that have a majority economically disadvantaged population, predominately African-American, where students have been successful in attendance, grades, and state standardized test. In addition, it attempted to understand if there is an impact of cultural attitudes and identify practices on the actions of African-American parents and what factors influence their involvement in their children's education. It found three major themes that influenced involvement with African-American families: (1) Strong, innovative leadership, (2) the impact of community associations, (3) adapting and creating programs that teach parents how to reinforce curriculum.**

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the many individuals that have been influential in my life. Without family and friends support, this endeavor would have never been possible to attain. First, I want to thank my mother Cathy Chavis for giving me the love, guidance, and influence to be able to dream further, reach higher, and accomplish monumental tasks so early in life. Second, I want to thank my father Herbert Chavis for never being a stepfather but always a real father that has been my backbone, my confidant, and my friend to help me become the man I am today. Third, Linda Tran for being my best friend and encourager throughout my graduate studies and helping me grow tremendously as a person. Finally, I am thankful for my grandmother Rose Williams, for being the fortress and strength of my family who always believed in me and gave me the confidence to know that nothing is impossible.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This study focused on the experiences of African-American parent involvement in two Title I urban schools in the southeast. The purpose was to understand the role of parent involvement as practiced in two schools whose population was primarily economically disadvantaged, whose race was predominately African-American, and whose students were successful. In this study, success was defined by these schools having consistently high ratings on the state standardized achievement test and zero percent retention rates despite recent legislation that retains students not passing the reading portion of the state exam. Although these two schools had low economic standing and high minority populations, they did well academically. There are a number of factors that contribute to academic success (i.e., teachers, administrators), however, in this study the research focused on the role of parent involvement. For the purpose of this project, parent involvement was defined as the active engagement by the parent in their child's education.

In general, the majority of research on the impact of parent involvement on achievement or underachievement among minority racial groups in most cases traditionally follows a "cultural deficit" model (Scott-Jones, 1993). This model was explained by "culture of poverty" theories that contend black families and their communities were fraught with elements of cultural deprivation, inadequate socialization, antisocial cultural practices, and so forth (Coleman et. Al., 1966; Jencks et al., 1972; Moynihan, 1965). Additionally, the literature indicates Black parents are often

characterized as indifferent and even disinterested in their children's education (Chavkin, 1989, 1993; Winter, 2000). Such perceptions contrast with historical portrayals of African-American parents during times of segregated schooling (Anderson, 1988; Walker, 1996, 2000). By focusing on African-American parent involvement in two Title I schools deemed successful in their district, I sought to understand the impact of cultural attitudes, to identify the practices and actions of the African-American parent, and what factors influence involvement in their child's education.

### Parent Involvement

The concept of parents being involved in the education of their children is nothing new. Parents have always been the child's first and most important teacher (Berger, 1991; Henderson, 1987; Kagan, 1990; Kochan & Herrington, 1992; Olson, 1990). In addition, an abundance of research in recent years has supported the belief that children do better in school when parents (both mother and father) are involved (Epstein, 1985; Henderson, 1987; Nord, 1995; Olson, 1990). For these reasons, recent major legislation, such as the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (Congress, 1994a) and the reauthorized *Elementary and Secondary Education Act: No Child Left Behind* (Congress, 2001a), has made the involvement by parents in their child's education a national priority and ties educational dollars to state and district plans.

Parents make a difference in the school-based lives of their children, but only when that role is meaningful, empowered, and sustained (Reed & Sautter, 1990). According to Epstein (1988), in order for educators to be successful in their endeavor to gain parent involvement, they must be cognizant of three points. First, educators must understand that any effort toward school-family connections must be developmental and

site specific, such as the different ways schools communicate with parents, what they communicate, when they communicate, as well as the language and culture of the school.

Second, educators must remember that families are changing. In addition to the two-parent traditional model, today's family grouping may be with one parent, or it may be a blended, foster, or extended group. English may not be the dominant language of the home. Whatever the differences, Ianni (1987) and Wahlberg (1984) state that regardless of their socioeconomic status or backgrounds, parents significantly increase their child's academic learning when they are productively involved in their children's education.

Finally, educators must accept that parental requests for involvement are constant. Chavkin and Williams (1993), who studied the attitudes and practices of minority parents regarding the issue of their involvement in their children's education, found that parents are concerned about their children's education and want to take an active role. Parents want regular, comprehensible communication from the school and they want to know about their children's attendance, behavior, and academic progress. Parents want to understand the school's curriculum and how to help their children at home (Epstein, 1988).

### **Benefits of Parent Involvement**

Although school, family, and community collaboration is increasingly important (Davies, 1996; Epstein, 1992), research shows that what parents do when they are with their children—whether monitoring homework, reading, watching TV, or just talking to them and advising them—is just as important to the success of the child (Lewis, 1996). Students at all grade levels, whose parents help them at home and stay in touch with the

school, have higher grades and higher test scores than children of similar aptitudes and backgrounds whose parents are not involved (Epstein, 1985; Henderson, 1987). They have better attendance, are less likely to be placed in special education, have more positive attitudes and behavior, show greater respect for family, have higher aspirations, and are more likely to graduate from high school and go on to college (Epstein, 1992; Lewis, 1996). The probability of children's success in school and in life increases when their parents are involved (Davies, 1996; Glatthorn, 1992; Henderson, 1988b; Henderson, Marburger: & Ooms, 1986).

Not only do children benefit when parents are involved, but their families benefit as well. Parents gain increased confidence in the school and have more confidence in their role as parent and "tutor." They better understand school policies and the teacher's job and feel more in control of their environment because they are on a more equal status with educators regarding the needs of their children. Ultimately, teachers' opinions of parents improve as parents become more involved (Lewis, 1996).

Schools improve when parents are intimately and meaningfully involved and when schools relate well to the community (Henderson, 1988a). When parents' confidence in the school increases, teachers are given higher ratings, and the reputation of the school in the community improves. Teacher morale gets a boost and student achievement improves (Epstein, 1985, 1986; Hatch, 1998).

Not surprisingly, community organizations benefit when they work with schools. They can coordinate services and reach more people, and by collaborating with and supporting schools, businesses can also gain access to school facilities and expertise (Davies, 1996).

Given the evidence, the education community, parents, and the general public can no longer consider parent involvement an optional part of their agendas (Lewis, 1996; Pape, 1998). In such a culture, parent involvement is no longer the school or district's response to a project or a funding requirement. Parent involvement is just the way things are done (Davies, 1996).

### **Barriers to Parent Involvement**

Although the concept of parent involvement is a positive one, it means different things to different people, and many variables hinder it (Marsh & Horns-Marsh, 1999). For instance, the typical models aimed at mainstream parents might be ineffective in involving the parents of poor and minority children (McLaughlin & Shields, 1987). There exists "considerable evidence that a major impediment to home/school collaboration results from teachers' and parents' stereotypes, misconceptions, and lack of understanding of mutual needs" (Leitch & Tangri, 1988, p. 70). According to Finders and Lewis (1994), barriers that prevent parents from becoming involved in the schooling of their children are usually social, economic, linguistic, and cultural. Social barriers refer to the physical, emotional, or psychological distance between parents and teachers (Moore, 1990). Economic barriers often involve time, transportation, or money (Davis, 1991), while linguistic and cultural barriers often exist when the language and the values and beliefs of the parent are a mismatch with that of the school (Finders & Lewis, 1994).

Additionally, schools have to deal with the complexities of modern life as well as an increasingly diverse environment that some may not be adequately prepared to

address. In 1986, *Principal* published its first annual article on trends that affect public schools. In that article, Hodgkinson predicted the number of minority students enrolling in public schools would increase. This same prediction has been made almost yearly since (Snyder, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1998, 1999; Rubin & Borgers, 1991). In the September 2001 article, "Trends in Education", Snyder again predicted increases in the numbers and percentages of children from minority backgrounds over the next five years. Hispanic students "whose numbers are expected to rise by 12% during this period, will soon be the largest minority group in elementary schools" (p. 40). The number of Black, Asian, and Pacific Islander students is also expected to rise.

Minority student enrollment surpasses the predictions in Texas where they represent 57% of the public school student population. Student enrollment also reflects 43% from the Hispanic community and 14% from the Black community. In the district represented by this study, 64% are from the Black community, while 10% are from the Hispanic community.

Texas schools must be sensitive to and strive to address the linguistic and cultural differences of Black and Hispanic students. According to Silverstein and Krate (1975), schools that serve poor and minority Black students often have greater difficulty "building trust and agreement between the home and the school." When the parents of these students "sense neglect or exclusion or when their children have difficulty in school, they often send mixed messages to their children: school is hope; school is the enemy" (Comer, 1986, p. 444). These conflicting messages undermine the home-school connection, which unintentionally promotes poor achievement.

Because the diversity among students and their families brings new challenges to schools and families, teachers and schools need more preparation and more information (Lewis, 1996; Rubin & Borgers, 1991). According to Rubin and Borgers (1991),

teachers must be prepared to handle issues of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity with awareness and respect. . . Communication must become broader, with more emphasis on diverse families and cultures. Problem resolution by teachers and families working together must become the norm. (p. 12-13)

If all parents, including those who “live on the margins or outside the mainstream” (Comer, 1991, p. 186), are to become involved in the schooling of their children, teachers and administrators must be committed to the idea. They must be educated about the value of involving all parents and appreciate the willingness of most parents, regardless of social and economic status or culture, to become involved in their children’s education. They must also learn about specific parent involvement models that have been successful (McLaughlin & Shields, 1987).

### Statement of the Problem

When parents are meaningfully involved in the schooling process, everyone—children, parents, teachers, and schools—wins. The children get better grades and have higher test scores. They have better attendance and more positive attitudes and behavior. They have higher aspirations and more long-term academic achievement, and they are more likely to be successful in life. Parents, meanwhile, have improved self-images and more confidence in themselves, the teachers, and the school. Teacher morale is higher and schools are more effective (Davies, 1996; Epstein, 1986, 1992; Henderson, 1988a, 1988b; Lewis, 1996). Although many studies focus on the positive effects of parent

involvement as a whole, there is a paucity of research of successful models of African-American parent involvement practices in Title I schools. In fact, research examining African-American parent involvement frequently compares them to Caucasians or other people of color, and views toward their involvement tend to be negative (Gavin & Greenfield, 1988; Graue et. Al., 2001).

#### Purpose of the study

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to garner an understanding of successful practices that are culturally relevant and identify factors that contribute to parent involvement with African-Americans in an urban school district. In addition, this study sought to understand how two Title I schools in an urban school district are meeting the needs of African-American parents who desire to be involved in their children's education and to determine the levels of parent involvement that these practices foster among parents (Epstein, 1988; Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

#### Grand Tour Questions and Mini-Tour questions

Grand tour question and mini-tour questions were used to encourage informants to speak freely about their experiences. James Spradley (1979) points out, "The purpose of grand tour questions is to obtain a preliminary survey of the meaning system your informant is using as well as to acquire many different category labels." This information was the basis, along with personal observations, for most of the other questions asked. The grand tour question and mini-tour questions follow:

**What are the experiences of African-American parent involvement with Title I schools and their personnel that lead to successful partnerships?**



- How do stakeholders interpret parent involvement, and what motivates or constrains their practice?
- What are the levels of parent involvement in the African-American community?
- Do cultural differences have any impact in African-American parent involvement in an urban school district?

### Definitions

Over the last 50 years, the concept of parent involvement has broadened to include “parent/family involvement and school/family partnerships” (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider & Lopez, 1997). Both terms recognize the importance to the education and schooling of children by both parents and family member other than parents (Davies, 1993; Epstein, 1992). For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined.

Parent means any family member, including a blended or extended family member (Shartrand et al., 1997), or other adult who plays an important role in the child’s life (National PTA, 1998) or who contributes to the learning of the child and to his/her improvement in school (Shartrand et al. 1997).

Parent/family involvement in the education of children will be referred to as parent involvement, which will involve any or all of the definitions listed below as defined by Epstein (1988) and Epstein and Dauber (1991). Parent involvement is (a) active engagement of parents at home in support of their children’s social and academic development (Epstein), (b) consistent and effective communication between the school and the home (Epstein), (c) active engagement of parents at school either as supporters or as volunteers (Epstein), (d) active engagement of parents at home in activities coordinated with work that children are doing in their classrooms (Epstein), (e) active

engagement of parents in school improvement programs (Epstein), and (f) active engagement of parents with community organizations that share responsibility for the education and future of children (Epstein & Dauber).

#### Limitation/Delimitations

1. The study was limited to two schools in an urban school district in Texas.
2. With the exception of the selected schools, participation in the study was voluntary.

#### Significance

This study was significant because it sought to identify practices that are successful with African-American parent involvement in Title I schools. The research provides insights from school administrators, teachers, and parents. It afforded the opportunity to investigate how the interpretation of parent involvement was put into practice, and it highlighted levels of parent involvement in two specific African-American communities in an urban setting.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The old adage is true: “In order to know where we are to go in the future, we must first know from whence we came.” Parent involvement in schools is not a new topic in the educational arena. It is a component that has stood the test of time in federal policy but has been an underutilized resource in public education. Since the 1960s, there has been a focus for improvement of not only the conditions of impoverished minority children but their schooling as well. To gain an insight on the national initiatives currently influencing parent involvement, such as No Child Left Behind, it is important to look at the impetus that brought the current mandates to fruition. To adequately traverse the evolution of parent involvement in public schools it is imperative to investigate and develop a comprehensive understanding of it and how parents were involved before the national initiatives were given birth and to examine the impact of the Title I program on schools. The following discussion will (a) present an overview of how parents have been involved in public education and how policies have been enacted to increase and encourage further parent involvement, particularly from those parents and students of low-socioeconomic status, (b) examine parent involvement in African-American families and schools, and (c) provide evidence of how parent involvement impacts the educational outcomes of children.

## Pre 1965

Before the establishment of free public schools in this country, parents were the primary educators of children (Moles, 1993). The responsibility of passing on core values to the next generation belonged to the family unit. The role of the family as provider and educator was to remain in this static condition for many years (Lombana, 1983). Since there was a generally held belief in the importance of knowing how to read the Bible, parents usually ensured that their children learned how to read. However, as public schools became more available in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, parents became less involved in the schooling of their children (Bidwell & Dreeben, 1992).

When the source of income evolved from farms to factories, the Industrial Revolution further changed the dynamics that existed within families. The role of the mother and father as primary educators was no longer a viable solution, so schools were expected to fill the deficiencies that arose in the home environment (Rioux & Berla, 1993). Since the beginning of free public schools, educators took on a growing number of responsibilities. In the past, schools were expected to be responsible for instruction in basic skills, while families were expected to instill moral values and promote social development (Moles, 1993). The emerging economy shifted the relationship between homes and schools with the primary burden of educating the child, intellectually, socially, and morally, falling upon the schools' shoulders.

To offset some of the tasks of educators, around the turn of the century parent organizations sprang up in the cities to deal with local issues of home-school relationships. Among these organizations were the National Congress of Mothers (NCM), whose mission was "to rouse the whole country to a sense of duty and

responsibility to childhood” (Birney, 1897). The (Parent Teacher Association) followed the NCM, and the associations were instrumental in creating playgrounds, school-lunch programs, better sanitation programs, expanded kindergartens, and other innovations (Butterworth). Though these groups held a strong sense of service and social responsibility, criticism came from wealthy taxpayers, who feared greater dependence among the poor, and from school officials who, preferring submissive and indifferent parents, often publicly praised the parent organizations but feared their encroachment on school decisions (Reese, 1978).

The 1930s brought an increased commitment from the federal government to educate the young through compulsory attendance laws, which lengthened the school year to a minimum of 172 days in all states. Parent control and involvement in their child’s education was lessening as the federal government was demanding more of the child’s time through schooling (Pulliam, 1982). These bureaucratic rules further eroded the personal connections between families and schools (Kagan, 1984). As public education became firmly established, most educators and many parents held the opinion that “schooling” and “family” were two unrelated entities that were in essence incompatible, competitive, and contentious (Parsons, 1959). Often educators believed their professional status was at risk if parents were allowed to share their responsibilities (Epstein, 1986).

## 1965 to Present

The 1960s brought an emphasis on children from impoverished backgrounds. War on Poverty programs focused on the lack of educational opportunities for all children as one of their primary issues. Parents were now seen as effective and necessary school supporters and were intentionally included in the schooling of their children (Gestwicke, 1987). Head Start and Follow Through were two intervention programs that arose out of the legislation, and parents were a key component. The federal programs, legislations, and regulations mandated by the government brought parent involvement to the forefront by recognizing that research indicated parent involvement had a positive influence on academic success (Zellerman, 1998). The passing of legislation increased research focusing on parent involvement showing its positive correlation with student performance; thus, more federal laws were passed mandating parent involvement as a component.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 provided funding for instructional supplies and services in elementary and secondary public and private schools. These legislative acts marked the inception of federally funded legislation linking parent involvement to education. Title I initiated the requirement that parents serve on school advisory boards and participate in classroom activities. The Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) became the formal mechanism to promote parents' roles in program planning, monitoring, and decision-making (Jennings, 2001). With the addition of PACs large urban school districts became the scene of intense struggles to place education decision-making in the hands of families in the belief that bureaucracies could

not deliver adequate services to poor and minority communities without parents' active participation (Moles, 1993). This legislation not only introduced the provision of funding to support educationally deprived children but also stressed the importance of involving parents with low-income students' parents in local programs.

Chapter I of the Education and Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981 replaced the Title I programs of 1965. With its ratification, parent meetings were only required once a year in Chapter 1 schools, and the parent-advisory council requirement was abolished. Some districts still continued to have PACs, but it was a local not federal, decision. Jay and Shields (1987) conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,000 school districts in 1985-1986, and their studies indicated that parents were rarely involved in evaluation and planning decisions, which could explain the dismissal of the PAC requirement from federal legislation.

The 1983 technical amendments revived parent involvement legislation. Local Education Agencies (LEAs) were required to hold annual meetings for parents to explain programs to parents. If parents requested other activities, LEAs were allowed, but not required, to use funds for these purposes. The Hawkins-Stafford Amendments built on the 1983 mandate. LEAs were required to involve parents in planning and implementation, provide parents information in understandable language, evaluate parent programs, and hold parent-teacher conferences. LEAs were encouraged to develop PACs and resource centers, and to expend funds for volunteers, liaison staff, and resources for home. These interventions were "suggested", although no additional federal funds were added for their implementation.

As research demonstrating the benefits of parent involvement grew, Title I was amended in 1988 to encourage schools to provide activities to actually help parents support their children's learning, such as providing materials for home-based learning and authorizing expenditures for home visits by parental liaisons, and the like. Governance and school volunteering remained important features of parent involvement, but training parents to be their children's "first teachers" assumed equal importance.

The 1988 amendments also created the Even Start family literacy program under the Title I umbrella. Even Start programs were designed to educate both young children and their parents, on the theory that educated parents are better equipped to produce educated children.

In 1994, the Elementary and Secondary School Act reauthorization, (called the Improving America's Schools Act), further strengthened parental involvement requirements. This reauthorization added the requirement for Title I schools to create compacts between the schools, parents, and students. It also established a spending floor for parent involvement, requiring districts receiving at least \$500,000 in Title I funds to spend at least one percent of those moneys for parent involvement activities. Family literacy activities like those funded under Even Start were made eligible for regular Title I funding if other reasonable sources of funds were exhausted. The 1994 amendments created a solid base emphasizing active involvement of parents in their children's education by setting aside funds to support the notion and mandating the development of school-parent compacts, which were formal agreements between the home and the school to induce commitment. Thus, departments of education, school districts, and schools that



had not previously developed and implemented parent involvement plans to comply with the new regulation had to do so.

Education was a popular topic in 1994 because during this time Congress also adopted eight National Goals for Education. The eighth goal called for increased parent and community support and involvement (National Education Goals Panel, 1995). The act set up federally funded state Parent Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs). The amendments believed that this addition would increase a collaborative relationship between the homes and schools by providing access to educational resources for parents to use at the schools and at home.

Even though the 1994 legislation made a few additions to foster a greater partnership between families and schools, many districts still lagged behind in the implementation. Many Title I schools were doing none, or only part of, what was required in the law. A 1999 education department report, *Promising Results, Continuing Challenges: The Final Report of the National Assessment of Title I*, which was the culmination of five years of studies, asserted that research supports the direction taken by the 1994 legislation; however, many schools have not made the commitment to support meaningful parent partnerships. The analysis concluded that school officials found compacts helpful in promoting desired behaviors, but compacts were used in only 75 percent of Title I schools, and parents were still not as involved with their schools as desired.

In another shift to increase accountability in schools, President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act into law in January 2001, which includes provisions that focus squarely on family and parental rights. The act requires each school district

that receives Title I funds to implement programs, activities, and procedures for the involvement of parents. According to the Act, school districts must meaningfully consult with parents of children participating in Title I programs in planning and implementing such programs, activities, and procedures. In carrying out the parental involvement requirements school districts and schools, to the extent practicable, must provide full opportunities for the participation of parents with limited English proficiency, parents with disabilities, and parents of migratory children, including providing information and school reports in an understandable format and, to the extent practicable in the parent's home language. The State Education Department must review the school district's parental involvement policies and practices to determine if the policies and practices meet federal requirements.

