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Parental Involvement in Two Elementary Schools: A Qualitative Case Study

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A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

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by

Vonda K. Stevens

December 2007

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Keywords: Elementary Education, Family Involvement, Parental Involvement, Title I,  
NCLB

## ABSTRACT

### Parental Involvement in Two Elementary Schools: A Qualitative Case Study

by

Vonda K. Stevens

Parent involvement is essential if students are to succeed in school. In fact, “parental involvement is more important to student success, at every grade level, than family income or education” (Starr, 2004). Yet many schools struggle to effectively engage parents in the education of their children as the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* Act of 2001 now requires.

The purpose of this study was to explore parents’, administrators’, and guidance counselors’ perceptions of parent involvement at a Title I elementary school and a non-Title I elementary school, both of which are located in the southern Appalachian region of the United States, to identify successful parental involvement practices, and to determine the perceived impact of parent involvement on student achievement and school improvement. Specifically, this study explored the strategies employed within the 2 elementary schools to encourage parent involvement, identified effective practices of highly involved parents at the 2 schools, and determined barriers to parental involvement at the 2 elementary schools.

The findings of this study suggested that parents in both elementary schools have very similar perceptions of parent involvement. Parents from each school reported that they feel welcome in their children’s school, communicate regularly with school personnel,

engage in parent-child learning activities, and serve on decision making bodies within the school. Surprisingly, parents in both schools expressed a desire for more parent involvement and perceived some parents as not having an equal opportunity to participate in school functions.

School personnel identified barriers to parent involvement and described the manner in which they were working to overcome challenges in their respective schools. While principals articulated the desire for greater parent involvement, they perceived their schools as providing opportunities for all parents to be actively engaged in the educational process.

Recommendations from the study include providing parents with a specific definition of parent involvement so there is a clear understanding that parent involvement encompasses more than “physical presence,” and establishing parent-to-parent outreach programs to mentor those who are reluctant or new to the school.

## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to—

My mother, Marie, and father, Gordon, who instilled in me a sense of absolute wonder, insatiable curiosity, and an unquenchable love of learning. Had it not been for their encouragement, their involvement, and their patience—especially their patience, I would not be the person I am today. I thank my mother for reading *The Lorax* with me, and pointing out the “funny little yellow things” as we sat at the kitchen table, and my father for waking me each morning with the familiar phrase borrowed from one of my first-grade readers, “Good morning, Rabbit.” Smiling, I would respond, “Good morning, Turtle.” My mother and father made reading fun and started me on a journey of lifelong learning, and for that, I will always be grateful.

To my sister, Tonda, who has always been a reader. I can still remember watching her as she wrote essays and read novels at the dining room table. I have always admired her intelligence and her fortitude, and I am thankful for the example she set for her “little” sister.

To my daughter, Bretta, who has been my source of inspiration since the day she was born. It is Bretta who taught me that I am limited only by my own will and imagination.

To my aunt, Helen, and my grandmother who supported me in my pursuit of a teaching degree through their active involvement during my daughter’s early school years.

To the many teachers I have known throughout my schooling including: Ms. Elaine Towns and Ms. Carolyn Tiller for providing hands-on learning opportunities in elementary school and subsequently inspiring me to teach; Mr. Jim Bishop in junior high school who inadvertently taught me the importance of maintaining a sense of humor; Mr. Frank Buchanan in high school who always found time to listen without passing judgment, Ms. Barbara Holbrook at Virginia Highlands who shared with me that “making a B is not a bad thing,” and Mr. Ben Jennings, also at Highlands, whose constructive criticism and positive feedback allowed me to come to see myself as a writer.

Finally, to all of my good friends who have encouraged me and stood beside me throughout this process.

Thank you, all, for believing in me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my mother and father for their continued support and encouragement throughout my education; for having high expectations of me; for holding me accountable for my actions, and for all the times they said, “You can do it.”

I also wish to express my appreciation to my daughter whose love and understanding are paramount.

I am very grateful to my chairperson, Dr. Kathy Franklin. Her advice and wisdom were always welcome and often reassuring.

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I extend a special thank you to Dr. Terry Caldwell, who served as my external auditor, Dr. Diane Schlauch, my peer debriefer, and Dr. Jim Geiger, my editor. Their willingness to assist me in this journey is greatly appreciated.

Finally, I would like to thank the parents, the principals, and the guidance counselor who opened their doors, their minds, and their hearts to me. If not for their help and authenticity this study would have been impossible.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship.”*  
~ Dr. James Comer (Washington State University, 2007, n. p.)

I sat in the gymnasium of our small elementary school looking into the bleachers that should have been filled with involved parents eager to learn more about their children’s academic progress and how they could play a more active role in the educational process. What I saw, however, was 13 teachers, their children and six parents—including the four that were serving on the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) Executive Board, and, therefore, hosting the meeting that was about to take place.

I thought back to the days when I was in elementary school. It seemed that the auditorium was always filled with parents at PTA meetings. Classroom parties were organized and conducted by smiling homeroom mothers, mine included. My parents read with me most every night, helped me with my homework and attended awards programs regularly. They participated in classroom field trips, hosted pizza parties, and even brought my new puppy, Brute, to school to meet my classmates and teacher in third grade.

I knew school was important, not so much because of what my parents said about education, but by the way they supported my sister and me as we worked our way through the public education system. They stressed the importance of learning over the attainment of grades and always encouraged and expected us to achieve our personal best regardless of the task. They valued learning and taught us to do the same. Wherever we traveled, whether near or far, my mother had a newspaper in hand, and my father always took the time to show us something new. He often said, “Learning occurs everywhere;

you just have to ‘see’ with your mind.” Through the words and actions of our parents, we did begin to “see” with our minds, and, in turn, my sister and I became lifelong learners.

As I reflected on my own education, I began to think of my daughter, Bretta. Was I as involved in her elementary education as I should have been? How would her teachers rate my level of participation? How many PTA meetings had I attended?

I began working full-time and married my high school sweetheart shortly after graduating from a southern Appalachian high school. Within a year of my marriage, I became pregnant and gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. A few short years later, my husband and I began to experience growing pains and were divorced before our daughter was enrolled in kindergarten. It became very clear, very quickly, that I needed to return to school. The test anxiety that had once deterred me from attending college paled in comparison to the importance of becoming financially able to support my child, and I had a strong desire to teach. I also wanted to set a good example for my daughter, Bretta. As she entered her first year of school, I began my third year of college: a single mom working three jobs.

As I thought about it, I came to the conclusion that my level of parent involvement, in terms of serving as a homeroom mother and attending PTA meetings, was minimal at best; however, I had very high expectations for Bretta, and, fortunately, I had the support of my parents, my sister, my aunt, and my grandmother. While I was attending class and trying to provide for my daughter, I knew there was someone to take her to and from school and to pack her lunch when necessary. My aunt served as a volunteer reader in Bretta’s classroom. If I did not have time to make cookies for a class party, my mother or my sister did. When I was too tired to read with Bretta at night, my

father was there to share a story and make sure she completed her assignments for the next day. I was, and still consider myself, very blessed. My parents and extended family members have always been involved in my education as well as the education of my daughter. Even today, as I sit writing my dissertation, they call to see how I am progressing and how my daughter, now in her third year of college, is fairing. I laugh and tell them that perhaps Bretta and I will walk across the stage together, and I acknowledge that learning has always been, and will always be, a way of life for me. I can only hope that my daughter will share my passion.

-----

Sitting in the gym of the school where I was teaching on that warm spring evening in April 2005, I thought how sad to see only 19 adults at our PTA meeting and realized that without the support and active involvement of my parents and other family members, there was no way I would be where I am today, a library media specialist working toward a doctorate degree in educational leadership. Moreover, my daughter, now 21 years of age, would not be where she is either: a college junior with a mind for business, pursuing a bachelor's degree in economics and public relations.

After thinking about my situation, I was saddened by the thought of our 194 students who seemingly lacked this type of academic, emotional, and social support from their families. Having served as the school librarian and a lead mentor and prevention coordinator through America's Promise, I had come to know many of the families throughout the school. From the outside looking in, many appear to have the desire to help their children, but they lack the skills, the knowledge, or the time to do so. Without the support and active involvement of their parents, how many of our school children will

succeed much less thrive? How many will complete high school? How many will set and pursue goals of higher education? How many will find themselves poverty-stricken and hungry? More poignantly, how many will find themselves homeless?

As educators and humanitarians we must ask ourselves these questions and work to find a way to increase parental involvement in public education. In our efforts to “leave no child behind,” educational leaders must employ methods to inform and engage parents from all walks of life: the wealthy, the poor, the educated, and those with little or no education, regardless of race, religion, gender, or ability level. If we are to excel in our quest to prepare children for the future, we must find ways to engage parents in every aspect of formalized schooling—from volunteering as chaperones for field trips and helping with homework to serving on decision-making bodies such as the School Improvement Planning Team. Parent involvement is not only essential to student achievement and school improvement; it is now mandated by the federal government.

According to Section 1118 of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (United States Department of Education [USDE], 2005) public schools must:

1. Provide parents with key information regarding curriculum, student performance on state assessments, qualifications of teachers and overall school and district performance.
2. Allow parents to transfer their child to another public school if the school in which they are enrolled is deemed persistently dangerous or if the child is a victim of a violent criminal act on school grounds.
3. Establish a Committee of Practitioners in which districts, parents, teachers and others review and advise the state educational agency on any regulations to

implement Title I and the Title I or consolidated state plan.

4. Develop a written school and district parental involvement policy for schools qualifying for Title I funding, which is to include a school-parent compact on the roles of the teacher, school, and parent in raising the academic achievement of the student and conduct an annual meeting for parents to explain the Title I program and opportunities for parental involvement.
5. Notify parents with children enrolled in a Title I school of their rights to participate in the development of the School Improvement Plan. (pp. 59-63)

Nevertheless, Appleseed (2006) found that:

1. Too many parents fail to receive clear and timely information about their children and their schools.
2. Poverty, limited English proficiency, and varying cultural expectations are among the biggest barriers to parental involvement.
3. Poor communication with parents hinders their ability to exercise NCLB's choice and supplemental education services options.
4. Creative, multi-faceted communication and engagement strategies can promote better parental involvement in schools.
5. Parental involvement is not uniformly valued by school leaders as a key accountability strategy. (p. 2)

In light of these findings, it is imperative that educators employ new, innovative ways to fully engage parents. As Epstein and Jansorn (2004a) noted:

Research shows that most parents who are not presently involved would like to be, if only their children's teachers, administrators and counselors showed them

how to help their children increase reading and math scores, improve attendance, and meet other important goals. (p. 10)

Yet school personnel have often reported that effectively engaging parents is difficult to accomplish. To address this need, a program of partnerships consisting of school, family, and community should be developed and implemented (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a).

Epstein (2001) ascertained:

This approach, developed with educators in the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, recognizes that students learn and grow at home, at school, and in their communities, and that they are influenced and assisted by their families, teachers, principals, and others in the community.

(p. 12)

This program, dubbed the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) would cultivate productive partnerships that involve schools, parents, and community stakeholders and sustain the work of these partnerships over time to improve schools and student achievement (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a). The ATP would be responsible for preparing the annual action plans as well as coordinating and marketing the activities associated with the plan and would be accountable for evaluating the programs and reporting results to the school council and relevant others (Epstein & Jansorn).

Community partnerships such as the ATP are becoming more and more important as the gap between those living in wealth and those living in poverty continues to expand (Gumbel, 2007). Gumbel stated that such partnerships can facilitate communication and understanding for all involved parties and provide on-site services within the school while enhancing learning opportunities and achievement for all students.

In the southern Appalachian region of the United States, specifically the area served by the school district described in this study, the differences among those living in wealth and those living in poverty are highly visible. According to the Elm Elementary School Improvement Plan (2006), the population of approximately 25,000, served by the school district described herein, is predominately white, non-Hispanic. The median household income is “below” the state average, and the median house value is “significantly below” the state average ([Elm] Elementary, School Improvement Plan).

The [Elm] Elementary School Improvement Plan (2006) stated that 17.4% of the city’s residents, 25 years or older, hold a bachelor’s degree or higher while 5.8% of the population hold a professional or graduate degree and acknowledged that the most common industries for citizens in this area include construction, accommodation and food services, machinery, education services, and health care.

Driving through area neighborhoods, passers-by become painfully aware of the aging school buildings in various states of disrepair. Box air conditioners are seen hanging from the weathered window frames, and paint peels from the wood trim. “The maintenance department works throughout the calendar year to maintain a safe learning environment; yet limited resources provide very few aesthetic enhancements” (Guidance Counselor, personal communication, August 15, 2007).

Of the 3,803 students, grades pre-school through 12, attending school in this district, 91.7% are white; 5.4% are African American, 1.7% are Hispanic, 0.8% are Asian, and 0.4% are Native American ([City] Report Card 2006, [State] Department of Education, 2006c). The [City] Report Card 2006 ([State] Department of Education) identified 1% of the students as Limited English Proficient, 14.6% as having disabilities,

and 46.8% as economically disadvantaged, therefore qualifying for the free and reduced lunch program.

Administrators and teachers within the school system report that, all too often, many of the children in the district come to school hungry, sleep deprived, and in need of medical attention. Educators throughout the school system are finding that in addition to teaching, they must now assume the roles of parent, guardian, coach, advisor, and mentor. These new roles, along with inadequate funding and unattainable goals for student achievement (Hoff, 2007) prescribed by the federal government have made it very difficult for schools and school districts to embrace *No Child Left Behind*. Nonetheless, this piece of legislation has ushered in an era of accountability far beyond that of any of its predecessors (Guilfoyle, 2006), demanding that all schools make adequate yearly progress (AYP) as measured by student performance on standardized, state-wide tests or face punitive sanctions imposed by the federal government.

Of the six southern Appalachian elementary schools located within this school district, two stand out with respect to parent involvement. Elm Elementary, with an enrollment of 449 students, and a rate of 37.0% economically disadvantaged students ([State] Department of Education, 2006a) is acknowledged by administrators and teachers throughout the school system as having a high degree of parent involvement. Approximately 123 of the students attending Elm Elementary are tuition or transfer students ([Elm] Elementary, School Improvement Plan, 2006).

Conversely, Oak Elementary has an enrollment of 218 students with a rate of 83.3% economically disadvantaged students ([State] Department of Education, 2006b). Approximately 20% of the student body receives special education services, in addition

to the 12%-15% who qualify for speech and language services ([Oak] Elementary, School Improvement Plan, 2006).

Elm Elementary School was built in 1954 and renovated in 1985. The building is situated on a sprawling campus with several area businesses located nearby. A little league field and a new condominium development sit adjacent to the physical building. The surrounding area also includes one low-income apartment complex.

Currently, Elm Elementary employs one full-time principal, 22 full time teachers, one part-time kindergarten through third grade teacher, one full-time librarian, one full-time physical education teacher, one full-time special education teacher, one part-time music teacher, one part-time art teacher, and one part-time speech therapist ([Elm] Elementary, School Improvement Plan, 2006). School support staff include two secretaries, one bookkeeper, one full-time school nurse, five cafeteria staff, and one custodian ([Elm] Elementary, School Improvement Plan, 2006).

According to the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) Parent Opinion Inventory conducted by Elm Elementary in 2005, 24.1% of the parent population completed high school, 25.9% had completed some college courses, 12% had obtained associate's degrees, 19.4% had earned bachelor's degrees, and 8.3% held a graduate degree or higher ([Elm] Elementary, School Improvement Plan, 2006). See Figure 1 for a comparison of the educational backgrounds of NSSE Parent Opinion Inventory respondents as reported by parents at Elm and Oak elementary schools.

Elm Elementary is a school rich in student achievement and parent involvement. In fact, Elm has been identified by area educators as being a benchmark school for parent involvement ([Principal], personal communication, 2006). According to school

personnel, parents frequently volunteer to help in the classroom and actively participate in school governance.

In contrast, it is commonly known that Oak Elementary, designated as a Title I school due to the high percentage of economically disadvantaged students, struggles to effectively and consistently engage parents in decision-making and volunteer opportunities. Although teachers actively recruit parents, consistency has been difficult to establish and almost impossible to maintain ([Guidance Counselor], personal communication, 2006). The principal and teachers at Oak Elementary have openly expressed their desire to increase parental involvement and strive daily to do so ([Principal], personal communication, July 10, 2006).

Oak Elementary School is situated off the main thoroughfare of the city in which it is located. Built in 1939, the facility was renovated in 1984. The small, neighborhood school sits close to the street, surrounded by sidewalks. A small playground sits adjacent to the aging building.

The Oak Elementary community consists of low-income housing, including mobile home parks and federally-funded duplexes, two homeless shelters, low to moderate income rentals, and a modicum of privately owned homes ([Oak] Elementary, School Improvement Plan, 2006). Many of the houses directly surrounding the school are older and in need of repair.

In addition to the principal, full-time faculty members include 13 classroom teachers, a librarian, a guidance counselor, a Title I reading teacher, two behavior modification specialists, and a physical education teacher ([Oak] Elementary, School Improvement Plan, 2006). Part-time faculty members include a music teacher, an art

teacher, and a speech therapist. The school also employs a secretary, a bookkeeper, a school nurse, four educational assistants designated to support the inclusion of students with disabilities, 11 teaching assistants, a special education teacher, a behavior modification teacher, three cafeteria staff members, and one custodian ([Oak] Elementary, School Improvement Plan). According to the Oak Elementary School School Improvement Plan, approximately 87% of the Title I funds have been allocated for personnel.

The [Oak] Elementary School Improvement Plan (2006) reported that Oak Elementary administered the NSSE Parent Opinion Inventory in 2005. Of those responding, 14.1% indicated that they did not graduate from high school while 37.2% reported that they did graduate from high school. Two parents responding to the survey, or 0.025%, hold an associate's degree; 0.025% hold a bachelor's degree, and 0.013% hold a graduate degree ([Oak] Elementary School Improvement Plan). See Figure 1.

