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Perceptions of Middle-School Parents Regarding Factors That Influence Parent Involvement: A Study of Four Middle Schools in Northeast Tennessee.

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Perceptions of Middle-School Parents Regarding Factors That Influence Parent Involvement:

A Study of Four Middle Schools in Northeast Tennessee

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by

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ABSTRACT

Perceptions of Middle-School Parents Regarding Factors That Influence Parent Involvement:

A Study of Four Middle Schools in Northeast Tennessee

by

John K. Boyd, Jr.

The cultivation of parent involvement in America's public schools is no longer an option. Under the provisions of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*: *No Child Left Behind* (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2001), it is now a mandate. Moreover, in the current climate of emphasis upon student performance and school accountability, schools need not just the *support* of parents, but also their full involvement in meaningful partnerships.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop a better understanding of the factors that significantly affect the level of parent involvement during the middle-school years. This was accomplished through the use of open-ended interviews with 24 participants in Northeast Tennessee comprised of 4 elementary and 4 middle-school principals along with 16 middle-school parents who were identified by their child's principal as having been highly involved when their child was in elementary school.

The findings from this study suggested that the parent and principal perceptions regarding the factors that influence the decline in parent involvement during the middle-school years are often quite different. In general, perceptions of parents and principals that were held in common were those associated with the role of the parent, the positive effects of parent involvement upon student success, and the role of the principal in modeling the encouragement of parent

involvement. The finding suggested, however, that there was significant disparity between parent and principal perceptions with regard to how well middle schools encourage parent involvement.

Major recommendations included middle schools communicating with feeder elementary schools to identify highly involved parents of rising middle-school students, a system of personally contacting such parents as a means to encourage their continued involvement, and the establishment of a dialogue among parents and educators with regard to developing an action plan based upon best practices.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated:

      To my wife, Carol, who inspires me daily with her tender patience, her endless generosity, and her loving encouragement. But for her, I neither would have begun nor completed this journey. In so many ways, she is a truly gifted teacher of children and me. She is truly my best friend.

      To my son, Jeb. Although, as his father, I have tried to be a good teacher for him, he has taught me more especially about courage, resilience, and forgiveness.

      To my mother and first teacher, Gloria. I am grateful to her for a lifetime of loving lessons in selflessness, integrity, and perseverance.

      To the memory of my father and friend, J. Kyle Boyd. I am thankful to have watched him model in every sense the true meaning of the word "gentleman."

      To the memory of an inspirational teacher and unselfish friend, Dr. Russell West.

      And to all family and friends whose kind words and thoughts have encouraged me along the way. Thank you for helping to shift the wind to my back.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The former editor of the *Saturday Review,* Norman Cousins, has been quoted as having asked, "Who took the 'public' out of public schools?" (as cited in Littky, 2004). Although the question is too simple to adequately address a complex problem, it does highlight an issue that is crucial to the success of American public education. There exists compelling evidence that the American public, including its educators, consider the involvement of parents in their children's education to be a very important issue. Indeed, the growing popularity of vouchers programs, charter schools, and home schooling all speak to the fact that parents want a stronger role in the education of their children (Pepperl & Lezotte, 2001). Although the issue is characterized by significant controversy, there is potentially much to be gained by involving parents more effectively. As Boyer (1991) said, "It seems clear that we cannot have islands of academic excellence in a sea of community indifference" (p. xvii).

For more than two decades, a storm of public debate has raged with regard to the causes and cures of a perceived decline in students' achievement. Given voice by the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the public's fears about the failure of the educational system have resulted in reform. Examples such as *the Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (1994) and the reauthorized *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*: *No Child Left Behind* included family involvement as a prominent reform (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2001). Additionally, Congress mandated an eighth goal to the National Education Goals saying that schools should implement policies and practices that would more highly involve parents in two ways: by supporting students' academics at home and in decision making at school. The *No Child Left Behind* Act also includes very significant

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provisions that address the degree to which parents must be informed and involved by the school (*Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, 2001).

Although serious debate has occurred among educators and the public as to the wisdom of *some* parent involvement practices, few elements in public education are as seemingly universally accepted as is the belief that parental involvement is crucial to the educational success of the child (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Young & Westernoff, 1996). It is commonly accepted that the parent is the child's first teacher and has, therefore, a vital role in both his and her formal and informal education (Berger, 1995). The theoretical and practical bases for the importance of parent involvement in education has been well researched.

Studies have documented that a student's performance improves when parents are actively engaged in the child's schooling (Baker & Soden, 1997; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Olmstead & Rubin, 1983). Many researchers have scrutinized the types of parent involvement and produced evidence of their relative effects upon both student achievement and attitudes (Epstein & Lee, 1995). Increases in parental involvement have been demonstrated to positively affect student attendance, behavior, and aspirations (Henderson & Berla). There is also evidence of correlation between parental involvement and dropout rates (Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990).

In fact, some researchers have suggested that it is relatively unimportant *how* parents participate in their children's education as long as they are indeed participating in some way (Henderson & Berla, 1994). In so doing, they send the child the simple yet vital message that education is important (Wherry, 2004).

Despite the virtually universal acceptance of this multitude of evidence, in practice, all groups seem to find the full partnership between home and school very elusive. Many parents remain detached from the school and its mission. Printed and electronic media report daily regarding the negative perceptions that many parents and educators hold for each other.

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Politicians continue to find it necessary to mandate incentives and sanctions regarding parent involvement practices (*Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, 2001). Moreover, parents who *have* been highly involved in their child's early schooling, often find that during the middle and high school years, the once-strong partnership begins to atrophy (Barber & Patin, 1997; Belenardo, 2001; Burke, 1999; Lucas & Lusthaus, 1978).

Statement of the Problem

As educators struggle to identify and maximize the use of every resource to improve students' performance, it is increasingly important that they establish and maintain high levels of parent involvement in their schools. Although parent involvement at the elementary-school level has been studied extensively, more research is needed "to determine why there is a decrease of involvement as the child advances to higher grades" (Smith, 2001, p. 149). The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of the factors that significantly affect the level of parent involvement during the middle-school years. This was accomplished through the use of open-ended interviews with 24 participants in Northeast Tennessee comprised of 4 elementary and 4 middle-school principals along with 16 middle-school parents who were identified by their child's principal as having been highly involved when their children were in elementary school.