Each school district must develop jointly with, agree with, and distribute to parents of participating children, a written parent involvement policy that must be incorporated into the district's plan. Specifically, the plan must describe how the district will involve parents in the joint development of the district's NCLB plan and the process of school review and involvement. The Act also requires the policy to include other provisions such as: (1) how the district will provide coordination, technical assistance, and other support necessary to assist participating schools in planning and implementing effective parent involvement activities to improve student academic achievement and school performance, and (2) how it will coordinate and integrate parental involvement strategies with parent involvement strategies under other programs, such as Head Start, Reading First, Early Reading First, and Even Start. The district must also conduct, with the involvement of parents, an annual evaluation of the parental involvement policy, use

the findings of the evaluations to design strategies for more effective parental involvement, and revise, if necessary, the parental involvement policy.

### Summary

The national initiatives over the past century have increasingly acknowledged and stressed the crucial role that parents play in their children's education. It was not until the 1960's, with the focus on the at-risk population, that the federal government began instituting national initiatives to mandate parent involvement as a primary means of improving student learning.

Unfortunately, research on the impact of parent involvement on student performance was limited during this time period. Research that was conducted on Black families, and on achievement and underachievement among racial groups in general, traditionally followed a "cultural-deficit" model. This model was explained by "culture of poverty" theories that contended Black families and their communities were fraught with elements of cultural deprivation, inadequate socialization, antisocial cultural practices, and so forth (Coleman et al, 1966; Jencks et al., 1972; Moynihan, 1965). The policies that were enacted were drafted with middle-class values that focused on the deficiencies of families and ignored their strengths.

The national initiatives have evolved to realize the important contributions that all families have to offer; however, even in light of the NCLB legislation, states, districts, and schools still lag behind in implementation. Arguably, it remains an enigma to understand the complexities involved with increasing the collaboration between the home

and the school. A further look into the African-American experience could possibly provide a rationale.

### **Black Families and School Achievement**

Most parents value education for their children; however, the aspirations of African American parents have been described as culture-specific, compelling, and passionate (Lightfoot, 1981). Living in America, the African-American family has overcome many adversities, and education has been seen as the primary means of achieving a better life. Historically, slaves used education as the paramount strategy for liberation, often times risking life and limb to prepare them for a free life experience (Irvine, 1990). Subsequently, the belief in the power that education entailed gave many parents the motivation and drive to ensure their children had a better experience than their own had been, a trend that still occurs in the present day.

If African-American parents genuinely have the passion cited in the literature, why does parent involvement in this community continually lag behind? Perhaps the history of the black school experience can create a picture of the complex relations that have developed over time in American public schools. Three areas in this section will help probe this complex relationship between African-American homes and schools: (1) the historic problems that have defined the relationships black families have with schools, (2) the theory of a cultural mismatch between schools and the black families, and (3) evidence of the practices and the achievement orientations of African American families that impact student attitudes and achievement.

## Historical Implications

Honing (1987) stated “that black parents overwhelmingly support high standards, tough courses, and more homework for their children, and they realize that the ability to compete, both in school and in the job market, is the greatest chance for their children’s lifelong success.” This belief has been ingrained in many African-American hearts and minds and resonates in how education has been sought after as an alleviator of poverty for many in this ethnic group. It is not a new phenomenon to hear how Black families value educational success. It can be traced back to slavery times when education was seen to possess almost “mystical qualities” because of the many roadblocks put up for Blacks not to receive this resource (Blassingame, 1972).

Once Blacks were free, they pursued many extraordinary and relentless routes to education, frequently utilizing abolitionists and clergymen to help them make a smooth transition from slavery to freedom (Lightfoot, 1978). Free schools for blacks were created in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the north; the first and most well known was the Bell School in Washington, D.C. founded by three illiterate slaves: George Bell, Nicholas Franklin, and Moses Liverpool. They built the school with their bare hands and employed white teachers to staff it. Other black schools rose up during this time, but many failed to remain open. Although they were diligent, black parents were often financially unable to maintain their schools (Dubois, 1901). There was not a strong enough nor active enough support system to keep schools open in the Black community, but this did not deter parents from their struggle for their children to receive an equal education.

When Black parents had no alternatives to provide an education for their children in their communities, they attempted to enroll their children in white schools; history confirms they were met with much resistance to mixing the races at school (Lightfoot, 1978). The resistance was so relentless that many northern communities provided separate but unequal schools to the black students (Bond, 1966). It was quickly realized by parents that African-Americans would not be allowed the same equal education as whites. The widespread support of this practice was made even more evident when the Massachusetts Supreme Court in *Plessey vs. Ferguson* upheld the “separate but equal” doctrine in an answer to the petition of Black parents. This decision was the first of many that allowed the paradox to persist: a free and unequal public education in America for Black families.

The period following the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, which integrated schools, brought new dynamics into the relationships between homes and schools. With this decision, Black parents believed their children would have better educational and equal opportunities; however, in schools that did integrate<sup>1</sup>, black parents began to realize that although their children were physically in the same schools with white students, schools were neglecting to include their children totally in the learning process. The polite distance and civilized exchanges between communities and schools grew into angry outbursts of discontent and frustration (Lightfoot, 1978). Instead of uplifting the communities, integration divided the communities further. Black schools during the segregation era, although unequal financially, became a functional system that

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<sup>1</sup> Many states resisted integration and some schools didn't integrate well into the late 1970s (Irvine).

served as a protective mechanism to screen out harmful effects of racial diatribes hurled at its members from the larger, hostile society (Irvine, 1990).

The 1960s “War on Poverty” shifted the paradigm from schools to the home, explaining school failure as a result of a deficient home environment; this belief has persisted. As stated earlier, “culture of poverty” theories introduced by Coleman and others helped to increase the momentum of this discourse. The parent involvement policies did attempt to bring parents into the schools, but they focused on parent training and attempting to create better home environments for the children instead of fostering solely the educational attributes of the children (Scott-Jones, 1993). The deficit ideology exemplified policymakers’ beliefs that an ineffective and deficient home life contributed to school failure by black and poor children. Some of these theories are still prevalent and can be heard from teachers and administrators today, but developing research has shifted the focus more to how parents can contribute to the area of student achievement and overall success.

The deficit view of black parents and families did contribute to the distrust of schools, but other conflicts in the schools contributed to the tension as well. Some authors argue that a cultural mismatch exists that plays a role in the rift between the black family and school, thus affecting the success of students.

### Cultural Synchronization

There are many reasons that parents are not involved in schools as they may like to be. Jacqueline Irvine (1990) developed a theory of “cultural synchronization” for

describing the tenuous relationship between homes and schools. She bases her theory on anthropological and historical research that advances the finding that Black Americans have a distinct culture founded on identifiable norms, language, behaviors, and attitudes from Africa. This theory has relevance because during the first years of integration (and now) students experienced classrooms where the teachers and administrators are different from them in numerous categories. She argues that when individuals have a different cultural frame of reference, their behaviors and interactions can take on a variety of meanings depending on whose lens one is utilizing.

Cultural misunderstandings between teachers, students, and parents result in conflict, distrust, hostility, and possible school failure for black students (Irvine, 1990). The theory of a lack of synchronization of cultures is evident in Lareau and Horvat's (1999) research of race relations in an urban school. Their ethnographic study in this urban community discovered that black parents experience moments of inclusion and exclusion in dealing with their children's schools. They assert that race is an independent factor in examining relationships that exist in urban schools. Their study revealed that many Black parents, given the historical legacy of discrimination in schools, couldn't presume or trust that their children would be treated fairly in school. At the time their children enter school, African-American parents encounter rules of the game in which educators define desirable family-school relationships based on trust, partnership, cooperation, and deference. Their outcomes revealed that parents who accepted the schools' authority and expressed empathy with the difficulty of the staff's work were praised, while parents who were opinionated and outspoken about the welfare of their children were treated with contempt. From the lack of cultural synchronization, we can



postulate that it is difficult for black parents to find a balance and equal partnerships with schools.

Students' experiences in the schools also contribute to the relationship that can evolve between parents and teachers. Some teachers lower their expectations based on the race of the child, the income of the child's family, the gender of the child, and the child's appearance (Oakes, 1988). Sometimes these perceptions equate to what Brophy (1893) termed self-fulfilling prophecies, which put these students at a tremendous disadvantage before they get a chance. If it is the perception of parents that teachers do not care or do not believe that their child can be successful, conflict can ensue. Most children are their parents' most prized possessions, and if the parents feel their children's teachers do not have faith in their children's ability, they are less likely to form a relationship conducive to the students' success in school.

Brice Heath presents an example of how language differences in the manner in which middle-class white teachers question black and white students presented different reactions from the students in her book *Ways With Words*. In her study, she provided an example of a teacher posing the question, "Would you like to sit down now?" The *Mainville* (Middle-class white) student she observed interpreted the question as meaning they needed to sit down now, while the *Trackton* (low-socioeconomic black) student perceived it as meaning they had an option of sitting or continuing whatever they were doing at the time. This type of interaction can explain why such a high number of minority students are reported to have major behavior problems: the misinterpretation of student behaviors by the teacher. When parents have to respond to incidents such as this, many times they perceive the incidents as trivial and bordering on harassment. Such

misunderstandings do little to foster a closer relationship; rather, they increase the rift in the desired partnership.

John Ogbu (1990) contends that differences in school success and in parental attitudes and expectations regarding education among ethnic groups are attributable to their relative positions in the “status-mobility system” of modern societies. He differentiates between autonomous, immigrant, and castelike minorities groups in the United States. American Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and American Indians are castelike groups, Ogbu notes, in that they have been involuntary subordinated, both politically and economically, by the dominant (white) group. He asserts that the adult members of the involuntary groups develop different, largely negative, cultural attitudes towards the dominant ideology, and those attitudes are transmitted to their children. Because of negative experiences, Ogbu contends, it is harder for involuntary groups to assimilate into the mainstream than it is for voluntary immigrants who come to America willingly seeking the ideological “American Dream”. In schools, this could explain why some parents are uncomfortable coming to schools and participating in activities the school define as parent involvement.

### Black Family Practices and Achievement Ideology

The studies of Clark (1983) and Ford (1993) furthered the discourse in identifying similarities in Black families that could transcend racial and cultural lines. The queries identified factors in the home that would contradict what earlier researchers found as deficiencies in the African-American home. Although some agree that there is a cultural

mismatch when most minority students enter school, many assert that the studies of Ford and Clark highlight similarities in the homes of students that give a broader perspective. Clark addressed the characteristics and practices that describe families of high and low achieving students, while Ford addressed the impact of achievement orientation of parents on student attitudes and performance in school.

Clark's (1983) ethnographic study demonstrated that among poor Black families there were considerable differences in family process variables among high- and low-achieving students. On one hand, parents of high achievers engaged in frequent parent-child dialogue, strongly encouraged academic pursuits, established clear and consistent limits, and had warm and nurturing interactions with their children. Low achievers, on the other hand, hailed from families in which success equaled survival, in which parents perceived themselves as powerless regarding their children's school performance, attributed problems to outside forces, and expressed chronic despair and hopelessness. His study demonstrated that it is not just marital status, education level, income, or social surroundings that define whether a student will be successful or not, but the beliefs and practices of their families that contributed to their accomplishment in schools. His case study portrayed a different picture than previous studies that blamed the home exclusively for student failure in school.

Ford (1993) continued this line of inquiry by investigating the achievement orientation of Black students as a function of perceived family achievement orientation. Her study examined the perceptions of 148 fifth and sixth graders in a predominately Black community to ascertain to what extent family orientation and family demographic variables influence underachievement and achievement among black urban students. In

her findings, she discovered that when family or parent achievement orientation was examined, the findings were quite different from the results of the demographic variables, pointing to a greater influence of family achievement orientation on achievement orientation of Black students. To sum up, children who strongly agreed that their parents consider school and gifted programs important were more optimistic and more supportive of the achievement ideology. Her findings were consistent with Clark's earlier study, which found positive ideologies in the homes of high achieving students.

### Summary

That African-American parents desire success for their children is beyond dispute. As is true for most cultures, there are different beliefs and levels of involvement that take place in different families. The deficit view continues to have an impact on how Blacks and other minorities are received in schools, but if it remains to be the defining factor that dictates the future success of minority children rather than emphasizing their strengths, there will continue to be a chasm between schools and Black families.

As argued above, there has been a cultural mismatch and a negative perception of African-American students and parents in public schools, but this does not mean that teachers and schools cannot be sensitive to the plight of the urban youth attempting to receive a quality education. If teachers have high expectations and make the effort to learn about the students and parents they serve, they can possibly foster a closer relationship with the school and home; however, this warrants further study. Clark and Ford demonstrated that Black parents, just like other parents, have ideologies that can

foster the success of their children, and teachers can tap into this resource with little effort. There is mounting evidence of why the relationship between the home and school needs to be closer, and numerous factors that hinder the achievement of such solidarity. The following section will bring to light the evidence that supports parent involvement in schools.

### **Benefits of Parent Involvement in Public Schools**

In recent years, a wealth of research has supported the belief that children do better in school when parents are involved (Epstein, 1985; Henderson, 1987). In fact, “parent involvement in almost any form appears to produce measurable gains in student achievement” (Henderson, 1988). According to Henderson (1988), there are many positive results from parent involvement. Specifically, students whose parents are involved get higher grades and higher test scores, have more long-term academic success, and have more positive attitudes and behaviors than students whose parents are not involved.

According to Epstein and Becker (1982), students whose parents are involved have better basic skills and access to a greater and more diverse variety of classroom materials. They also have additional enrichment activities provided by the parents that the teacher cannot provide. Finally, they have parents who have positive self-images.

Individual students and parents are not the only ones who reap the benefits of parent involvement. Schools with high parent involvement are more effective and have more successful programs than schools with low parent involvement (Epstein & Becker,

1982). In such schools, teachers realize that learning does not begin and end at the schoolhouse door. Rather, families are also sources and motivators of learning. In this context, the parent is seen as a necessary collaborator for the teacher and the school (Davies, 1996; Epstein, 1992)).

In 1987, the National Committee for Citizens' Education published *Parent Participation-Student Achievement: The Evidence Grows*, which documented over 80 studies, all of which supported parent involvement (Henderson, 1987). Henderson summed up the important conclusions derived from those studies:

1. The family provides the primary educational environment.
2. Involving parents in their children's formal education improves student achievement.
3. Parent involvement is most effective when it is comprehensive, long lasting, and well planned.
4. The benefits are not confined to early childhood or the elementary level; there are strong effects from involving parents continuously throughout high school.
5. Involving parents in their own children's education at home is not enough. To ensure the quality of schools as institutions serving the community, parents must be involved at all levels in the school.
6. Children from low-income and minority families have the most to gain when schools involve parents.
7. We cannot look at the school and home in isolation from one another; we must see how they interconnect with each other and with the world at large.

Henderson and Berla (1994) produced more "compelling research evidence" (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997) to support parent involvement. The opening statement in their book, A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement declared, "The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life" (Henderson & Berla, 1994). In fact, when parents are involved in key

roles, students are at their best; they achieve more, stay in school longer, and attend better schools.

After reviewing the research on parent involvement, Baker and Soden (1998), however, suggest that some types of parent involvement are more effective than others. They stress the importance of the early childhood years with an emphasis on literacy in the home by careful planning and awareness of “parental stimulation of the children’s language development, security of the parent-child attachment relationship, and parent involvement in preschool and early intervention programs” (p. 1). Later, children have higher academic achievement in school when their parents:

1. Continue to stress literacy in the home (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991);
2. Have high expectations for them while providing moderate support and supervision (Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1995; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998);
3. Monitor their homework and television viewing (Clark, 1993);
4. Participate in learning activities with their children at home (Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982);
5. Emphasize the effort of the child rather than the ability (Stevenson, 1983), and
6. Use authoritative rather than authoritarian parenting practices (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991).

When Thorkildsen and Stein (1998) researched parent involvement and its effects on children, they found that communication between the parent, the school, and the child

is also important to the child's success in school. They concluded, "parental expectations ... have the strongest possible correlation with achievement" (p. 19).

Through the years, responsibility for educating children gradually shifted from the parents and families to public school institutions. Years of study and research by Henderson (1987, 1988b), Epstein (1985, 1986, 1988, 1991, 1992), Davies (1991, 1996), Becker (1982), and others, however, support the concept that student achievement in school improves when parents are involved. In fact, teachers and the entire school, as well as parents, are positively affected by meaningful, on-going, parent involvement. Although the evidence is profound about the benefits of parent involvement and many schools and parents are working hard to establish and strengthen relationships, some still lag behind.

### Gaps and Conclusions

The history of parent involvement in American public schools has been wrought with conflict, particularly for African-American parents. The past experiences of many African-Americans with schools, legacies that have been passed down to their children, have done little to foster a closer relationship between the school and the home. However, the evidence of the positive impacts of parent involvement presents a strong argument for schools and families to build a collaborative relationship with one another.

The federal government added parent involvement to their national initiatives in 1965 to aid in the "War on Poverty" and has continued to recognize it as an important component of impacting Title I schools in the current No Child Left Behind policy of



2002. Even though the federal government has clearly stated its position, states, districts, schools, and parents still lag behind in building effective partnerships and in adhering to the policies enacted in the law. If parent involvement is as important and as effective as the legislators and researchers have argued, why has it continued to lag behind in many venues?

As an explanation, some researchers have highlighted the cultural mismatch of schools and home (Irvine, 1990), while others have identified other barriers impeding involvement: time, transportation, and parents' bad experiences in school (Finders & Lewis, 1994). These and other factors can cause apprehension in stakeholders who desire to be involved in the schools; nevertheless, the focus here is on the cultural issues that impede or foster effective parent involvement practices for African-Americans. Many studies have investigated factors in the school and in the home that have an effect on furthering or hindering parent involvement, but few studies or findings from a cultural lens reporting successful practices.

There have been many changes in schools and in the African-American community that impact the current generation. Schools today are facing the first generation who did not experience the civil rights movement and who have gone to school in the post segregation era. Since children in schools today did not face many of the struggles that their parents did, there is another set of dynamics impacting the cultural perspectives of students. Perhaps, future studies can evaluate how different cultural experiences in the same family impact the relationship between the parents, children, and the schools and if the current policy has had any impact on their increased or decreased involvement.

In this new era of investigating parent involvement, the questions need to change **from** a cultural perspective. With this new generation of African-American families, **some** questions elicit further investigation: (1) What are the concerns of families in this **new** generation? (2) How are the families involved at home? (3) How do families feel **about** being involved at school? These explorations have the potential to start a new **discourse** on investigating how parents and schools are working with one another in the **present** day.

## CHAPTER III

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, METHODS AND PROCEDURES

#### Introduction

African-American parents and relevant school personnel (principals, counselors, and teachers) were interviewed and observed throughout the 2004-2005 school year to assess how parent involvement was appropriated in their schools. Namely, this study sought to understand how the schools and families communicated and formed relationships with one another and how that contributed to student success. Documents such as past policies concerning parent involvement and district newsletters seeking parental participation were examined to help build a database of how the district attempted to interact with parents in the past.

In the sections below, I provided a rationale of why qualitative methodology was my approach of inquiry and then outlined the methodology used in this study, including the plan for interviews, participant observation, and document collection.

#### Methodological Rationale

##### Paradigm

Guba and Lincoln (1994) noted, “questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm” (p. 105). By this, the authors argue a methodological rationale needs to be situated within a paradigm to define a researcher’s worldview. In order to locate the mode of inquiry best suited to understand the phenomenon to be examined, I identified

the paradigm after examining my assumptions. Guba (1990, p. 17) defined a paradigm as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action.” For example, Bell (1992) offers a reminder of the lingering significance of racism and our inability to eliminate it from U.S. society in his book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, a revolutionary discourse which examines the impact of race throughout society. It was imperative that I evaluated my belief system while conducting this study in order to identify any preconceived notions that would influence not only my observations while researching, but also my interpretation of the data. I also identified my assumptions concerning epistemology, ontology, and methodology that dictated the selection of a paradigm.

Gloria Ladsen-Billings (2000) believes it is important to reinforce the concept of epistemology as more than “a way of knowing.” She argues that an epistemology is a “system of knowing” that has both an internal logic and external validity. To build on her point, there are many factors that impact how one sees or states a position about knowledge. Knowledge is subjective because it is filtered through the everyday life and experience of the individual. Knowledge development is also transactional because as Ladsen-Billings asserts, “the race, ethnicity, language, class, sexuality, and other forms of difference work to inform his or her relationship to knowledge and its production” (p. 266). I hold a transactional position in respect to epistemology; however, I needed to examine my understanding of how this knowledge influences reality.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) postulate that beliefs about ontology describe an individual’s perceptions of reality. Is reality an individualistic phenomenon, something defined for people by their communities? Or is reality shaped by social, economic, and cultural values crystallized over time? Or both? I believe that individuals construct their

views, but those views are heavily influenced by historical realities that have impacted their individual experience. Since I assert that an individual's environment shapes his views, I believe historical realism best matches my ontological position.

The choice of methodology follows epistemological and ontological perspectives where the relationship between the known and the knower impact one another throughout the inquiry in the development of knowledge. As Charmez (1991), argues, researchers must develop dialectical selves to gain a heightened awareness and recognize different nuances that affect research as they become more experienced in the field. Recognizing the mutual impact the researcher and subject have on each other, the position in this paper is a dialogic/dialectic methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

After examining personal assumptions, the paradigm consistent with these beliefs regarding ontology (historical realism), epistemology (transactional), and methodology (dialogic/dialectic) is critical theory. A critical theory paradigm addresses all of the assumptions, making it the best paradigm to conduct this inquiry.

Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) explain several frameworks within the critical theory paradigm. Critical theory, according to these authors, involves a dialectical concern with the social construction of experience. These disciplines are viewed as manifestations of the discourses and power relations of the social and historical contexts that produced them. Carspecken (1993) argues that it is crucial that researchers recognize where they are ideologically located in the normative, and identify claims of others and, at the same time, be honest about their own subjective referenced claims and not let normative evaluation claims interfere with what they observe. The task here was to

understand the experiences of African-American families as they interact with schools and to acknowledge subjective assumptions as they arose.

### **Method**

The choice of inquiry for this study was qualitative research because it is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices to make the world visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). A qualitative method allows for “rich descriptions” of phenomena (Geertz, 1973) that promote a more in-depth view of how context variables interact. The intent was to understand how school personnel and parents interact with one another and to comprehend how their beliefs and social and personal experiences impact their practices.

Qualitative research places greater importance on the individual’s point of view (Becker, 1994). This researcher followed a set of assumptions; however, the focus was to understand experiences of the study participants and how they relate to their practice of parent involvement. As participant observer in two Title I schools, this researcher had the ability to collect field notes and visit research participants to better interpret their assessments of their everyday experiences. Similarly, interactions of parents in the school and their interpretations of parent involvement in the home offered further data for comparison. In qualitative inquiry, researchers tend to look again and again, and they evaluate the varying moods and times of both researcher and researched (Peshkin, 1988). This method allowed the data to emerge within its context and not my own. The grand question was asked of parents and school personnel: “What are your experiences in interacting with the school (or parents)?” To establish the need for personal responses

(Spradley, 1979) asking the grand question allows the researcher to discover background on the individual and allows the subjects to relax by easing them into the interview situation.

Practitioners of qualitative research share a commitment to understanding the complexity of the phenomenon of interest to them (Peshkin, 1988). Parent involvement in schools is a phenomenon that has been studied by class, gender, race, and by different disciplines, including education and sociology. However, there is a paucity of research literature that examines the successful experiences of African-American families with schools and how these relationships translate into student success. Qualitative research provided the opportunity to explore parent involvement in low-socioeconomic schools, and it provided further insights from the perspectives of African-American families and the school personnel who interact with them.

Qualitative methods have been utilized previously in parent involvement research. Lareau and Horvat (1999) explored how African-American parents experience moments of inclusion and exclusion in their children's schools. Their observations demonstrated how lower class African-American parents lack the cultural capital to interact with schools constructively, while middle class parents were equipped with the cultural capital to communicate with school personnel and demand a voice in their children's education. Clark (1983) also examined the practices in the home that contributed to or hindered African-American students' success or failure in schools. As these researchers demonstrate, qualitative methods are useful to explore parent involvement in and out of school. Qualitative methodology enabled me to understand the experiences and practices

of African-American parents and Title I school personnel that contribute to student success.

### Participant Observation

Participant observation was used in this study because it provided the opportunity for acquiring the status of “trusted person.” It allowed firsthand information and observation in how the actions of others corresponded to their words, to see patterns of behavior, to experience the unexpected as well as the expected, and to develop a quality of trust with others that motivated them to tell me what they otherwise may not (Peshkin, 1992). By acting as a participant observer, I had opportunities to observe many nuances that may not be captured by the casual observer. This rite of entry opened doors for me in the schools that may have been locked had I not been allowed to become one of them (my participants).

Through participant observation, I sought to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange (Erickson, 1973). Much became routine for me in my role as teacher and administrator. Absence from the schools gave time to look more keenly at behaviors both routine and not that could have had a detrimental or helpful effect on parent involvement in the schools, observations perhaps not seen before. The participant observer systematically experiences and consciously records in detail the many aspects of a situation (Peshkin, 1992). Field notes gathered from time spent in the setting helped in developing and understanding perspectives. As Peshkin argues, participant observation allowed me to understand the research setting, its participants, and their behavior.



## Document Collection

Documents corroborate the researchers observations and interviews and thus make his findings more trustworthy. They may raise questions about his hunches and thereby shape new directions for observations and interviews (Peshkin, 1992). By examining past parent involvement policies, newsletters, and other forms of communication that the school district utilizes to build the link between school and home, I garnered a background knowledge which allowed me to move forward in examining patterns or methods that were or were not have been successful. Although I used participant observation, I was aware of Peshkin's assertion that the document collection provided me with historical, demographic, and sometimes personal information that was unavailable from other sources.

Documents add both historical and contextual dimensions to the researcher's observations and interviews. They enrich what he sees and hears by supporting, expanding, and challenging his portrayals and perceptions (Peshkin, 1992). In addition, the document collection was an assistance in establishing trustworthiness in the research by corroborating the data collected during interactions with the study participants.

## Interviews

Fontana and Frey (2001) assert that interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways we try to understand our fellow human beings. Kvalve (1996) defines qualitative research interviews as "attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations." As a qualitative researcher, the intent was to understand

and bring meaning to the experiences of the study's participants. Interviewing allowed discourse with the individuals enabling this researcher to extract more personal information with which to more effectively conduct the study at hand.

Qualitative researchers state that the focus of interviews is to move to understand what people are doing as well as how they are doing them in their lives (Ciourel, 1964; Dingwall, 1997; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Kvale, 1996; Sarup, 1996; Siedman, 1991; Silverman, 1993, 1997a). The aim was to discover how individuals appropriate meaning from their practices. The interview helped in understanding the perspectives of individuals working towards parent involvement and how they collaborated with one another. In the interviews, during multiple interactions, the use of probing questions elicited broader information concerning the beliefs, values, and practices of the participants.

Interviews are interactional encounters and the nature of the social dynamic of the interview can shape the nature of the knowledge generated (Fontana & Frey, 2001). Having an outsider persistently probing into the lives of participants impacted what could be uncovered. However, time, the development of trust, and having a shared culture with the participants enabled this researcher to discover an understand and to add to the body of knowledge of parent involvement in African-American families.

### Participants

Participants for this study were purposely selected from two Title I schools within an urban district in the southern United States. The schools selected were economically disadvantaged (Title I), had a high African-American population, demonstrated academic

success, and deemed successful in involving parents by the school district. The following school personnel participated:

- Both principals, assistant principals, or counselors from 2 selected schools
- Teachers from the two schools that were observed
- Parents at 2 selected schools

School personnel provided me with insight about school practices and how they actively worked to get parents involved; also, they helped identify any barriers that hindered their interaction with families.

Four families from the two identified schools were selected to provide insights from the home and how parents interact with the schools. From purposely selected classrooms, I sought economically disadvantaged families that the teachers identified as successful in their volunteer involvement. A letter was provided to parents to describe the study and to share with them how their participation contributed to the study's success and to their children's academic success. Also, all parent events were attended that provided a short synopsis of the study to families interested in participating in this study.

### Conclusion

As Denzin and Lincoln point out (2001), qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is being studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. To understand how African-American parents and low-socioeconomic schools appropriate parent involvement, I perceived that qualitative inquiry affords the best opportunity to bring meaning to the experiences of these participants. Through the methods of participant

observation, documentation, and qualitative interviewing, This study furthers the discourse to understand the ways African-American parents engage successfully in Title I schools.

## Chapter IV

### Study Setting and Data Results from

#### Jackson Elementary: A Community School

*"I would argue that the degree of mismatch between expectations of child, parent and state are at the heart of most parenting problems today. Parents are being asked to do a job without any job description."*

*M. J. Campion (1995) from Who's Fit to be a Parent?, Routledge*

This study sought to discover, through participant observation and interviews, the educational perceptions of parent involvement from two Title I schools that serve high populations of African-American students and families. The results presented provide a brief description of the participants and their community, content of interviews from the schools' staff and families are then presented. Results of the constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which examined the gathered information provided by the individual school participants and family cohorts, are also presented. Three themes emerged in the first set of findings: high expectations from the school and community, positive influence of community affiliations, and the leaders' influence on school culture.

With the use of the progressive, regressive, stability method to reveal narrative constructs, the following stories emerged and are demonstrated in this chapter: (1) high expectations from the school and community, (2) community support and opportunity, and (3) leadership influence in parent and community involvement. Expectations from the school and community focused on learning and the high levels of involvement parents exhibited despite living in poverty stricken neighborhoods and single-parent homes or lacking in equitable resources. Stories were revealed that demonstrated the impact of

community organizations upon the schools and neighborhoods. Finally, the analysis of the influence of the school leaders focused on the parent, teacher, and community relationship and how they made these participants work together. These stories have a ping-pong or reciprocal effect whereby the communities and schools overlap and influence each other.

### **The Participants and Their Community:**

#### **Rolling Hills City in Davis County**

The drive to Rolling Hills in Davis County from Houston was challenging. The long stretches of highways along picturesque farms, old rivers, and lakes heralded an area much different from Harris County in both size and economic development. Nevertheless, Rolling Hills is an inviting place to be. The area reflects development where because the county is trying to attract more businesses and people. Growth is reflected in the 2.5 million dollar entertainment complex found just off the main highway, which county officials hope will attract entertainers and bring additional income and jobs to the area.

Once I reached Davis County, I was awed by its breathtaking beauty. The surrounding farmlands on the outskirts were full of harvested crops and an occasional biplane could be seen flying over the fields. A small portion of the county is farmland but most of the residents live in the county seat of Rolling Hills. Rolling Hills reflects a population of almost 60% of the county's more than 250,000 residents. It is the home of the largest chemical producers in the area and the plants which stretched across miles

employ a large percentage of the population. Other businesses were evident along the highways and in different parts of the city, attesting to the push for economic development.

The city is laid out in quadrants. The west end of town is the most affluent and progressive with businesses rising up daily; the east side, on the other hand, shows signs of deterioration and neglect, and the north and south sides, which are the oldest, reveal depressed and downtrodden communities. Although there is some glimmer of improvement in the north and south areas, these communities are still the least desirable for those seeking a place to raise a family. A sightseeing tour of the city further magnifies the contrasts between these quadrants: west and east side's streets are paved with concrete, while those of the north and south sides are covered with blacktop. The city has opened new night clubs in an effort to rebuild the downtown area. While this has resulted in diversifying the choices for recreation, it offers little promise for new jobs. Most residents of the city drive many miles to the shopping mall located on the west side of town; there are few stores in the other sections of the city.

Historically, Rolling Hills was a segregated city, not surprising since it is situated in the Deep South. The school district did not truly become integrated until the late seventies and early eighties when two school districts combined to form Rolling Hills Independent School District. In the early years, race relations in Rolling Hills were extremely strained with primarily white citizens dominating the governing bodies and the economy. However, over the last 15 years changes have occurred. The city elected its first black mayor and a diverse city council, with members representative of the White,

Hispanic, and Black populace, and the school district's African-American superintendent oversees a diverse body of administrators, teachers, and students.

Two schools from the district will provide a window for observation of the community and its role in the educational system of Rolling Hills.

### Jackson Elementary

Jackson Elementary, the first of the two Title I schools presented in this study is located in an impoverished community in the Gulf Coast area of Southeast Texas. Because the community is situated near two major chemical refineries and one of the major ship channels along the coastline, the smell of chemicals and the sounding of whistles from the shipyard are mainstays. The Jackson community consists of abandoned houses and buildings and occasional glimpse of drug deals taking place on corners.

Jackson Elementary has a front entrance but no driveway. It is situated on a corner of a very narrow but well-maintained street. There is a small church in front of the building and a brand new community center around the corner from the school. Upon entering the building one can see and feel the history of the school and the pride that the community has invested in its well-being. Originally, Jackson was one of two high schools in the African-American community in the early and middle 1900s, and there are plaques and portraits of past and current administrators that showcase its deep heritage. A flight of stairs leads visitors to the front office where they sign in and are greeted by staff. The office is usually quiet except for the occasional children, parents, and teachers



traversing in and out. The school's receptionist, principal's secretary, and parent facilitator are housed in the front office at adjoining desks. Teachers' mailboxes are also found in the front office, which tends to promote occasional bursts of activity. The principal's office is to the right of the mailboxes and, although her door is usually open, she is rarely in her office. She can usually be found walking the halls or moving in and out of various classrooms. The secretary, receptionist, and parent facilitator (hired by the principal to encourage parent involvement) – who range in age from 26 to 38 - are usually dressed professionally except on Fridays when they wear their school spirit shirts. The office wall is dominated by plaques and certificates the school has received for being recognized as an exemplary campus and from business partners and community leaders throughout the city.

Jackson was built in the thirties and has served as a high school, middle school, and elementary school. The classrooms are located in three long indoor hallways that are lined with lockers that are no longer in use. There is a large auditorium in the middle of the school, a cafeteria, and gymnasium. The school's 417 pre-kindergarten through fifth grade students are 92.1% African-American, 6% Hispanic, and 1.9% White. 91% of the students qualify as Economically Disadvantaged and are on free or reduced lunch according to federal guidelines. The school's 20% mobility rate is slightly lower than the state average.

### Initial Observations/School Climate

Observation of the school began on August 20, 2004 at Goals Night, the school district's version of Open House and a first time to view how parent meetings were conducted and the level of parent involvement. Involvement of the school's business partners was readily apparent; they provided bicycles, embellished warm-up suits and laptop computers during the year to students who performed at the highest level on the state exam. This generous display of support from the partners and others is a testament to the hard work and persistence of the school's principal who actively seeks partnerships with the business community; her efforts have been rewarded with the acquisition of 7 partners for the 2004-2005 school year. This meeting was about celebration. Additionally, it was also about informing parents about the school's curriculum, state tests, school expectations, and parents' rights and responsibilities. Judging from the parents' reactions to the events presented for the evening, the 300 parents at this meeting (mothers and fathers) appeared to be excited about what the school was doing and the projected goals. The standing room only crowd who remained until the final agenda item was completed was a testament to the efforts of the Jackson staff.

A further tour of the school revealed several posters and signs with various affirmations highlighting the school and its stakeholders: *Jackson Students Are the Best* and *Jackson and Charlton Pollard Sticking Together Creates Exemplary Students*. It is important to note that the Charlton Pollard Neighborhood Association has been a driving force in improving and empowering this once undesirable community, and its office is

actually housed in the elementary school. This organization will be addressed later in this chapter.

Two classrooms and multiple events at the school involving parents were observed throughout the first semester of school. Examples of parent involvement at the school ranged from parents volunteering in their children's classrooms (working with individual children and groups) to parents interacting with other parents at evening socials consisting of activities such as athletic events and family nights. The school was very creative in organizing events that motivated parents to come out, such as *TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) and Touchdowns*, during which fathers and their children received academic training and an evening meal; they were later treated to a high school football game at the local high school. Parents were seen during the school day easily interacting with administrators, teachers, and students, possibly due to the family-friendly atmosphere which the school embraced.

As in most schools, discipline concerns were present at the Jackson, though they were at a minimum. To address serious problems, parents and teachers worked together, thus strengthening the home-school connection. Teachers' records revealed regular communication with parents either by phone or daily notes. Teachers did not bombard parents with only negative complaints; they made an effort to balance the negative comments with positive ones, thereby promoting goodwill. Also, the principal required teachers to stand at the student drop-off/pick-up point during dismissal, which offered many parents the opportunity to speak with their children's teacher if they needed to do so.

## Leadership

This section reveals the investigation of the meanings, perceptions, practices, and impact of parent involvement as viewed by the administration of Jackson Elementary. As the data collection progressed, it became evident that the administrator's beliefs and practices were an integral part of the school's culture, and she had a determination to instill this belief in her staff and parents. These beliefs and philosophies of the administrator are presented in her own words.

### *Mrs. Woods*

The principal assumed the helm at Jackson in the 1999-2000 school year and her leadership made an immediate impact on student achievement, parent involvement, and overall school culture. The school's attendance rate was high, but student performance was low because of its location in a low socio-economic community, Jackson was not a desirable site for many teachers to practice their profession. When Mrs. Woods came, she immediately assessed the strengths in the community and began to build from them. She is energetic and positive about finding ways to make differences in the lives of her students. When asked to describe how she tapped into resources, she stated:

*We're the only campus with a neighborhood association, especially one housed in the building. It gives us in-roads to the community, in-roads to businesses, and all that will support us in our mission. We have seven business partners, including Exxon-Mobil and McDonald's, and we're working on our eighth. We have meetings here, parent meetings, community meetings, and state focus*

*meetings because we have a variety of resources that can help us accomplish our goals. They make things happen; they make things happen for us.*

Rather than seeing the community as a deterrent, she recognized it as a tool to not only empower the school but also the community. By recruiting strong teachers and by the help of the community (helping in the classroom, publicizing events, hosting block parties), Mrs. Woods and Jackson Elementary began to experience positive changes: rising achievement scores, improved staff attendance, and waiting lists for teachers and students. Mrs. Woods explained what makes the major difference in Jackson's continuing improvements in this way:

*Success. Success. You can't argue success. We're very successful, as I said before, top exemplary campus, recognized campus with TAKS. And it's because of the high levels of parent involvement. It's because of the Neighborhood Association being so involved with our children. It's because of the way we think, of the way we do things. It's not traditional. It's no way traditional. But it's successful. And you just can't beat success.*

Mrs. Woods was quick to recognize the importance of everyone who contributed to Jackson's success, but she reserved a special place for parents. When asked to describe parents, she defined their involvement:

*Parent involvement is positive interactions with children. Often times parents mistake the impression that if they can't get into the school, if they are not at every PTA meeting, they're not involved, and there's no way that they can be involved, but that's just not so. We want to have our parents involved in the everyday school life, the actual school culture with their children, and so we*

*provide opportunities outside of the classroom. We provide extra curricular type activities for the children that the parents will be comfortable in participating; it's about positive parenting interactions.*

She further explained that a critical component of involving parents is making them feel a part of the process and recognizing their vested interest in their children's success.

*This is a school wide project; we make our parents aware of our goals here at Jackson Elementary, and then through that ownership, through them that come in as stakeholders in the entire process, they become involved in their children's education. We believe by coming in that our parents have invested interest in their children's success and that we are here for the academic success of the children. We adjust the whole child, and parents come in as a resource. We believe as a district as lead by our superintendent that if we provide time and resources, all of our children can compete with anyone, and an involved parent is a resource in this endeavor.*

Following initiatives from No Child Left Behind, Mrs. Woods endeavors to keep her parents at Jackson informed, but she does it in, as she would say, "untraditional" ways. For example, she explained creativity in utilizing activities:

*Extracurricular activities seem to be a carrot for the children, you see, and so we make the requirements for participation academic, in extracurricular activities academic performance, so we need to make the parents aware of what we are requiring academically so that they can have their children to participate, and its*

*much desired extracurricular type activities because first and fore most we're about academic activity.*

She further explained how these activities provide the school a vehicle to interact with parents and train them in various areas. Before their school basketball games, which run from October to March bi-weekly, they hold parent meetings and parents are exposed to various TAKS objectives and are taught how they can work on different things in the home.

Although Mrs. Woods and the Jackson staff do a lot to involve parents, she realizes there are obstacles; therefore, she tries that much harder to get these parents to take an active role in their children's educational experience. She explains her secret here:

*The secret is to make it something that the parents are comfortable with. Often times you may have parents who may have baggage from their experiences in school. Maybe there is something that provides some apprehension on their part. But we dispel those kinds of myths because the fact of the matter is that we need our parents here to accomplish what we are trying to accomplish. We cannot do it without our parents, and that's made clear to the, at functions like Open House, and you will hear that at Open House. But the thing is to do those kinds of things that are interesting to our parents. For example, we have kite flying day in our science department, and the back field is full of students and their parents after they create their product. We have an OSCAR celebration - Outstanding Students Comprehending Accelerating and Reading, and we do a spin off of the red carpet.*

*We acknowledge the highest readers and take them to lunch with their parents in limousines from the red carpet.*

One characteristic about Mrs. Woods that stood out was her persistence, as evidenced by the number and eagerness of the school's business partners to sponsor some of the activities the school promotes such as the OSCAR celebration. She believed they helped level the playing field for students in Jackson's community. She was proud that these partnerships were not token:

*They benefit the students' academic performance. It's all about academics. So they've got to come in, and we talk about where we need to go with our kids, what needs to be done. With the TAKS test, it's a more rigorous standard that has to be met, and sometimes, we'll need help in providing the visual aids that the kids may need to grasp the idea that the teacher assigns an importance to the kids. They come in and volunteer in classrooms. Sometimes we may need to provide rewards. Kids aren't so intrinsically, you know, motivated at this time. So we have to motivate them extrinsically. So we may have to put out a reward for performance and that type of thing until they can grow to the point of knowing, "I'm gonna do this because it's the best thing that I can do for myself," you see. And that helps us to get the kids focused and to make them work. Because we've got to make them think that this is, and we do, the best show in town. Work the curriculum; Come to school; Don't miss a day in school. We have the kids show up because we have something fun, and so we've got to pull that together and make them feel that we are well organized, we are well prepared to impart this*



*knowledge to them. An education is the ticket for them to change their lives, and our business partners help us.*

In order for the initiatives at the campus level to be effective, communication with the home is key. It is important to have wonderful things going on at the campus with the help of the school, business partners, and community organizations, but it is just as important for the parents to find out about these events. The principal explained how the school communicates with the home:

*We feel that children are the ambassadors, and we encourage our children, we reward our children, you know, for getting our messages home to our parents, we provide newsletters and, from the campus, on a monthly basis. The Title I program provides newsletters that are sent home to the parents. This year those newsletters and reports will be included in the report card, each six week period. We make phone calls to the parents, as well, to keep them involved. And we move about the campus. I, the counselor, and our parent facilitator move about and talk to our parents as they enter the building. We're a neighborhood school, and many of our parents are responsible for transportation for the children. So they're here with us, and so we talk with them as they come in. They're very comfortable with meeting with us and having breakfast with us, or coming in for lunch, and that type of thing. And we use that opportunity to ask, "Are you signed up?" "Did you know this was coming?" "Did so-and-so tell you?" And you know, if they hadn't known about it, we're gonna get to that kid that wasn't that involved with us! And so we make that happen.*

In addition to using the children as ambassadors for broadcasting events, the school partners with the neighborhood association, which uses word of mouth and the school district's Channel 7, which is broadcast to every home. A marquee is also prominently displayed in front of the school, keeping parents up to date with events at the school.