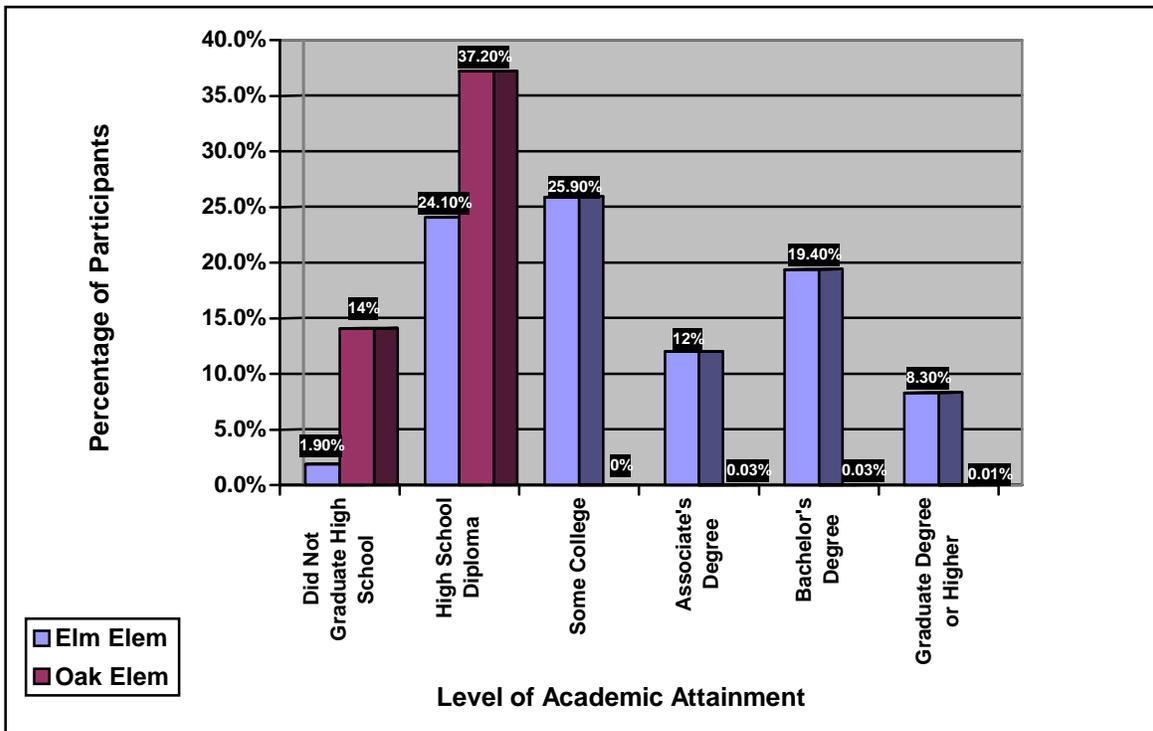


Figure 1. Comparison of the educational background reported by respondents at Elm and Oak elementary schools on the 2005 NSSE Parent Opinion Inventory.

### *Statement of the Problem*

In our efforts to “leave no child behind,” educational leaders must employ methods to inform and engage parents from all walks of life: the wealthy and the poor; the educated and the undereducated in every aspect of education—from helping parents understand phenomena associated with childhood development to serving on decision making bodies such as school improvement planning teams—parent involvement is essential for school improvement and student achievement. However, barriers to parent involvement including “cultural differences . . . parental illiteracy, family problems . . . economic conditions . . . and lack of resources needed for participation” (Plevyak, 2003, p. 32) do exist and can prove challenging for school systems to overcome.

### *Research Questions*

The following research questions provided the focus for this qualitative case study as the researcher attempted to determine the factors that influence the level of parental involvement present at each of the schools:

1. How do highly involved parents describe parent involvement with respect to their child's education?
2. What do highly involved parents and school administrators perceive as factors affecting the level of parent involvement within public schools?
3. How does parent involvement promote better student achievement and school performance?

### *Significance of the Study*

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has ushered in an unprecedented era of accountability for public schools nationwide (Guilfoyle, 2006). Under this law, schools and districts must demonstrate annual yearly progress (AYP) in raising student achievement with all students proficient by the end of the 2013-2014 academic school year.

As schools attempt to achieve this goal, teachers, and administrators must effectively engage parents as partners in education. *NCLB* plainly states that parents should be “1) informed of the academic progress of their children and the performance of their schools; and 2) involved in meaningful ways as a partner with school officials” (Appleseed, 2006, Preface section, para. 4). Even so, it is widely reported that many schools fail to effectively engage parents in school functions. Even more disturbing, some

parents report feeling uncomfortable in the school setting, and various teachers feel as if they are “under attack” when parents frequent the classroom (Starr, 2004, para. 1).

Considering the plethora of research documenting the importance of parental involvement and federal legislation which mandates it, this qualitative case study investigated, a Title I elementary school and a non-Title I elementary school, both of which are located in the southern Appalachian region of the United States. This case study also explored parental involvement as perceived by parents, school administrators, and an elementary school guidance counselor and attempted to determine the factors that influence the level of parental involvement present at each of the schools.

Although generalizations are not appropriate, Merriam (2002) noted “working hypotheses that take account of local conditions can offer practitioners some guidance in making choices—the results of which can be monitored and evaluated in order to make better decisions in the future” (p. 28). Therefore, the information gained throughout the course of this study adds to the existing body of research and serves as a reference for educators and parents in schools with similar demographics wishing to replicate practices for recruiting and retaining parents as partners in education. Furthermore, policy-makers, looking to effect positive change in education-related legislation can benefit from this study as it discusses the factors affecting parent involvement as related to student achievement and school performance.

#### *Scope of the Study*

The researcher conducted a qualitative case study of parent involvement as it occurs within two elementary schools located in the southern Appalachian region of the United States. Parents, school principals, and an elementary school guidance counselor

were interviewed to determine the degree and perceptions of parental involvement in the two urban elementary school settings: a Title I elementary school and a non-Title I elementary school. To increase validity, documents including School Improvement Plans, school Web sites, and school newsletters were also reviewed, and participant observations were conducted at each site, permitting the researcher “to hear, to see, and experience reality as the participants do” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 100).

#### *Limitations of the Study*

This qualitative case study is limited to two elementary schools located in the southern Appalachian region of the United States. When conducting a case study, “a small sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (Merriam, 2002, p. 28).

Personal biases as a working mother, a former classroom teacher, and a full-time advocate for parental involvement are fully acknowledged by the researcher. Therefore, precautions have been taken to guard against the skewing of data including the participation in an audit process (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) and the use of an Institutional Review Board (IRB) certified peer examiner.

#### *Delimitations of the Study*

The findings of this study were limited to two elementary schools located in the southern Appalachian region of the United States; therefore, results should not be generalized to other populations.

### *Definitions of Terms*

1. *Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)* – A measure of a school’s or school system’s ability to meet required federal benchmarks with specific performance standards from year to year ([State] Report Card, 2006d).
3. *Casual Register* – Language between friends characterized by a general word choice consisting of a 400-800 word vocabulary (Payne, 2005, p. 27).
4. *Formal Register* – The standard sentence syntax and word choice of work and school. Uses complete sentences and specific word choice (Payne, 2005, p. 27).
5. *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* – Implemented during the 2002-2003 school year; amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. NCLB, which was signed into law in January 2002 by President George W. Bush, requires schools to have 100% proficiency among students in math and reading by the academic year ending 2014. Schools and school districts must also meet graduation and attendance standards ([State] Report Card, 2006d).
6. *Parent* – For the purpose of this study, the term parent is defined by the researcher as including biological parents, legal guardians, and primary caregivers.
7. *Parent Involvement* – Participation of parents in regular, two-way communication involving student academic learning and other school activities (United States Department of Education, 2004).
7. *Student Achievement* – For the purpose of this paper, student achievement is defined by the researcher as student gain in academic areas as measured by year-end standardized tests.

8. *Title I Funding* – Federal money distributed to states and then to schools, based on their percentage of low-income students as measured by the number of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches (Furger, 2005).

#### *Overview of the Study*

Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the study, a statement of the problem, research questions, the significance of the study, the scope of the study, limitations of the study, delimitations of the study, definitions of terms, and an overview of the study. Chapter 2 contains a review of available literature pertaining to parent involvement as it relates to public education and student achievement. Chapter 3 describes the methods and procedures used in this qualitative case study including demographic information of participants, the research design, instruments used to collect data, and how the data were analyzed. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the research and the data analysis. Chapter 5 consists of a summary of the study with findings, limitations and delimitations, recommendations for further research, and conclusion.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

*Do not confuse physical presence with parental involvement.*  
~ Ruby Payne (2006 p. 1)

#### *Introduction*

Parental involvement is essential for student success and school improvement (Appleseed, 2006; District Administration, 2003; Hopkins, 2000). In light of heightened accountability for schools and school personnel with respect to student achievement and school performance, it is becoming increasingly important to engage parents as partners in the education of America's children, yet "schools and districts do not universally embrace parental involvement as a central strategy for accomplishing academic gains" (Appleseed, 2006, p. 2). In fact, many parents report feeling "uncomfortable in their children's schools," and "teachers often feel under attack by parents who are highly involved" (Starr, 2004, para. 1).

Parental involvement is not only critical to the academic success of our students; it is federally mandated as well. The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* of 1965, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, was the first federal education law to provide funding for kindergarten through 12th grade education. The purpose of the act was to improve academic achievement among disadvantaged students by allocating funds for professional development for educators, instructional materials, resources to support educational programs, and the promotion of parental involvement programs.

In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed the *Improving America's Schools Act*, thereby, amending *ESEA* and heightening requirements for parental involvement. Specifically, *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, also signed by President Clinton in 1994,

called for partnerships to be established for the purpose of increasing parental involvement and developing the whole child: socially, emotionally, and academically (Starr, 2004).

Public eye turned once again to America's schools and the need for improvement in 2002 when President George W. Bush signed the latest amendment to *ESEA* into law: the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*. This landmark piece of educational legislation ushered in a new era of accountability for public schools far beyond any of its predecessors (Guilfoyle, 2006) and, in doing so, has been highly praised by some while being greatly criticized by others.

In a letter to the editor of the Cincinnati Enquirer, Regional Representative for Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, Cohn (2007) noted:

It's also awesome to see the progress that our students have made under the law. According to the Nation's Report Card, more reading progress was made by 9-year-olds in five years (1999-2004) than in the previous 28 years combined. Math scores have reached new heights. And achievement gaps between young African-American and Hispanic students and their white peers have narrowed significantly, in many cases to record lows. (n. p.)

While it is difficult to argue with hard data collected by the federal government through state-wide, standardized testing measures, one might question the absolute reason for such gains. Are public schools doing a better job of providing appropriate staff development for teachers? Are educators responding to the call for greater accountability? Are school administrators and teachers becoming more successful at involving parents in meaningful ways for the purpose of increasing student achievement?

*No Child Left Behind* holds teachers, schools, and school districts accountable for student achievement as well as graduation and attendance rates, issuing sanctions if annual yearly progress (AYP) is not made. This law also requires two-way, significant parent involvement, yet there are no consequences prescribed by *NCLB* for parents who fail to take part in their children's education. Nonetheless, schools and districts are still responsible for involving parents in the day-to-day operations of the school.

Despite federal legislation and research findings, many administrators and teachers find it difficult to engage parents in meaningful ways (Hopkins, 2000). Although many schools strive to involve families in the education of their children, "they can improve results by taking a team approach to organize their partnership program, reaching out to more families, and linking involvement activities to student achievement goals" (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a, p.15).

Mary Ellen Imbo, principal at Westwood Elementary School in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma stated, "Any activity that involves parents...enhances ownership in the education process and directly contributes to the achievement of children" (as cited in Hopkins, 2000, para. 5). Yet public schools must do more than conduct a few activities to involve parents. *NCLB* is a call to action for schools and school districts to build capacity to effectively implement parent involvement policy.

*No Child Left Behind* requires that each state include parents in the development of its Title I plan. Likewise, school districts and schools receiving Title I funds must have a parent involvement policy developed jointly with and approved by parents (Public Education Network, 2004). *NCLB* also requires schools to use at least 1% of their Title I funds to develop a parent involvement program, explain the curriculum, standards, and

assessment to parents, develop a parent-school compact outlining procedures for collaboration between families and the school to increase student achievement, and provide parents with detailed information regarding students' academic progress (Appleseed, 2006).

Moreover, *NCLB* requires that districts provide technical assistance to schools failing to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for 2 consecutive years, subsequently identified as "high priority" ([State] Report Card 2006). Schools unable to make AYP for 3 consecutive years must offer tutoring and enrichment services in addition to instruction provided during the regular school day (Appleseed, 2006). Districts must also provide parents with written notification of the school's status and be given the choice to move their child to a higher performing school within the district.

#### *Barriers to Parental Involvement*

Numerous studies have demonstrated that students experience greater achievement when parents are actively involved in their children's education.

"School-aged children in both two-parent and single-parent families are more likely to get mostly A's, to enjoy school, and to participate in extracurricular activities, and are less likely to have ever repeated a grade and to have ever been suspended or expelled if their fathers or mothers have high as opposed to low levels of involvement in their schools" (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). (p. 53)

Yet educators struggle daily to actively engage parents. According to Appleseed (2006) reasons for the inability to enlist parents as partners in education include:

- The challenge of defining clear and meaningful benchmarks by which effective parental involvement can be evaluated;
  - A preoccupation with the accountability elements of NCLB, such as testing and teacher quality; and
  - A lack of awareness and training on how to effectively engage parents
- (p. 2)

While many educators openly acknowledge the value of parental involvement, implementing an effective parental involvement plan can be cumbersome and time-consuming for classroom teachers. “Limited professional development at the school or district levels” and the “lack of pre-service training” (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005, p. 77) contribute to the deficit of parents actively engaged in their children’s learning. Until educational professionals understand the importance of implementing a successful parental involvement program for the purpose of increasing student achievement and improving school performance they will not devote the time and energy necessary for doing so (Ferrara & Ferrara).

To further complicate the matter, the extent to which schools are implementing parental involvement programs in children’s education is unclear because defining and accurately measuring the degree and success of parental involvement is a difficult task (Appleseed, 2006). This is due, in part, to uncertainty regarding the activities and desired outcomes of various parent involvement programs (Baker & Soden, 1998).

Unfortunately, barriers to parent involvement exist far beyond pre-service and in-service deficits. “Cultural differences, fear of authority-based institutions, parental illiteracy, family problems, negative education experiences, job-related issues, economic

conditions, health, living arrangements, and lack of resources needed for participation” (Plevyak, 2003, p. 32) are among those often cited.

Social constructs such as culture and socioeconomic conditions often influence the manner and the degree to which parents become involved in their children’s education (Payne, 2005). For example, parents living in poverty view the importance of education very differently than their working class or wealthy counterparts (Keller, 2006; Payne, 2005). For example, “If the school asks parents to read to their children, for instance, and a parent sees reading as what the school does, the demand is not likely to be honored” (Keller, p. 13). Therefore, it is imperative that school staff dialogue with parents to define and clarify role expectations for all involved parties, providing appropriate training when necessary.

#### *Strategies for Engaging Parents*

“Research shows that students with involved parents—regardless of their background or income level—reap a bevy of benefits, including attending school regularly, enrolling in more advanced classes, getting better grades, graduating from high school, and pursuing post-secondary education” (District Administration, 2003, para. 3). Still, it is widely held that schools and school districts struggle to effectively engage parents in the educational process of their children (Keller, 2006).

In order to bring about systemic, positive change, school and district administrators must allocate the time and resources necessary for educators to have a thorough understanding of the factors influencing parents and their decision to assume an active role in the school (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). Only with this support will “teachers,

students, parents, community members, and others work closely together for the benefit of schools and the children they serve” (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004b, p. 23).

Additional factors influencing the degree of parent involvement include:

1. Parents’ beliefs about what is important, necessary, and permissible for them to do with and on behalf of their children;
2. The extent to which parents believe that they can have a positive influence on their children’s education; and
3. Parents’ perceptions that their children and school want them to be Involved (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997, as cited in American Educational Research Association, 1997). (n. p.)

Culture, education, and socioeconomic status influence personal beliefs and perceptions and often affect a child’s academic achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Payne, 2006); therefore, these factors must be considered when implementing an effective parental involvement program. Lee and Bowen found “that levels of parent involvement and child achievement varied significantly across demographic groups” and “significantly higher academic achievement among European American children than among Hispanic Latino and African American children” (p. 204).

According to Lee and Bowen (2006), European American parents are more frequently involved at school and spend less time managing their children’s use of time at home than both Hispanic Latinos and African American parents. European American parents also report more frequent parent-child educational discussions than Hispanic Latino parents (Lee & Bowen).

Although culture had no apparent effect on educational expectations and the amount of time spent in helping with homework, the same does not hold true for socioeconomic status (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Parents with children participating in the free and reduced lunch program reported less involvement at school, fewer parent-child educational discussions, and lower educational expectations for their children (Lee & Bowen).

Payne (2006) affirmed when planning for parental involvement, consideration must be given to the fact that public schools are largely organized for the middle class, yet, in addition to students from middle class homes, children and youth from both poverty and affluence attend these institutions. This knowledge dictates that school personnel embrace economic diversity in addition to cultural and social diversity and work to eliminate the social, emotional, and financial barriers associated with poverty that hinder or prevent parents from becoming involved in the education of their children (Payne).

### *Key Components of Parental Involvement*

To better understand the dynamics of parent involvement and assist in the development of a comprehensive parental involvement plan, Epstein and Jansorn (2004a) defined six types of parent involvement:

1. parenting,
2. communicating,
3. volunteering,
4. learning at home,
5. decision-making, and

6. collaborating with community.

A discussion of each of the six types of involvement follows.

Given the knowledge that demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, culture, and educational attainment of parents directly influences their degree and types of parent involvement activities (Lee & Bowen, 2006), the question remains, do parents have the skills necessary to convey high expectations and provide academic support to their children? Schools must be willing and able to provide parents, especially those who are reluctant to be involved in the educational process, with appropriate training that will equip them with the skills necessary to facilitate the learning process at home (Payne, 2006).

So what, then, can school personnel do to assist parents and ensure their active involvement in the education of their children?

*Parenting*

Parents often have the desire to help their children succeed in school but lack the knowledge, the time, or the skills necessary for doing so (District Administration, 2003; Epstein & Jansorn, 2004b); therefore, it is the responsibility of the school district and the school to provide parents with the tools that will allow them to become more engaged. Administrators, guidance counselors, and classroom teachers alike have a shared responsibility for meeting parents on their terms and training them to effectively work with their children (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). Parents, in turn, carry the responsibility of learning to help their children. “The goal is to hold parents and schools mutually accountable and to have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to succeed at improving the academic achievement of all students” (Christie, 2005, p. 646). Regardless of the goal

or the desire, however, entering a school can be somewhat threatening for parents born of poverty and deemed unnecessary by more affluent families (Payne, 2006). Nonetheless, school personnel and parents share the responsibility for raising student achievement and facilitating the learning process (Christie).

Understanding the family background of individual students is imperative to enlisting parental support for learning. Lee and Bowen (2006) stated:

Parents from non-dominant groups may exhibit less parent involvement at school . . . . Parents with low levels of education, for example, may be less involved at school because they feel less confident about communicating with school staff owing to a lack of knowledge of the school system, a lack of familiarity with educational jargon, or their own negative educational experiences. Or parents from different cultures may value home educational involvement more than involvement at school, . . . . the same parents may still be actively involved at home in one or more ways consistent with the values and practices of the school system. (p. 198)

Regardless of the students' social or cultural background, educators must not assume that the lack of physical presence within a school indicates a lack of interest on behalf of the parent population (Payne, 2006). According to Payne, factors such as inadequate transportation, conflicting work schedules, and illness can affect the ability of parents to attend school meetings or events but have no impact on the parents' desire to see their children succeed in school. Moreover, an understanding of economic diversity is essential if school personnel are to appreciate the role of parent involvement for each family in the school community (Payne). Payne also noted, "For many parents in

generational poverty, school is not given a high priority. It is often feared and resented”

(p. 6). When working with parents living in poverty Payne suggested that:

The first issue to address when working with parents from poverty is mutual respect. The second is the use of casual register. The third is the way discipline is used in the household. The fourth is the way time is viewed. And the fifth is the role of school and education in their lives. (p. 6)

To assist this population, Payne (2005) recommended training classes so they [those living in poverty] may learn to speak English and be taught to complete job applications.