The reasons for interviewing only parents who were highly involved during their children's elementary-school experiences were twofold. First, it was a basic objective of the researcher to examine factors that might have caused a decrease in involvement among those who were already highly involved. Secondly, it was an assumption on the part of the researcher that parents who were perceived as having been highly involved when their children were in elementary school will be information-rich with regard to the focus of this study.

Based upon the perceptions of middle-school parents who were identified to have been highly involved when their children were in elementary school, the study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a change in the level of parent involvement as the student transitions from elementary to middle school?

2. What factors have been perceived to promote or inhibit the parents' involvement during the children's middle-school years?

3. What barriers to parent involvement during the middle-school years do parents perceive as capable of being influenced by the school?

4. Are there significant similarities or disparities in the perceptions of middle-school parents and their children's middle-school principal with regard to these factors?

Significance of the Study

Current federal legislation promotes more choice for parents and makes more information available to parents (*Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, 2001). Additionally, schools that qualify for federal funding under Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* operate under a system of incentives and sanctions based upon the kinds and degree of parental involvement within the school. Although evidence exists to indicate that not all types of parental involvement are equally effective, it is generally accepted that all stakeholders benefit when parents are appropriately involved in their children's education. There is also significant evidence that the degree to which parents are involved diminishes as the students move into the middle- and high-school years (Burke, 1999; Lucas & Lusthaus, 1978).

Although most high-school teachers in one study said that their students would benefit from an increased level of parent involvement, only a very small percentage said that they considered the encouragement of parent involvement to be their responsibility (Rumberger et al.,

1990). A 1998 study by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory produced similar findings (Burke, 2001). Given the tremendous challenge of ensuring proficiency for every student and every subgroup of students, educators must maximize the resource that parent involvement represents by having a better understanding of the factors that influence that partnership between school and home. Findings of this study might improve educators' ability to positively influence the degree to which middle-school parents remain involved in their children's schooling.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by the degree to which the parents and principals interviewed expressed their opinions with candor. Of course, responses of the interviewees are open to interpretations other than the author's conclusions.

Delimitations of the Study

The findings of this study were limited to four middle schools in Northeast Tennessee. Results, therefore, should not be generalized to other populations or settings.

Definitions

There has been significant discussion among some as to whether the term "parent involvement" or "family involvement" best conveys the desired meaning. Given the diversity of today's American society, many children have adults other than mothers and/or fathers fulfilling or assisting in the parents' role. Within the scope of this study, the use of the term "parent" is not intended to exclude the consideration of other family members or caring adults who are fulfilling the parental role. Although in most cases the term "family" could be substituted for the word "parent," there are instances where legal factors may preclude participation by those other than parents or legal guardians.

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Title I schools are defined as those schools that receive federal funds to improve students' performance in reading and math by virtue of their having at least 40% of the students enrolled qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch.

Overview of the Study

This qualitative study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the topic, a statement of the problem, a list of four research questions, the significance of the study, the limitations and delimitations, and a definition of the term "parent involvement." A review of relevant literature is included in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 includes a description of the methods and procedures that were used. In Chapter 4, the data are categorized and presented through emergent themes that address each of the research questions. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the findings, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Parent involvement is a salient predictor of students' success (Million, 2003). In fact, many researchers suggested that parent involvement positively impacts students' achievement, attendance, attitudes, behavior, graduation, and life goals (Becher, 1984; Burke, 2001; Cloud, DeLeon, Eugenio, Kimber, & Wu, 1989; Epstein & Dauber, 1995; Truby, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). There is also much evidence that these benefits cross lines of family income and parent education level (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Funkhouser, Gonzalez, & Moles, 1998; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Karnes, 1979; Young & Westernoff, 1996). In an era characterized by tremendous emphasis on school accountability as measured by students' performance, education reform measures are replete with components that address parent involvement (Belenardo, 2001).

Despite the consensus among researchers, educators, legislators, and parents regarding the potentially positive effects of parent involvement in schools, there are significant impediments to the full participation of each group of stakeholders, i.e. students, parents, and educators. In fact, some might find it surprising that any practice with such a high potential for benefit would have to be mandated by policy and law. Moreover, there was compelling evidence that both the incidence and quality of parent involvement significantly declines as the students move to middle and high schools (Barber & Patin, 1997; Burke, 1999; Lucas & Lusthaus, 1978).

Chapter 2 of this study presents a review of literature as it pertains to the recent historical development of parent-school involvement, its benefits, some barriers and bridges to its creation and maintenance, its various forms, and an overview of the typical decline in parent involvement during the middle-school years.

Historical Perspective

It has long been recognized that the parent is the child's first teacher and that the home is his or her first classroom (Berger, 1995). Nevertheless, in the American experience, there has always been some degree of ambivalence regarding the role that parents should play in the child's formal education (Nicolini, 2003). In the nation's early years, the degree to which parents provided formal education varied greatly across geographic and economic lines (Berger). During the 19th century, however, parents generally relinquished to professionals their responsibility for the education of their children. Nevertheless, parents were able to exert great control over schools through the influence of both home and church. In many instances, this control extended to such important issues as curriculum, calendars, and hiring (Bowen, 2003).

To some degree, this trend began to reverse itself in the 1920s. With the spread of compulsory attendance laws, preschool and parent-education programs grew in popularity. The general acceptance of teaching as a profession began to change the face of parent involvement in schools (Berger, 1995; Bowen, 2003; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). During this period, there existed a climate in which parents and educators perceived a common culture. Parent involvement had entered what Henderson (1988) called the "bake sale" mode.