The Principal's philosophy concerning Jackson and its parent involvement in the success of the students is evident in her persistence, her positive stance in the school, and a never quit attitude, a philosophy she embraces despite the school's negative stereotypical image in the outside community. She sums it up eloquently:

*That's why we stand as an exception to the rule. You see? Because if it can be done at Jackson, people really believe that it can be done! You see? They're just not giving lip service to this. But, in knowing that, we're dealing with issues of poverty that often times other campuses aren't faced with. So you have to take that as a factor in your campus planning, and we do. You see? And I think that has led us to think the way we think. To go beyond the traditional, to something more creative, more resourceful and everything. Because we can't allow poverty to determine our success. We just simply can't. This is something that has to be factored in in our mission of accomplishing the goals that fortify our district. You see? Often times we have families with single parent households. Sometimes grandparents are leading the households. Sometimes the parents are asking for support in how they can help the child. You know, and we've got to do that. Often times we may have families who don't need that kind support. People who don't need that kind of empowerment. But often times we do need that for our families,*

*so we have to provide that. It's just not a matter of us knowing about it, and thinking that we can't do anything to impact that. Yes, we can. So we're close enough to our people, our families, and our community to know what's needed to level the playing field. Cause see now when we level the playing field, bring on the TAKS. Bring on the competition, and we're going to excel. But first, we've got to level the playing field. We don't let pot holes and cracks and obstacles defeat our purpose. We level the playing field.*

### Teachers

To garner an understanding of perceptions and practices of parent involvement held by teachers at Jackson Elementary, classrooms were visited on Goals Night and during special events held throughout the first semester of the school year. During my observations, I noticed that teachers practiced an open door policy with parents and encouraged them to come in and get involved in their children's classroom. Some of this involvement included volunteering in the classroom, bringing food on holidays, decorating the classroom and campus or supporting campus events by showing up. Throughout the study, teachers and parents seemed extremely comfortable interacting with one another: some teachers and parents had each others numbers saved in their cell phones. The teachers would call parents to either praise students, ask for assistance with a behavior or academic problem, or to inform them of classroom or school happenings.

To show their support, the teachers followed the principal's lead by participating in the many activities going on at the school, such as attending Goals night and playing in

the annual baseball game against the parents. These teachers echoed the principal's words about the success the school has experienced and believed the parents make a difference through their efforts. Rather than speak negatively about their students, they expounded upon the potential they see in all of their students, and the impact they aimed to have in the students' lives. The teachers also described the parents as a resource and acknowledged that, even though all of the parents aren't involved, a majority of parents have some degree of participation in their children's educational experience. They recognized that there are many ways parents can be involved in their children's education. This section reports on investigation of the meanings, perceptions, and beliefs regarding the impact of parent involvement held by two teachers at Jackson Elementary. Through observations and interviews, their philosophies and practices are revealed as spoken by them.

### *Mrs. Troung*

Mrs. Troung, a third grade teacher at Jackson Elementary, was in her 13<sup>th</sup> year of teaching, seven of which had been served at Jackson. She taught in schools with similar demographics as Jackson, with high populations of African-American students in high poverty areas. She was a Vietnamese- born American who had been in the Southeast Texas area for about 20 years. According to her principal, Mrs. Troung was very effective in working with the students and parents in this community, effectively breaching any cultural differences. She was an upbeat teacher and always appeared to be full of energy and enthusiastic for her students and their successes in the classroom. She

believed in parent involvement as an important component of students' successes and had her own definition of what it meant to her.

*Parent involvement, to me, that's like parents getting involved in their child's education, working alongside with the school, the teacher, the principal, mainly just the school, the staff. Getting involved and knowing their child's education and what's going on.*

She expounded further about what she considered to be the ideal parent involvement moments in her classroom:

*My ideal situation, I would want the parents to step in, come and sit in the classroom and watch their child from time to time, come by and talk to me and ask questions. I always welcome questions; I love for parents to ask me questions. How can I improve my child in their work studies, anything? Just more involvement, seeing of their faces, having them come in for workshops, have strong attendance, being supportive when notes are sent home or something, or even when I write a note, they'll write something back to me. Because I know when a child sees their parents being here at the school, you can just see a light; their faces just shine, just seeing their parents here. I would love the parents be more involved. The child that really needs it, that's the parents that don't get involved. Most of the time, the good kids are ones you see more the parents of, but the ones that really need it, you don't see the parents.*

Mrs. Troung perceived the relationship between the home and the school as a partnership with the two entities helping each other; however, she did admit that she didn't see as much involvement as she would like:

*Okay. I see it as about 60% of the parents are involved. I mean the parents that are truly involved, they're the ones you see often at the school and wanting to know how their kids are doing. There are some you really don't ever see even though you make contacts, and you ask them to come to a conference that you never meet with. Overall, I think the school is at about a 60% to 40% split.*

From her comments, she perceived the parent-school relationship as successful and described her typical interactions with parents:

*Parent teacher conferences, we always hold workshops for parents to come in and just learn what we do as a school. I hold my own workshop in the classroom, having parents to come in and see the strategies that I teach in class. That way they can learn it and go home and can help their child, teaching them the strategies. So that's what I do. Like I said, I always open my door so parents can come in anytime of the day. They can sit in, watch they're child, watch me, watch me teach. Phone calls, I call them when there are problems, or you know, even when they're doing something good. That's about it and notes, send home notes, and I do an assignment sheet, I keep in contact with the parent everyday. The child does not do homework I make notes on it. Parents can always see if their child did their homework or not, and it's all on that assignment sheet, and it gets sent home everyday. They write notes back to me or I write notes to them.*

Mrs. Truong believed communication with parents was key to ultimate student success. Parents were not contacted for solely negative offenses, but positives ones as well. My perusal of the daily assignment sheets revealed that parents did read the teacher notes and sent back some, keeping the line of communication open. For example, Mrs.

Troung wrote a note to one parent about her child's failure to complete a homework assignment and negative behavior in class. The parent wrote back apologizing about the child's work and behavior and noted that the teacher's concerns would be addressed at home. Furthermore, the parent initialed the child's completed assignment the next day.

Mrs. Troung and other teachers at the school addressed concerns as soon as they arose and were up front with the parents – which the parents appeared to appreciate as evidenced by their prompt responses. Mrs. Troung described how the school attempted to increase and encourage parental involvement:

*The school does a lot of things, like I said always holding some kind of workshops to get parents involved, and they never stop at the first time, We go and we always award students with the most parent involvement or like we hold TAKS meetings at night to get parents to come. We always try to work around their schedule because you know some of them can't make it in the afternoon, and some can't make it in the morning. But we always try to attempt to cover all the times we can get some parents in, but on the other side, there are some parents that won't attend, but we do attempt.*

The key factor here is the school and the teachers are putting forth an effort to get and keep parents involved in their children's education. Mrs. Troung further remarked how the tone was set from administration, and it trickled down to every facet of the school:

*Well, I mean I think it starts from the top, the administration; the office is always trying to get parents involved. We you know they support that, and we make phone calls home trying to get parents to come in also. Speaking from my point*

*of view, I call and try to get parents to come in, and maybe send notes home, but there's always some kind of activity or program trying to get parents to come in to workshops and a lot of reminders, the same notes coming home again.*

She expounded on how Mrs. Woods encouraged teachers to include parents in the educational process and, through her example, demonstrated to the staff how to positively interact with parents. The teachers kept logs of their parent contacts, which they turned in to the front office every six weeks to document their efforts. The uplifting and proud tone of the school was evident throughout the building, and with all of the staff, Mrs. Woods, and the school's mission statement permeated Jackson. Mrs. Troung believed in what the school was attempting to do with parents as she conveyed in her comments:

*We always try. We push real hard for parents to get involved. We do. Every little thing we try to reward, like this past Halloween, we did the staff and parents baseball game to get parents involved. We sent flyers home, and we did Dad's night out, where we take Dads and their children to a football game, getting the dad involved. Then a couple of weeks ago, we did the mom's night out. Yeah, we do have a lot here. We do a lot.*

In keeping with the school's objectives, Mrs. Troung did a lot in her classroom to reinforce the school's mission statement. Her genuine belief in her students' abilities to achieve translated into academic success for them:

*I always have high, high expectations of my kids. They think I'm so tough on them, but then they always come back and thank me for it because they know I want them to be the best. You got to believe in them first. You got to let them know that you believe in them.*



From my classroom observations and interviews, I concluded that Mrs. Truong believed in her students and, subsequently, the students and their parents believed in her – a proven formula for success.

*Mrs. Evans*

Mrs. Evans was a fifth grade teacher in her sixth year at Jackson Elementary and twenty total years of experience in vastly different populations, working in communities with high numbers of Hispanics, Vietnamese, and African-Americans. Mrs. Evans was a teacher with a quiet but strong demeanor with her students. It was obvious the students respected her as evidenced by their excellent behavior in her classroom. Her love of teaching and longtime experience were obvious as she flowed effortlessly through lessons and communicated respect and great expectations for her students. When she addressed Jackson and its interaction with parents, Mrs. Evans excitedly spoke of all the activities the staff promoted to invite parents into their world and to be welcomed into the parents' worlds.

*We have great parent involvement; our parents come out. Anything we ask them to do, they participate. For example, we had a student/parent baseball game where the parents came out and played against their children. We trained parents about different TAKS objectives with Compass Learning and fed them. It was fun and the school was packed with parents. We don't have many problems getting parents to come out.*

Mrs. Evans echoed the words and philosophy of the principal as she spoke about the school and all of the things the staff did to increase student achievement, uplift the school, and get parents and the community involved. It was clear that the school culture was about everyone being involved to help students to be their best:

*Parent involvement is where you can have parents come in . . . make them aware of there children's behavior, their activities, and how they are doing in school. We have a lot of single parents, and we try to keep an open line of communication with those parents. We just want our parents to be concerned about their child's education.*

Parent involvement to Mrs. Evans occurred when parents communicated with the school on an ongoing basis in different ways, not only when the parents came to school. She shared that she sent home weekly checklists and talked to a lot of parents by phone. Having been born and raised in the Rolling Hills, Mrs. Evans knew a lot of the students' families or someone who knew them. These relationships benefited her because she saw the students and parents in the community setting as well as the school setting, thus forging strong relationships. She admitted the school did a lot to encourage parent participation:

*To get parents to come out we give great incentives for participation, and we reward our kids for their success for passing the TAKS and just coming to school. The school and business partners give bicycles, wind suits, graphing calculators- just to name a few things. We have a lot of meetings during the day and at night for our parents and have incentives for them also to come. We have our parent*

*room where parents can come in and check out resources, such as books or even laptop computers.*

To the staff, community partners, and parents that visited the school, parent involvement was a major priority as evidenced by the school climate and ease of interaction between the parents and staff. When asked about her personal practices in the classroom that encouraged parent involvement, Mrs. Evans stated:

*I send home weekly notices about grades and behavior to communicate with parents if their child is doing their homework or not and different activities in class that are going on. We like to let the parents know if their children are holding up to their expectations. We also have activities during the holidays and TAKS family night throughout the year.*

When asked if the activities she did in her classroom were done to satisfy administrative demands or to practice a principle she genuinely believed in, she replied:

*Oh no, it is something we do on our own because we feel like the more parent participation we have our students will do better. Mrs. Woods does set the culture of the school, but we know that if our students see us and their parents working together we have a united front pushing them in the right direction to get their education.*

Mrs. Evans was decidedly motivated to influence student success with high expectations and best practices, although she admitted the principal did have an impact on what she did and believed. She talked about how she communicated with parents:

*With word of mouth, we see many of our parents throughout the school day and after school when students are dismissed. Our parents live in the community, and*

*they talk with one another. We always have an activity going on to where they can here about what's going on. We also have a monthly calendar our parent facilitator creates for the families, but mainly telephones and notes sent home with students are our other means to communicate with them.*

Mrs. Evans' 5<sup>th</sup> grade level teachers did some creative activities, such as the campus reading initiative Rockin' and a Reading, to involve parents and the community. During the Rock-and-Read-A-Thon, sponsors pledged a quarter per book for every book a student read while rocking. In addition, parents, grandparents and members of the community demonstrated how quilts were made, and students created stories about the quilts. A local furniture store that participated in the Read-A-Thon donated a recliner to one of the students who participated in the event. The rocker was presented at the school's annual "Gumbo Cookout" a week later. These are just a few of the many activities that were an integral part of the desire to keep learning fun and exciting by the staff at Jackson.

Staff, student, and parent participation was not confined to the classroom; fifth graders, under the direction of the physical education teacher, participated in a district league basketball games. Mrs. Evans elaborated on the success of the basketball team:

*We try to cut out excuses for parents not to be involved. Many of our parents like sports, so we use our basketball games to train parents in areas to help us on the TAKS test, inform them of upcoming events, or just communicate with them about the progress of their child.*

Athletics seemed to be an effective means to inspire parents to come out because each game was jammed with parents, grandparents, and other siblings. The students who

participated were held to academic and discipline standards in order to stay on the team. This was just another example of how Jackson used creative and untraditional ideas to foster parent involvement on their campus. Mrs. Evans, along with other grade level teachers, did many things to keep parent involvement and academic success at Jackson Elementary at an optimum level. Surely, Jackson could be the village described in the African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child” because of the intricate intertwining of the home, school, and community as they came together for the good of the child.

### Jackson Parent Perspectives

This section discusses the role of parents at Jackson Elementary and their thoughts about participation with the school in their children’s educational process. Their practices and their thinking was gathered by interviews and observations of their involvement at the school.

Parents were found at Jackson on any given day in a variety of postures - conversing with teachers and administrators or eating lunch with their children. At many events, such as Goals Night, the Read-and-Rock-A-Thon, basketball games, and Dads and Moms Night Out, parents at Jackson are observed as supporters of their school, by their loyal presence and thus, become supporters as well. Attendance levels of parents was not extraordinary; however, it was significant, with a number of the same parents showing up at different events. For example, at the Dads and Mom’s Night Out at least 25 to thirty parents participated with their children at each event. Sign-in sheets revealed

that the school basketball games always had at least a hundred or more parents. At most events, Jackson was, as the principal stated, “the best show in town.”

Jackson’s PTA president was a parent who worked as a paraprofessional at the school, which gave her an inside track on the daily happenings. This relationship also enabled Jackson to have a parent, community member, and staff person in one, serving as a voice to get the word out to all the stakeholders. When asked about how she was involved in her child’s education she stated:

*I keep tabs on my child, I have meetings with his teachers, I sit in his class during her teaching time and observe what she is doing in the classroom, and I reinforce it at home.*

Because of her unusual position, Mrs. Fuller had a rare opportunity to intervene on behalf of her child and monitor his progress, although I observed some parents doing the same thing throughout the study. Another parent I approached about why she felt the need to be involved in her child’s education remarked:

*Morale is high here, enthusiasm, the test scores are high, they show interest in the child. They want my child to be here, and my child wants to be here. There was just a difference in this school; teachers just go out of their way of helping and getting my child to want to learn.*

When asked what she believed made the difference in getting her to work with the school, the parent replied:

*Following through with the curriculum, and just keeping me informed about what I can do with my child at home. Also sternness and discipline, I believe in discipline being one of the factors helping kids learn.*

All of the parents I spoke to in the study remarked favorably about being informed of things going on with the school and being given suggestions on how to help their child. One parent discussed how she was made aware of what was expected of her child and what her child was learning in the classroom:

*Well, in my case, my child's teacher had a layout of the things they were going to be doing throughout the year on Goals Night. She always has things going on in her classroom that I can help with or observe. We were taught how to go online and look at the curriculum in a school workshop, so we can know where our children should be during the year. There is always something going on.*

The parents reiterated they were pleased with the number of opportunities they had to attend various events throughout the year. Many admitted they didn't make all of the events, but they made as many as they could. The PTA president commented on how scheduled events or concerns were communicated to parents:

*The parent facilitator and teachers send out flyers and stay in contact constantly through students. Lots of times we're doing personal phone calls to parents, letting them know if their children are failing, setting up time schedules for them to come in and have conferences with the teachers. We just try to give a personal touch when staying in contact, even if it means going out into the community. It's easy for me because I live here.*

The PTA president was just as excited about getting other parents involved as the administrator and the school staff was. She and the parent liaison worked hard and enjoyed the fruits of their labor as they witnessed the number of parents that participated

in events. When I asked what parent involvement meant to them, I received a variety of responses. The PTA president remarked:

*Just being an interactive parent within the school, your child's school.*

Another parent remarked:

*Coming in. Checking on your child. Making sure your child has his or her homework, and just having open communication with your child's teacher.*

While still another parent shared,

*Supporting the teacher and keeping your child doing their work and behaving in school.*

These parents all believed in supporting the school. The result of their participation with the school and cooperation with the children's teachers was evident in improvement in their children's grades, good attendance, and positive behavior in the classroom. Jackson's parents were present and accounted for. They did not have high levels of participation by conventional standards of involvement; nevertheless, they were there in many ways. Participation does not mean only being on site. Any concerned involvement is significant.

### Summary

Jackson Elementary presented perspectives of a school that possessed a strong, visionary leader who led and modeled by example. The school, teachers, families, and students did not let their economic situation impact their desire or goals to achieve a better life through the vehicle of education. Jackson was a school that defined a community and helped highlight something successful in an otherwise rundown



community. It took dedication, but this school modeled that good things can take place in any situation as long as you can have individuals who can focus on a goal. In the next chapter, Hebert Elementary will highlight how a school can be successful and sustain success over an extended period of time in a low-income African-American community.

## Chapter V

### Data Results from

#### Hebert Elementary: The Influence of Tradition

*Dream big dreams! Others may deprive you of your material wealth and cheat you in a thousand ways, but no man can deprive you of the control and use of your imagination.*

*Jesse Jackson.*

Hebert Elementary is a school that has experienced success in academics, involved parents, and productive students, teachers and administrators for an extended period of time. The school's achievements have placed it in the enviable position of being one of the most sought after schools in Rolling Hills for children to attend. In spite of its demographics, Hebert has capitalized upon its success and continues to provide trendsetting programs and to shape future leaders in spite of its demographics. This chapter will highlight Hebert and its experiences and will also summarize some of the emerging themes both Hebert and Jackson Elementary offer to African-American parent involvement.

#### Hebert Elementary

Hebert Elementary, a small school, is situated in a blue-collar African American community in the Gulf Coast area of Southeast, Texas. The school is situated in the center of the city near aging shopping centers and declining businesses in the area. There has been growth in the area, but compared to other areas in the city that have seen

booming economic development, it has been slower. The school is located in an historical, but tightly knit community, comprised of a mixture of very young families and senior citizens. The neighborhood is clean and most of the houses are occupied; very few are abandoned. The school is bordered on one side by the school district's bus garage and on the other side by homes. Near the school are a trailer park and housing project, which are a sources for the student population. Throughout the neighborhood, houses have signs and banners advertising support for the neighborhood high school.

Hebert Elementary has a front entrance and an arced driveway in front which allows for buses to navigate easily as they drop off and pick up students. The school is enclosed by a hurricane fence as a deterrent to trespassers. Nevertheless, the entrance to the school is inviting, and the office staff greets all who enter. The school's motto, "Do Your Best and Nothing Else" is prominently displayed along the wall, as well as plaques and accolades the school has received for its academic performance. The school is recognized as a mentor school for the state of Texas and has won the National Title I School Award, given to schools serving at-risk students who have achieved continued exemplary academic performance. Although the school is "hidden" in a well-kept community, its success is known throughout the city. The office has a steady flow of teachers, students, and parents but remains relatively quiet. The principal's office is in the front area; her door remains open for anyone to enter. Visitors are asked to sign in, but the secretary and attendance clerk usually knows everyone by name. Their desks are stationed in different areas of the office, but they are readily accessible to all who enter. Personnel are professionally dressed but do show school spirit by wearing T-shirts, pins, or other accessories. The assistant principal's office is adjacent to the principal's office,

but she is usually monitoring the halls or handling small discipline problems with students. The personnel's years of experience averages 9.1 years and covers a variety of fields of expertise. Many of the schools' personnel move up to administrative positions fairly quickly after proven successful in the classroom.