Conversely, when working with parents from wealth, Payne (2005) recommended addressing parents through formal register, getting straight to the point, and emphasizing issues of safety and legal parameters. When engaging parents of affluence, Payne (2006) noted educators must “understand that a primary motivator for wealthy parents is the financial, social, and academic success of their child” (p.18).

Regardless of socioeconomic status, it is of vital importance to assist families with parenting skills, knowledge of child development, and family support (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a). By equipping parents with these tools and providing academic, emotional, and social support, schools enable parents to become effective partners in their child’s education. Tableman (2004) noted:

The most accurate predictor of a student’s achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student’s family is able to create a home environment that encourages learning; communicate high, yet reasonable, expectations for children’s achievement and future careers; become involved in children’s education at school and in the community. (p. 1)

Although socioeconomic status is only one predictor of student achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Plevyak, 2003), it is, nonetheless, a factor that impacts learning (Fantuzzo, McWayne, & Perry, 2004). It is our duty as educators to effectively engage parents from all social classes and to encourage and assist them as they endeavor to support their children as they journey through the learning process (Chavkin, 2005).

### *Communication*

*The Parent, Family, and Community Involvement Guide* published by the Massachusetts Department of Education (2000) stated that communication is a critical element when developing partnerships that result in positive relationships, conflict resolution, and increased student achievement. Effective home-school communication, therefore, is a two-way exchange of information involving all parties and engaging them in give-and-take conversation, goal setting, and timely follow-up (Massachusetts Department of Education [MDE]).

As with parent training, administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors share the responsibility of effectively communicating with parents (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a). Signage should be displayed prominently at school entrances, and the use of school directories, guest books, and displays should be developed with the purpose of conveying the message that parents are welcome in the building (Payne, 2006).

In addition to behavioral and emotional concerns, communication should include information related to school performance and student achievement, school programs, events, and extra-curricular activities (Payne, 2006). Web sites, school newsletters, handbooks, and informal notes, to and from school, in addition to phone calls, are ways in which school personnel correspond with parents (Payne). In her book, *Working with*

*Parents: Building Relationships for Future Success*, Payne suggested, “For all activities, organizations, handbooks, etc., use simpler formats for giving the information. Liberally use visuals to appeal to the illiterate, the immigrant, and the busy.” (p. 5)

Expectations for behavior and achievement should be presented clearly and conferences should be conducted at a time convenient for parents (Payne, 2006). Written communications should be translated to ensure non-English speaking parents have access to information (Payne). Adults and students should be given the opportunity to learn together, and activities should be organized that encourage all school stakeholders the opportunity to get to know one another (Payne).

### *Volunteering*

To encourage parents to volunteer in the school, Epstein and Jansorn, (2004a) found it necessary “to improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences” (p. 21). Educators should be “enabled to work with regular and occasional volunteers who assist and support students and the school” (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a, p. 21) and trained on the legalities of establishing and maintaining volunteer programs (Marzano, 2003). School and district administrators wishing to impact student achievement through increased parental involvement must provide time and appropriate staff development opportunities to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary for engaging parents of differing cultures and economic backgrounds (District Administration, 2003; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005): recruiting and retaining them as volunteers throughout the school while enlisting parental support for learning at home.

“Research shows that most parents not presently involved would like to be, if their children’s teachers, administrators, and counselors showed them how to help their children increase reading and math scores, improve attendance, and meet other important goals” (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004b, p. 10).

Payne (2006) suggested the use of technology to increase the level of parent involvement present in schools specifically recommending training videos, child-focused and short in length, as a means to facilitate parent engagement. These videos, placed on the school Web site and made available in VHS and DVD formats, will ensure that almost 100% of the school’s population will have access to information (Payne). Payne further recommended that online and printed communication tools such as newsletters and surveys should also be streamlined and laden with graphics for non-English speaking or illiterate parents. Translated versions should also be available to accommodate parents of varying nationalities (Payne).

Enlisting the support of parents who are already involved can also be an effective strategy for increasing parent involvement. In her book, *Debunking the Middle-Class Myth: Why Diverse Schools Are Good For All Kids*, Kugler (2002) stated that schools enlisting the services of involved parents to serve as mentors for those less involved can build networks that strengthen their parental involvement program and school culture. Parent mentoring programs may also provide a platform for breaking down cultural and socioeconomic barriers (Kugler) especially if they involve an outreach component in which volunteers are willing to meet parents off school grounds (e.g., home visits, community venues, and faith-based events) (Long, 2007).

### *Learning at Home*

Successful parental involvement programs “involve families with their children in academic learning activities at home, including homework, goal-setting, and other curriculum-related activities” (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004b, p. 12). According to Payne (2006), “When a parent provides support, insistence, and expectations to the child, the presence or absence of a parent in the physical school building is immaterial. Training for parents should concentrate on these issues” (p.1). Appleseed (2006) noted “with the guidance and support of teachers, family members can supervise and assist their children at home with homework assignments and other school-related activities” (p. 7). Therefore, teachers should design homework assignments that spark conversation and involve family members (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004b). Such assignments encourage parents to model interest and learning as a lifelong process, thereby, allowing them to “communicate clear expectations for achievement” (McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Choen, & Sekino, 2004, p. 364).

### *Decision-Making*

Public participation in school governance was given a major boost in the 1960s and early 1970s with federal requirements for the establishment of parent advisory councils (PACs) under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Head Start, Follow Through, and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Marzano, 2003, p. 49). “Although the requirement for PACs has been lifted” (Marzano, 2003, p. 49) *No Child Left Behind* now requires that “districts, parents, teachers, and others make up a Committee of Practitioners that reviews and advises the state educational agency on any

regulations to implement Title I and the Title I or consolidated state plan” (Appleseed, 2006, p. 13). Moreover, *NCLB* ensures parents in Title I schools of the right to participate in the development of the school improvement plan. However, with or without federal legislation, schools should strive to “include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, PTA/PTO, and other parent organizations” (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a, p. 21).

“Specific structures that allow parents and community some voice in key school decisions” (Marzano, 2003, p. 48) are imperative if educators hope to effect positive and systemic change in the academic environment

Fege (2007) ascertained:

Parental and public engagement is a critical element in the process of creating and sustaining educational equity. It is often a civic process, one that not only focuses on volunteerism, supporting individual children, and conducting fund raisers, but also organizes and mobilizes the community; knows how to collect and evaluate school performance information; builds collaborations between the school and community; votes for education-oriented candidates; pressures the school board and decision makers; knows how to "work the system"; and understands big public education issues such as equitable funding, teacher quality, instructional leadership, broad school curriculum, and modern school construction. (pp. 571-572)

### *Collaborating with Community*

To develop and sustain strong organizational partnerships, Epstein and Jansorn

(2004a) advocated the organization of an “Action Team for Partnerships (ATP), consisting of teachers, parents, the principal, other educators, and community partners” (p. 12). According to Epstein and Jansorn (2004a) this ATP would be responsible for “preparing annual action plans, organizing committees, implementing and coordinating activities, monitoring progress, evaluating results, publicizing activities, and reporting regularly to the school council, faculty, parent organizations and other school and community groups” (p.12).

Similar to the concept of an Action Team for Partnerships is the philosophy of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students initiative which awards federal dollars through the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Education in the form of grants to school districts wishing to form partnerships with local agencies, including mental health agencies, the police department, juvenile justice, and after-school care providers for the purpose of preventing violence and substance abuse among the nation’s youth (Safe Schools-Healthy Students Initiative, 2007). Grantees are required to provide outreach services to school and community members, evaluate results of programs initiated through federal funds, and plan for sustainability (Safe Schools-Healthy Students Initiative, 2007).

Research by Mediratta and Fruchter (2001) supported such partnerships with their findings: engaging others for the purpose of increasing student achievement benefited the school in a number of ways including upgraded facilities, improved leadership, and the availability of higher quality learning programs. Moreover, Payne (2006) confirmed that community agencies, local businesses, faith-based institutions, and civic organizations can provide a wealth of resources for families in need (Payne, 2006).

### *The Principal's Role*

The principal's role is vital to the success of any parent involvement program. "Only with their leadership and ongoing support will teachers, students, parents, community members, and others work closely together for the benefit of schools and the children they serve" (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004b, p. 23).

As the school leader, the principal must convey that the school is part of the community and that all members of the schools' population will work together to maximize student potential. Effective principals can support teachers by providing professional development opportunities for the purpose of improving school, parent, and community partnerships (District Administration, 2003). "Many studies confirm that when schools develop excellent programs of partnership, even hard-to-reach families become involved in their children's education" (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a, p. 23). Likewise, "educators want and need specific preparation about the knowledge, attitudes, and skills it takes to enhance the involvement of diverse families in their children's education" (Chavkin, 2005, p. 16). Yet many teacher preparation programs neglect to deliver instruction in forming partnerships with families.

Epstein and Jansorn (2004a) stated:

principals, successful in creating a learning community, frequently remind school stakeholders that a partnership among personnel, parents, and community exists within the school and that team members will work together to assist all students as they strive to achieve their fullest potential. Likewise, successful principals make known to all students the importance of their families to the school and to the students' success. In addition to providing in-service opportunities for

teachers, they build trusting relationships with all school and community stakeholders, and allocate funds for family and community activities. Principals wishing to engage parents also work with district administrators and are visible within the community, developing partnerships with local businesses and civic organizations thereby enriching the curriculum and providing valuable resources for students in need. (pp. 13-14)

Through collaboration, administrators, teachers, and parents can and will make a positive difference in the academic, social, and emotional lives of children. However, much depends on the development of trusting relationships among all entities and understanding that school and community stakeholders have the best interest of all children at heart, regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, or socioeconomic status (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a).

### *Summary*

“Students who succeed in school are almost always supported by their families, while other students struggle without support from home” (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004b, p. 19). However, there is no “one size fits all” approach to parent involvement; therefore, if we as a nation are to succeed in our quest to improve schools and increase student achievement, parents and educators must join together to celebrate the successes of public education while identifying areas for growth in our schools and in our homes.

Former U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard Riley stated:

The American family is the rock on which a solid education can be built. I have seen examples all over this nation where two-parent families, single parents, stepparents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles are providing strong families support

for their children to learn. If families teach the love of learning, it can make all the difference in the world to their children. (America Goes Back To School, n. p.)

Parent involvement is vital to student and school success. The time is now for teachers, administrators, and parents to come together for the good of our nation's children. "Educators, parents, and the community must work together to plan and implement a comprehensive program of involvement to create a welcoming school environment and help students succeed" (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004b, p. 23). We must build on the strengths of those parents already involved in the classroom, in decision-making, and in the home, while at the same time recruiting parents who are less involved (Long, 2007).

Educators, at all levels, must work to break down the barriers preventing or limiting parent involvement, and teachers must be taught and expected to accommodate parents' work schedules, embrace diversity, offer applicable parent training in non-threatening environments, and to link families in need to appropriate community resources (Chavkin, 2005; Payne, 2006). "Both school administrators and teachers have substantial decision-making power when it comes to getting parents involved with education" (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004b, p. 22).

To succeed in raising student achievement and improving our schools, we [educators] must open our doors, our minds, and perhaps most importantly our hearts for the sake of acting in the best interest of our nation's most valuable resource, our children.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS AND PROCEDURES

*If a child is to keep alive [an] inborn sense of wonder, [there] needs [to be] the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering . . . the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.*

~ Rachel Carson (Connecticut Audubon Society, 2002, n. p.)

#### *Methodology*

This chapter describes the methods and procedures used during the examination of the perceptions and practices of two elementary school principals, an elementary school guidance counselor, and parents as related to parent involvement, in a Title I and a non-Title I school. Specifically, this chapter provides a description of the study design, the research participants, data collection, treatment, analysis, and the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness.

#### *Study Design*

Curious by nature, I have always asked questions. Who? What? Why? When? Where? How? I never cease to wonder why things exist; Why things happen as they do; Why some people behave in one manner when others behave very differently given the same situation. I consider myself to be relatively quiet, but I am always watching others to see how they interact with their environment and those around them. I love visiting places where large crowds of people gather: the beach, a college football game, a NASCAR race, not for the event itself, but to watch the actions and reactions of others.

As a child, my parents fueled my curiosity by making and pointing out observations of the world around me and encouraging me to ask questions and investigate my surroundings. My father often asked, “How can you learn if you don’t ask

questions?” My mother would add, “You have to read the newspaper to know what’s happening around you.”

In their book, *Designing Qualitative Research*, Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe qualitative researchers as those who:

espouse some common considerations and procedures for its conduct and certain habits of mind and heart. They are intrigued by the complexity of social interactions expressed in daily life and by the meanings that the participants themselves attribute to these interactions. (p. 2)

A qualitative researcher’s interests “foster pragmatism in using multiple methods for exploring a topic. Thus, qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 2). Naturalistic inquiry is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of participants’ views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and the researcher becomes part of the study (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). In fact, Strauss and Corbin (1998) maintained, “The two [qualitative researcher and the research] are so intertwined that it becomes difficult to separate one from the other” (p. 4).

My parents’ involvement in my life certainly shaped my personality and developed my interests, ultimately influencing my decision to conduct a qualitative case study and providing me with the opportunity to reflect on all aspects of parental involvement from multiple perspectives: that of an adult looking back on childhood, from the perspective of a working parent, and from the perspective of an educational professional.

This study uses thick, rich description (Geertz, 1973) and a constant comparative method of data analysis to develop a complete and in-depth understanding of parental involvement. It is particularistic (Merriam, 1998), focusing strictly on the parent involvement program as it is perceived to exist in two schools within the same school district located in the southern Appalachian region of the United States.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions and practices of the parents who have been identified as being highly involved in their children's respective schools to determine if differences exist among the two populations and to investigate the methods employed by school principals to promote parental involvement in educational practices.

### *Setting*

Two urban elementary schools located within the same school district in the southern Appalachian region of the United States were purposefully selected for this case study. The sampling criteria used to select the sites for this study included the verbal accounts of parental involvement by the faculty and staff throughout the school district, the willingness on behalf of parents and the school administration to participate, and the diverse economic composition of the parents of children enrolled in the two schools. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and the names of both elementary schools were changed to protect the privacy of individuals participating in the study and to maintain the anonymity of the two participating schools. The demographic data for Elm Elementary and Oak Elementary, as reported by the 2006 [State] Department of Education School Report Card is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

*Demographic Data for Elm Elementary School and Oak Elementary School*

Demographic Categories	Elm Elementary	Oak Elementary
Total Population	449.0	218.0
% Economically Disadvantaged	37.0	83.3
% Caucasian	88.6	95.4
% African American	6.5	3.7
% Hispanic	3.8	0.9
% Native American	0.0	0.0
% Pacific Islander	0.0	0.0

*Research Participants*

Criterion sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) was employed to select the participants for this qualitative case study. Elm Elementary was chosen based on its non-Title I status and its reputation for having a high degree of parental involvement. Conversely, Oak Elementary was selected due to its designation as a Title I school and the general perception that there is little parental involvement in the school. The school principals at Elm and Oak elementary schools were then asked to identify parents they considered highly involved with respect to the educational practices of their children.

Initially, a phone call was made to the principals at each school for the purpose of explaining the study. Pending permission from the Director of Schools, both readily agreed to participate in the interview process and provided names of parents who might also be willing to participate in the study. An electronic mail message (e-mail) was sent

to the Director of Schools requesting permission to investigate parental involvement as it exists in the two elementary schools selected for the study. Permission was granted, and a list naming prospective participants was obtained from each principal. Elm Elementary provided nine names, and Oak Elementary provided six names.

### *Data Collection*

Interviews with the principals and one guidance counselor were scheduled via e-mail. A letter (Appendix A) of introduction was mailed to explain the study to the parents whose names appeared on the lists. A follow-up call was then made to schedule appointments.

Eighteen interviews were conducted. In addition, the principal at Elm Elementary chose to respond electronically. Fifteen parents were interviewed including eight parents from Elm Elementary, six of whom appeared on the original list provided by the principal, and seven parents from Oak Elementary, three of whom appeared on the original list provided by the principal. Three of the parents on the original list from Elm Elementary were unavailable during the course of the study. The original list from Oak Elementary included one parent who declined participation due to a death in the family and two parents who did not respond to the initial mailing or follow-up phone calls. Another parent from Oak Elementary agreed to participate in the study but was subsequently unavailable for an interview. In an attempt to solicit additional study participants and develop an accurate picture of parental involvement in each building, snowball, or chain sampling, in which study participants identify other information rich cases (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), was also employed.

The principal and guidance counselor from Oak Elementary participated in the interview process. Because the principal at Oak Elementary School was in her first year, the former principal of the school agreed to participate in the study by granting an interview. The guidance counselor at Elm Elementary was unavailable throughout the course of the study. Table 2 illustrates the number of parents appearing on the original lists provided by each school principal and the number of participants recommended by other parents.

Table 2

*Source of Participant Referrals for Elm Elementary School and Oak Elementary School*

Referral Source	Elm Elementary	Oak Elementary
Principal	9 (6)	7 (3)
Participating Parents	2 (2)	5 (4)
Total Referrals (Participants)	11 (8)	12 (7)

*Interviews*

Interviews consisted of face-to-face, one-on-one contact with participants. Due to time constraints, the administrator at Elm Elementary elected to respond to the interview guide electronically via podcast— an audio broadcast that has been converted to a format for playback in a computer. Nine interviews were conducted in the natural setting of the school building or the family home. To accommodate work schedules, nine participants requested that the interview take place during lunch or at the work place. Figure 2 identifies the meeting sites, broken down by school, selected by parents agreeing to

participate in the study.

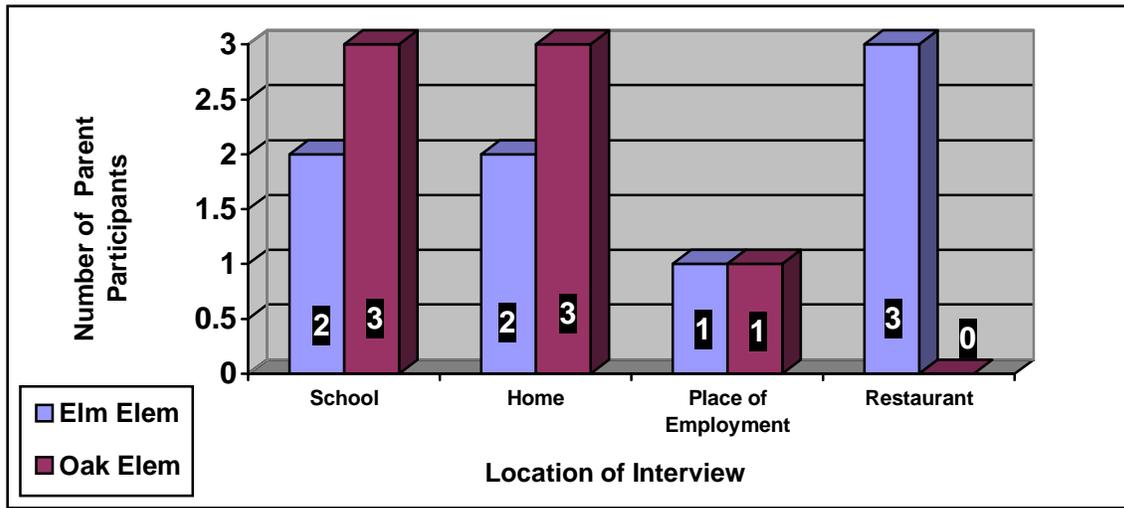


Figure 2. Meeting Site Selected by Parents Participating Study

Interviews were audio-taped to provide maximum interaction with each participant. Field notes were recorded by hand in a non-obtrusive manner to allow the recording of non-verbal cues when appropriate.