Sweeping societal changes took place in the two decades following World War II. As the "baby boomer" generation began to move through elementary schools in the 1950s, teachers typically held the view that they should teach and parents should simply be supportive of the teachers and the school (Berger, 1995). The nature of the typical American family, however, had been influenced by two important factors: (a) changes in the mother's role caused by her entrance into the work force and (b) changes in the typical American family brought on, in large part, by the growing questioning of all institutions.

In more recent history, new emphases have emerged. Parents were influenced by research in the 1970s that suggested they should play a greater role in school governance because both they and their children were influenced by school decisions (Lightfoot, 1978; Sarason,

1971). Calls for parent involvement in the 1980s were motivated by something quite different, i.e. parents' dissatisfaction with poor student achievement and the resultant desire for influence in the school's decision-making process (Murphy, 1990). As a consequence, school districts across the nation responded to parents' demands for the decentralization of power to the school level and to the empowerment of parents on site-based councils (Feurstein, 2000). Parents were often included in significant matters such long-range curricular planning and decisions regarding the use of school resources.

As many in the nation increasingly shifted toward more conservative values, public-school officials found themselves increasingly in competition with home schooling and private schools. Educators were often forced to defend themselves against charges of having low expectations for students or what some perceived as having condescending attitudes toward parents. Responding to public concerns, legislators have introduced reforms that give parents more alternatives. These reforms include relaxing laws that govern home schooling, voucher systems that permit use of federal dollars to pay private tuition, and legislation that includes monetary and policy incentives for charter schools. Provisions in *The Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (1994) and the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act: No Child Left Behind* included significant incentives and sanctions concerning the nature and degree to which parent involvement is encouraged (*Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, 2001). Indeed, for the first time, federal education officials have actually defined parental involvement. Notification regarding students' progress, eligibility to transfer to other schools, and tutoring services are a few of the better-known requirements (Davis, 2004). Districts receiving federal money must dedicate a minimum of 1% of their allocation to be used for documented programs that increase parent involvement in promoting the academic, social, and emotional growth of students (*Elementary and Secondary Education Act*). Individual schools must establish and disseminate a parent-involvement policy that includes regular communication with parents and parents' participation in the development and implementation of a strategic plan for school

improvement. No longer may schools regard parent involvement as simply including parents in fund raising or attending an occasional student play or music performance. Parent involvement in today's American public schools now includes the concept of a meaningful partnership between stakeholders (*Elementary and Secondary Education Act*).

Benefits of Parent Involvement

The benefits of parent involvement in the schooling of their children have been well documented (Epstein & Conners, 1994; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Olmstead & Rubin, 1983). A significant link has been found between students' achievement and parent involvement (Keith & Keith, 1993). Indeed, there is compelling evidence that parents' interest and support are the primary factors for students' success or failure (Berger, 1995). Research by Ngeow (1999) indicated that the more extensive the parents' involvement, the higher the students' achievement. Henderson (1981) pointed out that parent involvement in almost any form improved students' achievement.

The benefits of parents engaging with their children in educational activities have been demonstrated to exist regardless of the family's economic background (Henderson, 1981; Pepperl & Lezotte, 2001). Researchers have determined that school performance of low-income students in particular seems to vary directly with the degree of parent involvement (Henderson, 1988; National Institute of Education, 1985). Ho Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) found that families of all ethnic backgrounds, education, and income levels often had positive influences on their children's learning. Research by Keith and Others (1992) suggested that parents' involvement in their children's homework had a substantial effect upon achievement test scores. An analysis of 51 studies conducted by Henderson and Mapp (2002) revealed that students with above-median parent involvement had academic achievement rates that were 30% higher than were those with below-median parent involvement.

In a 2001 study of standards-based reform practices conducted by Westat and Policy Studies Associates, eight such practices were considered in an effort to determine their impact on students' achievement in 71 Title I elementary schools. The practices included visibility of standards and assessments, basic or advanced teaching techniques, teacher preparation and teachers' skills in math instruction, high or low ratings (by teachers) of professional development, focus on assessment and accountability, district standards policies, and outreach to parents. Results indicated that both reading and math scores were positively affected by outreach practices. Indeed, in schools characterized by high levels of teacher outreach to the parents of low-performing students, growth in test scores was 40% higher than in low-outreach schools. Of the seven other reforms, only professional development, a practice that was highly rated by teachers, was consistently related to students' growth in both reading and math.

In a review of 66 studies, Henderson and Berla (1994) suggested that the most accurate predictors of student success in school were the ability of the family, along with the help and support of school personnel, to: (a) create a positive home learning environment, (b) communicate high and realistic expectations for their children's school performance and future careers, and (c) become involved in their children's schooling.

Becher (1984) conducted an extensive review of research as it related to the involvement of parents in their children's learning. Looking at nearly 200 studies, she focused on the following issues: (a) how the role of the family influences the child's intelligence, competence, and achievement; (b) how parent education programs affect students' achievement; (c) how parent practices influence reading readiness; and (d) the effects of parent involvement in education.

Becher's (1984) results indicated that students with high achievement had parents with high expectations for them. These students had the benefit of frequent interaction with their parents. These parents were apt to see themselves as "teachers" of their children as they modeled and reinforced learning.

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Secondly, Becher's (1984) research indicated a significant link between parent-education programs and students' performance. This was found to be particularly true among low-income parents who had been trained to work with their children in improving their language skills.

The positive effects of parent involvement are not limited to students' achievement. Research conducted by Epstein (1985) indicated that as a result of increased parent involvement in learning activities at home, students reported having more positive attitudes towards school, more regular homework habits, more similarity between the school and their family, more familiarity between the teacher and their parents, and more homework on weekends.