Hebert was built in the fifties and has served elementary grade levels since its inception. Initially, the school served predominantly white students, but as the demographics of the area changed, the school population changed to an African American majority. Approximately 403 students are enrolled: 94.29 % African American, 3.47% Hispanic, and 2.23% white. Hebert is guided by a staff of 57 teachers, instructional aides, support personnel, and curriculum specialists. 75.6% of Hebert's students qualify as economically disadvantaged compared to the state average of 51.9% and are on free and reduced lunch according to federal guidelines. Hebert's attendance rate has consistently remained above 95% annually.

#### Initial Observations/School Climate

Observations began at Hebert Elementary on August 20, 2004 at their Goals Nights, which immediately followed my visit at Jackson Elementary, made possible by the staggered times of their programs. This was a consensual decision of both principals in an effort to accommodate the families to myself and the study. Everyone was hospitable and offered assistance to all visitors trying to get to the correct locations creating a feeling of "family". The principal assigned student ambassadors to help with the greeting of families as they entered the building. Staff were seated at two tables set

up at the entrance to sign parents up as volunteers or members of the PTA and to distribute brochures outlining the different programs and services that could be found at Hebert. Immediately obvious were the strong numbers of parents who attended this event.

I was further made aware of the large turnout for Goals Night by my inability to find a seat in the gym, where the bleachers were full, the 350 chairs were full, and the walls were lined with parents trying to get a good viewing area for the night's activities. The program in the gym was informative as well as welcoming to the new and returning families of Hebert and the volunteers. The principal began the evening with a song that was sung and written by a group of teachers, students, and select families. The original lyrics about Hebert were set to the melody of a song entitled "Yes, I Can" by Donny McKlurkin. It was uplifting, especially when everyone in the gym starting singing the song once they caught the melody.

The principal presented the school's accountability rating acquired with the assistance of teachers, students and parents, demonstrating that when the principal had an opportunity to involve stakeholders, she did it. After more presentations informing parents about the school, the principal released them to their children's classrooms.

Most classrooms were large with open arrangements utilizing desks and tables for student work areas. Student work was displayed in the halls and classrooms, and the school's mission statement and motto "Do Your Best and Nothing Less" could be found everywhere. The principal had the mission statement redone by a committee of teachers, parents, and students, again reflecting involvement by stakeholders.

This section will highlight the variety of oppurtunities Hebert offered to involve families, some of which include basketball games, TAKS family nights, the F.A.S.T.

program (Families and Schools Together), monthly meetings, along with other events to lure families to participate. The principal expressed and demonstrated a strong desire to make parent and community involvement an important component of the school's success. The unique observation of Hebert was that the community wanted the school to be successful and they were therefore committed to be involved in its many programs. The school had multiple volunteers and partners that desired to be affiliated with the school. The mention of Hebert in the community brought high praises, so that many parents tried to get their children enrolled in the school. The school's success made it stand out in the school district.

Discipline seemed not to be an issue. Hebert had an assistant principal and counselor who assisted teachers in deterring problems. They were visible throughout the school and were sometimes hard to find when they were interacting with students. By virtue of Title I funding, Hebert was one of the first schools in the district to have an assistant principal at the elementary level. This administrative move helped to contribute to the success of the school's management plan. No one was made to feel like a stranger at Hebert. Parents were frequently seen in the halls or eating lunch or breakfast with their children and remarkably most staff knew many of the parents by name. No one was made to feel like a stranger at Hebert. Teachers were seen having conferences with parents and being visible before and after school, which made them accessible to parents to discuss the progress of their children. Again, there were many opportunities for interaction.

## Leadership

This section discusses the meanings, perceptions, and impact of parent involvement as viewed by the administrators of Hebert Elementary. This is followed by the views of other instructional staff and parents.

*Ms. Smith*

The principal assumed leadership of the school in the 2002-2003 school year after the school had gone through many changes in leadership. She inherited a school that had the same administrator for fifteen years followed by two different administrators in the two years prior to her arrival at Hebert. As aforementioned, Mrs. Smith began work in a school that had been successful academically and was renowned for its ability to reach minority and low-income students. She had to acclimate herself to Hebert as well as Hebert had to adjust to her. She had come from a school that had a strong parent involvement history, and she wanted to keep those community interactions strong at Hebert also. When asked to describe how she attempted to involve parents she stated:

*Well, at the beginning of the year I send home a parent letter, and it just says welcome and has different information that is informative, such as school times and other little tidbits. We have an orientation for our kindergartners. The things we do in the school is we invite them in and try to have refreshments and things like that, but on a daily basis I try to speak with as many as I can and try to make them feel welcome and always welcoming them back. We also ask them to*

*volunteer and just try to get them to spend time at the school, either in the classrooms or at various events we have throughout the year. We do a lot of things at different times of the day, and especially at night, because we have a lot of parents who work during the day. Our district Title I department helps out also conducting surveys to inform us of times that better serve our parents. We just try to make them feel a part of the school.*

She did many things to welcome the parents and made them feel that they were stakeholders as was obvious at Goals Night when the students, teachers, and parents sang the school song they had co-written and were received enthusiastically by the audience. Also the parents had an integral part in revising the school's mission statement to reflect the changes Hebert had gone through. When asked for more examples of how parents' voices were heard, Ms. Smith reflected:

*I send home monthly newsletters from the school with teachers and other staff input and even the kids. When I do send them, I have an area for parent suggestions. We take them in passing but also have a suggestion box in the front of the school in case a parent doesn't feel comfortable talking about something. We try to answer to parent requests when it is feasible. For example, a funny thing about it is that you wouldn't think parents are reading stuff, then they say, "When ya'll having a fundraiser, ya'll send me fifty notes, and you have something else on the academic side, and you send two notes." And that was just a little suggestion on the bottom of a newsletter, so that was an awareness, so you have to take the good, and when you lend yourself to that you have to take the*



*good with the bad. And a lot of times you hear some things and I thought I was doing okay and apparently I wasn't.*

She always tried to find different ways to let the parents' voices be heard and acted upon it. Ms. Smith was quick to point out that from her first interactions with the community, she saw them as a resource that could be utilized. She described how they made her transition easier:

*Personally, I feel like one of the best things about Hebert and its parent involvement is our community. The community around here is Hebert positive, if that's a word. Just talking to people in the community I know I came to a good school, I and I know it comes from them. The people around here make it easier. They don't even have children that still go here, but they still support the school. For example, we had a big pep rally and performed, and all the people around here came out, and it's like we had our own mini-parade, and those types of turnouts happen all the time. Also if something happens around the school, the community members don't hesitate to get involved. I had one older man bring two boys back to the school that was about to fight off the campus before anything could happen. We were able to get their parents up to the school and address the situation. It's just good to have people looking out for you like that in the community.*

Ms. Smith was passionate about the positive influence the community had upon the school. She believed their involvement, along with the parents, contributed to the school's success. We discussed the ever-evolving definition of parent involvement and she defined it in these terms:

*I know in the past it was when parents were in the building and doing things, but it's an extension to the school; it is what you are also doing with your children at home. It's when parents are involved to the fact that they know what's going on in the school, talking to their children about homework, about how they expect them to act in school, calling, and those types of things. Because there are working parents, you can't expect them to be here all the time. That's what I have to keep in mind. A parent may only come to the school once every three months, but if they are at home encouraging that child, giving their expectations while that child is in school, that's what we look at as parent involvement. We don't measure it on how many people we have signed in here because we have some parents that can't come. It's broadened from past expectations of just being a body in the building; it's more than just being here.*

Even though Ms. Smith highlighted the importance of not defining parent involvement based on just bodies present, she had to admit that at Hebert, the bodies were there. On multiple occasions, an overflow of parents participating in events such as TAKS family nights, basketball games with homework presentations and other activities were observed. The large number of parents at events led to an inquiry about how the school communicated events or activities to the families. Ms. Smith described some typical forms of communication:

*Mainly through communications through the home, sending letters home, of course, the marquee, you know those types of things. Even something like when we do the urban summit, we call. We have an instructional aide that's assigned for each grade level, and they call those parents for their grade level, and tell*

*them, "You know this is going on; we need you to come out," so that's a really big push to get them to the urban summit because that's development across the district for all the parents. So I would say phone calling, through letters, we send home a monthly newsletter and try to keep them up to date on things that are going on.*

Their communications methods were traditional with the exception of the urban summit. I inquired further to grasp an understanding of what the urban summit actually was, and she offered this explanation:

*Every year the district puts on this big summit for parents, and it starts out with a health fair where you can go in and get some screening done and things. Then there's sessions, all kinds of sessions, There's things about getting scholarships; there's things about health issues; there's things about TAKS. All of the schools participate describing their campuses and programs, I mean you name it. And what we do, how they plan it, we get together and brainstorm on things we know our parents need, and again I think the biggest piece is the health fair because you get a chance to go through some free screening and things like that, and the health department's there. I think even Texas workforce is there on filling out applications and resumes, so that's a big push, so it's one big district wide push for all the parents. They provide transportation for them, so it's a big deal.*

Her description of the urban summit gave some insight into the Rolling Hills school district's efforts to get parents involved. Schools were not on their own in trying to get parents involved in the educational process of their children; they benefited from

the many partners and networking possibilities. She spoke highly of the district's parent involvement coordinator's efforts to work with schools and parents,

*The best blessing in this all is that you do have parent involvement through Title I. Now Mrs. Devine is excellent with how she brings everyone together. She works with our counselor and parent liaison, and they have monthly meetings as a team. She keeps them informed on many things, and they bring the ideas from the meetings in to benefit all of the parents in the school.*

District support was evident, but more obvious was how things were implemented in the school with the teachers, students, and their families. Ms. Smith lead by example not opting to be a mouthpiece, merely telling everyone to get parents involved.

Questioned further, to help asses her typical interactions with parents as an administrator, she related this:

*I try to be as out there in the front as I can, especially in the morning when parents are dropping off kids. I try to get definitely out on the campus at the end of the day and try to make them feel welcome. And the biggest thing I know, and I'm aware of, if you've gone to a school where people don't know you, that you're an administrator, or that you're an educator and the feeling that you get sometimes from teachers and other administrators is that they don't know who you are, I try not to do that to people because I know how it feels because I had that happen. So in my interactions with people I try to smile and always have a calm pleasant voice for them, but now during the year the goals night is always a big night for me because that's my time to really talk to parents, and I try to be as jovial but informative as possible, so now this my planning time for my goals*

*night talking to them more specifically about what my expectations are of the children as well as for them. I think visibility and access is most important during the year. I know it is not always possible, but I try to be out there as much as I can.*

Ms. Smith could be seen interacting with parents at different times of the day.

Her visibility was highest toward the end of the day, where she was one of many school staff loading students into cars, speaking to parents, and letting her presence be known.

She shared some of the tactics she employed to encourage teachers to interact with parents:

*You see a lot to a little, but most of the time my encouragement is to for everyone because the first step, especially as we deal with kids that's having academic problems first thing we do is talk to their parent and encourage them, at least in the first week of school, to make some type of contact with home. And I'm always on parents about giving us good numbers because that's our life line right now. The computer is good if they have it, but mostly everybody has a phone, especially cell phones now. So during the first week trying to get every teacher in here to realize the importance of contact them. But, you know, I have some teachers who give their home number, and they are actually on the phone with parents at night. I just stress with them I want them to have contact with every parent by the end of the first week. And by checking that, by asking them to talk to me about a specific parent to let me know they are finding out here, and that lends itself to letting us know it's going to be hard to catch up with that parent. And so that's the*

*encouragement, but I have some teachers that go way beyond that, and they're comfortable doing it, and you can see it in their classrooms.*

She recognized that was not easy to get teachers to recognize the importance of involving parents, particularly new teachers who were not accustomed to recruiting parents for something they should automatically do. Ms. Smith shared more secrets of how to get her overall theme of parent involvement across to the staff:

*I think in our actions with parents because a lot of time you're gonna have to have teacher parent teacher conversations, I'll tell my teachers before we even go into that setting, let's sit back and let them vent, especially if there's someone who comes in there angry. So in that I always bring it back to you as a person; you're a parent. Think about your child in dealing with them. If you gonna talk to them, you act like your momma is standing right next to them. And that way you never go wrong, you know, and so that's the way I deal with them, and I always tell them it's not my forte because I don't have children but I have children that I love and care about, and I always make sure that when I'm dealing that love is there, but the firmness is there as well. I said that from the first day I walked in here. I want you to teach and teach that child like it's yours because you want the best for your children, and so that's how it comes across to them, and they know it.*

Not only did she encourage the participation of teachers and other staff, she offered a variety of activities and trainings to involve parents not only in decision making but also to keep them informed and to help them better work with their children. She didn't hesitate to highlight the plethora of activities and programs Hebert offered its families to assist them:

*I've already mentioned Goals Night, and we have our half-day parent teacher conferences each semester to allow parents to pick up their children's report cards and discuss with teachers their child's progress. We have our basketball games where we also inform parents of upcoming events. There is also the F.A.S.T. program (Families and School Together), that works with select families who may be struggling at home and works with the school to advocate for them. We always have our TAKS family night, and that's the night we come out sit down and eat together, and we talk about TAKS for the 3rd through 5th grade, and then we come back and have another night that is K through 2. We also have a big science night. Now the science night is a lot of fun because they do hands on science experiments. Through our business partner, DuPont, we have a family picnic once a year, and that's a lot of fun, and also DuPont workers lend themselves to being volunteers in doing those types of events, and it's for our kids to keep them engaged, so that's, as far as big events, that's kind of our big events right now.*

Hebert always had something going on to impact the students. Ms. Smith attempted to utilize all of her resources to keep positive things going on at Hebert. She did remark during the interview that she was working harder to get more business partners in the school as role models and stakeholders in the students' education and not just for financial support. Her vision shined through in her words and her practice and she recognized the importance of the school being an important factor in today's ever-changing families and their involvement in school. She summed up the importance of parent involvement in this way:

*I think that one of the things we have to begin to see is that the traditional family is no longer there where there is a momma or daddy looking at a child when they get home. Today's there could be grandma, grandpa, auntie, or even just a guardian raising a child now. As long as there is a significant person in the child's life encouraging them to go on, or to steer them straight, it makes a huge difference. There are so many other avenues children can take now, but to have a "parent" involved, it helps keep the children in the right direction.*

*Ms. Justice*

Ms. Justice arrived at Hebert twenty-three years ago and has gone through four head principals during her tenure at the school. She began as a third grade teacher then progressed to lead teacher curriculum coordinator; she is currently assistant principal, a position she has held for the last nine years. She has witnessed the growth of Hebert Elementary school from being just one of many in the district to one of the best elementary schools in the nation. She believed there are many factors that have contributed to Hebert's success: strong leadership, excellent teachers, supportive staff, and, last but not least, parent and community involvement. When asked to define parent involvement she described it in these terms:

*I was taught that in order for students to learn you are going to have, you have to have, the parents involved because the teacher has to do one-third of the teaching, the child has to do one-third of the learning, and the parent has to do one-third of following up with their child. I feel that if the parents don't do their*



*part, which is one-third, it makes the teacher have to work that much harder to fill that void. I'm not saying that a parent always has to be seen in the school, but just making sure that they have done something that evening with the child as far as spending time with their child, maybe reading aloud, an activity outside, watching their child play, or just making sure homework is done. Just being supportive of the mission we are trying to accomplish, which is making that child successful in school.*

Ms. Justice's view of parent involvement blended with the principal's: it is a support system for the school, but one that is mandatory for success to be experienced in the school. Although Ms. Justice acknowledged that a parent doesn't have to be at school everyday, she did reflect upon parents she rarely saw:

*It bothers me when a parent comes and picks a child up, and I've never seen that parent before, especially when I try to have a conversation with the parent, and they can not even tell me their child's teacher's name. These parents I really try to talk to and kinda make them feel bad about not knowing their child's teacher, but I don't do it in a bad way. I share with them the wonderful things we have going on and just try to bring them in and encourage them to come to the school more to see what it's about.*

The staff of Hebert were emphatic with making sure the parents were knowledgeable about school events and ways they could help their children. Ms. Justice's wealth of experience at Hebert allowed her the opportunity to elaborate on parent involvement at Hebert:

*Okay, parent involvement here, I'm going to say it's about average. A couple of years back we started TAKS family night that began with just third to fifth grade but has been expanded to kindergarten to fifth. We used to have a packed house with about two hundred or more parents trying to get here and hear what needs to be said. Our attendance has dropped slightly because I think a lot of parents are working nights more, and it is conflicting with the times we have events, but we are trying to adapt to better serve them. A lot of our parents volunteer with other children in other classrooms as well just their own. Our grandparents also assist when we have a grandparents' day. They come in every now and then and volunteer and even doing black history month to share their stories with other children. It truly creates more of a community atmosphere. I believe that many of the teachers and parents have bought into the fact that if one student does well, we can all do well, so we help each other to attain our goals.*

The African proverb of "It takes a village to raise a child" is as applicable at Hebert as it was at Jackson. Ms. Justice's described how everyone had a hand in helping the students be the best that they could be. She spoke highly of the parents, grandparents, and volunteers who came to assist them in their endeavor and acknowledged their efforts. Observing the family nights, the F.A.S.T. program (which will be explained later in the chapter), and other extra-curricular events witnessing and the large turnouts that Ms. Justice mentioned, led to questioning how the school communicated their events so well that parents were so heavily involved:

*First of all, the school has a tradition of having events that are welcoming and inviting to the parents and overall fun for them. We have a lot of parents who*

*actually attended Hebert so a lot of them are waiting for events they know are coming up throughout the year. But we do also send notes home, utilize our marquee that was donated from our business partner Dupont, and we remind them every morning and evening when the students are arriving or leaving the school. We do feed the parents, so this is an extra for them, since many of our meetings may be around their suppertime.*

Ms. Justice also explained how Hebert's students were the communication link between the school and the home. They offered incentives to students to try to get their parents involved in school events. Some of these incentives included stickers, tickets to purchase items from the school store, pizza or ice cream parties, and sometimes even lunch with one of the administrators or their favorite teacher. It appeared that anything that could intrinsically or extrinsically motivate the students was used to help get their parents involved with their schooling. The school's methods of communication were not really different from traditional ways of informing parents about school agendas; however, their tenacity in actively courting parents stood out clearly.

Ms. Justice, being an assistant principal, had interactions with parents from that of teachers, other school staff, and even the principal. She was seen not only as an instructional leader but also the primary disciplinarian for students whom teachers could not handle in the classroom. Her interactions with parents of troubled students usually occurred after all other avenues had been exhausted. She described some of her typical interactions and how she tries to work with parents:

*I have an open door policy for parents and teachers to come and talk to me whenever there is a concern. The biggest concern when parents come to me is*

*issues between teachers and their child. Some of them feel that the teacher is not being fair to their children, and they come to me for assistance. I've learned from all the administrators that I've worked under that one of the best things to do is just listen. Sometimes individuals just need to vent and have their voices heard. I'll listen and then repeat what was told to me to make sure the parent knows that I understand and am empathetic to what they are saying. If I can do something within school policy that is fair for the parent, teacher, and, ultimately, the child, I do what I can. I think when a parent comes to my office as an assistant principal it bothers me if they leave out because they are not satisfied with the way I handled it, and they have to go to the principal or even higher. I try to have us work together to work out our issues in house.*

Ms. Justice had many more interactions with parents who were having problems with their children at home. It appeared that some of her many hats included serving as a mediator between teachers and parents, students and teachers, and other complex relationships throughout the school. The hat that seemed most evident was that of counselor. I observed parents and teachers coming to seek advice on how to handle various situations. She described this role briefly:

*Besides having parents coming in to complain, I have parents come in just because they might be having problems at home. Some of them may say "I can't get my child to do homework," and I notice that teachers are sending the end report home. Or, My child is always receiving an N or U on their daily conduct sheet; what can I do?" So I'll have come in with all kinds of issues to address.*

Ms. Justice seemed to thrive in this role: telling parents about scheduling a conference with the teacher, telling how to learn a teacher's expectations, and sharing simple hints on getting children to get their work done at home. She admitted that since many parents have come to her because she had been a consistent face at the school for many years, she had to be careful not to overstep her bounds when families she has known for years come to her without following the chain of command. She highlighted that how the school presented itself to the parents early in the year set the tone for how well the interactions with parents would go throughout the school year:

*I would have to say the principal sets the tone, along with other administrative staff and the campus educational improvement committee, that's where it is set. At the beginning of the year we have mini in-services where staff are retrained or trained for the first time how to interact with parents from veteran teachers and staff. We set up different scenarios to give teachers alternatives of situations they may encounter and multiple examples. Our principal talks about our school as if it is a family, and she carries about business in that way at the school and expects the same for the staff. Expectations are clearly defined. We reward teachers when they model expectations and just continue to reinforce expectations throughout the year. Some of the things we may do is maybe a weekend get-away, a check from PTA, or something as simple as putting a memo in their box just to let them know we appreciate their efforts. We try to keep the atmosphere positive.*

Ms. Justice's position afforded her the opportunity to observe many things going on around the school with students, teachers, and parents. We talked about some of the

things that could be seen happening in classrooms throughout the year. She expounded on a few:

*Believe it or not, we have a lot of teachers here who call parents all the time. Sometimes I think they may even be calling too much. I say that because I've actually had parents come to me and say that a particular teacher calls me too often. However, some of our teachers are so caring, so loving of their class, and they want their students to do their best, so they are going to call basically every night and during the day, and a majority of the parents don't mind that. Teachers invite parents in, and they volunteer along with some of our business partners and community leaders. One thing we stress is trying to get to know as many of our frequent faces by name to really make them feel welcome. Our teachers have conferences and make themselves available for many of the evening events we have on campus without much apprehension. It helps to have a majority of the school on the same page with similar ideals that we all want to attain.*

Ms. Justice's sentiments and actions echoed those of the principal. She made valid points of the sacrifices that the school, staff, and families made to ensure that students were successful. She did not hesitate to highlight the fruits of their labor, especially since she had seen the growth of Hebert during her tenure. Ms. Justice's views and practices led to another veteran staff member of Hebert's who needed to be included in this study; the counselor.