An informed consent form (Appendix F), stating the purpose, duration of the study, procedures, and possible risks throughout the study was obtained from all participants. All interviewees were assured that information gathered during the interview process would be treated confidentially, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Interview guides, consisting of open-ended questions, were used to explore the perceptions of parent involvement as it exists among parents (Appendix B), the guidance counselor, and principals (Appendix C). Although the interview guides were prepared to ensure systematic data collection, there were no predetermined responses and the researcher was free to probe within areas of inquiry (Hoepfl, 1997).

The interview guides were developed after reviewing extant literature pertaining to parental involvement. The researcher's knowledge of the subject area was also considered during the construction of the interview guide. The interview guide was emergent in design and consisted of questions that were designed to provide insight to the following research questions.

1. How do highly involved parents describe parent involvement with respect to their child's education?
2. What do highly involved parents and school administrators perceive as factors affecting the level of parent involvement within public schools?
3. How does parent involvement promote better student achievement and school performance?

#### *Document Review*

Marshall and Rossman (2006) stated that "knowledge of the history and context surrounding a specific setting comes, in part, from reviewing documents . . . produced in the course of everyday events or constructed specifically for the research at hand" (p. 107). With this in mind, Web sites, agendas from meetings, School Improvement Plans, and newsletters were collected from each site for the purpose of adding to the information gained through the interview process and providing thick description. A document review guide (Appendix D) was used to systematically and accurately record descriptions and themes (Creswell, 1998).

#### *Observation*

Observation is a "systematic data collection approach" in which "researchers use all of their senses to examine people in natural settings or naturally occurring situations"

(Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2006, Observation section, para. 1). The advantages of conducting observations include gaining a “firsthand experience with participants,” having the opportunity to “record information as it is revealed,” and “having the opportunity to notice the unusual” (Creswell, 2003, p. 186).

“Observation is a fundamental and highly important method in all qualitative inquiry” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 99). Due to summer vacation, observation opportunities were limited to site visits, the year-end graduation, and an award ceremony at Oak Elementary School and the Back-to-School PTA and Open House at Elm Elementary School.

Data collection concluded when new information no longer surfaced.

#### *Data Recording, Analysis, and Interpretation*

To accurately portray the perceptions of parental involvement on behalf of the parents, the guidance counselor, and school principals in this qualitative case study, data were recorded, analyzed, and interpreted in a manner which ensured validity and credibility. Merriam (2002) suggested the use of “triangulation, peer examination, investigator’s position, and the audit trail” to ensure “consistency and dependability or reliability” (p. 27). Triangulation occurred through peer examination, personal reflection, and an audit trail that was completed in the form of a researcher’s journal—a detailed account of “how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam, p. 27).

To accurately interpret data collected, grounded theory, “the basis for theory building and coding” (O’Flaherty & Whalley, n. d., *Qualitative Data Analysis*, para. 8)

and the primary means for achieving the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was employed.

Constant comparative analysis and microscopic examination of data sources provided the researcher with in-depth understanding of the perceptions of parental involvement in the two elementary school settings. Throughout this process, data were coded, re-examined, and compared for similarities and differences.

### *Interviews*

Interviews were audio-taped and personally transcribed along with the podcast. This allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the data and provided additional opportunities for reflection between interviews. Member-checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in which participants were asked to comment on the interpretation of the data, were conducted to ensure credibility and accuracy. To further ensure credibility, guard against researcher bias, and guarantee the plausibility of the data and analysis, a peer review was conducted by a colleague unfamiliar with the study.

### *Document Review*

Web pages, School Improvement Plans, school newsletters, and agendas from meetings were examined for the purpose of providing background information for each site. During this examination, notes were recorded on the document review guide (Appendix D), and a better understanding of the practices and procedures the school faculty and administrators use to engage parents began to develop. Evidence of parent-led activities and events that take place in each facility also began to emerge.

### *Observations*

Observations of PTA meetings and site visits were recorded on Observation Guides (Appendix E) to provide consistency and facilitate the processes of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting the data.

### *Biases*

As a professional educator, there were concerns that personal perceptions could possibly influence the interpretation of the data. To offset this risk, a peer examiner, not affiliated with the study, was used to identify and eliminate biases through dialogue. To assist the peer examiner and further ensure transparency of data, an audit trail was created and verified by an external auditor.

### *Summary*

Chapter 3 contains an overview of the methodology and procedures for this study. This investigation included correspondence and dialogue with two elementary school principals, one former elementary school principal, one elementary school guidance counselor, and 15 parents identified by their respective principals or other study participants as being highly involved in their children's education.

Chapter 4 categorizes participants' responses and themes that emerged resulting from the research questions.

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA ANALYSIS

*In each family a story is playing itself out, and each family's story embodies its hope and despair.*

~Auguste Napier (Wisdom Quotes, 2006, n. p.).

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to develop a better understanding of the factors influencing parent involvement in the elementary school. More specifically, it was the intent of the researcher to examine the perceptions of parents and school personnel, including the two principals, a former principal, and a guidance counselor, in both a Title I and a non-Title I elementary school within the same school district located in the southern Appalachian region of the United States. The purpose of this study was to examine successful parent involvement practices, identify barriers to parental involvement, and determine the perceived impact of parental involvement on student achievement and school improvement.

#### *Participating Schools*

As stated in Chapter 3, purposeful sampling (Creswell, 1998) was used to select the two urban schools for the study. Elm Elementary School is a school well-known throughout the community for its high level of parent involvement. Conversely, Oak Elementary, a Title I school, has been branded a school with limited parent involvement. The two schools were selected based on their respective levels of parent involvement and demographic variance.

### *Study Participants*

Criterion sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) was used to select study participants. Principals were asked to identify parents they perceived as being highly involved in the elementary school. Snowball, or chain, sampling was subsequently employed to secure the names of additional participants. Parents interviewed were asked to provide the names of others considered highly involved in the elementary school.

Structured interviews, using open-ended questions, were conducted with parents, the current and former principals of Oak Elementary School, and the Oak Elementary guidance counselor. The principal of Elm Elementary School chose to participate via podcast. The guidance counselor at Elm Elementary was unavailable throughout the course of the study. Interviews were audio-taped and personally transcribed. Schools and participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

The principal at Elm Elementary identified nine parents as highly involved. Six of the nine were readily accessible and agreed to participate in the study. The principal at Oak Elementary identified seven parents as highly involved. Contact with four of the original seven was made. Three appeared for interviews; one declined to participate due to a death in the family. Parents participating in the study were very helpful in identifying others who they believed to be highly involved.

Five parents chose to meet in their children's schools; five chose to meet in their homes, two at their places of employment, and three requested that we meet during lunch to accommodate their work schedules. Of the 15 parent interviews that took place, all were with the mothers only. Table 3 provides demographic information related to the

participants' gender, school, number of children and their respective grade levels, and the parents' nature of employment.

Table 3

*Demographic Information Related to Gender, School, Number of Children (Parent Participants) and Parents' Employment*

Name (Pseudonym)	Role	School (Pseudonym)	Child(ren) in Grade(s)	Parents' Employment
Ms. Anderson	Parent	Elm Elementary	5, 7	Office Manager
Ms. Trent	Parent	Oak Elementary	1, 4	At Home
Ms. Bowers	Parent	Elm Elementary	4	Human Resources
Dr. Canter	Principal	Elm Elementary	-	-
Ms. Carpenter	Parent	Oak Elementary	1, 5, 7	Teacher
Ms. Collins	Parent	Elm Elementary	5, 2	At Home
Ms. Eller	Parent	Elm Elementary	1, 4	Teacher
Mr. Flannagan	Former Principal	Oak Elementary	-	-
Ms. Flint	Parent	Elm Elementary	5, 6, 10, -	At Home
Ms. Green	Parent	Oak Elementary	1	Ed Asst
Ms. Harrison	Parent	Oak Elementary	4, 7	Day Care
Ms. Hartsock	G. C.	Oak Elementary	-	-
Ms. McCall	Parent	Elm Elementary	2	Self-Emp.
Ms. Morenings	Parent	Oak Elementary	K, 2, 5	Substitute
Ms. Newton	Parent	Elm Elementary	5, 7, 7, -	Self-Emp.

Table 3 (continued)

Name (Pseudonym)	Role	School (Pseudonym)	Child(ren) in Grade(s)	Parents' Employment
Ms. Rayburn	Parent	Oak Elementary	4	Program Director
Ms. Rose	Principal	Oak Elementary	-	-
Ms. Surber	Parent	Elm Elementary	5	Educational Asst.
Ms. Warner	Parent	Oak Elementary	1	Teacher

### *Research Questions*

Drawing upon the perceptions of parents who have been identified as highly involved in the education of their children, school administrators and guidance counselors, the study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do highly involved parents describe parent involvement with respect to their child's education?
2. What do highly involved parents and school administrators perceive as factors affecting the level of parent involvement within public schools?
3. How does parental involvement promote better student achievement and school performance?

To answer these questions, data were collected, analyzed, and categorized as follows: Understanding Parent Involvement, Parents as Decision Makers, Parenting and Collaborating with Community, Benefits of Parent Involvement, Barriers to Parent Involvement, The School's Role in Parent Involvement, and Parent Involvement and Student Achievement.

### *Understanding Parent Involvement*

Through the process of documenting the perceptions of parents, school principals, and an elementary school guidance counselor, a picture of parental involvement as it occurs at the two schools defined in the study began to emerge.

As previously outlined in Chapter 2, Epstein and Jansorn, (2004a) identified six types of parent involvement:

1. Parenting –Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families’ backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.
2. Communicating –Communicate with families about school programs and student progress in varied, clear, and productive ways. Create two-way communication channels from school-to-home and from home-to-school so that families can easily keep in touch with teachers, administrators, and other families.
3. Volunteering –Improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences. Enable educators to work with regular and occasional volunteers who assist and support students and the school.
4. Learning at home –Involve families with their children in academic learning activities at home, including homework, goal-setting, and other curriculum-related activities. Encourage teachers to design homework that enables students to share and discuss interesting work and ideas with family members.

5. Decision-making –Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, PTA/PTO, and other parent organizations. Assist family and teacher representatives in obtaining information from and giving information to those they represent.
6. Collaborating with Community –Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, colleges or universities, and other community groups. Enable students, staff, and families to contribute their service to the community. (p. 12)

Many of the responses made by study participants echoed Epstein’s typology of parent involvement. For example, when asked to describe parent involvement, many parents cited activities such as communicating with school personnel, being present in the school, volunteering in the classroom, and helping their children with homework assignments (Types 2, 3, and 4).

With respect to volunteering in the school, one Oak parent and former teacher at Oak Elementary, Ms. Warner, stated that since her daughter had been in school, she [Ms. Warner] had:

Tried to volunteer in her classroom every week as much as possible, working with other students. Sometimes with [her daughter], but mostly with other students. [I’ve] tried to support teachers by being available for field trips or bringing extra supplies or tangible things like that...providing extra funds for students that needed it or clothes, or just trying to be involved in whatever way was needed....I also serve on the PTA board.

She also noted the importance of becoming involved early in the pre-school years:

We started, from the very beginning, spending a lot of time with [our daughter] and books. All of our car time, particularly when she was younger, was devoted to learning—whether it was just nursery rhymes or stories or other little games—name three things that live in the sky...learning things that made her think and training her brain to focus.

Ms. Green, an educational assistant at Oak Elementary, described parent involvement in a similar manner, naming communication as important component of her involvement:

[Parent involvement is] knowing what's going on in your child's school. Having the communication with your child's teacher, . . . [and the] other teachers at the school, principal, and all the staff.

We do her [her daughter's] homework together every evening. I let her do some on her own, and then, anything that becomes just really stressful and challenging, too challenging for her, then I help her. We do it together. Then I always check her homework before I allow her to pack it in her backpack to take back to school.

Ms. Morenings, a substitute teacher at the Title I school, defined parent involvement as:

Keeping in contact regularly with your child's teacher, getting to know students that your child frequently talks about—is friends with, helping the school and class whenever possible, even if it's just sending cupcakes for a party, and staying up-to-date on issues and changes that occur in the schools . . . . I make it a point to talk to my children's teachers regularly, even if there aren't any known problems. I like to know about the day-to-day things that you may not hear about otherwise.

Ms. Carpenter, a special education teacher at Oak Elementary, pointed out that her level of parent involvement varies among her children, stating that “[it] looks different for my first grader than it does for my fifth grader.” She noted that her two older children were very “self-motivated,” and revealed, “They strive to achieve their best just with an internal drive.” On the other hand, her youngest child, “is a little more difficult” so she sets “simple, realistic goals for him to measure up to.” In regard to her youngest child's reading she stated:

Reading is a very important foundational skill, and my youngest child struggles with that so just putting up a visible chart on the refrigerator so he can see his progress and work toward a goal has been beneficial to him.

Responses from the parents at Elm Elementary School were very similar to those of the parents at Oak Elementary. Ms. Collins, a stay-at-home mother, stated:

I help them with their homework if they need it, and of course, I read to them, but they are to the age now where they pretty much read on their own, but we've always made sure they get their AR [Accelerated Reader] goals and their homework done . . . . As far as at school, I have volunteered . . . in kindergarten . . . let the kids read to me there and worked with some of them who were struggling.

Ms. Surber, an educational assistant at Elm Elementary, believes that overseeing homework assignments is an important part of their daily routine, stating:

At home, we work on homework together, as much as I can help them at this point. As soon as we come home from school, even if there's anything else going on, I like for them [my son and my daughter] to get their homework over with . . . . I look through folders and sign papers and ask questions—a lot.

Describing her involvement in terms of “physical presence” and “participation” in school activities, Ms. McCall, a self-employed mother, stated that parent involvement was “sun up to sun down.” Like other parents who are highly involved in the education of their children, she explained:

I keep in almost constant contact with teachers as well as the principal. I come to the school . . . . I'm constantly asking [my daughter] questions about what goes on during the day and things like that. I have lunch with her [daughter]. I talk to the teacher . . . a lot of parent conferences, notes back and forth; emails—that kind of thing. I go to the school and participate in field trips or field day.

Ms. Eller agreed:

Parent involvement includes participating in school activities, PTA, helping out in your child's classroom and doing any kind of fundraising for the school that they ask you to do. That's one aspect of parent involvement. I think that the other kind of parent involvement is being involved in your child's education. Paying close attention to homework and test scores and making sure that they [your children] do everything that they need to do as far as their school work goes.

A school teacher at Elm Elementary, Ms. Eller continued:

I'm involved as much as I can be because I'm there anyway . . . . Anytime that anything is needed in their classrooms, any notes that come home and the teacher needs this done or that done, then I do what I can.

I'm looking at those folders every day. I'm always making sure that they get their work done . . . . Papers signed that need to be returned and things like that; conferences with teachers, making sure they are where they need to be, and if there's anything that I can do, if there are any concerns . . . . any after school help, anything that I can do with PTA. I try as much as I can.

Over and over, parents continually confirmed the importance of being present both in the home and at school. When defining parent involvement, Ms. Anderson, a store manager, declared, "They [parents] are visible in the school and around the staff and children."

Ms. Flint, a stay-at-home mother with four children, noted:

I think of parent involvement as any parent that cares about their kids, cares about their education, that gets involved with their teacher—the faculty of the school and knows their child's teacher . . . . has a rapport with their child's teacher so they can ask questions and know any issues that their children have and [then] be willing to address them. [Parent involvement] has to occur at home and at school. You have to watch how your child learns and try to help the teachers at school. If your child is going to succeed, you have to be involved and notice when they are falling short.

Echoing Ms. Flint's thoughts on establishing and maintaining a good rapport with teachers, Ms. Anderson agreed that it is important for teachers to know "who they [parents] are and know that they are approachable." She, too, shared her belief that education is not just the responsibility of the school and the teachers and affirmed that she and her husband are always interested in the lives of their children:

helping with homework, encouraging them, and also, even in extra-curricular activities, knowing who his [her son's] peers are, being involved with groups: PTA, sports teams and that type of thing.

Ms. Bowers, who works in human resources, agreed that parent involvement includes "appearances at school and events" and added that she believes it extends

beyond the realm of the biological parents. She and her husband often include both sets of grandparents when “attending functions to support the school both monetarily as well as in person.” She went on to describe the types of activities they participated in when given the opportunity, stating that she often quizzes her son:

like driving down the road, “What are the letters on street signs that we see, or names of places, buildings, you know, can you sound that out? Can you find your name? Let’s see if you can spell your name as we go down the road. Even just naming objects in the house, doing things like that. Counting. Counting money.

She also stated, however, that, “As he’s gotten older, we do less and less of that each year.”

Three administrators and the elementary school guidance counselor also defined parent involvement as essential to student success. Ms. Rose, the principal of the Title I Oak Elementary stated:

I view parent involvement as being involved in their students’ academics, not only with school activities, but also completing homework at night; just being involved in their students’ lives period . . . . being involved with the school setting, helping out at school, coming to PTA meetings, chaperoning field trips, etc.

Ms. Hartsock, the guidance counselor at Oak Elementary School, agreed and expanded her definition to include:

Any action parents may engage in which indicates to the child that his/her education is important and vital to them . . . . attending school functions such as PTA, conferences, and programs, volunteering time or money, communicating through notes, phone calls, visits, and making available a time and a place to study with materials; insisting on good attendance and respect for authority and spending time discussing the child’s school day.

Dr. Canter, the principal at Elm Elementary, a school recognized throughout the community as having a high level of parent involvement, referred to parental involvement as:

The extent to which any caregiver sets up a child for success by participating in school events, encouraging the children at home and at school, sets up a structure so that the child can be successful and can do the work which leads to more learning.

### *Parents as Decision Makers*

Decision-making (Type 5) occurs throughout the school all day, every day. Yet, unless prompted, few parents included participation in school-based decision-making as a component of their parent involvement. Nonetheless, parents and school personnel alike should have ready access to information that will allow and encourage them to be knowledgeable, proactive members of the school community, capable of making decisions regarding curriculum and educational policy. While some schools may be reluctant to bring parents on board (Plevyak, 2003), their involvement in federally funded, public schools is mandatory. To satisfy requirements prescribed by *NCLB*, a Committee of Practitioners, including school districts, parents, teachers, and others, that “reviews and advises the state educational agency on any regulations to implement Title I and the Title I or consolidated state plan” must be formed (Appleseed, 2006).

Of the parents participating in the study, most have served, or are currently serving, on the PTA Executive Board, and all are active members of the PTA general membership as evidenced by personal, PTA newsletters, and the minutes recorded from executive board meetings. Additionally, each school has one study participant who is currently serving on the PTA Council—a system-wide organization comprised of members from the eight schools in the district.

Although many parents taking part in the study noted their involvement with PTA, they had to be encouraged to share their experiences, if any, regarding decision-making activities in which they had participated. In some cases, participants’ names

appeared on school documents as representatives of the School Improvement Planning Team, yet again, unless prompted, these parents did not describe their decision-making experiences in detail. Figure 3 illustrates the percentage of parents participating in the study from each school who have served or are currently serving on a decision-making board within the school or school district.