Horn and West (1992) found that parent involvement had a strong influence on the drop-out rate among students. In a longitudinal study of approximately 25,000 eighth graders, the evidence suggested that there was a strong relationship between parent involvement and whether or not a student dropped out of school between the 8th and 10th grades. Likewise, Rumberger et al. (1990) found in their study that students who dropped out of school reported that their parents rarely attended school events or helped with homework. Another study of 704 low-income parents in Chicago indicated that eighth-grade students whose parents were highly involved were 38% less likely to be retained in grade (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Other areas that have been demonstrated to be positively affected by increased parent involvement include students' attendance, attitudes, behavior, and higher aspirations (Henderson, 1988; Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Students were not the only beneficiaries of parent involvement. As the home/school partnership strengthened, teachers developed a greater sense of efficacy and, therefore, higher morale. In addition, they experienced increases in the rate of return on homework and reported more success in their efforts to influence students (Bowen, 2003). Studies have also shown that as parents learn new and better ways to help their children, they develop more confidence and come to better understand the school and its mission (Henderson & Berla, 1994). The symbiotic relationship among student, parent, and school benefits was further highlighted in Pryor's (1994)

study of parent-school bonding, student-school bonding, and academic achievement among ninth-grade students in five communities. Pryor suggested that parents' bonding to the school positively affected students' bonding. Furthermore, students' bonding to the school positively affected their achievement.

Barriers and Bridges to Parent Involvement

Virtually all parents wish to see their children succeed in school. Indeed, it has been clearly established that family involvement positively affected students' success in many areas such as achievement, attendance, attitudes, behavior, graduation, and aspirations. Despite its many benefits, Kerbow and Bernhardt (1993) found that parent involvement must sometimes be urged, coaxed, supported by incentives, legislated, and mandated. According to the authors, this was because, unfortunately, there were real barriers that negatively affected the engagement of each stakeholder group, i.e. parents, students, and educators. Indeed, the mechanisms that encourage parents to become engaged in their child's education have not been clearly understood (Kerbow & Bernhardt). Moreover, there is much evidence to suggest that parents and educators often had very different views about the reasons for low student performance, the appropriate role for parents in the school, and the role of the principal (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000).

Feurstein (2000) maintained that one could best categorize school-level influences on parent involvement in three ways: staff members' characteristics, students' characteristics, and the school's characteristics. With regard to staff, factors such as age, experience, racial composition, and disposition toward parents have been identified. Students' characteristics included factors such as socioeconomic status and minority composition. Kerbow and Bernhardt (1993) suggested that parents were more likely to contact the school for academic reasons, to volunteer, and to attend PTO meetings in schools that had a higher average socioeconomic status. Furthermore, they noted that low socioeconomic status schools had higher levels of parent involvement in schools with large minority populations.

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With regard to a school's characteristics such as the nature of the setting, size, academic focus, and climate, Feurstein (2000) reported that research appeared to be limited. Although parent involvement has fluctuated over the past two centuries, its importance has now become a national agenda resulting in a significant increase in the attention given to home/school partnerships (Belenardo, 2001). Because family involvement has been demonstrated to have such significant effects upon students' performance, the factors that influence it have become a matter of great interest to educational decision-makers (Feurstein). Although the factors may not be easily influenced, bridges can be and are being built over these barriers. It has become clear that "great schools have strong partnerships with parents" (Million, 2003, p. 5). A review of related literature reveals a myriad of impediments and hopeful solutions for each group in building strong home/school partnerships.

For Students

In many cases, students are ambivalent regarding the degree to which their parents should be actively engaged in their schooling. A multitude of factors affects their feelings, not the least of which is the student's age. At any age, however, the relationship between parent and child is key, for, as in most endeavors, clear and frequent communication is crucial to successful relationships. Researchers such as Coleman, Collinge, and Seifert (1993) suggested, however, that the perceptions of students regarding their schooling were often independent of their parents' perceptions. According to the researchers, evidence pointed to a "disconnect" between students and their parents regarding their perceptions of schools, classrooms, and teachers that affected their overall rating of the school. Yet, the same study suggested:

> For students, the most important element is the student's perception of communication with his or her parents about the school. The student's perception of student-teacher collaboration is critically important, since it strongly connects with parent attitudes. For parents, positive attitudes toward school begin with the parent's perception that teachers are concerned about parental involvement. (p. 63)

The implications of the research conducted by Coleman et al. focused on two important themes. First, changes in teachers' practices that improved the level of teacher/student communication had positive effects. Students benefit when they have the perception of collaborating with the teacher in a learning partnership. It was desirable for teachers to change their practices in such a way as to strengthen the parent-student communication. According to Zellman and Waterman (1998), "Although enthusiasm is not a tangible contribution, research shows that parent-child interaction is more important than the extent of parent involvement at school. Programs should incorporate both on-school-site and at-home interaction" (p. 370).

For Parents

Societal changes have created many pressures that serve as barriers to parents' ability and willingness to become truly engaged in schools. The number of unmarried heads-of-household grew by 71% in the 1990s. Fully one third of all births in America in 2000 were to unmarried women (Christenson, 2004). The number of immigrants has ballooned. For these reasons and many others, a growing number of parents have not had a positive school experience of their own with which to build the cultural capital needed for strong home/school partnerships. It is obvious that even when the desire is present, parents who face challenges such as these are not likely to have the time to devote to frequent engagement with the school (Christenson).

In some cases, it is the overall climate of the school that most impedes parents' involvement. According to Liontos (1992), the degree to which parents felt welcomed and heard was crucial to the health of school/home partnerships. In many instances, parent involvement was largely symbolic leaving parents to feel that schools were only paying lip service to meaningful partnering (Liontos). Berger (1995) pointed out that once parents are able to assume meaningful roles within the school, some teachers might feel that their professional status was being challenged.

Educators sometimes construct barriers to parent involvement. Such counterproductive practices include contacting the parent only in crisis situations, labeling family structures (e.g. "single-parent"), and judging the family as "deficient" (Christenson, 2004). Educators who would seek to help remove barriers to parent involvement were challenged by Christenson who stated:

> We fail as educators when we form conclusions based on what we believe families need. This is heightened when we do not consider how families may be supporting their children's education already. In fact, parents who experience diverse ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and educational backgrounds are involved in the lives of their children, regardless of whether they are formally involved in their school life. Furthermore, many families are involved in the education of their children, albeit in ways that school personnel may not consider because they see no concrete product. As a result, there is too little outreach to families and children about whom school personnel are most concerned; if educators portray families as "dysfunctional," then how can a partnership for children's learning occur? (p. 9)

As the student grows and matures, parents are apt to feel even more pressure to disengage from close home/school partnerships (Barber & Patin, 1997). Seemingly, the message from all directions (students, schools, and society) is that parents should step back in the interest of the student's independence. As a result, especially during the middle- and high-school years, parents become less involved with monitoring students' individual behaviors but more concerned with their learning opportunities at school. Catsambis and Garland (1997) suggested, however, that most parents welcomed opportunities to communicate with their child's teacher and many desired a greater role in their school's decision-making process.