*Mrs. Marshall*

It is imperative to include Mrs. Marshall in this section because she is such an integral part of the activities and programs that involve parents at Hebert Elementary. Currently the school's counselor, but she has served as a teacher for many years before entering into her present role. The following is a summary of her experiences:

*Well, I've been teaching for 15 years. I began my career in a middle school within this district teaching low income Hispanic, African-American, and Caucasian students. I taught there for two years and then went to a private school for two years and taught primarily African-American students. My next experience was in a neighboring district that was totally different because it was 85% Caucasian but it was lower class and it gave me a wake up call. I had never seen students so low academically and it interesting to see that with mostly Caucasian students regardless of their economic status. After that I came to Hebert and have been content here ever since. I have had the ability to teach Kindergarten, first, second, and fifth grades (Which I fell in love with) and found my home. This is my second year as the school's counselor, and I guess my feet are still wet, because I'm just willing to try anything to see what works best for us.*

Just like Ms. Justice, Mrs. Marshall saw Hebert grow and change over a period of at least ten years, so she was knowledgeable of the different intricate methods that described Hebert and the principals' attempts to accomplish specific things throughout the years. Mrs. Marshall offered her definition of parent involvement and what it means to a child's education:

*I feel that that's when we get our parents involved in what's going on at the school. When they come to Goals Night, go to classrooms, and find out what'd going on in our classrooms. Or when they stay in our meetings for the Open House, and they find out how our test scores, what our test scores were for the school year, and what we did to accomplish these good scores, because we do a lot of things, and we need our parents' help to be successful with test scores. Because if we didn't have our parents, I mean, I don't think we would have the success that we would have.*

She elaborated on the importance of having parents involved further:

*I just want to say that working with parents, I mean when you work with parents, you just find out a whole lot about the children. The children learn from when the parents come to school, the children know the parents care when to get there, and that they need to do their best and nothing less. We try to instill our motto in our kids and their parents, and we expect the best out of our children, and I we get it.*

Mrs. Marshall was passionate about her belief that all kids could be successful, especially when their parents were involved. She was proud to mention the many avenues that Hebert uses to get parents active within the school, but before she elaborated on the multiple activities, she talked about how she and Hebert informed parents and the community:

*Well, I get on the phone a lot. I call parents and send notes home. Also, I do the morning announcements and talk to the kids in the morning. We have the kids assemble in the gym, and on Mondays I tell them what we are doing for the week*



*and the events they need to be getting ready for. With the notes I send home I usually put on a loud color like a neon green to catch the students' eye and tell them to watch out for it. I begin about two weeks in advance to inform students and just keep reminding the students, teachers, and parents when I see them in the school. We also use the marquee for important dates parents need to know about throughout the year.*

As was the case with the other Hebert administrators, Mrs. Marshall was very capable of communicating with parents and getting them in the school or just involved in some other manner in their children's schooling. Mrs. Marshall spent a lot of time in the evenings and throughout the day during the year to assist in the school's efforts to involve parents and the community. She shared some of the activities:

*We do different things with TAKS strategies, where we have parents come out for a Math or Reading family night where we serve them dinner. Our parent facilitator also has workshops with the parents throughout the year teaching them how to use their home to reinforce school skills with Compass Learning. We have programs for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Black History month during the day and the night. Our Grandparents' Day has a real big turnout every year, fifth grade graduation, and our end of the year carnival. I just can't remember everything that we have going on all the time. Recently I have been working with families with the F.A.S.T. (Families and School Together) program, which I love, that works with low-income families that are struggling in different ways.*

Mrs. Marshall was excited about the F.A.S.T. program and actually starting telling me about it when I first arrived to the school because she wanted me to come to

some of the sessions to see how it worked with the families. She gave me a synopsis of what the program consisted of:

*O.K this program is called FAST, and it's the acronym for Families and Schools Together, and I like to tell parents it's an evening bunch of families getting together, eating dinner, and having a good time. And, basically, how it started, we recruit our families. Teachers make a nomination, and what I tell the teachers is you don't need to nominate a problem child. I don't need all your behavior kids. I don't need your ADH kids. I said, "What I need you to do, I think you should look at students in your room that you feel that would benefit from this program." A child may be where, C. C level. I mean, whereas this child can do, but he's having a hard time. Maybe he's not getting help at home. Maybe someone new to the school. And they nominate the child, O.K., from that nomination, I get phone numbers, and call the parents, and I tell the parents about the program. This program is eight nights, on Thursday nights, eight weeks in a row. And what we do, we start out, the students, the children, we have dinner and the children wait on the parents. Parents never get up and come to the table and get anything. They are waited on, and you wouldn't believe, they like that because most parents are at home on Thursday night cooking and serving their children. After dinner, there are different sessions where parents can voice their concerns with the school or at home, and we assist in any way that we can. We have a representative from family services that helps out in any way that she can. After the parents session, the roles are reversed and students get to vent with no repercussions about anything they want to talk about to get them vocal. The last*

*session would be the family working on a project together that they complete that would go with the theme of the night.*

In one of the sessions, which addressed drugs, the students and parents watched a video followed by a discussion at the end of the sessions. It was interesting to see the children and parents in their different roles and to see how they were working together through this program. Unfortunately, the program was limited to a small number of families because it could have a positive influence it could have on the families who participated. Families who graduated from the program came back to mentor other families who were new in order to keep a support system in place. This was one of the positive things Mrs. Justice implemented in her new position, and she really enjoyed it.

Watching Mrs. Marshall's interactions with parents, it was evident that she loved what she was doing and believed she was making a difference with Hebert students. In addition to F.A.S.T., she formed a student council and organized a parent partners program where parents or community members team up with teachers and volunteer their time with students in the school who may not have the support at home that other students have. She shared her excitement with one session she did with parents after school one day:

*I know I did one working session teaching parents to use the newspaper, and I did one for science before TAKS, and I actually got up there to do experiments. And you wouldn't believe the parents eyes. I did one experiment, and I used vinegar and the baking soda in the balloon. And all I could think is, if this explodes . . . I had on navy blue, and I'm gonna be washing it! So when I poured the solution in the balloons in there, and the parents are going, I guess they could see my facial*

*expression, cause you can see their eyes, and I mean, they were all into it. And when it said, 'BOOM,' and their faces expressed the boom, too. But they were so excited. And afterwards, they want everything, what did you do? How did you use it? Can I get this? And here, that's, once again you have parents working with their children. They're gonna go home and do these experiments with their kids.*

Her excitement resonated in most of her tasks at the school and it carried through to the parents and teachers. She supported “hands-on” science experiments and didn’t mind “getting her hands dirty” in the classroom and relieving teachers if they needed to talk with a parent or to assist in giving sessions. She led by example and was enthusiastic in doing so. She did assist in arranging many of the opportunities for families and the community to be involved and was a valuable resource for the students, parents, and staff of Hebert Elementary.

### Teachers

To further understand perceptions and practices of parent involvement held by teachers at Hebert, Goals Night, multiple events throughout the school year, classroom visits, and general conversations with them on different occasions provided perspectives. It was easy to observe the number of parents who frequented events, and also the number of teachers who readily gave their time to the school. Most of the teachers held events in their rooms, such as displaying student-parent projects or the TAKS strategy sessions that have been mentioned previously. Both schools that I studied kept parents informed and trained in an effort to help their students to be successful for the state test.

The teachers followed the principal's lead and they could be heard mentioning the school's motto and mission statement throughout their conversations to demonstrate their acceptance of school practices. They pushed hard to have the students "Do their best and nothing less" on a daily basis. The family-friendly theme that the principal promoted was also embraced. Teachers were constantly analyzing how they would want to be treated as a parent when they dealt with their families in controversial or positive situations. These teachers work so hard to get parents involved because they all took a stake in the schools success.

*Mrs. Guillory*

Mrs. Guillory is a third grade teacher and is in her 5<sup>th</sup> year of teaching, all spent at Hebert. She has taught students who have been primarily of low socio-economic status and predominately African-American during her tenure. She is a Hispanic American born and raised in Texas and has been in Rolling Hills a majority of her adult life. From administrator, teacher comments, and observations, Mrs. Guillory fits right in with the school staff and students. She is highly respected and was actually the principal's first choice when asked who would be good for this study. She is enthusiastic about her job and works hard for students to be successful in her classroom. She shared her definition of parent involvement,

*Well, parent involvement would be where they feel free to talk to me on the phone or in the hall on a friendly basis. It would be where I could see parents helping*

*their children with their projects or homework or just any school activities, that kind of thing.*

She portrayed the parent teacher relationship as one in which both could work together to experience the child's success. This involvement did not necessarily involve the parents being there everyday, but it would be evident in how they communicated and how the child perceived their relationship together. This was further illustrated when she described her ideal situation of parent involvement:

*I would want them, every day, when their child gets home from school, I would want them to get a whole overview of what they did that day. There would be a lot of discussion between the child and the parent. They would be checking over their homework. They would be sitting in with them, checking in and out if they did their homework, not just check it over and don't even see if they did it wrong or right. I would have my parents calling me and wanting to know what area in math can I help them with this week? Or what area in reading. I would definitely have more reading. My parents would be reading every day. Not just ten minutes, but every day, some days for an hour. It would be fun for them! Progress would be fun.*

Most of the opportunities for involvement she promoted were things that parents can do in the home, some may seem extensive (an hour of reading), but she believes she can make anything fun if it helped parents to work better with their children. She would relate with parents how she works with her children. I asked her about parent support at Hebert, and she offered the following:

*I admit that it is a slow start this year, but I would say I have about 80 to 90 percent of parents involved in one way or another in my classroom. Last year was wonderful because I believe I had about 95 percent involved then. Whenever the school has events it is always packed, and it's been that way since I got here. The parents at this school believe in coming out to our plays, basketball games, programs, and even our family nights. It is a different situation from most schools.*

Her claims were supported by the number of families I saw during any given event at Hebert. I asked her to share with me her typical interactions with parents and how she communicates with them to form relationships:

*Mostly, I talk to the parents through phone calls and letters. I call most on a weekly basis, and we do have our conferences coming up next week. I use that time to reinforce my goals and the school's goals to make sure we are on the same page. I also try to get correct contact information because parents change phone numbers or address, and I share my number with them as well. I talk to parents about keeping up with their child's reading logs, and the projects we will have throughout the year and that their assistance is needed. I will call them if their child is becoming a behavior problem. For example, this week I called parents to let them know we are working on subtracting three digit numbers, and I tried to give ideas how they can work at home; just reinforce the school concepts. You notice the students whose parents have taken my advice and who work with their child.*

Mrs. Guillory tried to communicate with her parents as much as possible and she admitted it isn't always easy, however she doesn't give up. She further discussed school-wide practices to involve parents and how it is encouraged at the school:

*Well, we have a lot of things going on with parent involvement. Just the other day we had Grandparents' Day. That was probably more parents than I have ever seen during the school day at the school. It was neat to see the different generations and the students' excitement of seeing them there. We have our TAKS family nights, where our families can learn strategies each grade level are using and just to inform parents how they could help their child. Of course, picnics, carnivals, plays, and just so much more, and I can't think right now. Our principal reinforces the open door policy that parents are always welcome in the school. A parent observed for an hour this morning. It makes a difference when a child sees that parent at the school. We just want them working with us.*

After further meetings with Mrs. Guillory, she discussed whether she believed that parent involvement really made a difference, and if so, why. She didn't hesitate in her response:

*I think it's extremely important. I think that it is key. That's the number one thing that you have to have. And the reason I think so, well, you know I'm a parent too, and you know, of course, you always go back with your own experiences, so you know, you go back and forth. But, from our classroom, I notice. I notice every day, that the kids who's parents are behind them 100%, those are the kids that are successful. These kids are learning. And if they didn't get it that day, they get it that night. A lot of times, they don't get it 100% that day. But when they do their*



*homework, it clicks. They come back, and we go over it again. And then we go over it again. And, you know, with this back and forth, they're getting it. They're getting it. You can tell. You can tell the ones who are working with the parents.*

These observations kept Mrs. Guillory working hard to reach these students and their parents. The effectiveness of her practices is supported by the success of the students in her classroom.

### Parents

This section sought to understand the role of parents at Hebert Elementary and to garner their thoughts about participation with the school and their children in the educational process. It examined their practices and obtained their thoughts through interview and observation of their involvement in the school. Along with data from multiple interviews with parents, the plight of one particular single-parent father is highlighted to examine his story and perspectives.

There were many events at Hebert throughout the year involving parents, most of them in the evening. At these events, it was impressive to observe the number of parents who attended. At the TAKS meetings, basketball games, F.A.S.T. sessions, a block party, and other community events throughout the year, the families' enthusiasm to support the schools efforts and willingness to participate and contribute some time to the school were impressive. Of course, turnout was never a hundred percent; however I never saw fewer than fifty parents, with the exception of the F.A.S.T. sessions. After

talking to a few parents to ascertain their rationale for being so involved in the school the following responses were received:

*I went to Hebert, and it is a good school, and I want my child to do well. I believe if I work with the school, they will work with me and my child, so they can make it here.*

Many parents echoed these same sentiments, and the degree of their genuineness showed in their comfort level when they visited the school or interacted with the teachers and other staff members. Parents 6 open-ended questions about their involvement with the school and their overall impression of Hebert school. These questioning opportunities revealed three pertinent themes. They include the following:

- 1) They are informed of the school's mission and activities to involve them.
- 2) They want their children to be successful and will do what it takes.
- 3) They want to be included in their child's education.

I learned that many of the parents I interviewed either went to Hebert or had a relative who went there; therefore, they were familiar with the school's success. Many of the parents were young and had teachers who still were at the school, one was actually Ms. Justice's student. Some connections between the parents and school staff were uncovered after deep probing.

The definition of parent involvement by most parents matched those generally of the school staff. They believed their involvement included supporting the school, helping their child with homework, and coming to the school to volunteer.

None of the parents felt the school was doing too much, rather they wished they could do more. The majority of the parents were working parents; subsequently, they

could not get away to visit the school as much as they would like. Some of the parents were involved in writing the school song and expressed their happiness in the principal's inclusion of them in things concerning the school. This sentiment of being included was expressed repeatedly, and parents stated that being given ownership made them feel welcomed and special.

The one concern parents did make in the interview was the hope that the principal would stay. The school has had so many changes in leadership over the past five years that the veteran parents just wanted consistency at the top. Many were confident in their current leaders' abilities.

Parents became aware of the school's mission to include them at Goals night and their first conferences with their children's teachers. Many stated they were in contact with their children's teachers weekly. One parent indicated how she communicated with her child's teacher:

*I get a conduct and grade report each Friday with my son's work. The teacher and I write notes on the form and it keeps me up to par with his grades and how he is acting in class. I tell her she can call me anytime.*

Another parent expressed a sentiment about Ms. Justice,

*I always see Ms. Justice in the building, and she knows my name. She reminds me of things going on at the school, and how I could do more.*

All parents interviewed wanted their children to be successful and to be better than they were. They saw education as the vehicle to bring their children to a higher status in life, and they pushed them to do well. These parents were well informed. When asked how they knew Hebert was a successful school regarding student achievement,

they remarked, “The internet, on the Texas Education Agency website.” Schools are dealing with more informed and educated parents and must be ready to do their part. The story of Terry Jefferson could highlight the struggles of an involved parent.

### *Terry Jefferson*

Mr. Jefferson is a twenty-eight year old single-father with three children, all of school age. He has custody of two of his children and the other resides with her mother in Atlanta. He is a known barber throughout the community and actually attended Hebert in his youth. He supports the school avidly and can be seen every Monday on his day off volunteering or checking with his children’s teachers to make sure they are doing well; most teachers know him by name.

His story was a complex one. Mr. Jefferson married and had children at a young age. He turned his life around after he was involved in some legal trouble. His stated intentions are to of “wake up and take responsibility as a man and father.” While he was trying to make the family life successful, his wife left him with two of his children and later she had a mental breakdown. He went through an involved custody dispute and won sole custody of the children before the school year began. He was devoted to his children and worked extremely hard with them in school because he wanted them to have a better life than he had.

He was eager to share his story when he met me on Goals Night. When asked how he works with the school and his children to ensure their success, he said:

*The first day of school I talked with their teachers to find out what I can do. I gave them all of my contact info and let them know they could call anytime. I try to be visible, so my kids can see me and never know when I will come to the school, so they and the school can get accustomed to seeing me.*

He also elaborated on how he works with his children at home:

*I sing the ABC's with them and read with them before they go to bed. I can't do it everynight, but I try to do it as much as I can. I let them know to follow the teacher's directions and to respect them, and I just follow up as much as I can.*

Mr. Jefferson expressed his gratitude to the school for offering training on how to work with his children at home and for the comfort level he has whenever he is visiting. He proudly commented about how the principals and many teachers knew his name and face when he visited. He was struggling and admitted it was difficult to always be at the school and be as involved as he would like to, but he tries.

Many parents are unable or unwilling to put forth the effort that he has been able to, but Hebert is striving to ensure all parents who want to be involved can be, and parents like Mr. Jefferson will be the rule and not the exception.

### Emergent Themes

In reviewing the units generated by the participants, three major themes emerged: high expectations for student achievement by the school and homes; influence of community affiliations; and the leaders' influence on school culture. The first theme, described below, provides the setting in which parent involvement occurred for the

participants. The second theme demonstrates the relationship between the school and community, and the third theme shows the importance of the leader leading by example and by motivating others.

### *School and Home Expectations*

School Expectations. The participants of both of the schools utilized in the study shared the common goal of having high expectations for student performance. Each of the participants described parent involvement as a key component if school expectations are to be realized. Effort was made to involve parents in the school process, and the schools benefited in many ways as evidenced by the analysis of their achievement data.

The schools' definition of parent involvement included not only the number of parents who attended campus events, but any type of parental interactions, including phone calls, talking to their children about school, sending and responding to notes, and any other intervention which encouraged their children to put forth their best efforts in school. The schools held their parents in high regard and consistently commented on them in positive ways. Rarely was anyone heard to express that these parents did not care about their children.

In their interviews, the parents defined parent involvement in many ways; however, the unifying belief was that parent involvement did not have to take place only within the school to be effective. This belief is understandable when one recognizes that many of the parents in the targeted schools are minimum wage earners who can not miss as much work as salaried employees. The schools worked with these families by offering

training throughout the day, at night, and on weekends, and they provided suggestions for the children and parents to use as they worked together at home.

These schools recognized parents as a valuable resource and they built on this belief to enhance involvement of the parents. They constantly reminded parents that neither the children nor the school could be successful without their committed involvement throughout the year.

Parent Expectations. The parents in both of these communities were exceptions to past research on involvement of African-American families that concluded that the level of their involvement in children's education was traditionally low. These parents were well informed, visible, and involved in their children's schooling. They had high expectations for their children, and their goals were for them to excel; they were willing to put forth whatever effort necessary to achieve that goal.

Interview data revealed five out of six parents who participated in the study selected their children's schools by word of mouth or information posted on the Texas Education Agency website. The parents' tenacity in researching and choosing the best schools for their children motivated them to lend their support to these schools in an effort to promote continued success for all the involved stakeholders. Many of these parents were leaders in the school and enthusiastically publicized the achievements of the school in the community, thereby enabling the school to thrive and cast a web to involve more families and community entities in the educational process. The families desired for their children to be at these schools, and they supported them accordingly.

## *School and Community*

Both of these schools worked hand in hand with the community to promote their programs because they recognized the community as a valuable resource that could be used in creative ways to ensure the success of the students.

Jackson Elementary had the added benefit of having a neighborhood association housed within its building; this encouraged community members to visit the school and business partners to support the programs. The school sought not only financial contributors but also volunteers and mentors to lead the students in positive directions. It offered many events that involved the community, such as the neighborhood block party, athletic events, and school visits. The efforts of the school, parents, and community created a cohesive relationship that helped to cast a positive light on an otherwise downtrodden area of the city.

The relationship between Hebert Elementary and its community was similar to Jackson Elementary and its community in that the community played an integral part in the success of each program by its support of school programs and positive representation to citizens in other areas of the city. The community was as proud of the school as the school was proud of it. The local high school and businesses contributed time and incentives to the schools, and they showed pride in the opportunity to work with the schools.



### *Leader Influence*

At both schools it was evident that the administrators influenced the school culture. The strength, enthusiasm, and support they offered to the teachers and parents forged relationships that might not have developed. They built exemplary schools by having stakeholders work together to create vision and mission statements and that they followed through with their promises.

The success of the two leaders in getting the teachers and parents to realize the value of partnering with each other led to all parties working together to achieve the school's vision for excellence. Field observations and participant interviews confirmed that everyone was guided by the same purpose when it came to the correct formula for student achievement. Leaders set the tone for success and maintained that persona throughout the year. Most importantly, they were respected by the staff, community, and parents who collaborated to make parent involvement evident in their schools.