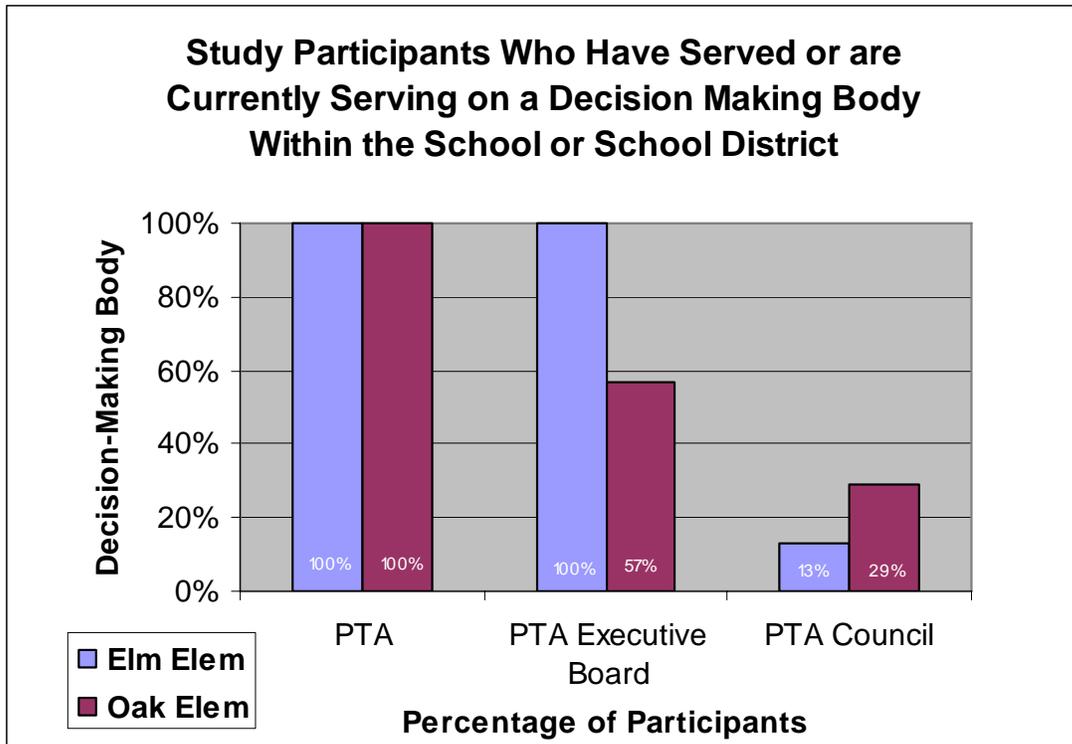


Figure 3. Study Participants Who Have Served or are Currently Serving on a Decision-Making Body Within the School or School District

When asked about her participation as a decision-maker, Ms. Warner simply stated that she has served and will continue to “serve on the PTA Board” during the upcoming school year.

Ms. Trent, a stay-at-home mother from Oak Elementary, spoke of her experience assisting with fundraisers and classroom activities, yet she did not discuss her role as a former PTA Executive Board member. Smiling, she reported:

I've been in PTA for, I think, three years now, and I've done the things as homeroom mother: take[ing] snacks for the kids, breakfast on test days. I did all the PTA activities as far as festivals and things like that.

Ms. Harrison, a day-care provider, reported:

I am the first vice president of the [Oak Elementary] PTA, and then, I'm going to be doing the membership for the PTA Council this year.

Likewise, Ms. Morenings explained that she would be serving as the "secretary for the school [Oak Elementary] PTA" and "treasurer for the district PTA Council."

Although Ms. Rayburn, a program director for an area non-profit agency serving pre-schoolers through aging adults, did not elaborate on her role in the school's PTA, she did indicate that she takes part in the decision-making process that occurs within the school, stating:

When there are forms sent home about my child's school environment and what I think about it, I really appreciate that.

Describing ways she was involved at her child's school, Ms. Surber smiled and said:

My children call me Miss PTA. [Laughs] I'm highly involved in PTA, and I have been for eleven years now. And I'm also involved on the Council level which goes with all the schools. [We] Just try to raise money for what the schools need and what the teachers need to better our children's education.

Ms. Newton, who is self-employed, reported:

I've been involved in PTA, volunteering in different ways for several years. I was on the board last year . . . . I was president the two years before that.

Ms. McCall briefly stated, "I am an executive board member for the PTA."

However, she continued her description of parent involvement activities, which included site visits and communication with school personnel and her daughter.

Ms. Anderson noted that she is "currently the president of the PTA," but also

stated that she has “served on the PTA for the last seven years in some capacity.”

Interestingly, one parent from Elm Elementary proclaimed:

I have been a member of the PTA for the past several years, but I will be honest with you, that I have very little understanding of what the PTA is, what it does, and although we have many parents who are involved in PTA, it is the same group of people over and over, so to me, that is not really touching the school as the Parent Teacher Association because it is a few parents and a few teachers that are always present at the meetings or at the events.

She went on to say that:

I am a member of the Executive Board, but that includes everybody listed as a chairperson on the PTA. I’ve really only done House and Grounds, and this year, I’m stepping into a membership role.

Ms. Bowers further explained that, at first, she was unclear as to what was expected of her, stating:

Coming from a human resources background, like at work...this is a time where I do see where job descriptions are valid, even if it’s just a brief listing of responsibilities and duties.

When asked to expand on her methods for engaging parents, the principal of Oak Elementary, Ms. Rose, responded by saying:

I know in the past, we have involved some parent advisory on some of our committees. We’ve sent them to training—PTA training.

Referring to public forums that were held at each of the schools in the district and the online surveys that were open to all community members to address the need to renovate or rebuild many of the aging buildings, Ms. Rose continued:

We’ve involved them [parents] in our new schools, the transition, and the building of our new schools, and updating them.

The principal of Elm Elementary, Dr. Canter, acknowledged:

The parents who serve on the executive PTA board have the biggest impact on decision making. They often spearhead efforts related to grounds maintenance,

incentives, fundraisers, and volunteering. Because this group of parents is so active and involved, they are usually the ones I approach to help with areas such as [the] SIP [School Improvement Plan].

Otherwise, I field individual requests, concerns, and suggestions from parents on a daily basis. I try to weigh their suggestions in terms of its effect on our overall program. Often, parents do make good suggestions or have valid concerns that we try to implement.

### *Parenting and Collaborating with the Community*

Parenting (Type 1) and Collaborating with the Community (Type 6) were mentioned the least by study participants; however, Ms. Rayburn shared her thoughts regarding parenting and communicating with her children, stating:

We've talked many times about how he may do things that might be disappointing to me, but it doesn't matter. Yeah, I'm upset about something, but overall, I love him, and the other doesn't matter. Regardless of what happens, my love is not going to change. You know, the way I care for him, the things I do for him...I just think that when you spend that time with your kids, your going to get that [openness and honesty between parent and child].

Another parent from Oak Elementary, Ms. Morenings, noted her thoughts regarding the need for more parent training classes, stating:

[The schools need to] teach them [parents] how to be involved with their children's education, include them on seminars regarding bullying issues, offer literacy courses so parents can begin to read with their children, etc.

The former principal at Oak Elementary, Mr. Flannagan, added:

The more parents become effective nurturers and positive role models for reading and the learning process, the more children can "hit the ground running" when they enter a formal school setting. These children usually take on the challenges of learning in and out of the school setting with confidence and perform at high achievement levels.

Parent involvement does not require volunteer work at the school, being a room mother, or serving in PTA. Our approach to parent involvement is to help educate parents about the importance of their consistent involvement in their child's development early on. Through various types of reading materials and parent training sessions, parents learn many specific techniques to help in the learning process.

Regarding community involvement, Ms. Carpenter described the Community Resource Center, a grant-funded office established within the school system to serve students and parents, as a tremendous asset to her children's Title I school, stating:

The CRC [Community Resource Center] provides us with community awareness events and works with local organizations to make parenting classes available. They [CRC staff] work with families in need, connecting them with agencies capable of providing social and financial support.

### *Benefits of Parental Involvement*

The benefits of highly involved parents are numerous, both for students and schools. Research indicates that students who have involved parents are more likely to succeed, academically as well as socially (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; Starr, 2004). Throughout the interviews, parents and administrators at both Elm Elementary and Oak Elementary confirmed these findings. The previous administrator at Oak Elementary stated:

When parents are keenly aware of the positive impact of their involvement in the learning and development, you see children who generally thrive in the school setting both socially and academically. When parents are made to feel an important part of the learning culture, the school community is viable and positive. Active parents quite often are supportive in their efforts to provide additional funding for public schools.

Noting the importance of communication in parent involvement, Ms. Rose added:

I do believe it [parent involvement] affects student achievement because you can have the consistency between home and school, the communication with the parent about the student's academics and homework, and their skills; what they need to work on at home. I think it helps promote achievement and retention of skills.

In addition to the obvious benefit for parents: a heightened learning experience for their children, the guidance counselor at Oak Elementary stated:

Parents gain confidence in their skills and abilities and gain an understanding of their child's work place.

She also noted:

Faculty get help with all the *extras* [italics inserted] that help make the school a community and get a more well-rounded view of their student[s].

Ms. Hartsock concluded by stating, "Students whose parents are involved develop a better sense of self and security."

The principal at Elm Elementary described parent involvement as essential to developing confidence in young learners and cultivating an environment conducive to student success stating, "Parent involvement is the single biggest predictor in determining the academic success of a child, even above socio-economics . . . ."

Dr. Canter continued:

I think that the benefits of parent involvement are paramount to successful education, for example, when parents show that they are interested in their child's education it displays to the child that the parents value education and hopefully even have a love for education and what learning can do for them so the child understands that education is important.

When the child sees it as worthwhile, when the parents see it as worthwhile, then the parents are far more likely to set up the structure to enable the child to be successful by requiring that the child do their homework and participate in studies and get projects done. By encouraging and helping provide that structure, the child is going to have more opportunities to participate; more opportunities to learn. That's going to translate into more learning which will mean better grades, and as children become successful in that arena then they are going to have more confidence in themselves. They are going to believe that they can do what's being asked of them. They will understand the value of working hard, of learning and studying, and that's going to translate into to a better self image, and hopefully, that will help them realize their potential for the rest of their lives.

When parents take an active role in the education of their children, the benefits, as discussed by school personnel, are interconnected: Student achievement increases, as evidenced by scores on standardized tests and classroom grades which contributes to

improved school performance and results, overall, in an enhanced school climate. As the principal at Oak Elementary noted, “It [parent involvement] helps promote a culture at your school that parents are welcomed, and when parents feel welcomed, they are more likely to participate at greater levels.”

As parents cited what they perceived the benefits of their involvement to be, their responses were multi-faceted, intrinsic as well as extrinsic, and often corresponded with those of school personnel. Ms. Warner stated:

I am a teacher, and that gives me a different perspective, I know, than many other parents have. I know that it’s very difficult for teachers to cover the tremendous range of needs that are in any given classroom, even as early as kindergarten and the gap just gets wider as the students get older . . . .

I wanted to feel like I was doing my part to not only assist [my daughter], but also make things easier for the teacher. I wanted [my daughter] to be a leader in the classroom, and I wanted her to develop the character traits that would hopefully encourage her to help other students; to be, hopefully, a positive role model.

Smiling, she continued:

at this age, [my daughter] really loves to have me around, and that’s really nice, and I hope that lasts as long as possible. I know that [she], or I feel that [she] is further advanced academically and in her character than she would have been had I not been involved, . . . . it’s important for me to know who she spends time with. I feel like choosing friends is, can be, one of the most significant decisions a child makes, and I love being available enough that I know the people in her class and in her school. I love being able to walk in the school, and kids of all ages, because of different activities that I’ve done there, they know who I am. They know who [my daughter] is, and I just like to meet the other parents because I know that the time will come when she’s going to want to do more and more things with friends, and I want to be able to feel comfortable making decisions . . . . That’s a big benefit for me; plus, I just enjoy it.

Ms. Carpenter commented:

I guess the benefits include just the rewards of seeing your child’s achievements . . . . knowing their friendships, knowing what kind of education they’re getting, knowing where to fill in. For teachers that may not be strong in a certain subject, to be able to supplement through cultural experiences or activities at home.

Another parent from Oak Elementary, Ms. Green, added:

A lot of parents have no clue what's going on inside the school, so when something comes up, they are totally shocked--What's going on? Where did this come from? T-CAPS? What's T-CAPS? I, I just think it makes things less stressful for [my daughter], and maybe I'm just a nosy mom.

I just like to know what's going on. She's my child. She's my responsibility, and nobody else may have the same goals in mind for her, and I'm here with her all the time. I can encourage her, you know, along with the teacher. It's not just the teacher's job to educate my child.

Referring to her daughter, Ms. Green continued:

I want her to get the maximum benefit out of her education. I realize how important it is in life. You can't get anywhere without it, and if she strengthens her study habits now and her love for education, then I think it's going to make it easier for her throughout her educational career. Hopefully, she will go on to college, and if I can instill that in her now, then I don't think it will be as challenging.

Ms. Trent, also from Oak Elementary, noted that she liked being at the school, stating, "With the things that are going on in the schools, you kind of want to be there." Although she said that she "didn't interfere with his [her son's] education," she does "want to help with things." She went further to say that since helping in the Title I school, she had become keenly aware of the needs of other children, saying:

Sometimes . . . when you do the breakfast in the morning, like when they are testing, you get to see kids that haven't had breakfast, and I think that's kind of beneficial to me. It gives me the warm, fuzzy feeling."

She shared that her son also perceives the same benefit and is developing an altruistic outlook, stating:

Well, I think the way that he sees it, is like, there are kids in his class that are less fortunate than him, and he sees it as helping them. I mean, that may sound like I am being high and mighty, but he has an opportunity to have breakfast every morning. There's food at our house to eat. I'm there to fix it. There's kids in his class that there's nobody there, and there's probably no food in the house. So he sees that I'm there to feed the kids, but he will say, "Can we go," or when I'm at the store, "Will you get popsicles for the kids?"

On another note, Ms. Trent added:

I think at times, he wished I wasn't there [at school] because I think he thinks he could act up more . . . when I'm there he's not getting in trouble with the teacher. He's getting in trouble with me.

When asked about the benefits of being an involved parent, Ms. Rayburn stated with passion:

*I love my child* [italics added] . . . and I want to see him succeed. I want to see him . . . do well through twelfth grade, and I want to see him go to college. I want to see him get a career that is fulfilling to him, that reflects his personality, and his gifts, and his purpose in life . . .

She also stated that being an involved parent let her child know that:

if a problem arises" [he can] come to me . . . He's not going to be afraid to ask me something, but will share with me, or tell me something.

Ms. Harrison also stated that being involved in her child's education, "keeps me in the know as far as what's going on in the school" and said:

I like being there and helping out . . . It gives me satisfaction, knowing I can be there to help in some way.

Likewise, Ms. Morenings replied:

My being involved shows them that their education is very important to me and what happens when they are not with me is of interest to me as well.

Parents at Elm Elementary responded in a similar vein. Ms. Collins said:

I want them [her children] to get the best education they can, and anything I can do to help with that, you know, I want to see them do their best.

Ms. Newton, however, shared a different perspective:

You know when I first started getting involved at [Elm Elementary], it's when I stopped working full time and found I had some time on my hands, but what I was most concerned about—what prompted me the most—was, I could almost see the students that were really high achievers were sort of falling through the cracks. And that's probably opposite than probably a lot of people see things. The teacher is really having to struggle with the students that are on the lower end and

the middle end. But, I found that my daughters were spending time getting their work done and spending time twiddling their thumbs.

She continued:

I think even if the kids are looking at you saying “You’re not going to spend all day at school, are you?” that they still like the fact that they knew I was in the school some...I guess it’s just self-satisfaction, and what I’ve seen in knowing that you can tell in little ways.

Interestingly, with respect to her children’s achievement levels, Ms. Newton stated:

I don’t really know that my involvement has affected their achievement any at all. I guess just knowing that they can come to me if they need help with their homework and providing them with the tools that they need, but I’m the type parent that would, I’d rather them try everything on their own, you know, and learn to do things on their own . . . . I think it will mean something to them at some point in time, but I don’t think that this [parent involvement] is going to help their achievement.

The purpose and the benefits for Ms. Surber’s involvement are intertwined, as is the case for many parents at both Elm Elementary and Oak Elementary. She stated she was involved at school:

to help my children get a better education and know what’s going on in the classroom as much as possible.

She concluded by saying “the more I know, the more I can help the teacher to get the tools and understand my child.”

Ms. McCall proclaimed:

If we don’t [get involved], legislation can pass things that we don’t necessarily agree with. I think if parents aren’t involved, then the children are at a real disadvantage because if you don’t know what is expected of your child, how are you possibly going to help them and have them be the best that they can be? And encourage them? And just know what they need? I don’t know of any parent who wants their child to fall behind. You have to be involved, I think, and you owe it to your kids.

She also described the benefits of her involvement on a more personal level, adding:

I can see the benefit in our personal relationship. Every time I go to the school and participate in field trips or field day, it makes [my daughter] so proud to be able to tell the kids that “that’s my mom” and she cares enough to take time out of her schedule to come and be with me.

Throughout the course of the interviews, regardless of personal backgrounds, parents repeatedly expressed their desire to be heard in good times and bad and to be informed of classroom happenings in both academic and social realms. They also expressed that visibility was an important factor in developing relationships with school staff, and it was evident from the Visitor’s Log, in both schools, that these parents do come to school frequently for a variety of reasons such as attending school assemblies and parent-teacher conferences and assisting with class activities.

Ms. Flint recounted the importance of being involved at the school and maintaining a positive relationship with school personnel, stating:

I think the benefit of being involved is being able to talk to the teachers; having an easy conversation with the teachers so that they can tell you any issues, and they know that you will go home and try to work on those issues at home. They are not afraid to call you or email you and let you know when something’s going on. They know they can call me and have me come to the classroom and help if they need help. That’s one thing I like. I like having that easy conversation with the teachers. I know their counselor; I know their nurse. When I walk into the school, they know me, and I think that helps your child see that you advocate for them. They know they can come home and say, “Mom, I have this issue at school.” and they know you’ll take care of it. That’s all. I like being involved and just knowing the teachers.

This Elm parent of four continued:

If you are not involved at the school level, you don’t know the true issues that are going on at school. You don’t know the teachers’ side of the story or versions of the stories. You don’t know classroom management. I think you have to be involved in both areas as much as you can be.

Ms. Bowers concluded that her involvement “keeps him [her son] on track, “helps with his behavior,” and ensures “that he really is getting the most out of

his education.”

As I visited the schools and attended PTA meetings and other school functions, I saw many of the parents participating in the study in attendance: talking with teachers and the school principal, interacting with other parents, and in some cases, taking pictures of their children. It was obvious to this researcher that the parents in this study had worked to develop positive relationships with school personnel and other families within the school. They all appeared “at-ease” whether addressing a group, meeting with school personnel, or speaking privately amongst themselves.

### *Barriers to Parental Involvement*

Despite the efforts of school personnel and state as well as federal legislators to increase parent involvement, economic, cultural, educational, and social barriers do exist. Of these barriers, for the small, Title I school, Oak Elementary, poverty appears to have the greatest impact on parent involvement.