The responsibility incumbent upon educators who wish to remove barriers to parent involvement was described by Christenson (2004):

> Understanding family constraints is seminal to educators' developing sensitivity and responsiveness to families' needs and desires for their children's schooling experiences. Educators must be sensitive to the status-oriented family issues such as socioeconomic status, parental education, and number of adults in the home. However, the psychological aspects, including parents' role conceptions, sense of self-efficacy related to involvement, attitudes toward education, and expectations for their children's performance should be our primary concern. (p. 8)

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In a multi-site case study by Sedlack (2003), this researcher suggested that the role of the principal in home/school partnerships was influenced significantly by the socioeconomic status of the community. Principals with low socioeconomic status populations viewed themselves primarily as a source of service, advice, and support. In contrast, principals in high socioeconomic status schools were likely to see themselves as partners with parents.

For Educators

True active family involvement means that parents need more information and guidance from schools; this often requires continuous training for parents and teachers (Etheridge & Hall, 1992). According to Epstein (1985), the time involved in training for, planning, and implementing parent involvement often results in attitudes and practices aimed at keeping parents out of both the process and the classroom.

The relationship between teachers and parents is not always a comfortable one. Differing views about the nature of the parent's role in the school often cause tension and further misunderstanding. Research by Stallworth (1982) indicated that although both teachers and principals encouraged parents' involvement in helping children with schoolwork and in supporting school activities, neither favored parents' involvement in curricular, instructional, or school governance domains. In other words, teachers and principals were often looking for parents' *support* rather than parents' *involvement*. Burke (2001) described the problem:

> Although volunteers at the school site may be valuable, administrators and teachers express concerns on how to manage these partnerships and maintain an adequate level of control over the quality of the educational program. Teachers also express concerns about the risks associated with volunteers' perceptions of teachers' abilities and their classroom management style. (p. 3)

According to Williams and Chavkin (1986), it is the school administrator who serves as the catalyst in the school/home partnership. St. John (1995) made the case that principals, in particular, must realize that it is their attitude that, to a large degree, determines whether parents

see themselves as unwelcome guests, instruments of school initiatives, or real partners in school restructuring.

Yet, as Fullan (1991) noted, it was the teacher who played a key role in enlisting and enhancing parent involvement. He cited evidence that there are "stuck" schools that see parent involvement negatively and "moving" schools that work hard to bridge the gap between home and school. As Pena (2000) pointed out, some teachers have not felt secure enough to welcome parents into a partnership. Few teachers have had significant preservice or inservice training in the development of effective home/school partnerships (Epstein, 1992). Burke (2001) described the training that teachers need in order to recruit and train parent volunteers. Elements included appropriate classroom support behavior and academic support strategies as well as techniques in managing difficult volunteers.

Conversely, research by Nicolini (2003) suggested that neither preservice training nor years of experience appeared to be predictors of teachers' perceptions of parent involvement. Rather, in Nicolini's study that was controlled for grade and socioeconomic status, the most salient predictor of positive teacher attitudes toward parent involvement was the level of teacher efficacy.

A factor that appeared to be significant to all groups was the degree to which there existed a sense of community within the school. Belenardo (2001) defined community as:

> …a shared psychological sense of coherence at a school. A sense of community is the presence of beliefs, feelings, and relationships that connect members of a school community to each other; it provides a sense of belonging to something that transcends the situational relationships in an organization. (p. 2)

Belanardo (2001) suggested that middle schools "promote a sense of community of all parents if there are frequent, meaningful opportunities for parents to be involved" (p. 6). She reported that the personal and cultural needs of families needed to be addressed by educators who wished to establish that sense of community. Specifically, she recommended:

> If schools conduct involvement activities and parents respond, then parents become active participants in the life and work of the school. These parents seem to feel a

stronger sense of community than do other parents. It is possible, of course, that more and better family involvement activities could capture the interest and involvement of typical middle-school parents as well as active parents. This study suggests that when previously inactive parents obtain the information they need to become more involved with the school, then all parents might feel a greater sense of community. (p. 6)

Types of Parent Involvement

Most research studies regarding home-school partnerships have drawn to some degree on the work of Epstein of Johns Hopkins University (Epstein & Lee, 1995). During more than 30 years of work, Epstein has studied the relationship between parent involvement in schools and students' success. These six typologies developed by Epstein and Lee (as cited in Staff Matters Web Based Resources, 2005) have become a foundation in efforts to define parent involvement and discover their relationship to students' performance:

1. Type 1: Parenting: Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.

2. Type 2: Communicating: Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.

3. Type 3: Volunteering: Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.

4. Type 4: Learning at Home: Involve families with their children in learning activities at home including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions.

5. Type 5: Decision-Making: Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations.

6. Type 6: Collaborating with Community: Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community. (¶ 9)

In a 1998 study by Catsambis, the following typologies were adapted for grade eight:

1. Type 1: Parenting: Expressing expectations about student's education; limiting television viewing; supervising time use and behavior.

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2. Type 2: Communicating: Parent-initiated contacts about academic performance; school-initiated contacts about student's academic program (courses, placement)

3. Type 3: Supporting school: Volunteering at school and fund-raising.

4. Type 4: Learning at Home: Academic lessons outside school, music or dance lessons, discussions about school, and plans for future.