## Chapter VI

### Study Summary, Analysis, and Discussion

What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore-And then run? Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over-Like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.  
Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes

Oftentimes, through sheer force of determination and dedication, dreams and aspirations, simply explode into reality, made real by a community of individual and collective wherewithal, inner strength, and unbroken fortitude.

This study began with the understanding that parents make a difference in the school-based lives of their children, but only when their role is meaningful, empowered, and sustained. Furthermore, Ianni (1987) and Wahlberg (1984) state that regardless of their socioeconomic status or backgrounds, parents significantly increase their children's academic learning when they are productively involved in their children's education. Thus, parent involvement is an important component of a successful school. This section of the study captures the personal insights, feelings, and conditions of the participants who shared relevant facts with the researcher. These factors influenced or contributed to the levels and types of parent involvement experienced throughout the year in two targeted communities in an urban school district in the Southwest part of the country. These experiences were of an individual and collective nature.

## Study Summary

This study sought to garner an understanding of successful parent involvement practices and to identify factors that contribute to parent involvement by African-American parents in an urban school district. In addition, it endeavored to reveal how two Title I schools in an urban school district are meeting the needs of African-American parents who desire to be involved in their children's education and to determine the schools' practices that encourage parent involvement.

Participants were selected who could provide insights about how school, community, and family practices contributed to an effective school, family and community partnership. The "community nomination" sampling method (Foster, 1997) allowed the selection of participants who were directly connected to the targeted schools and communities. This selection process provided an understanding of the issues faced by individuals at different levels of the partnership and revealed their perceptions constructed through their experiences.

Nine participants were interviewed for this study. Interviews were conducted over the span of 7 months. All participants agreed to devote an hour to the initial interview and thirty minutes to a one-hour for follow-up interviews. Additionally, other participant excerpts are included detailing observations at various events throughout the duration of the study.

Field notes from observations at various events were recorded over the 7 month period. Observational data provided the opportunity to examine levels and types of involvement activities that increased parent participation throughout the school year.

This study was guided by a major question: What are the experiences of African-American parents and school personnel in Title I schools that lead to successful partnerships? Other questions that guided the study were: (1) How do stakeholders interpret parent involvement, and what motivates or constrains their practice? (2) What are the levels of parent involvement in the African-American community? (3) Do cultural differences have any impact on African-American parent involvement in an urban school district?

### Framework for Analysis

In order to constructively analyze and interpret the meanings of parent involvement as perceived by the participants utilized in the study, Joyce Epstein and her colleagues designed a framework for analysis. Epstein (1996) proposed a framework of parent involvement that includes six main types of activities that connect families, schools, and communities: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community.

Parenting refers to the responsibilities of the home that can include, but are not limited to, ensuring children's health and safety, supervision, discipline, guiding children at each level, and creating positive home conditions that promote development.

Communication refers to the contact made from school and homes that informs the parties of school programs and children's progress. These communications can include memos, notices, report cards, conferences, and similar means. Volunteers include community members and business partners in addition to parents that assist teachers,

administrators, and children in classrooms and other areas of the school. Learning at home describes initiatives from the school that help the parents or guardians to better assist their children at home and to monitor the children's progress. Decision making outlines the parents' roles in PTA/PTO, advisory councils, or other forms of advocacy for their children at a school or within a district. Lastly, collaborating with the community refers to how the integration of various community agencies and resources supports the school programs.

These parent involvement activities provide the blueprint used to highlight how these schools endeavor to create strong, positive family and school partnerships in their respective communities.

### Parenting

Both schools used a myriad of approaches to teach families about creating positive environments for children at home. It is important to note that the "tips" that the schools gave the parents were not intrusive or demeaning in their approach. The schools took advantage of multiple methods to keep parents informed and give them helpful hints on their parenting by offering workshops, distributing pamphlets and notes, and using the media. Many of the skills that were taught were accessible to any parent in the district through newsletters, newspaper ads, news media, and Channel Seven, which broadcasts to every home. Word of mouth was successful in both schools because of the communication the families maintained with one another. The schools were creative in their approaches.

Jackson Elementary took full advantage of its being a neighborhood school. Since the neighborhood association was housed in the school, it gave many of the parents who visited the association the opportunity to experience activities in the school and to get the word out about upcoming events and training that could help them to help their children succeed. Jackson utilized these “teachable moments” to conduct mini-workshops and to inform and excite parents of the positive impact they could have in their children’s educational experience. They used the <sup>1</sup>I Care and <sup>2</sup>Compass Learning” programs as a structure to introduce parents to ideas they could utilize to help their children succeed in school. For example, the programs encouraged the parents to document reading with their children or participation in family outings and taught them how to use their homes as mini-labs to explore school concepts or their everyday lives.

The school offered assistance to families that were in need by linking them with community agencies that were willing to help. For example, students who needed glasses or other necessities were referred to community organizations, such as The Lion’s Club, and parents who needed job assistance were referred to the Texas Workforce Centers. The school demonstrated a true partnership with the families.

Hebert Elementary presented positive parenting skills to its parents through special programs supported by federal and state funding. It offered social assistance to families by providing necessities such as children’s glasses and job assistance by referring families that needed employment to appropriate agencies.

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<sup>1</sup> Parenting program that documents activities and practices parents utilize with their children.

<sup>2</sup> Educational curriculum that teaches parents how to use their home as teaching tools to reinforce school concepts.

Hebert used its <sup>3</sup>Families And Schools working Together program to teach many of the parenting skills to select families; however, the skills learned in the program were carried over to other families throughout the school. The program taught parents how to communicate with the school and how to truly become advocates in their children's school experiences. In addition, it helped parents understand their children's developmental stages and deal with issues, such as peer pressure and drugs. Hebert also utilized "I Care" and Compass" to highlight and influence how parents should work with their children to ensure the children's success in school.

Both school recognized parents as valuable assets and strong supporters and, as part of the partnership, worked with their families in constructive and creative ways. Also, both schools were tenacious in their use of the surrounding communities to help with employment, supplemental needs, and overall support of their efforts to be exemplary campuses.

### Communicating

Communication was a strong point for both of the schools utilized in this study. Typically, in schools with families in the low-socioeconomic range, teachers have problems contacting parents or guardians by phone, letters, or visits to the schools. The schools' approaches to solve this problem were proactive and successful in keeping families informed of school functions or special events. Schools used similar approaches but with subtle differences unique to their communities.

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<sup>3</sup> State funded program that teaches families how to help student avoid drugs and how to better work with the schools.

Jackson Elementary primarily relied upon face to face interactions with its families. The principal modeled and encouraged teachers to be visible before and after school and seized every opportunity, when a parent was in the building, to discuss issues, events, or concerns that needed to be addressed. In addition, everyone was required to meet and greet parents who picked up their children after school. The neighborhood association allowed access to the school to families who visited the school, and word of mouth with the community worked wonders for the Jackson population. The environment and setting was conducive to welcoming parents, and many parents looked forward for the school's next event.

The school also utilized athletics as a vehicle to inform parents of their rights, responsibilities, and "happenings" occurring at the school. The local high school broadcaster consistently talked about the schools' events at varsity football and basketball games, and the elementary school basketball games were always used as parent forums before the games began. Jackson used every opportunity to access the parents who were present in order to keep open the lines of communication.

Hebert also utilized face to face interactions; however, the community had a network that assisted the school in getting information to multiple families. Many of the families were from the community and regularly associated with one another within the neighborhood, either at sporting events or through regular community activities, such as shopping or worshipping together. Hebert capitalized upon athletics as a means to inform parents as well. Its association with the neighborhood high school helped in these endeavors, especially because of its close proximity to the school. Hebert sent out multiple newsletters and student incentives to help encourage parents to be involved.



Both schools used traditional methods (letters, phone contact, conferences) and creative methods (neighborhood association, athletic events to reach parents, and their tenacity and unstoppable desire to have parents involved in some way was rewarded with increased parent involvement and academic success for the students. Jackson and Hebert realized the obstacles identified by the schools; however, they did not let these potential roadblocks define their practices and beliefs, nor preclude them from having the best possible schools for the families they served.

### Volunteering

Jackson and Hebert were able to use their surrounding communities and business partners as volunteers to help students in more ways than financially. The schools had grandparents and members of the community assist teachers in their classrooms, individual students, and groups of students facing academic difficulties and social concerns.

Jackson Elementary had seven business partners and was able to use the companies' personnel as volunteers. At the beginning of the year, the principal had the grade level representatives brainstorm ways volunteers could be useful and used this list to provide tutoring ideas for the volunteers. When volunteers arrived, the teachers had ready schedules and names of the students with which they would work. This ensured there were no instances of volunteers sitting around doing nothing while they were at the school. The volunteers had "planned" activities and tasks that would achieve specific goals with the students. This was a testimony to Mrs. Wood's leadership.

In addition, members of the neighborhood association were available to provide helping hands. Many of these volunteers were older, retired individuals, and many had relatives in the school. They worked with students and offered a wealth of knowledge. Some could be observed reading to children or sharing stories of how things were in the city in years past. The school believed the community provided something of immeasurable value to the school.

Hebert did not have the number of business partners Jackson had; however, the factory (DuPont) that worked with the school was a wonderful supporter. The workers who volunteered at the school were assigned grade levels and students; they reinforced the teachers' curriculum by reteaching various concepts the students covered. They also assisted in the science lab that the plant built for the school as a resource for science teachers to bring different concepts to light.

What Hebert lacked with business partners they made up for with grandparents and other relatives. These helpers could be seen helping in the cafeteria, the gym, and throughout the halls, providing additional support for the teachers. They helped in their relatives' classrooms, but did not hesitate to provide assistance to a child needing help in another classrooms. The volunteers at the school worked together to lift the school's effectiveness up and to keep it achieving the accomplishments it had in the past.

### Learning at home

Learning at home was promoted by the schools in various ways, but the emphases for the schools were on the two distinct parent involvement programs the school district

adopted for use: “I Care” & “Compass Learning”. The school district gave the individual schools the option of which program to implement, and each principal chose the program that best fit her particular community. Hebert Elementary focused on the “I Care” program to reinforce academics at home; Jackson relied heavily upon “Compass Learning” and used a parent involvement facilitator to help manage the program

In the mornings and afternoons, Jackson’s parent facilitator provided monthly training for parents in the “Compass Learning” parent involvement kit. The kit consists of a set of parenting resources designed to help schools reach out to parents and teach them how to work with their children’s academics at home. It includes parent modules and take-home activities, such as, providing homework habits, reinforcing children’s self-esteem, and kitchen-oriented math activities. Exercises are designed to foster positive academic abilities and attitudes in the home environment, and to promote creativity, problem solving, imaginative thinking, parenting and family communication skills, and to strengthen the connection between home and school.

Jackson’s parent facilitator chose different themes from the twelve modules to train parents on at different times of the month and different days in order to give as many parents the opportunity to get familiar with the program’s curriculum. In addition, she and other teachers used the kit to give parents additional training before the school’s basketball games or other campus activities. There was also a resource room where parents could check out books, laptops, calculators, or other materials that would assist them at home in working with their children. The school received many of the materials from the district’s Title I department and their multiple business partners.

Hebert's assistance with parents at home focused on the "I Care" positive parenting program. They had the compass learning kit available to them but chose "I Care" to be their main means of helping their parents with their children at home. "I Care" is a comprehensive curriculum designed to build strong relationships between parents, students, and teachers. "I Care" promotes essential learning experiences through planned parent and child activities. The program reinforces character education, reading, and total quality relationships between educators and parents. It provides schools, and parents with meaningful tools to document, measure, evaluate, and increase parent involvement for each student, classroom, school, and school district.

Hebert's facilitator utilized the program's evaluation tool to document the types of activities families were using at home in order to assess how the school could better serve families in ways with which they were comfortable. For example, one component of the program has parents return a form to document the activities done for the month at home. Some of the forms demonstrate going to the park, reading for twenty minutes, or helping with homework three nights a week. Hebert's facilitator would use this data to hold workshops on how parents can use the park environment to enhance science or math skills or provide tips for helping with homework.

Both schools believed and demonstrated that parents should be shown how to best facilitate a home environment conducive to helping children with their academics. Skills were continuously modeled by parent facilitators, teachers, and even administrators when the opportunity allowed. These types of parent involvement activities empowered the parents to believe that they could have an impact on their children's studies by supporting the school and reinforcing skills at home. More importantly, it equipped the parents with

the tools necessary to have the confidence and abilities to help their children in multiple ways.

### Decision Making

Both administrators vocalized the importance and desire to have parents take roles in the school as part of the decision making process; however, the maturity of this desire was not as evident as in other areas of parent involvement. If there was a weak component of each of these programs, this would have to be it. The schools did want to have parents as vocal and active members as part of the decision making process; nevertheless, many of the parents just went along with the decisions the schools made, unless the decisions negatively impacted their children in some way. The parents at both schools mainly accepted the school's "expertise" as being most beneficial for their children.

Jackson had a few parents who were able to be willing and consistent partners of major decisions on campus improvement teams and other areas, primarily because the PTA president worked at the school as a paraprofessional. Also, other parents who worked in the building and dependable volunteers provided additional voices from a parent's perspective. The parents' voices were not evident on a grand scale at the school because many parents did not attend meetings dealing with decision making and because they did not feel comfortable in making school decisions about issues that affected the operation of the school. The principal reflected that she attempted to seek parents' advice through surveys provided through the Title I department or by talking to parents daily,

however, she understood the apprehension of many of the parents. She noted: “Many parents had bad experiences in their past with schools and don’t feel that that they are equipped to help in those areas”. She admitted that she is trying to change these parents’ views by making them feel welcome and stressing they are willing contributors; nevertheless, it has been a slow transition.

Hebert did not have the luxury of a PTA president working in the school, but it did have parents who were dependable volunteers at the school. They had a harder time getting parents to be involved in major decisions than Jackson, but the principal utilized some creative techniques to encourage the parents who did not feel comfortable vocalizing their opinions to the school. She incorporated a suggestion box that any parent, student, or teacher could use to anonymously voice their concerns and comments. She took the suggestions to heart and responded to as many as she could in the schools’ newsletter. Hebert did have parents who were members of the campus improvement committees, but they did not make all of the meetings and were really “on the roll” members instead of contributors to the big decisions. As with Jackson, parents deferred to educators when decisions had to be made, although the principal made many attempts to move them beyond a “token” membership. In an ironic twist, Hebert’s success more than likely contributed to the parents’ confidence in the school’s ability to make the best decisions for the children.

Decision making was an area in which both schools truly struggled to achieve an acceptable level of parent involvement. It was evident that parents did care about the issues brought before the school; nevertheless, they chose to defer to the perceived expertise of the educators or authority in the school. The fact that many of the parents at

the schools were wage earners or high school graduates may have influenced their confidence at being participants in this area of parent involvement. The schools did make legitimate efforts and allowed the opportunity for parents to have their voices heard, albeit through face to face contact, suggestion boxes, or other forms of communication that were not as formal as serving on and working with committees. It is important to recognize that parents were always informed of their right to know and to have an influence on how they could share with their children's school in the decision making process.

### Collaborating with the Community

The community was the backbone of Jackson and Hebert throughout this study. Both of the schools used the influence of their communities, the ability to communicate in various platforms, the desire to volunteer, and the willingness to provide financial support to benefit the schools. The community support that both schools experienced afforded them the means to have all of the positive achievements that they were accomplishing to be disseminated throughout their neighborhoods and their school districts. The mention of these two Rolling Hills schools did not elicit the negative connotation that typically followed many schools in low-income, high minority populations. Proud parents and neighbors were wearing the schools' t-shirts and riding in cars with school bumper stickers highlighting positives accomplishments at their respective campuses.

Jackson took full advantage of its neighborhood association by supporting events the association sponsored and presented many opportunities for the community to be involved on its campus. The school publicized its school basketball games, parent-teacher softball games, and annual block parties that were avenues to include the community in school events. For example, the annual block party provided music, food, job opportunities, and health information and highlighted school organizations, such as the choir and drill teams. It was meant to expose the neighborhood to the positive things going on at the school, but it served to benefit the community as well through the job and health fairs. The school enlisted members of the city's employment office and Rolling Hills University officials to participate and educate about topics that could benefit them. The principal saw the school as a vehicle that helped the community and, in turn, the community helped them. It was clear from interviews and observations that the feeling was reciprocal because of the praises that could always be heard about the school. One neighbor commented, "I just want to give back what has been given to me. I got into truck driving school because of Jackson. They are always helping out." The school is as much a resource for the community as they are a resource for the school.

Hebert also included community members in its events. The school marquee informed everyone of upcoming events at Hebert and invited their participation. Volunteers and parents got the word out when events were going on at the school. Hebert's community members can be seen at basketball games, family nights, and the annual picnic which serves as Hebert's showcase for the year. It did not enjoy as many outside contributors as Jackson, but it did highlight the students of Hebert Elementary in a strong and positive way. These events drew parents and community members from all



over the city because of Hebert's admirable reputation in the community that garners strong support and recognition. Many community members at Hebert supported the school through anonymous donations, word-of-mouth, and community networks.

Both schools and their communities benefited from district support that provided opportunities for the schools to highlight their success and for parents and community members to receive support and training at the annual district-sponsored Urban Summit. The superintendent of Rolling Hills began the Summit in 1998 and has sponsored it annually to benefit the district and its community members. The Summit sets up booths where each school in the district can showcase its achievements, programs, training for parents, in-services for teachers, health information, and job opportunities for families. The district demonstrates and reinforces the need and desire to have the entire community as a strong part of the schools and their successes.

Community collaboration was a part of Jackson and Hebert, but it was also practiced by the school district benefiting all schools within Rolling Hills ISD. It was evident that the schools and community attempted to work together to support each other's endeavors, which in the end benefited the students. Table 4 in Appendices highlights the parent involvement activities observed in both schools.

### Defining Parent Involvement/Beliefs Underlying Experiences

The meanings and perceptions of parent involvement that participants brought to this study are critical to understanding the rationale of how they made it work in their communities. Parent involvement has multiple definitions as evidenced in the research literature. In this study, traditional definitions of parent involvement held true; however, there were numerous instances of parents being involved in their children's education in significant, but untraditional ways. The import difference noted was that the school personnel and parents did not believe they had to see each other or talk to one another on a daily basis in order to be classified as involved in their children's education –a tenet of traditional parent involvement.

Some of the variations of parent involvement included, but were not limited to, helping with homework, volunteering at the school, participating in athletic events, coming to parent meetings, going to different events within the school, supporting teachers' efforts, and keeping kids in school daily. The parents at the school were not always visible on the campus, but their presence was felt in the educational lives of the children. Their involvement could be evidenced in subtle ways, such as the teachers looking over students' homework and noticing the difference between a child who had a parent or guardian check the work versus one who had not. These schools understood parent involvement could make a difference in how parents could be perceived.

In turn, parents also recognized that they could be an important part of their children's education in more ways than just being in the school. One parent stated, "I can't be there all the time even though I want to, but I make sure my son goes to school

and listens to his teacher.” Just having the students there ready to learn satisfied most of the teachers in the school, but they let parents know they desired more. The parents and teachers’ ideals are similar, as evidenced in how they communicated. Teachers at both schools were not afraid to talk or meet with parents, and they conversed with many by phone or through weekly letters, which helped them share their expectations with one another. Communication was the key in making these relationships work from administration down to parents and students.

Schools and the families they serve need to share the same goals when it comes to making parent involvement work. As both of these schools demonstrated, expectations need to be made clear early and often throughout the school year to forge a successful relationship. These expectations must be made known to parents, community members, business partners, and whoever else is a stakeholder in the process. Expectations make the difference, and the leader has a major hand in setting and maintaining them.

### Leadership

Throughout the study, the single most important and influential individuals were the school leaders. The teachers, parent facilitators, counselors, parents, and students were extremely important to the success of parent involvement at these schools. However, expectations and similar ideals played a major role in making things happen in the schools. The principal has the most important role in this process, by setting the tone, helping everyone realize the vision, modeling expected behavior and expectations, and holding stakeholders accountable to get the job done.

The principals at Jackson and Hebert faced the same obstacles, but they were presented to them in different ways. Mrs. Wood, at Jackson, built her program from the ground up. Her program has continued to improve by the annual renewal of the mission statement and by the high expectations she holds for the school and the community each year. Mrs. Smith at Hebert faced the challenge of following behind previous administrators who have experienced success and built strong relationships within the community. She was able to succeed because she realized she did not need to reinvent the wheel but rather to sustain the positive attitude the school had going for it and building upon it. Both principals realized the importance of assessing their situation and building from there.

At Jackson Elementary, Mrs. Wood's personality reflected her expectations of how she wanted parents to be involved in the school life of their children. She was always seen talking to parents, encouraging them to come out and get involved, and she showed up at events rather than delegating responsibility to someone else. She let teachers and parents know that it was extremely important to her that it should be just as important to them to be involved. On a regular basis, she sent memos and, monthly calendars and communicated expectations constantly with all stakeholders to ensure they would never forget her stance in this endeavor. Most importantly, she used a hands-on approach in assisting a teacher or parent who was struggling to achieve an amicable relationship. There were no excuses when it came to parent involvement at Jackson.

At Hebert, Dr. Smith had a more subdued personality; however, she made her expectations clear with teachers and parents alike. She made a point to communicate with as many parents as she could by remaining visible and learning everyone by. Her

expectations were modeled in how she interacted with others on a daily basis. She held teachers accountable, but checking frequently with them and parents to see if there was any way she could provide assistance. She had a no nonsense attitude but was fair and consistent with her staff.