Ms. Rose explained:

I believe it’s the socioeconomics that we are dealing with here. We are 86% free and reduced lunch which goes to show that education is not top priority for some kids. If you’ve done any of the “understanding poverty,” it’s all about entertainment and helping out their friends, and education is not the top priority. I think it is something that we are going to have to work through and help promote and help maybe change ideas about education.

This elementary school principal further illustrated:

We have a high percentage of our students who do not complete homework or do not have someone to help them with their homework at night. It could be due to [the parent] not having the time for their child, to help them out, or to the parent not understanding the homework, or not having the knowledge to help their student.

Ms. Rose demonstrated empathy for her student and parent population when she said:

Being a working parent, I can see how tough it is to be involved like we would want our parents to be involved with our students, but also being a working parent, I know it can be done.

The former principal of Oak Elementary added:

Obviously, economic deprivation and family dysfunction play a huge role in the parent and school relationship. In fact, family stress levels in these situations often create some hostility towards the school. Low income schools face especially difficult challenges in meaningfully engaging parents in schooling.

The guidance counselor at Oak Elementary noted several additional reasons for the lack of parent involvement at her school, many of which could be poverty related, including the [parents'] "level of education, employer support, or lack thereof, parental comfort with school staff and authorities, time and scheduling, transportation, and childcare."

It is evident by the accounts obtained from the school personnel at Oak Elementary that poverty is perceived as having a tremendous impact on the level of parent involvement within the school. This was confirmed when Ms. Carpenter stated, "[Our school] almost begs for parent involvement." She continued:

There are lots of children at the school that do not have involved parents. They come from single homes; they are raised by grandparents, and I think several of the parents maybe don't value education as much as other parents do.

Ms. Green insisted that it was much easier for her to be more involved now that she was working in the school. She illustrated:

I worked at the hospital, and my hours were a whole lot different. It was harder to be more involved, but I did what I could do with the time that I had.

Another Oak parent and PTA Executive Board member expressed her concern that the PTA Board does not do enough to increase parent involvement when she stated, "You've got to go out and say to another parent that's not involved, "We're

going to do this as a group. Would you like to help?”

Ms. Warner added that many parents do not have the knowledge or the skills necessary to recruit others, stating:

We do not have nearly as much parent involvement as I would like to see us have. We do not have nearly as much parent involvement as most of the schools in our district have. I feel that’s due to a variety of different obstacles. I don’t think they are insurmountable, but I think they are not going to be quick and changing either. Part of the trouble is that the involved parents, a big component of it, is led by a small handful of parents who themselves are not trained in how to encourage more parent involvement.

The principal at Elm Elementary acknowledged many of the same concerns as he shared his perception of the barriers to parent involvement. He explained:

I see this as kind of broken down into two different areas. One would be the personal circumstance of the parents or personal circumstances of the parents. For example, if you are talking about a nuclear family where the father works and the mother is able to stay at home, then of course, that mother is going to have more time to work at the school and to support the children with different types of projects, bringing in brownies and coming to eat lunch, and this could be mother or father, . . . versus a single mom who has to work full time. That makes a big difference because of the time factor, and so, many of the personal circumstances come down to the time or lack of time to participate in things, which I know is a really hard pill to swallow for those parents, but torn between coming to school to do things or putting food on the table, there’s no question. If they have to work, they have to work. Some parents have to work more than others. If there’s a single job and that job’s a good job and is flexible and those employers value the role of education and value employees and families, then those people have an easier time getting in to do things in the school than, say, someone who’s working two jobs, you know, possibly at a factory or a restaurant, and have no means to get off very easily to come into the school, and when they get home they’re just beat, exhausted. It makes it harder, and I think that’s a reality that we have to understand and try to work with given those parameters.

Dr. Canter further stated:

Other degrees or factors that affect parent involvement include the number of children in a family, obviously when there are more children than there is a bigger draw for the limited resources and time, of one or both parents. Other commitments; people are so busy these days. There seems to constantly be a ballgame going on, soccer, baseball, all the sports, scouts, and church activities, and so it’s hard to get around to everything. The age of the parents sometimes

makes a difference. If they are very old or very young then it can be harder to get them into the school. Also the degree to which the parent or parents value education makes a difference. If a parent was unsuccessful in school, then they may not understand the importance of education, or they may. They may really push it, and I've seen it go both ways. But the extent that they value education really does make a difference as far as how much they are able to support the child and do support the child in receiving an education, and their attitude. You know, if they dropped out of school and the parent just feels intimidated to come into the school, then they are not going to come into the school, and they probably have a bad attitude about schools and education, and the children are going to pick up on that.

Educators have spent much of their lives in schools, first as students then as teachers. For many of us, the school building is our second home; however, it is critical for us to remember that this is not always the case for the parents of the students we serve. We often forget how intimidating it can be to enter an institution designed for learning. Dr. Canter described the importance of the school climate and culture as he continued:

The other factors influencing parent involvement include the attitude or atmosphere of the school community, and that can either be a school level: How are parents greeted when they come in the door? Is the secretary nice and inviting? Do they [parents] really not want to talk to her? Thankfully, our secretary is great about knowing the parents, and she participates on the PTA, and that's helpful because the parents feel that they can come into the school, and they are invited.

But also, in individual teacher classrooms: Is the teacher open to individual parents coming in to bring things to support the children? Does the teacher send home work folders every week to share the things that are going on the class and ask for signatures? Do they have a homework agenda that the parents have to sign off on? So, both within the school level and at the classroom level, parents will pick up on how much they are invited into the school and how much they are desired to be there and to provide help. So the school's got to meet the parents, and the school has to appreciate what the parents are doing to help their children. This is only going to help our job as educators to be more effective educating the children.

From a parent's perspective, Ms. Newton added that both teachers and parents need to be comfortable communicating with one another when she confirmed the

importance of:

feeling comfortable enough that they [parents] can walk in the school...and speak to the principal by name, speak to the teachers by name . . . . being familiar enough with people just to shout out “hello” and just making the teachers feel comfortable enough in the classroom that if they need something, they know they can call on those particular parents.

Just as some parents need that bit of encouragement to participate, teachers need to feel at ease asking for help, and visibility in the school appears to facilitate this two-way communication among educators and parents.

Ms. Newton makes sure that the teachers and principal at Elm Elementary know that she’s willing to get involved:

I guess I just sort of nosed my way in. I said, “I’ve been doing this, so if there’s a need in the school, I’ll do it, if not, then that’s ok too.”

Although some teachers may perceive this behavior as a threat (Starr, 2004), others tend to welcome assertiveness such as that displayed by Ms. Newton. Ms.

Carpenter reported:

I really appreciate parents who knock on my door and ask what they can do to help. Unfortunately, it doesn’t happen often enough.

While Elm Elementary is noted for its high degree of parent involvement, Ms. Surber, indicated that they could always use more parents in the school:

We’ve had a hard time because of a lot of us having to work and stuff. They need more parents to do stuff there . . . . throughout the day, to read to students and help make copies.

She added, that if made aware, working parents could also contribute to their children’s education through their willingness to provide materials for the classrooms, saying:

that’s something [providing items for the classroom] that even working parents can do . . . . The ones that work full time. There’s a lot that think they can’t be involved.

An educational assistant at Elm Elementary, Ms. Surber is very comfortable walking through the doors of her children's school. Because the teachers know her, they are willing to ask her for help. She acknowledged:

If they need something, they call us. When they come up with pictures . . . they are all the time asking for help.

When asked to share her thoughts as to the barriers to parent involvement, Ms. Bowers expressed concern with the overall attitude of parents, stating:

My impression is that parents do think that "oh, it's a day care. They have to go to school. They have to be there. They are out of my hair. That's the teacher's job to teach; to expand their knowledge, and when they're home, they're home."

She also revealed that one teacher had told her that there was "absolutely nothing" that could be done "to get more parents involved." Perhaps this outlook comes from repeated, unsuccessful attempts to do so. As, Ms. Warner, from Oak Elementary, shared:

Part of the trouble is, that with involved parents, a big component of it is led by a small handful of parents who themselves are not trained in how to encourage more parent involvement. . . . This is not meant to be a criticism; I feel in some ways, many of the teachers there [Oak Elementary], and I was one of them for a very long time, have almost given up because it is a struggle and is not something that changes quickly. And sometimes, when you pursue and pursue and pursue, and you don't get results, you tend to just stop pursuing.

### *The School's Role*

School personnel must work together to effectively engage parents in the education of their children (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a). Schools must provide training for parents to ensure they have the skills necessary for "setting home conditions to support learning" (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a, p. 12). Likewise, principals and teachers must facilitate two-way communication between home and school while providing

opportunities to volunteer both in the classroom and as decision makers (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004a). The former principal of Oak Elementary stated:

From the school's perspective, I think parent involvement means creating opportunities for parents to meaningfully be involved in their child's learning and development. Schools can help create a culture of open communication by proactively engaging parents in their child's day-to-day schooling and the learning process in general.

The school's current principal added that there are plenty of opportunities to volunteer at Oak Elementary noting:

We have scheduled PTA board meetings. We have scheduled PTA meetings for parents where students are involved. We encourage homeroom parents. We encourage parents to chaperone field trips.

This coming year, we are going to do daily communications through planning . . . . This year, we bought a planner for each student, and I envision that the planner will have notes home to parents, assignments that need to be completed in it, and then parents will need to sign it and the teachers will check it and make comments. The parents can make comments also to provide that daily communication.

The guidance counselor, Ms. Green, added:

Most schools try to include parents on various committees other than PTA. Each school usually designates at least one faculty member to be a parent involvement or family resource person. Teachers are encouraged to contact parents on a regular basis and often must supply written plans explaining how that will be accomplished.

To increase parent participation in her particular programs, she stated that she would often "involve the children" and "vary times for conferences to accommodate parents' schedules." She smiled as she exclaimed, "Offer free food and prizes!"

Ms. Rose confirmed, "It helps to promote a culture at your school that parents are welcomed" describing one fourth grade teacher in her school that is "great at it [involving parents]" she stated:

She is all the time having parents come in to help with little projects that involve parents: making ice cream, providing things for her to do little science projects. She does a great job of encouraging parents; to get her parents involved.

Ms. Warner confirmed that the faculty and staff do an excellent job of making them feel comfortable, acknowledging, “The principal is very welcoming.” She went on to say, “The teachers are always glad to see me.”

Ms. Trent shared:

She [the teacher] often asks for parent involvement. She is constantly wanting to do hands on education where the kids are actually involved. If they read a story about a coconut cake, she brings a coconut cake, and she wants parents there to dress up or just come in and serve the cake.

Ms. Rayburn agreed:

I feel like the school has always given me the opportunity to be a part of that [my child’s education].

She also reported that she was pleased with the manner in which school personnel at Oak Elementary communicate with her:

The school, in general, may have sent out notices or questionnaires, for example, the schools are looking at renovations and stuff and they sent an application home to ask what you thought would be great. I loved that. I really appreciated that. Even if the teachers, now, since we are in a technology world, and I work, I really appreciate email communication and receiving notifications of things.

In turn, she is able to communicate with the school using the same technology:

If I have a concern and I want to make sure the teacher knows about something, I make sure they know they can communicate with me that way, but, you know, it’s great to get an email saying this is what’s happening. Would you like to be a part of that? Do you have time to do that or work that into your schedule?

While exploring the Oak Elementary and Elm Elementary Web sites, I found that both schools have created Web pages with links to teachers’ e-mail addresses and classroom Web pages. Many of the teachers have uploaded announcements, assignments, and photographs to share with class members, parents, and the community. Embracing

the latest technology, Elm Elementary includes podcasts and blogs to further facilitate communication between home, school, and community.

While technology has changed the way many educators communicate with parents, when working with the public, interpersonal skills are equally important. Ms. Harrison reported that she appreciates “the friendly staff” at Oak Elementary and the principal who “always makes it known that she’s there if you have any questions.”

Ms. Morenings commented on the pleasantness of school faculty and staff:

The teachers have always made time to talk to me and many have gone way above their duty to work with me and/or my children. The staff and teachers truly present an attitude of love for the children, and that love extends to the family.

She further stated:

[In the last year] I see more efforts to include parents and a willingness to hear people. I would still like to see more changes in this area. I don’t think that a lot of parents are given adequate opportunity to be involved. I’d also like to see more outreach from the school when it comes to the parents.

Dr. Canter also spoke of multi-faceted outreach efforts on behalf of the school advocating:

The school’s got to meet the parents, and the school has to appreciate what the parents are doing to help their children which is only going to help our job as educators be more effective educating the children. We need to provide opportunities for communication and for fostering that relationship, such as the take-home folders and during conferences, use newsletters and emails and assemblies, and our Web site and every form of communication that we’ve got, we need to avail ourselves of that to build a relationship with the parents, to support their children, our students, in learning as much as they possibly can.

He continued:

I believe that our school, [Elm Elementary], does encourage parent involvement. We certainly try to get parents involved in PTA. We send out notices about that. We ask for volunteers, and we get a lot. PTA is very involved here at our school. We have a lot of executive board meetings and PTA meetings. We encourage parents to participate in the functions of the school. PTA hosts a big fall festival which is a huge fundraising event for us every year, as well as helping out in a

number of other ways from providing readers and tutors for some of our students to working in the library, and we have homeroom mothers. The PTA is involved in helping us come up with the yearbook, and, we try to seek out that parent involvement.

Regarding the manner in which teachers receive parents, Mr. Rose explained:

Our teachers, from what I have observed, are very open to parents coming in and helping, and typically, the teachers will invite parents in to help. Sometimes, it's the same parents over and over, and that's probably a function of who has time to help, and you get used to those people being available, and you call on the ones that are reliable and do a good job. So, I would like to see us seek out and use even more parent volunteers, and I think that the time to really hook the parents is when their children are young, and get them in and establish that relationship so that they will be involved throughout their child's years at [Elm Elementary].

Dr. Canter, well-versed in the use of technology, also addressed the importance of using a variety of tools to keep parents informed and to encourage two-way communication between the school and parents acknowledging:

I think mostly we use the tools of communication that are available to us to try to engage parents and hopefully increase parent involvement. I do a podcast and a blog to try to keep parents informed. [We] have teacher class pages; we try to be very accessible through email. The volunteer forms that we send out are one way that we try to decide, or hone in, on which parents are willing to come in and help us do things.

He also commented on the manner in which his teachers communicate and involve parents:

Teachers are always submitting newsletters to parents to help keep them informed. Often, those newsletters will say we need these things if you can provide them for our class, or if you can help out with this activity or that activity, and parents are often in the building for various things.

Dr. Canter confirmed that parents tend to be more involved when their children are in the primary grades, noting:

Typically, it [parent involvement] tends to be at the lower grade levels than the upper grade levels although at every grade level, parents are here somewhat and helping. So I'm sure we have room for improvement for increasing parent involvement, but those are the things that we do....

Elm Elementary parents also expressed their contentment with the efforts of the school to involve parents. Ms. Collins said that faculty and staff are “always friendly.”

Recounting a personal experience involving her son’s academic performance, she added:

If there has been a problem, they try to figure that problem out, and especially with my son, they, this past year, tried to get him where he needed to be in a certain subject. They went beyond the call of duty.

She also stated that the school PTA has sent “packets where they were asking for parents help” and asking them to “give of their time.” She concluded:

People have plenty of opportunities there, and I’m sure with each classroom, they [teachers] have questioned if anybody could help.”

When asked if she felt welcome in her child’s school, Ms. Surber responded, “Yes, yes I do.” With respect to the principal, she simply stated, “He’s there. He’s ready to listen.” Revealing a time when she entered the school upset because her son was experiencing some difficulty at school, she said:

They talked to me, got me calmed down, offered me assistance and everything, and it [the manner in which she was treated] was all just wonderful.

Describing the friendly environment of the school, Ms. McCall offered:

Every teacher that you pass in the hallway will speak to you whether they know you or you know them. The principal always, always speaks to me by name . . . . I’ve never seen him speak to anybody he didn’t know the name of, and he knows the name[s] of all the children too. And I think that’s just amazing. It’s just phenomenal.

Ms. Eller agreed:

I felt welcome even before I taught there. The faculty was always very nice and friendly—at drop off and pick up, things like that, anytime I was in the school to help out with anything. I had wonderful experiences there. With teachers, [they] always had an open door policy, so anytime I wanted to ask them a question or wanted to do something for them—I had a cell phone number, or could come in anytime.

Discussing the importance of the PTA, she shared:

I think we have a wonderful PTA and I know the beginning of the year they are always asking, sending papers home, asking what can you do? How can you volunteer? We'd love to have you.

Of the parents, she confided:

I think they are great resources, and I think the teachers understand that, and there's always parents in the school.

Ms. Anderson reported:

At the beginning of each school year, the teachers usually have a meeting with the parents and provide an outline of how they want to be approached whether it's via email or a certain time of day, or a note, or what they would like. It seems that they always do make themselves available and encourage parental involvement. Some teachers have said that you need to help your child outside the classroom and have been quite pointed in telling what you need to be doing and how to encourage them.

She continued:

I feel that they are very easy to work with, and at the elementary level, they clearly outline what they expect of the children, so, that as a parent, you can encourage them and follow those guidelines.

Although most parents at Elm Elementary reported that they believe their child's school and school personnel encourage parent involvement, Ms. Eller stated:

I think they encourage parent involvement to the limited extent that it's always been done before.

However, she admitted:

I really have no basis for that other than I really don't see anything other than the PTA meetings and Open House.

She went further to describe the experience she shares with her step-daughter, attending school in a neighboring district:

The very first day of school is actually an open day where all the parents go into the classroom, and the teacher spends anywhere from 20 minutes to 45 minutes sometimes just talking about "I'm so glad to have your child in my class. Here's what we are going to do."

Ms. Eller acknowledged:

We've even done that at PTA Open House at [Elm Elementary], but I know this past year, it was a month or six weeks into the school year before there was that open time to allow parents to come in and understand what their child would do.

*Parental Involvement and Student Achievement*

The degree to which parent involvement affects the academic performance of their children varied among parents participating in the study; however, most parents reported that they measure the success of their children in terms of the whole child: mind, body, and soul. Conversely, school personnel, reported that their measures of student success are largely data-driven.

Ms. Rose maintained that she measures success:

Through data collection. You collect the data and use it to make improvements. Being able to use that data, from assessments, to show our students' growth.

However, she added:

I think we also need to look at social growth along with their achievement growth. We have to look at social growth, not just learning.

The guidance counselor at Oak Elementary defined student success as:

A student who enjoys going to school and learning and who makes progress academically, socially, and emotionally.

Ms. Hartsock also stated:

Unfortunately, standardized testing is currently the only way allowed to measure student success.

The former principal at Oak Elementary, Mr. Flanagan, resonated:

Student success is best measured through multiple informal evaluations as part of a "coaching" process. This involves putting children in a context for performance based processes where problem solving and reflective moments are encouraged and success celebrated. Absolutes are minimized and inquiry, curiosity, and wonder are integral components for evaluative processes.