5. Type 5: Decision-Making: Taking part in parent organization.

6. Type 6: Collaborating with Community: Using community learning resources (like museum visits); taking part in community groups (scouts, sports). (p. 12)

Ho Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) used four types of involvement as the basis for their study of achievement in middle schools. Two were home-based (discussing school activities and monitoring out-of-school activities) and two were school-based (contacts with school staff and volunteering and attending parent-teacher conferences and other school events).

Parent Involvement in Middle Schools

Research indicates that parents' involvement in middle schools has been less frequent than in elementary schools (Bowen, 2003). Ron Skinner, research director for *Education Week*, (as cited in NAEP, 2000) tabulated data collected by the National Assessment of Educational Progress for the year 2000. He found that 90% of fourth graders were in schools that reported more than half the parents participated in parent-teacher conferences. That population was only 57% among eighth graders (NAEP). Relatively little is known about the degree to which students, parents, and educators were truly willing to invest time and effort to improve family involvement at the secondary level (Smith, 2001). As previously discussed, the barriers to such involvement are many and formidable. Although many forces appear to be working against it, some studies have indicated that middle and high schools, in fact, can enable families to remain involved in their children's education (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Epstein, 1996).

In a study of nine middle schools, Belenardo (2001) emphasized the importance of the underlying climate and culture upon the effort levels of students, parents, and teachers. She noted, "As students transition from elementary to secondary schools, parent involvement in

schools tends to decrease, eliminating a crucial element in the school community" (p. 1).

Belenardo's (2001) maintained that student success was strongly linked to a sense of community within the school. One of the crucial elements in establishing and maintaining such a sense of community is parent involvement. According to Belenardo:

> Teachers reported a stronger sense of community if they conducted family involvement activities that directly supported their classroom program, including helping students at home and holding parent-teacher conferences. In particular, teachers' reports of a sense of community were related to the extent of teachers' communications with families about academic requirements and how to help children at home.
>
> Those parents most involved with the middle school reported a stronger sense of community when their schools regularly informed them of their children's progress and school events. In addition, active parents reported a stronger sense of community if their schools welcomed and organized volunteers and conducted activities with business and other community partners.
>
> For those parents who were not particularly active at school or involved in other activities in the school system, a sense of community was unrelated to their reports of the school's program to involve families. Their responses may be the result of being less informed about the school and its programs, and about how parents may become involved. What the school is doing to involve parents, then, does not significantly affect whether typical parents feel a sense of belonging to the school. (p. 5)

Nevertheless, when data from all groups in Belenardo's study were combined, it was determined that there was a strong correlation between family activities that promoted communicating, volunteering, helping at home, and collaborating with the strength of the school's sense of community.

According to Catsambis (1998), many parents of middle-school aged children reported they believed that their active participation in their children's schooling mattered less as their children grew older. Based upon their perceptions of the student's developmental need for autonomy and greater responsibility, their retreat from engagement was often influenced by messages from children, schools, and society. In fact, parent involvement continues to influence students' achievement, attendance, and attitudes throughout the middle and high school years (Catsambis).

Research conducted by Burke (2001) focused on Epstein and Lee's (1995) Type 3 (volunteering) and Type 6 (collaborating with the community). Burke's (2001) suggestions for middle- and high-school principals included creating a learning environment for students that "can effectively nurture the academic success of culturally and economically diverse community groups" (p. 1). Deemed as critical to this goal were orderly facilities, friendly staff members, adequate two-way communications strategies and support services, and a comprehensive volunteer development program.

Summary

Although evidence supports the need for increased parent involvement as a necessary reform in public schools, it is crucial that such changes go beyond merely the superficial changes, e.g. increased parent attendance at school programs. Indeed, parent involvement in today's schools must be characterized by meaningful partnerships.

Pepperl and Lezotte (2001), in the introduction to their work, drew an important distinction between the type of parent involvement that many schools have been practicing and the kind that is now necessary by contrasting the two as first and second generation parent involvement: They explained:

> The First Generation: In the effective school, parents understand and support the school's basic mission and are given the opportunity to play an important role in helping the school to achieve this mission.

> The Second Generation: During the first generation, the role of parents in the education of their children was always somewhat unclear. Schools often gave "lip service" to having parents more actively involved in the schooling of their children. Unfortunately, when pressed, many educators were willing to admit they really did not know how to deal effectively with increased levels of parent involvement in the schools.

> In the second generation, the relationship between parents and the school must be an authentic partnership between the school and home. In the past, when teachers said they wanted more parent involvement, more often than not they were looking for unqualified support from parents. Many teachers believed that parents, if they truly valued education, knew how to get their children to behave in the ways the school desired.

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It is now clear to both teachers and parents that the parent involvement issue is not that simple. Parents are often as perplexed as the teachers are about the best way to inspire students to learn what the school teaches.

The best hope for effectively confronting the problem – and not each other – is to build enough trust and communication to realize that both teachers and parents have the same goal – an effective school and home for all children! (Introduction, n. p.)

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methods and procedures that were used in the investigation of the perceptions of parents of middle-school students and their children's middle-school principals. Specifically, the chapter provides a description of the design of the study, the research participants, the collection and treatment of data, and the data analysis and procedures including measures taken to ensure trustworthiness.

Design of the Study

This study was characterized by what Marshall and Rossman (1989) referred to as real-world observations, dilemmas, and questions; therefore, it was approached from the qualitative tradition. As opposed to logical positivism through which the researcher strives to distance himself from the subject lest his bias creep in, naturalistic inquiry relies upon the participants' views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and upon the researcher becoming a part of the study (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). In doing so, the researcher is able to give meaning to the experiences of the participants (Polkinghorne 1991). As stated by Creswell (1998):

> Writers agree that one undertakes qualitative research in a natural setting where the researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in language. (p. 14)

Another positive characteristic of natural inquiry involves its ability to benefit from the previous experiences of the researcher. As an elementary-school principal, I have personal knowledge and experience in promoting partnerships between school and home. I chose a qualitative approach so that as an instrument of the research, I could filter information through the lens of my personal experience to incorporate both the intellectual and emotional perspectives of the participants.