A most important factor about each of these leaders was she never let an unfavorable view of her schools or the families she served cloud her judgments or views. Each looked for positive elements in the community and built upon them to make the schools better. Each modeled expected behavior and was tenacious in her attainment of specific goals. These attitudes carried over to staff and families and made an impact in the schools to performance.

### Community and Parent Perspectives

“It takes a neighborhood to raise a child,” a rephrasing of an old African proverb, may be a truism in the African American community of today as reflected in the high level of parent involvement of these two schools. Each of these schools was deeply entrenched in low poverty neighborhoods; each was successful by stats and national standards, and each experienced high levels of parent involvement. These schools experienced networks that kept them informed of school activities, ways they could help their children and how they could contribute to their schools’ success.

It took more than just administrators wanting parent involvement to work in their schools. Administrators needed to get teachers, school staff, parents, students, community members, and business partners to accept the idea of becoming stakeholders

in the success of their schools. Fortunately, these schools had leaders with vision and participants with the will for success.

In these communities, not only did the school need the parents and community, they needed each other. The schools provided information regarding employment and health clinics meanwhile announcing forthcoming activities and events at the school. It was a reciprocal effect. When each realized how they benefited each other, the relationships continued to have a positive effect. Children saw and can respect parents and business partners who came out to events, and the neighbors and community got to know the students as well. The school capitalized repeatedly on these opportunities.

The community and its involvement with the schools made a positive difference on success denying expectations from the demographic profile.

#### Administration and Teachers Perspective

In this study, a positive attitude about schools, staff, community, students, and parents was a major factor in the success of the schools. The slogan was evident in the halls of both schools, but more importantly it was evident in the daily interaction between school and family. The leader set the tone, but everyone followed suit when the benefits of the teamwork were actualized in student progress throughout the year.

School districts in areas of poverty with high student populations of African American, Hispanic, Asian, and other minorities face deficits when compared to more affluent school districts. Jackson Elementary and Hebert Elementary however, were able to overcome the negative percentages of National statistics in the drive for success by

students and in the support of parents and communities. They believed, teachers believed, and parents believed that “high-risk” children could be the best and be successful in school.

Teachers at both schools enforced the school’s vision and took the steps necessary to achieve those goals. “No excuses” was a consistent theme, from analysis of their interviews and their observations and it was evident in their practice.

If schools strongly supported a “can” and “will” attitude towards students success and developed a positive bond of unity among schools, parents, community, business, and students, it is possible that schools in like situations could achieve similar levels of success.

As a compensation for breeches in communication or few opportunities to meet and greet parents on a continuous or regularly scheduled basis, both schools were skilled in the art of making the best use of time spent with parents. Administrators and teachers were visible at every possible opportunity, held events at various times of the day, and evening, and shared information with parents on every occasion.

Schools used athletics as a means to get parents into the school and used the opportunity to communicate necessary information. These types of teachable moments could be seen on any given day. At each school, many spontaneous lessons or information settings could be observed because staff viewed them as opportunities for sharing with parents. Each person who works in a similar setting must be proactive, creative, and ready to work with families in multiple ways and to take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself for any type of parent involvement to take place.

### Similarities in Prior Research

Analysis of interviews, observations, and field notes, congruencies between the research literature and this of African-American parent involvement in two Title I schools. Henderson and Mapp (2002), in their annual synthesis of parent involvement, “A New Wave of Evidence,” found seven key points from their compiled analysis of current research in this area:

- Programs and interventions that engage families in supporting their children’s learning at home are linked to higher student achievement.
- The more families support their children’s learning and educational progress, the more their children tend to do well in school and continue their education.
- Families of all cultural backgrounds, education, and income levels encourage their children, talk to them about school, help them plan for higher education, and keep them focused on learning and homework.
- Parent and community involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement.
- Programs that successfully connect with families and community invite involvement, are welcoming, and address specific parent and community needs.
- Parent involvement programs that are effective in engaging diverse families recognize, respect, and address cultural and class differences.
- Effective programs that engage families and community embrace a philosophy of partnership.
- Organized initiatives to build parent and community leadership to improve low-performing school are developing in low-income urban areas and the rural South.

Themes from this study in many ways correlate with an analysis of theirs. First, Hebert and Jackson used programs that empowered parents to confidently help their children at home and encouraged the development of systems that promoted peer support. Jackson attained this goal by implementing the “Compass Learning Program,” while Hebert capitalized on the “I Care Program” and F.A.S.T. program. These programs empowered parents to make a difference with their children at home. Second, this study



endeavored to look at the experiences of involvement by African-American parents; it found them to be significant factors in these communities. Parents at the schools were involved in workshops, volunteering, community assistance, and athletics. Parents communicated with teachers and were found to be supportive in their respective schools. Last, the programs and events that the schools actuated to get parents involved focused on student learning. Programs and workshops were designed to inform parents of the curriculum and how parent involvement could make a difference.

### Differences from Prior Research

In the literature, Hebert and Jackson schools diverged from the usual portrayal of African Americans. The majority of the families in this study contrasted dramatically from the indifferent and disinterested parents that were highlighted in previous research (Chavkin, 1989, 1993). The parents of Hebert and Jackson's schools were interested in their children's education and wanted the best for them. The schools were significantly involved in the endeavor; they trained parents and taught them how to be advocates for their children. It was a two way partnership with the schools leading the way. Parents were not always in the building; however, they were fully supportive of the teachers and the schools' programs.

In addition, the schools and neighborhood communities diverged from the culture deficit models that past researchers used to portray the African-American community in a negative light (Coleman et Al., 1966; Jencks et. Al., 1972; Moynihan, 1965). In this study, the communities had networks that helped to keep parents informed of strategies

and ideas that helped their children succeed. Once these families were taught how they could be a part of the educational program, they did not have a problem supporting the schools. Athletics played a crucial part in reaching some parents who would not normally come to school. Pre-game events included workshops, dinner, and other activities that provided information on the state test, curriculum, and ideas to assist their children at home. These games were well attended and reached many parents who would have not otherwise been uninformed.

#### Additions to Current Research

This study makes valuable contributions to the existing literature designed to improve involvement between parents from the African-American community and low-poverty schools. First, the impact of the school leader in shaping a vision, cultivating it, and holding stakeholders accountable when it comes to involving parents is not sufficiently addressed in current literature. In this study, the administrators were invaluable resources in bringing parent involvement to life in their communities. Leaders needed to assess their surroundings, correlate their programs with the community, and achieve acceptance from all stakeholders in order to achieve the level of success they reached. Someone strong and visible to whom the communities could relate made a difference. However, the leader was only one component.

Second, the community was used in positive ways. They played major roles in assisting Hebert and Jackson schools. The relationships were reciprocal and benefited both school and the community. Community members provided word of mouth

communication, volunteering, and support for the school programs. In turn, the schools, notably Jackson Elementary, provided the community with a building for the Neighborhood Association, health assistance, and job opportunities, all assets cultivated to enhance the schools and their surroundings.

Finally, the schools learned to adapt and be creative in building relationships with their families and motivating them to have high expectations. School personnel learned the skill of capitalizing on every opportunity to interact with parents or the community to keep lines of communication open. Also, athletics played a major role at the elementary level, and high school games were used as avenues to communicate with parents attending various events. The keys to the schools' abilities to work with families were of preparation, of positive attitudes, and of genuine belief in the parents' desire to be involved in their children's educational experience.

## Discussion

This study began with the belief that strong parent involvement can help these children achieve success in schools in low socioeconomic communities who have a high population of African-American students. This researcher believes that the findings of this study corroborates this premise.

Each school found methods to make parent involvement work in the community. They were able to provide parents with skills to assist their children at home, to communicate with their families in multiple ways, to recruit and retain volunteers, to assist parents to help their children learn at home, to include parents in decision making,

and to collaborate with their community to build success. In addition, leaders were able to communicate expectations and visions to the school and communities so that all stakeholders share the same ideals and realize the importance of all contributors to the schools success. These schools were experiencing levels of parent involvement that worked for their communities, and they capitalized on the opportunities to contribute to their success.

This study revealed high educational aspirations, goal setting from strong leaders, and tenacity in attacking endeavors; all were part of the schools striving to do whatever it took for them to be successful. In this study, the schools chose to develop parents volunteers to be active stakeholders in the school lives of their children. Members of these communities utilized their strengths and opportunities to overcome obstacles and to increase and maintain parent involvement. Moreover, the stories and experiences of this group of educators, parents, and community members were positive overall and indicated a degree willingness to be an integral part of their family's success and for some, for years after their children were no longer attending the schools.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Analyzing this data, I concluded that additional research could add to the present knowledge base. The following are suggested topics of interest for future research.

1. This study targeted two schools in specific African American communities. The replication of this study in other communities in the north and other parts of the nation would provide deeper insight into other strategies for getting parents both into the schools similar and involved in their children's education. Additionally,

the inclusion of other minorities and how they are getting their parents involved would provide more information regarding experiences across races.

2. Family participants of this study were all low-socioeconomic. A replication of this study with middle-class families would reveal how schools endeavor to include these parents in their children's education.
3. Another factor that would be of interest is that of the role of religion as a networking tool for students in the African American community. Many participants in the study briefly talked about hearing about school events at the church. Future research might benefit from understanding the role of religion and spirituality as they relate to education in some areas.
4. Replication of this study with other races with low-socioeconomic status is necessary. It would be interesting to see how schools work with these families and with what success. Of particular interest would be a study of the Native American and the Asian American experiences since they haven't been researched in depth in these areas.

## **Epilogue**

Positive involvement of the African American parent from low-socioeconomic schools has been an ongoing struggle for many schools. It is not by any means an easy thing to achieve in a low-socioeconomic area or in schools with different demographics. Parent involvement may always be present to some extent, but may be less visible. The schools in this study have been able to accomplish their aims by including parents in the

school lives of the children by hard work and by instilling the belief within themselves, their parents, and their communities that they can make a positive difference in the success of their children.

This study began with the understanding that African-American parents living in low-socioeconomic schools can and do make a difference in the schooling of their children. They do take part in the education of their children in less visible ways not recognized by the research literature as involvement (phone calls, notes, and other such ways). Furthermore, if schools demonstrate the wherewithal, confidence, and belief that their parents and other stakeholders can make a difference, effective family and school connections can take place.

Though challenges persist in the ability of the family and the school to compete on both an educational level and an economic level with more affluent districts, the persistence of school administrators and teachers to overcome the obstacles do make a difference in the student success. It is important to believe that all stakeholders can and must make a difference in all schools, but it will take effort and understanding from everyone to make parent involvement happen and to be effective in any school.

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Table 1

Jackson Ethnicity Summary Report 2004 - 2005

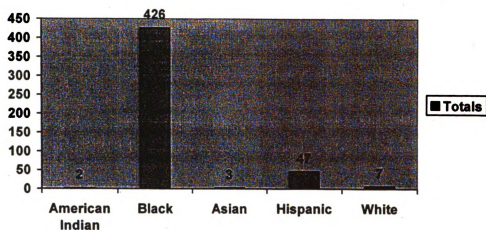
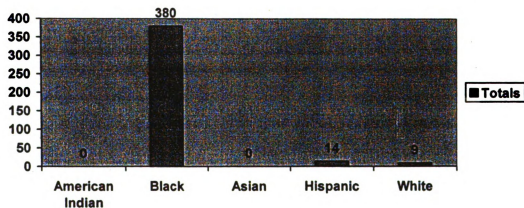


Table 2

Hebert Ethnicity Summary Report 2004 - 2005



Data retrieved from Texas Education Agency  
[www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us)

Table 3

Five Year Attendance Report Hebert Elementary (All Students)

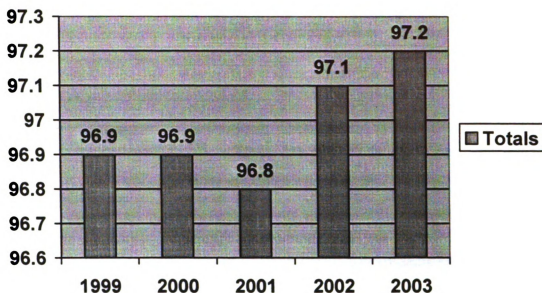
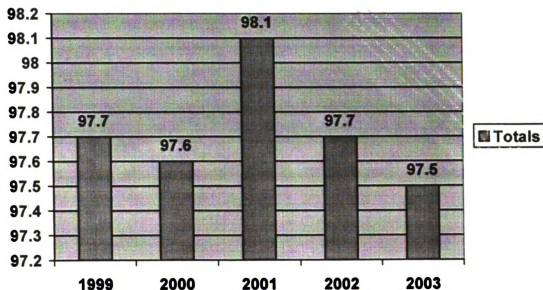


Table 4

Five Year Attendance Report Jackson Elementary (All Students)



Data retrieved from Texas Education Agency  
[www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us)

Table 5

Two-Year History  
Texas Assessment of Knowledge & Skills (TAKS)  
Percentages

Jackson Elementary

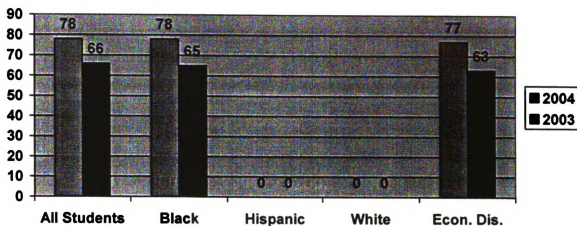
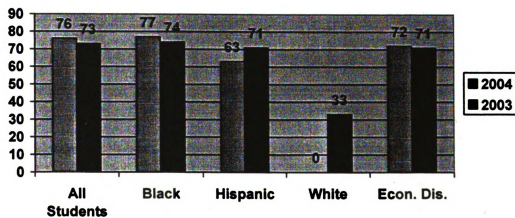


Table 6  
Hebert Elementary



The following chart presents a synopsis of the type of events used at both elementary schools. It is adapted from Joyce Epstein's six spheres of influence.

Table 4

Summary of Parent Involvement Activities in Hebert and Jackson

Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at home	Type 5 Decision Making	Type 6 Collaborating with Community
Help all families establish home environments to support children as students	Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress	Recruit and organize parent help and support	Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum related activities, decisions, and planning	Include parents in school decisions, develop parent leaders and representative	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.
Examples from Jackson of each type:					
"Compass Learning" Family Nights	Face to Face Newsletters Calendars Word of Mouth Visibility Phone Calls Athletics	Parents Business Partners Neighborhood Association	"Compass Learning"  Teacher Lead Workshops	PTA Campus Improvement Committees	Block Parties Athletics Neighborhood Association
Examples from Hebert of each type:					
"I Care" Family Nights F.A.S.T.	Face to Face Newsletters Calendars Word of Mouth Visibility Phone Calls Athletics	Parents Business Partners Community Members	"I Care"  Teacher Lead Workshops  F.A.S.T.	PTA Campus Improvement Committees Suggestion Box	Block Parties Athletics Community Parades and Carnivals

**MICHIGAN STATE**  
**UNIVERSITY**

July 14, 2004

TO: Christopher DUNBAR  
407 Erickson Hall  
MSU

RE: IRB# 04-377 CATEGORY: FULL REVIEW

APPROVAL DATE: July 12, 2004

EXPIRATION DATE: June 12, 2005

TITLE: A Qualitative Analysis of Parent Involvement with African-American Families in Title I Schools

The University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects' (UCRIHS) review of this project is complete and I am pleased to advise that the rights and welfare of the human subjects appear to be adequately protected and methods to obtain informed consent are appropriate. Therefore, the UCRIHS approved this project.

**RENEWALS:** UCRIHS approval is valid until the expiration date listed above. Projects continuing beyond this date must be renewed with the renewal form. A maximum of four such expedited renewals are possible. Investigators wishing to continue a project beyond that time need to submit a 5-year application for a complete review.

**REVISIONS:** UCRIHS must review any changes in procedures involving human subjects, prior to initiation of the change. If this is done at the time of renewal, please include a revision form with the renewal. To revise an approved protocol at any other time during the year, send your written request with an attached revision cover sheet to the UCRIHS Chair, requesting revised approval and referencing the project's IRB# and title. Include in your request a description of the change and any revised instruments, consent forms or advertisements that are applicable.

**PROBLEMS/CHANGES:** Should either of the following arise during the course of the work, notify UCRIHS promptly: 1) problems (unexpected side effects, complaints, etc.) involving human subjects or 2) changes in the research environment or new information indicating greater risk to the human subjects than existed when the protocol was previously reviewed and approved.

If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at (517) 355-2180 or via email: [UCRIHS@msu.edu](mailto:UCRIHS@msu.edu). Please note that all UCRIHS forms are located on the web: <http://www.humanresearch.msu.edu>

Sincerely,



Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D.  
UCRIHS Chair



**OFFICE OF  
RESEARCH  
ETHICS AND  
STANDARDS**

University Committee on  
Research Involving  
Human Subjects

Michigan State University  
202 Olds Hall  
East Lansing, MI  
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517/355-2180  
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E-Mail: [ucrths@msu.edu](mailto:ucrths@msu.edu)

PV: kj

CC: Felix Simileou  
1634 Seven Trails Court  
Okemos, MI  
48864

### **District Personnel Consent to Participate**

#### ***"A Qualitative Analysis of Parent Involvement with African-American Families in Title I Schools"***

As part of my dissertation research, I am conducting a study on the practices and perspectives of parent involvement with African-American families and their interactions with Title I schools. The purpose of the research is to examine the experiences that contribute to effective home-school partnerships in these schools. In particular, the research will focus on the impact through which the practices of the Title schools with the working-class families have on the experiences of their partnership.

The research will involve two elementary classrooms in two schools within the district. The study will include interviews with the superintendent, title I coordinator, one school board member, parent involvement coordinator, classroom teachers, and principals from the selected classrooms in the two Title I schools. All of the interviews would be 'semi-structured' interviews with open-ended questions. The interviews would last a little more than one hour and would be tape recorded. All of the persons in the study would be assured of confidentiality.

The interviews with the school staff will focus on the district and schools perceptions and practices that lead to their interactions with families. The interviews will be conducted in the schools, homes, or by phone of selected participants.

In addition, I will conduct classroom observations within the two selected classrooms and schools that agree to participate and observe the activities and practices they utilize to increase and sustain levels of parent involvement. It is important to emphasize that the purpose of this study is not to evaluate teachers, schools, or parents but rather to understand how they interact with one another in effective ways.

This work is my dissertation. In writing my results, identities of the participants will be concealed to ensure confidentiality. If quotes from or details about individuals are used, names will be changed. Only de-identified data will be used in all project reports and if identifiers are retained, they will be kept separate from de-identified data, making matches difficult. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Your participation is strictly voluntary, you may choose not to participate at all, or you may refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions or discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. Schools and families will hopefully benefit from the knowledge of how to best form and sustain relationships with one another.



If you have any questions about this study, please contact Felix Simieou III by phone: (409) 363-3310, email: [simieouf@msu.edu](mailto:simieouf@msu.edu), or regular mail: 3145 Cartwright, Beaumont, TX 77701 or Dr. Christopher Dunbar by phone: (517) 353-9017, email: [dunbarc@msu.edu](mailto:dunbarc@msu.edu), or regular mail: Office 407, Erickson Hall, MSU MI-48824. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish – Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCHRIS) by phone: (517) 355-2180, fax: (517) 432-4503, email address: [uchris@msu.edu](mailto:uchris@msu.edu), or regular mail: 202 Olds Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Sincerely,

Felix Simieou III  
Doctoral Candidate  
Michigan State University

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sign here if you agree to participate

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

☐

Please Check Box if you agree to be tape recorded

**UCRIHS APPROVAL FOR  
THIS project EXPIRES:**

**JUL 12 2005**

**SUBMIT RENEWAL APPLICATION  
ONE MONTH PRIOR TO  
ABOVE DATE TO CONTINUE**

### **Parent Consent to Participate**

#### ***"A Qualitative Analysis of Parent Involvement with African-American Families in Title I Schools"***

As part of my dissertation research, I am conducting a study on the practices and perspectives of parent involvement with African-American families and their interactions with Title I schools. The purpose of the research is to examine the experiences that contribute to effective home-school partnerships in these schools. In particular, the research will focus on the impact through which the practices of the Title schools with the working-class families have on the experiences of their partnership.

The research will involve two elementary classrooms in two schools within the district. The study will include interviews with school personnel and six families from the selected classrooms in the two Title I schools. All of the interviews would be 'semi-structured' interviews with open-ended questions. The interviews would last a little more than one hour and would be tape recorded. All of the persons in the study would be assured of confidentiality.

The interviews with families will cover a number of issues in family and school life that lead to the parents having effective home-school partnerships with the schools. The interviews will be conducted in the schools, homes, or by phone of selected participants.

In addition, I will conduct classroom observations within the two selected classrooms and schools that agree to participate and observe the activities and practices they utilize to increase and sustain levels of parent involvement. It is important to emphasize that the purpose of this study is not to evaluate teachers, schools, or parents but rather to understand how they interact with one another in effective ways.

This work is my dissertation. In writing my results, identities of the participants will be concealed to ensure confidentiality. If quotes from or details about individuals are used, names will be changed. Only de-identified data will be used in all project reports and if identifiers are retained, they will be kept separate from de-identified data, making matches difficult. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

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Felix Simieou III  
Doctoral Candidate  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
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