Dr. Canter shared his thoughts regarding student performance and the difference parent involvement makes, affirming:

I measure student success by the indicators that we have, largely data-based, such as the extent to which the children perform well on achievement tests and the extent to which we are able to do well on value-added criteria. I think that is what our mission is and that's how we need to define success so we'll know what we're shooting for. I think that parent involvement is a large part of helping us accomplish our mission because without it, we know for a fact, that we are going to do poorly on those indicators.

Parents agreed that academic performance is important; however, as a rule, parents reported that their child's happiness was equally as important. Surprisingly, views were mixed as to the importance of their role in their child's achievement. Ms. Warner reported:

I feel like it's [parent involvement] critical. I feel like [my daughter] was blessed from birth with a great brain and a knack for certain things. I feel like language is just a gift that she was born with, and it probably wouldn't have mattered, I mean she would still be successful regardless of whether or not I was involved, but I do believe that her level of achievement is much higher because of our involvement, and not just mine, my husband's and her family's and different people in the family.

Addressing the manner in which she measures success, Ms. Warner continued:

Maybe I can describe it by how I don't measure it. Because I don't, if [child's name] came home with everything perfect on her report card and she was not happy, that would not be success. If she came home with everything great on her report card and was happy, but was not a kind, honest, compassionate child, that would not be success. I would prefer, if I had to choose, I would choose character over academics.

And again, that's why I wanted her to be at [Oak Elementary], because I believe that at [Oak Elementary], she has a greater opportunity to learn those skills, and it doesn't matter to her what brand her clothes are. She doesn't know anything about any of that. She doesn't know, she doesn't pick her friends based on where they live or who their parents are, and I appreciate that. And to me, that's what I'm looking for.

She concluded:

I want [my daughter] to be good because I know she is capable of that. But it is only a small part of it.

Ms. Carpenter responded that being an involved parent:

helps with accountability and helps my children to know that I value education and have high expectations for them.

She added:

I just know what a difference education can make in terms of quality of life.

Ms. Carpenter also acknowledged that their involvement had “probably impacted her children’s achievement to a large degree, stating:

Just having the accountability of knowing that my mom or my dad are going to look at my grades and have high expectations is kind of the standard for what they need to achieve. I have a son with special needs, and I think that had I not been involved, he would have struggled tremendously. He struggles as it is, so I think giving that extra support and that extra help helped him achieve.

She added that her children receive “praise for good grades” and “praise for accomplishments through projects or citizenship awards, anything that is related to school.” Likewise, she reported that she and her husband do not “discourage them by putting them down or disciplining them for not having those achievements.” In regard to their personal measures of success, Ms. Carpenter stated:

Their happiness and their love for school. I don’t measure success on grades. I have three children and they all vary in their ability to achieve at certain levels, and I think if I had a flat “I want all three children making straight As,” one of my children might achieve that and the other two would become highly discouraged. So I think just seeing them happy and involved in school is my measure of success.

Ms. Green reported that had she not been involved, she “may not have noticed or realized that she [her child] was struggling with reading” or that “she had trouble seeing.”

When measuring her child’s success, Ms. Green stated:

Just seeing her accomplishments. Just her daily activities. It doesn't have to be anything extraordinary; just being able to drive down the road and she read a billboard to me or get a book and read to me.

When asked why she participates in her child's education, she replied:

I want her to get all she can out of life and to be all she wants to be. I don't really have a career picked out for her. That's her choice. I mean if she wants to be a cashier at Wal-mart, that's fine, as long as she's happy and she's the best cashier they have.

Laughing, she continued:

I have higher expectations for her, but I support her in what she wants to do, and I ask her every now and again, [child's name], what do you want to be when you grow up? "Well, I don't know." She really doesn't; she's seven. She doesn't know at this point, but I want her to be—whatever she's going to be, to be the best that she can be.... We'll go and look at books about things that she may want to do . . . . I don't really care what she is as long as it's something moral and legal.

Pausing, she added, "And she's happy."

Although Ms. Trent stated that she didn't think her involvement had "impacted [her son] at all" she continued to say that she measures her son's success by "if he's happy or not." She also noted:

I don't want him [her son] failing, but if he comes home with As and Bs, I'm happy, so I don't really put a lot of emphasis on his grades. I mean, if he is making a bad grade and his teachers are having to call and say... your son is going to fail this class, I'll be the first to say, what can we do to help him pass it.

Conversely, Ms. Rayburn stated, "I think [my involvement has] greatly impacted his [her son's] achievement." She confided:

We've had times when we've had to sit down, and we've had to have meetings. My child is special. All children are special. He's just a great, special child. When we've had times that we've had to sit down and actually discuss things, he's been a part of that. There's never been a time when I didn't know what was going on, he didn't know what was going on, and the school didn't know what was going on, and it's been teamwork so far. All the way through.

She also stated that her son's success is measured in terms of "his happiness and his

being comfortable at school.” She shared:

He has never said to me once, I don’t want to go [to school]. I don’t want to be there. I don’t like my teacher, or I don’t like the other students, or I don’t like this class. To me, that’s a great success. Now granted, he has decent grades, and I like that. I like him having good grades because I know he’s capable of it.

Above all, Ms. Rayburn conveyed:

I want him [her son] to be happy. I want him to keep his grades up....I would like to see him grow into clubs and groups and different opportunities that might be in place for him as he gets older. I think it’s good for him to be in those groups....I would just like to see him be involved in his community, learning to give back to his community, and just growing with that through middle school, through high school, and then through college; wherever he chooses to go.

Ms. Harrison reported that had she not been an involved parent, her children “probably wouldn’t be as motivated,” and stated, “They like that I’m involved.” She shared that she measures her children’s success:

by their grades and as long as they are doing the best they can. That’s all that matters.”

When asked about the aspirations she has for her children, this single mother of two stated that it was important to her that:

they [her children] graduate high school. That they go onto college if they want to, and that they just do what they want and be happy.

Ms. Morenings felt that her involvement has “impacted their [her children] achievement by being able to handle things more timely and directly.”

She added:

Success is not only what they are able to learn but their classroom behavior and the way they respond to those who are in authority. Also, I measure success by their ability to follow rules and get along with other children. In addition, success is achieved by learning to be responsible for yourself and your actions. School is preparing them for the “big world” where they will have to be responsible for themselves and their actions and work with peers who may not always be pleasant to work with as well as have authority figures that they will have to obey. Their

academic achievement is very important, but I feel that the other things I mentioned are equally as important.

Parents at Elm Elementary School shared similar aspirations and measurements of success. Ms. Collins offered:

I think they [her children] would still have done as well as they have, but I think it's probably been good for them to see that I was interested and there at the school...just to be able to help.

She further stated:

I'm not one to expect straight As. I just want them to do their best, and as long as I know that they are putting forth their best effort, then I think that's all I can ask of them.

She also reported that she encourages them to do their best by “studying and doing their homework” and “being at school” noting that her children were not “ones to lay out.”

Laughing she added, “They always want to be at school.”

Ms. Newton could not say with certainty that her involvement affected her children's achievement claiming, “I think it will mean something to them as some point in time, but I don't think that this [parent involvement] is going to help their achievement.” She did say, however, that she expected her children to “do the best that they can do.” Noting the differences among her four children, she shared:

I've got one, and when she went to [Elm], she finished at [Elm], and made straight As—was one of the top students, and she went to [middle school] then didn't do as well as she could have done, and, her sister was at the honor's banquet and had the same type of grades she had gotten all through [Elm], and I said, “You know what? You could do better than this. I know you can.” I met with all of her teachers. She's very shy...but in my opinion, they need to do the very best that they can do every single time. They need to be putting forth their very, very best effort, and if their very best effort means that they are going to make Cs then that's ok. But, you know, it's hard to push a 13 year old and say, “You know you could be making As and Bs, and you are bringing home mostly Bs.” You just have to realize each child's potential, and treat them all separate. That's very hard.

This self-employed mother also spoke of the aspirations she has for her children.

Expressing her desires for her children to challenge themselves, she stated that she has told them:

“Don’t hold yourself back.” I guess my aspirations for them is just be everything they can be and don’t—maybe, think outside the box, don’t think that “just because I choose this path, I have to stay the course.”

As if speaking directly to her children, she said:

Open your eyes. You can choose the medical field, and that’s fine, but realize there’s a multitude of things that you can do, and that, you know, just don’t, don’t box yourself in.

Ms. Surber ascertained, “I do think he [her son] tries harder because he knows I’m watching,” and reported her measurements of success for her child include the “Terra Nova test, the report card,” and the “weekly work folder that we get of what they’ve done.” However, she stated:

I feel like they [her children] would do just as well if I were less involved.

Smiling, she added:

I feel like they are working up to their potentials . . . . We really encourage them to do the best they can.

Ms. McCall believes that her involvement makes a difference in her daughter’s achievement “because she knows that I know what she has to do.” Describing her measurements of success she exclaimed:

Gosh! On so many levels, I don’t think success is just . . . [trails off]. I just see so many areas of success. I see the way she interacts with other children; I see the way she interacts with adults as well as academics. I don’t think it’s just all based on grades. It’s just a well-rounded child.

When expressing her aspirations for her child, Ms. McCall smiled and stated:

To be President of the United States, of course! I just want her to be happy in whatever she chooses to do. I would like for her to go to college, but I know,

some, I wasn't cut out for college at the time, and I think it would have been a wasted amount of money for my parents and for me, so at some point, as long as she is happy in whatever she chooses to do. I think that's what I aspire to, and as long as she is a good person and treats people with respect and kindness.

Ms. Eller reported mixed feelings when asked if she perceived her involvement in her children's education as making a difference with respect to their achievement. She responded:

Well, I have two completely different children. One does her homework, no problem, don't have to ask, check it, usually, it's all right. The other, it's a constant "Are you finished? What problem are you on now?" You know, staring off into space. Yes, maybe one, not so sure, maybe the other. [My daughter] is really driven. She really loves school, and she loves doing the best she can, then my son, "What can I do to get by? What can I do to make a C?" And of course, I don't go for that so, so maybe, if I hadn't pushed him, I don't know.

A school teacher, Ms. Eller, acknowledged that she measures her children's achievement by:

looking at report cards, teacher conferences, their homework assignments, how much help they need, [and] their attitude towards school.

She persisted:

I really want them to just enjoy learning and not think that it's always such a bad thing . . . I just want them to be successful and be happy.  
Referring to the differences in learning styles and ability levels among her four

children, Ms. Flint, a stay-at-home mother related:

It's their personal best and their happiness. That's their success to me.

She continued:

I want them to be happy in life in whatever they choose to do, and I want them to be generous and give back to the community. I would like to see them be strong in their religious beliefs, and to continue in church. I would like to see them all go to college.

Laughing, she reflected:

I have all these aspirations, but most of all, I want them to be happy with their lives.

Another Elm Elementary parent, Ms. Anderson, also believes that parent involvement has made a difference in the lives of her children. Without hesitation, she reported:

I think, quite honestly, that being involved as a parent has impacted my child's achievement because he knows that I am going to be there or that my husband is going to be there. They know that we are asking questions and reviewing work trying to make sure that they are excelling. We have an idea of who their peers are and how their peers are behaving and how that affects their behavior. Being involved, you're talking to parents constantly, people around the school constantly, and I think that that gives a real good avenue...I don't know that they would have known how high their standards would be. We don't require them to get As or anything like that, but that is what they try to achieve. In my opinion, definitely, as far as involvement, if you don't talk to your children, you don't know what capacity they have.

With regard to how she measures her children's success, she stated:

Grades, of course, are very important, But also, their behavior and overall attitude. I think that they set high standards for themselves. We strive to let them know that they don't have to be perfect; that we are all human. It can't always be about grades: you want a well-rounded person—the academics, the social graces and the behavior.

Ms. Bowers stated that her involvement has had a positive impact on her child's achievement, saying:

[My son] does know that we care and that we do want him to do his very best. We are not a family that says you have to make all As. I want him to do his very best, and with looking through his homework, I know his capabilities...So that enables me to—I keep saying me, but [my husband] is involved too—make sure that he is achieving all he can.

She described the measures of her son's success, noting:

grades, but also friendships, his social skills and social abilities. His interests in something, whether it be reading, math, science, social studies . . . sports. I want him to be the best that he can be and do all that he can do . . . Whatever he becomes is what we will support and love.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

*Children are likely to live up to what you believe of them.*  
~Lady Bird Johnson (Compassion, 2007, n. p.)

#### *Introduction*

Parents must be involved in the learning process if students are to achieve their maximum potential. Schools can provide learning opportunities disseminated by caring adults; however, there is no substitute for having parents who are actively engaged in the educational setting. We know from research that “Children whose parents are involved with their school will feel more secure in their school surroundings” (Plevyak, 2003, p. 35), and that they “are more likely to succeed academically . . . if their families are involved in their education” (Starr, 2004, para.1). Students with involved parents are more apt to attend school regularly, make better grades, enroll in advanced classes, graduate from high school, and attend college (District Administration, 2003, para. 3).

Therefore, it stands to reason, that school personnel do everything within their power to cultivate meaningful relationships with the parents of all children attending their schools.

A review of extant literature and interviews or correspondence with 15 highly involved parents, two elementary school principals, one former elementary school principal, and an elementary school guidance counselor, along with personal experience in public education: first as a student with highly involved parents, then as a parent, and an educator, have provided the researcher with the opportunity to draw conclusions and make recommendations for further study regarding parental involvement and its effects on student achievement and school improvement.

### *Summary of Findings*

Surprisingly, data analysis from parents at both the Title I elementary school and the non-Title I elementary school yielded similar results. Perhaps this is due in part to the employment background of the parents participating in the study. Four parents from Oak Elementary and two parents from Elm Elementary identified by the principals as being “highly involved” are currently employed by the school system.

Parents in both schools reported feeling “at ease” when entering the facility, approaching the principal, and talking with teachers. They noted many of the same activities when describing parent involvement and stated comparable reasons for being involved in the education of their children. When asked if their involvement impacted their children’s achievement, most parents paused to reflect before stating that they believe their children would achieve regardless of their involvement; however, several parents acknowledged that they also believe their children appreciate their [parents’] participation at school.

Despite research that indicates the importance of parents acting as decision-makers with respect to curriculum and school policy (Fege 2007; Marzano, 2003), parents at either school rarely included this function in their definitions of parental involvement. Only after prompting did they speak of their roles on the PTA Executive Board, and none of the participants identified themselves as members of the School Improvement Planning Team. While it was evident from membership directories that some parents participating in the study do act in an advisory capacity, decision-making with respect to curriculum and school policy was not discussed. During the interviews, parents expressed that they are comfortable sharing their opinions with school personnel,

and both school administrators affirmed that parents have an active voice in the decisions affecting their children.

Unexpectedly, parents in both facilities claimed that they would like to see more parent involvement in their respective schools, but for very different reasons. Parents at Oak Elementary cited lack of skills and knowledge as factors limiting the level of parent involvement present in the school while the parents at Elm Elementary were more likely to identify work schedules as an obstacle to parent involvement. Regardless of the reasons given, ideas for soliciting more parent involvement were offered only when encouraged, and at best, were broad in scope.

According to research, parent involvement requires more than physical presence within the school (Jansorn & Epstein, 2004a); yet, most parents interviewed included visibility in their definitions of parent involvement. Perhaps more parents are involved in their children's education but do not appear to be because they are unable to attend school functions. Long (2007) stated to build effective partnerships with parents, educators and parents considered highly involved must become proactive, visiting with those who appear to be uninvolved away from school grounds—in their places of worship, during recreational activities, and throughout the community—a concept reinforced by Dr. Canter.

Both Dr. Canter and Ms. Rose shared similar thoughts with respect to parental involvement; however, Ms. Rose specifically addressed the issue of poverty at her Title I school and how she perceived it to negatively affect the level of parental involvement at Oak Elementary. She added that she and other principals across the school system have

provided their faculty with in-service opportunities to better understand, relate to, and assist those living in poverty.

### *Defining Parental Involvement*

As parents described parental involvement with respect to their children's education, three themes continued to emerge: that of volunteering or being physically present in the school (Type 3), helping with homework (Type 4), and communicating with teachers and school administrators (Type 2). Activities often cited included attending PTA meetings, volunteering in the classrooms, and sending requested items to the school. After prompting, many parents reported that they have served or are currently serving on decision-making entities (Type 5) such as the PTA Executive Board within the school.

Parents confirmed that they help with homework, read with their children, and make sure that assignments are completed and returned to school on time. Moreover, dialogue emerged as being an important component of parental involvement. Parents from both schools stated that they talk daily with their children to learn more about school events and to reinforce academic concepts. Several parents with young children noted that they use "drive" time to engage in conversation and educational play, asking their children to name points of interest or read road signs.

Two-way communication with educators was also cited as being important to parents. In addition to newsletters, many parents, especially those who work or work outside the school their children attend, noted the importance of e-mail, personal phone calls, and Web sites to stay informed of school events and classroom happenings. All

parents participating in the study reported that they feel comfortable talking with the principal and their children's teachers.

School personnel described parent involvement in a similar manner—volunteering at school and helping with homework. The guidance counselor at Oak Elementary included establishing respect for authority in her definition of parent involvement, and the principal at Elm Elementary noted the importance of “encouraging children at home and at school” and developing a “structure so the child can be successful.”

#### *Factors Affecting Parental Involvement*

When asked to share reasons for their involvement, most parents from both the Title I and the non-Title I school cited the importance of “knowing their children's peers.” In addition, many parents stated that they like to be “kept up-to-date” on the “day-to-day happenings” of the school and that their involvement allowed them to know “first-hand,” areas in which their children were struggling or achieving. One parent stated, matter-of-factly, “I love my child.” Although not explicitly stated by others, as parents recounted their activities and experiences, it became very clear that their involvement stems from the love and concern they have for their children.

For two parents, one from Elm Elementary and one from Oak Elementary, the benefits of being involved in the school setting extended far beyond touching the lives of their own children, but for very different reasons. The parent from Elm Elementary noted the importance of helping children who were more advanced and in need of enrichment opportunities while the parent from Oak Elementary spoke of assisting those in need by providing nutritious snacks for children who had no money to purchase their own. Both

parents expressed a strong belief that their own children appreciate their willingness to contribute their time, talents, or tangible items to others.

Throughout the interviews, document reviews, and observations, it was apparent to this researcher that supporting their children, the teacher, and the school in the education of their children was the primary reason that the parents participating in the study have chosen to be highly involved in the elementary schools.

Another common factor affecting the level of parental involvement at both schools is the comfort level parents experience as they enter their children's schools. Parents from Oak Elementary and Elm Elementary reported that they feel welcome in the school building and can easily approach the principal or their children's teachers.

Although highly involved, many parents with children in the upper elementary grades admitted that their level of involvement was beginning to decline reasoning that their children had outgrown the need for direct assistance with homework and reading assignments. A few parents shared that they believe the classroom teachers encourage a greater degree of independence in the upper grades, and while they still feel welcome in the school, they do not feel as needed in the classroom as they did in the earlier grades, defined as kindergarten through third grade.