Best and Kahn (1993) described the themes of qualitative research as proposed by Patton (1990). Among them were naturalistic inquiry, inductive analysis, qualitative data, and personal contact and insight. According to Best and Kahn, the aim of the researcher in naturalistic inquiry should be to describe real-world situations as they unfold naturally--nonmanipulative, unobtrusive, and noncontrolling. The researcher employs inductive analysis through which important categories and interrelationships emerge. The qualitative data are detailed through thick description that describes the personal perspectives and experiences of the subjects. Participating middle-school parents were purposely selected based upon their previous reputation for having been highly involved when their children were in elementary school.

Research Participants

Based upon the perceptions of middle-school parents who were identified to have been highly involved when their children were in elementary school, the study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a change in the level of parent involvement as the student transitions from elementary to middle school?

2. What factors have been perceived to promote or inhibit the parents' involvement during the children's middle-school years?

3. What barriers to parent involvement during the middle-school years do parents perceive as capable of being influenced by the school?

4. Are there significant similarities or disparities in the perceptions of middle-school parents and their children's middle-school principal with regard to these factors?

A multi-site study design was employed using four school systems in Northeast Tennessee. Systems were selected to provide the study with variation in demographics and system population. During a personal conference with each director of schools, I explained the focus of the study and requested permission to conduct research in one middle school.

Documentation was provided to explain the methods and procedures and to assure confidentiality and anonymity of the participants (see Appendix). Stratified, "chain" and/or "snowball" sampling techniques (Patton, 1990) were used in that the directors of the systems were asked to recommend one of their elementary schools that they knew to have a culture characterized by a high degree of parent involvement. The principals of the identified schools, in turn, provided recommendations of highly involved parents whose children had recently transitioned to the local middle school.

In an effort to build and maintain trust that is an important element of access and entry as cited by Lincoln and Guba (1985), informal contact was established with each of the elementary-school principals. I explained the study and provided each with a written description of the project (see Appendix D). I requested that they select four families that had been highly involved in their elementary school and whose children had recently transitioned to a middle school within the system. I emphasized that the only important commonalties of the participating parents should be that they had a child who recently attended their elementary school, that the parent had been highly involved in the child's elementary schooling, and that the child had recently transitioned to the local middle school. I assured the principals that variations among all other demographic factors were welcomed.

An assumption on the part of the researcher was that parents who are perceived as having been highly involved when their children were in elementary school would be information-rich with regard to the focus of the study. Similar informal contacts were then made with and information provided to the middle-school principals and recommended parents.

Data Collection and Treatment

The primary method of data collection was by means of 24 structured open-ended interviews with parents, elementary-school principals, and middle-school principals that were audio taped and transcribed (See Appendices A, B, & C). This approach allowed for increased

comparability of responses and facilitated the organization and analysis of data (Best & Kahn, 1993). Interviews were conducted one-on-one except in those cases in which both parents were participating. In all cases, I interviewed one family at a time, usually at the school site, and at a time convenient to the participants. During each interview, I attempted to represent the learner in the situation, accepting all answers while gently probing for clarification when necessary. Creswell (1998) described the researcher's role as "an *active learner* who can tell the story from the participant's view rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants" (p. 18). All participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity (see Appendix D). Although confidentiality was assured, participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any question and that at any point they could choose to end the interview. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that the use of member checking was crucial to maintaining credibility. Interviewees were, therefore, given a copy of the transcript from their interview and asked to initial it after they had made any necessary corrections. Finalized transcripts were then hand-coded. The use of nodes to code information allowed themes to emerge from the data. Because not all information that is useful to a qualitative study comes from an interview transcript, I kept a journal of personal reflections and impressions regarding nonverbal cues.

Data Analysis and Procedures

Marshall and Rossman (1989) contended that the processes of data collection and data analysis in a qualitative study should be simultaneous. According to Schatzman and Strauss (1973), the analysis of qualitative data primarily involves the categorization of things, persons, and/or events and the properties that characterize them. The data from interview transcriptions and journals were, therefore, analyzed through the category construction method that consists of organizing the data sources, reducing the text, and generating conceptual categories, themes, and patterns by coding units of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam,

1998). More specifically, the data were organized by the processes of horizontalization and textural description as described by Moustakas (1994). Creswell (1998) added:

> The researcher then finds statements (in the interviews) about how individuals are experiencing the topic, lists out these significant statements (horizontalization of the data), and treats each statement as having equal worth, and works to develop a list of nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements. These statements are then grouped into "meaningful units," the researcher lists these units, and he or she writes a description of the "textures" (textural description) of the experience – what happened – including verbatim examples. (p. 147)

It then becomes the responsibility of the researcher to describe the essence of each experience. Emergent themes based upon response patterns were compared to the four research questions.

Trustworthiness

The usefulness of research is limited or enhanced by its validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness in qualitative research is comprised of four main elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

The technique of member checking was used to ensure that accuracy was achieved within each interview. Peer debriefing is another technique used to ensure credibility. Dr. Richard Bales, a trusted colleague who is very familiar with both the topic and the process of qualitative research, agreed to serve as my peer debriefer. As a "disinterested" peer, he was able to examine the data and my analysis to see if the conclusions were plausible. Triangulation through the use of multiple data sources was also employed. Finally, in an effort to ensure the dependability of the study, Dr. Richard Spurling served as an inquiry auditor (see Appendix E). His knowledge of the process and thorough review of the documentation also added to the study's comfirmability.

Although, as previously stated, my own previous experience provided a lens through which the participants' stories were interpreted, I made an honest attempt to do so fairly. I tried diligently not to reveal to any participant any of my preconceptions or biases regarding parent involvement.

Summary

Chapter 3 contained an overview of the methodology and procedures for this study. This investigation included interviewing parents and elementary- and middle-school principals in four Northeast Tennessee school systems. Corresponding middle-school principals were also included in an effort to better understand the similarities and/or discrepancies between their perceptions and those of the parents. In Chapter 4, the data will be categorized and presented through emergent themes that address each of the research questions.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop a better understanding of the factors that significantly affect the level of parent involvement during students' middle-school years. More specifically, it was the intent of the researcher to examine the perceptions of middle-school parents who had been highly involved in their children's elementary-school experiences. Additionally, the perceptions of those middle-school parents were compared and contrasted with those of the elementary- and middle-school principals.