Several parents from both Oak Elementary and Elm Elementary addressed the need for more parental involvement, naming work schedules and few opportunities for all parents to contribute as the primary factors influencing the number of parents who are actively involved in the school. However, after reviewing school newsletters and minutes from PTA meetings, it appears that all parents are given the same opportunities to participate in the education of their children. Although several participants stated that

“it’s the same parents over and over again,” there are multiple opportunities for all school stakeholders to contribute to the educational process. School newsletters and Web sites inform parents of upcoming events and identify multiple opportunities to get involved. Parent conferences are scheduled throughout the day and after hours appointments are also available. Both Elm Elementary and Oak Elementary have an open door policy, allowing parents to meet with school administrators at their leisure. Likewise, volunteers can serve during the school day, assisting with field trips and classroom activities or in the evenings helping to raise funds for school projects.

When considering ways to increase parental involvement it is important to remember, as the former principal of Oak Elementary pointed out, that parent involvement does not require physical presence on school grounds, it does require, however, the “consistent involvement in their child’s development,” and that is not always visible to others outside the family.

Several barriers to parental involvement that are often less apparent to others were noted by school personnel. Socioeconomic status and related issues such as transportation and time off work, family dysfunction, and the attitude of the school community were all cited as factors limiting the degree of parental involvement for many families within the school system. The principal at Elm Elementary also discussed family dynamics including whether one or both parents work outside the home, the number of children in the household, and the age of the parents raising the children; whereas, the principal at Oak Elementary maintained that poverty was the single largest factor influencing the level of parental involvement at her school.

### *Promoting Student Achievement and Improving School Performance*

Research shows that the educational aspirations parents hold for their children have the greatest effect on students' academic growth (Fan, 2001; Michigan Department of Education [MDE], 2002) —over and above that of socioeconomic status, regardless of subject area, ethnic group, and data sources (Fan, 2001). While parents from both schools listed emotional and social structures as their primary measurements for success, defining achievement in terms of their children's happiness, morality, and kindness toward others, they also indicated that they hold high expectations for their children. Many parents stated that their goal is to see that their children strive to do their best, “working up to their potentials” in all they do. Only one parent, from Elm Elementary, emphasized the importance of report cards when evaluating her children's achievement; however, she, too, acknowledged that her children's happiness is paramount.

The guidance counselor at Oak Elementary School shared a similar view and noted the importance of developing the whole child—socially, emotionally, and academically. However, both school administrators cited data collection in the form of standardized tests as the primary measurement for success. The principal at Elm Elementary also included Value-Added criteria as another important measurement. In light of the pressure school officials face to ensure that all children make Annual Yearly Progress and are proficient by the school year ending 2014, the use of quantifiable data to measure progress is as understandable as it is necessary.

### *Recommendations*

After analyzing the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered.

Educators should take measures to ensure that all parents, including those who are considered highly involved, have an accurate, working definition of parental involvement whether using the six types of involvement identified by Epstein and Jansorn (2004a) or another model. Based upon the responses from parents participating in the study, parental involvement includes serving as a volunteer at the school (Type 3), communicating with school personnel (Type 2), and helping their children with homework (Type 4). Very few parents identified any activities associated with decision-making (Type 5), parenting (Type 1), or collaborating with community (Type 6) as components of parental involvement.

Elementary schools wishing to increase parental involvement might consider training highly involved parents to serve as mentors to those who appear to be reluctant to get involved and to parents new to the school. Building personal relationships throughout the school community may very well augment the level and quality of parental involvement experienced within each school.

Networking away from school property may also prove effective in forming strong connections between home and school. Increasing personal contacts and visibility at the ball field, at church, and during community events can enhance a parent's trust and raise the comfort level for those who are initially disinclined to participate in school events.

#### *Limitations and Delimitations*

This qualitative case study was limited to the responses shared by parents and school personnel and the degree to which participants were comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions. The findings of this study were delimited to a small sample size in

two elementary schools located in the southern Appalachian region of the United States. Although the results of this study should not be generalized, those wishing to improve the degree and quality of parental involvement may benefit from the responses herein.

#### *Recommendations for Further Research*

Recommendations for further research include an exploration of parental involvement as it is perceived by parents who are considered uninvolved. Although soliciting participants may prove to be a difficult task, a study such as this could provide insight that might possibly lead to a greater understanding of the barriers to parental involvement and result in changes in practice and policy.

A study focusing on the perceptions of parents who are non-educators might also provide useful information for developing best practices and increasing parental involvement.

Likewise, a comparison of the practices and perceptions of parental involvement as it occurs in private schools versus public schools could prove interesting.

Another investigation for consideration is the comparison of standardized test scores among students with parents considered highly involved and those with parents who are perceived as uninvolved.

Parents participating in this study demonstrated mixed feelings when asked if they believe their involvement impacts their children's achievement. A qualitative study measuring the students' perceptions of parental involvement might be of benefit in determining the degree to which parents influence their children's learning.

Finally, it might prove interesting to explore the reasons for the decline in parental involvement as students move up in grade level.

The recommendations for further research could help to identify additional factors influencing parental involvement and the impact of parental involvement on student achievement and school performance, thereby adding to the rich body of research already available and enhancing current practices employed by schools to improve the level and quality of parental involvement.

### *Conclusion*

If public schools are to succeed in the quest to “leave no child behind,” schools and school districts must educate parents and enlist them as partners in the educational process: training highly involved parents to serve as mentors to those who appear uninvolved, teaching parents to understand developmentally appropriate learning strategies, and enlisting parents to serve on decision making bodies within the school and throughout the school district. No longer can schools afford to be held responsible for all aspects of educating our nation’s children. Increasing student achievement and improving school performance is a shared responsibility. Until educators, parents, and students become mutually accountable, our schools will not succeed in fully educating America’s youth and preparing them for a global society.

To foster this attitude, schools and school districts must allocate the time and resources to train teachers to effectively engage parents. In turn, teachers must look beyond cultural, social, and economic differences and understand that all parents, despite appearances, want their children to succeed. As one parent stated, “I don’t know of any parent who wants to leave their child behind.”

Likewise, parents must be receptive to new ideas and realize that much learning occurs outside the regular school day. The African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a

child.” still holds true today. If America’s youth are to excel academically, emotionally, and socially, it will take everyone—parents, guidance counselors, teachers, administrators, and community members working together to provide the support structures necessary for our students, our children, to achieve success.

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As I think back on my own experiences, both as a student and a parent, I realize that many of the expectations that my parents had for me were conveyed during conversations that took place around the dinner table and in the car. Although we never overtly discussed college, my mother often shared her dream that her daughters would become nurses or teachers, and my father constantly encouraged us to always be grateful, but never to be satisfied. He always challenged us to ask questions and explore new territory.

As a first generation college student and a parent, I approached my daughter’s education in a slightly different manner. When she was younger, I often asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” We often discussed where she might go to college, and I frequently shared my experiences as a college student with her.

In comparing my parents’ style of parental involvement to my own, I have found one constant. My parents had high expectations for my sister and me, just as I do for my daughter, and while I wasn’t always able to be physically present, I now realize that my involvement in my daughter’s education was, and still is, supportive of a home environment that encourages learning (Tableman, 2004). Perhaps this is where schools can start assisting those parents who feel it is solely the school’s responsibility to teach academics or those who feel that they can not be meaningfully involved in the education

of their children due to life's circumstances. When parents feel that they can enter a school without the fear of being judged, when they feel unconditionally accepted, they will be more receptive to what teachers, principals, and other staff members have to say. They will begin to feel that they are an integral part of the school's culture and recognize that they are valued members of an educational team, working with school personnel for the benefit of their children.

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APPENDICES  
APPENDIX A  
Letter of Introduction to Parents

Vonda K. Stevens

[Street Address]

[City, State Zip]

[Phone]

[Email]

June 12, 2007

Dear [Participant's Name],

My name is Vonda Stevens, and I am a graduate student at East Tennessee State University. In order to fulfill the graduation requirements prescribed by the college, I will be interviewing parents of students enrolled in [the area school district]. The purpose of the interviews is to learn more about parental involvement as it exists at your child's elementary school and to determine how parental involvement impacts student achievement.

[Dr. Rose] has stated that, as a highly involved parent, you may be willing to participate in the interview process. All interviews will be private and confidential. Participants ***will not*** be identified at any time during or after the study. Likewise, information gained through the interview will be coded to ensure that each participant remains anonymous.

Your participation will help identify effective parental involvement activities and enhance practices employed by schools to engage parents in the education of their children.

Interviews should last approximately 30-45 minutes and will be conducted at a site to be agreed upon by the participant and the interviewer. I am including a copy of the interview guide for your review. If you have any questions or prefer not to participate, please call me at [private phone number]. You may also email me a [private e-mail address].

I will call within two weeks of the date of this letter to schedule an interview if you agree to participate.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Vonda K. Stevens  
East Tennessee State University  
Graduate Student

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Guide for Parents

1. What does parent involvement look like to you?
2. Your child's principal has identified you as being highly involved in your child's education. Describe how you are involved.
2. What are your reasons for being involved in your child's education?
3. What are the benefits of being an involved parent?
4. Do you feel welcome in your child's school? Why or why not?
5. Do you believe your child's school encourages parent involvement? If so, what takes place in the school to make you believe this? If not, why do you feel that your child's school does not encourage parent involvement?
6. To what degree and in what manner do you feel that your involvement has impacted your child's achievement?
7. How do you measure your child's success?

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Guide for School Administrators and Guidance Counselors

1. Describe parent involvement.
2. Describe the benefits of parent involvement.
3. To what degree and in what manner do you believe parent involvement affects student achievement?
4. What factors do you perceive as impacting the degree and quality of parent involvement?
5. Do you believe that your school or school system actively encourages parent involvement? If so, how so? If not, why?
6. What strategies, if any, do you employ to engage parents and increase/improve parent involvement?
7. Do you incorporate parent involvement activities with other aspects of the educational process? If so, how do you do so? If not, why not?
8. How do you measure student success?

APPENDIX D

Document Review Guide

<p>Document Title:</p> <p>Type of Publication:</p> <p>Publication Date:</p> <p>Date of Review:</p>	
<p>Notes:</p>	<p>Comments:</p>

APPENDIX E

Observation Guide

Location of Observation:	
Event:	
Date of Observation:	
Beginning Time:	Ending Time:
Notes:	Comments:

## APPENDIX F

### Informed Consent

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Vonda K. Stevens

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** Parental Involvement in Two Elementary Schools: A Qualitative Case Study

This Informed Consent will explain the participant's role in the research study named above. It is important that you read this material carefully and then decide if you wish to be a volunteer.

**THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH STUDY IS TO:** examine parent involvement as perceived by school administrators, guidance counselors, and parents or guardians who have been identified as highly involved in their child's elementary education. This research study does not involve the use of investigational drugs, marketed drugs or devices.

**DURATION:** Each interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Participants will be asked to verify transcripts resulting from the interviews via electronic communication (email) or in a follow up session lasting approximately 15 minutes.

**PROCEDURES:** Interviews will be conducted and audio-taped by the researcher using an interview guide. Principals at the two schools participating in the study will identify parents or guardians who may be interested in participating in the study. Once participant interest has been determined, appropriate signatures will be secured. Participants may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study, without stating a reason, at any time.

The researcher will review school documents, provided voluntarily by the school administrators, using a document review guide.

The researcher will observe a variety of school functions, with permission from the school administrator, and record observances on an observation guide.

Data may also be recorded using a camera or video camera. Photo release forms will be signed by all participants.

**POSSIBLE RISKS:** There is a risk that the nature of the questions may cause some participants to feel uncomfortable or threatened. Any participant may decline to answer any question without explanation.

**POSSIBLE BENEFITS:** Although there are no direct benefits or compensation to the participants, there are potential benefits for school leaders wishing to enhance parent involvement programs within their school communities and for parents wishing to learn effective ways to engage their children in educational activities.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:** Participation in this research experiment is voluntary. You may refuse to participate. You can quit at any time. If you quit or refuse to participate, the

benefits or treatment to which you are otherwise entitled will not be affected. You may quit by calling Vonda Stevens, whose phone number is (423) 383-1115. You will be told immediately if any of the results of the study should reasonably be expected to make you change your mind about staying in the study.

In addition, if significant new findings during the course of the research which may relate to the participant's willingness to continue participation are likely, the consent process must disclose that significant new findings developed during the course of the research which may relate to the participant's willingness to continue participation will be provided to the participant.

In addition, if there might be adverse consequences (physical, social, economic, legal, or psychological) of a participant's decision to withdraw from the research, the consent process must disclose those consequences and procedures for orderly termination of participation by the participant.

**CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS:** If you have any questions, problems or research-related medical problems at any time, you may call Vonda Stevens at (423) 383-1115, or Dr. Kathy Franklin at (423) 439-7621. You may call the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board at (423) 439-6054 for any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject. If you have any questions or concerns about the research and want to talk to someone independent of the research team or you can't reach the study staff, you may call an IRB Coordinator at (423) 439-6055 or (423) 439-6002.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of the records from this study will be stored in the office of Vonda Stevens for at least 10 years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a subject. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the ETSU/VA IRB (for medical research) (or ETSU IRB for non-medical research), the FDA (if applicable), and personnel particular to this research (individual or department) have access to the study records. Your (medical) records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above.

By signing below, you confirm that you have read or had this document read to you. You will be given a signed copy of this informed consent document. You have been given the chance to ask questions and to discuss your participation with the investigator. You freely and voluntarily choose to be in this research project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT DATE

\_\_\_\_\_  
PRINTED NAME OF PARTICIPANT DATE

\_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR DATE

\_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE OF WITNESS (if applicable) DATE

APPENDIX G

Letter from Auditor  
**BRISTOL VIRGINIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS**  
**222 Oak Street**  
**Bristol, Virginia 24201-4198**

**(276) 821-5600 – Fax (276) 821-5601**

**Bristol Virginia School Board**

Douglas E. Arnold, Ed.D.  
Superintendent

Butch Tolley, Chair  
Ronald Cameron, Vice Chair  
Eric Clark  
Virginia Goodson  
Randall White

Michael K. Amstein, Ed.D.  
Assistant Superintendent

November 1, 2007

Ms. Vonda Stevens  
Vance Middle School  
815 Edgemont Avenue  
Bristol Tennessee, 37620

Dear Ms. Stevens:

I would like to commend you on your hard work in completing the data collection and analysis for your dissertation “Parental Involvement in Two Elementary Schools: A Qualitative Case Study.” After reviewing your materials and meeting with you to discuss your research objectives and methods, I have found your work to be reliable, complete and verifiable. I have witnessed evidence that this study was conducted in an ethical and professional manner according to the procedures outlined by Creswell in his book *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (2003).

Your research is of particular interest to the Bristol Virginia Public School system and me because at this time we are exploring many different strategies to increase parental involvement within our schools. It is my greatest hope that we will combine our efforts in the future concerning this important issue within our schools.

In my opinion, the interview questions were clear and concise and served as the focal point of the study. As your auditor, I investigated your observance of qualitative research standards and methodology. Furthermore, I have reviewed the audiotapes and transcripts that resulted from your interviews with study participants. In addition, I have examined the observation and document review guides. All are in compliance with the methods and procedures prescribed in the methodology.

Your work is consistent with the procedures of a qualitative case study employing naturalistic inquiry to gain a thorough understanding of each participant’s experience. I

was particularly encouraged by your personal narrative and reflections as a child and a parent.

Thank you for the opportunity to evaluate your research in particular to the benefits of involving parents in the educational process. As we know, parents are the first and foremost important teachers in a child's life. Parental involvement is significant to the success of the American educational system. It is my greatest hope that your research will add to the pool of information that motivates educators to actively involve parents in the educational development of our children.

Sincerely,

Terry W. Caldwell, Ed.D.  
Coordinator of Support Services  
Bristol Virginia Public Schools

## APPENDIX H

Letter from Peer Reviewer  
Vance Middle School  
815 Edgemont Avenue  
Bristol, Tennessee 37620  
(423)652-9449

TO: Vonda Stevens  
FROM: Diane Schlauch, Ed.D.  
SUBJECT: External Review of Selected Dissertation Analyses  
DATE: 10/25/07

Thank you for providing a draft copy of your dissertation, *Parental Involvement in Two Elementary Schools: A Qualitative Case Study*, for my review. I have completed my external review of your findings. I was able to gain a sense of the journey you have taken to develop and present this study through our discussions of your dissertation and the processes you used to collect and analyze data. Your presentation of the data along with your analysis and findings show objective interpretations based on direct participant responses. Your themes emerged from collective responses of participants, yet they were also supported by and/or compared to the literature base throughout your dissertation. The reflective component of the study added intrigue and perspective that highlighted the personal relevance of the topic for children and their families. I believe your analyses were conducted in a manner that presents an unbiased view of parent involvement in schools and that supports the findings, recommendations, and conclusions drawn from your study.

The results of your research clearly indicate that parent involvement is an important aspect of education that merits further development in schools and further study to determine effective approaches to doing it well. I am glad to have had the opportunity to critically read your study and to participate in your research process. Best wishes through the next steps of your journey.

VITA

VONDA K. STEVENS

Personal Data:      Date of Birth:            August 15, 1966  
                                 Place of Birth:            Bristol, Tennessee

Education:            Public Schools; Blountville, Tennessee

                                 Virginia Highlands Community College; Abingdon, Virginia  
                                 Elementary Education, A.A.S.  
                                 Business Administration, A.A.S.  
                                 1991

                                 King College; Bristol, Tennessee  
                                 Colegio Nellie, Barcelona, Spain  
                                 Summer Studies  
                                 1992  
                                 Behavioral Science, B.A.  
                                 1993

                                 East Tennessee State University; Johnson City, Tennessee  
                                 Instructional Media, M. Ed.  
                                 1998

                                 East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee  
                                 Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, Ed.D.  
                                 2007

Professional  
Experience:            Teacher-8<sup>th</sup> Grade Government (Interim), Virginia Middle School;  
                                 Bristol, Virginia  
                                 April 1994-June 1994

                                 Teacher-5<sup>th</sup> Grade, Lincoln and Jefferson Elementary Schools;  
                                 Kingsport, Tennessee  
                                 1994-1996

                                 Teacher-Kindergarten, Jefferson Elementary School;  
                                 Kingsport, Tennessee  
                                 1996-1999

                                 Library Media Specialist, Central Elementary School;  
                                 Bristol, Tennessee 37620  
                                 1999-2006

Professional  
Experience:

Community Outreach Specialist, Bristol Tennessee City Schools;  
Bristol, Tennessee  
2006-2007

Library Media Specialist, Vance Middle School;  
Bristol, Tennessee  
2007-Present

Honors and  
Awards:

Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society – 1999  
East Tennessee State University

State Literacy Grant – 2001  
Team Mentor - \$36,500

Anne Richardson Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) – 2003  
Regional Volunteer of the Year

King Pharmaceuticals Education Grant – 2003  
Read Around Central Elementary (RACE) - \$5, 000

National Education Association Innovation Grant – 2005  
Iditarod! IditaREAD! - \$5,000

King Pharmaceuticals Education Grant – 2005  
Reference Safari - \$5,000

Teacher of the Year – 2006  
Bristol, Tennessee City Schools

Distinguished Educator – 2006  
Tennessee Education Association

Teacher of the Year – 2006  
Bristol, Tennessee Chapter: Rotary International

Lowe's Toolbox for Education Grant – 2006  
Project CENTRAL - \$5,000

Memberships:

Tennessee Association of School Librarians – 1999  
Alpha Delta Kappa – 2003  
Boys and Girls Club Board of Directors – 2007  
Theatre Bristol Board of Directors – 2007