As stated in Chapter 3, a multisite design was employed using four school systems in Northeast Tennessee. Systems were selected to provide variation in demographics and system population. Identification of principals and parents was accomplished by using stratified "chain" and "snowball" sampling techniques (Patton, 1990). Directors were asked to recommend elementary principals of schools that had established positive reputations in the cultivation of parent involvement. The elementary principals were then asked to recommend four families that had been highly involved in their elementary school and whose children had recently transitioned to a middle school within the system. It was an assumption on the part of the researcher that parents who were perceived as being highly involved when their children were in elementary school would be information-rich with regard to the focus of the study. Variances in other demographic factors within the sample were welcomed.

Structured open-ended interviews with parents, elementary-school principals, and middle- school principals were the primary method of data collection. Although the interviews were audio taped and transcribed, confidentiality and anonymity were assured and were maintained. Schools and participants within the study were referred to by pseudonyms.

Interview guides for parents and elementary- and middle-school principals were piloted within a fifth Northeast Tennessee school system. Based upon the results of the pilot tests, no revisions were made to the guides. The responses from the pilot tests were not included in the study's results.

Although initial accessibility of participants was negatively influenced to some degree by their summer vacations, once contacted, participants were virtually unanimous in their willingness to grant interviews. In most cases, the interviews were conducted at the corresponding school. Three parents chose to meet in their homes and one at her place of business. Of 16 family interviews conducted, 14 were with the mother only, 1 was with the father only, and 1 was with both parents.

Table 1 presents the demographics of the participants in the study.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Role	School (Pseudonym)	Ethnicity
Ms. Anderson	Parent	Fairfield Middle	African American
Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong	Parents	Clark Middle	Caucasian
Mrs. Barnett	Parent	Sunnydale Middle	Caucasian
Mrs. Cameron	Parent	Adams Middle	Caucasian
Mr. Ellis	Principal	Sunnydale Elementary	Caucasian
Mrs. Garcia	Parent	Fairfield Middle	Hispanic
Mrs. Henderson	Parent	Sunnydale Middle	Caucasian
Mrs. Jennings	Parent	Sunnydale Middle	Caucasian
Mr. Jeremy	Principal	Adams Middle	Caucasian
Mrs. Jones	Parent	Clark Middle	Caucasian
Mr. Johnson	Principal	Adams Elementary	Caucasian
Dr. Joy	Principal	Clark Elementary	Caucasian

Table 1 (continued)

Name (Pseudonym)	Role	School (Pseudonym)	Ethnicity
Mrs. Keys	Parent	Adams Middle	Caucasian
Mrs. Michaels	Parent	Fairfield Middle	Caucasian
Dr. Morgan	Principal	Fairfield Middle	Caucasian
Mrs. O'Brian	Parent	Adams Middle	Caucasian
Mr. Patrick	Principal	Fairfield Elementary	Caucasian
Mr. Price	Parent	Clark Middle	Caucasian
Mrs. Richards	Parent	Clark Middle	Caucasian
Mrs. Rivers	Parent	Fairfield Middle	Caucasian
Mr. Roberts	Principal	Clark Middle	Caucasian
Mrs. Walker	Parent	Sunnydale Middle	Caucasian
Mrs. Ward	Parent	Adams Middle	Caucasian
Mr. Woods	Principal	Sunnydale Middle	Caucasian

Research Questions

Based upon the perceptions of middle-school parents who were identified to have been highly involved when their children were in elementary school, the study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a change in the level of parent involvement as the student transitions from elementary to middle school?

2. What factors have been perceived to promote or inhibit the parents' involvement during the children's middle-school years?

3. What barriers to parent involvement during the middle-school years do parents perceive as capable of being influenced by the school?

4. Are there significant similarities or disparities in the perceptions of middle-school parents and their child's middle-school principal with regard to these factors?

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The Participating Schools

As previously stated, stratified "chain" and "snowball" sampling techniques (Patton, 1990) were used to identify participating elementary schools and "highly involved" parents. Several factors were important in the selection of the participating school systems. Geographic proximity to the researcher was one factor. Of the four systems chosen, two were rural in nature and two were suburban. Variance in other demographic factors, although not controlled, was welcomed. Nevertheless, ensuring that participants represented a cross-section of varying economic, ethnic, or other groups was not a focus of this study.

Adams Elementary and Middle Schools

Adams Middle School served approximately 600 students. It was the only middle school in a county system serving approximately 2,500 students. Although 100% of the schools were accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the 2004 per-pupil expenditure for the system was almost $1,000 below the state's average and almost $2,600 below the national average. Almost one fourth of the system's funding was from local sources. Because slightly more than half of the school's population was deemed economically disadvantaged, the school qualified for Title I funding. In school year 2003-2004, Whites made up 96% of the enrollment. Hispanics constituted the largest minority within the school.

Adams Middle School has had three principals in three years. The first of the three was currently serving as director of the school system. Mr. Jeremy was a young, friendly administrator who was beginning his second year as principal. An immediate challenge facing his school was found in the system's decision to relieve overcrowding in the elementary schools by moving the fifth grades to the middle school. This decision necessitated that eighth graders be moved to the adjacent high school. When I first entered Adams Middle School, Mr. Jeremy was in the cafeteria conducting a mid-summer orientation session for upcoming fifth graders and their parents.

In contrast, Adams Elementary School has been led for 17 years by a veteran principal, Mr. Johnson. A small school located near a state park, Adams Elementary served approximately 230 students in school year 2003-2004. The percentage of disadvantaged students here was very similar to that found at the middle school.

Clark Elementary and Middle Schools

Clark Middle School had a 2003-2004 enrollment of approximately 625 students, 46% of who qualified for free- or reduced-price lunches. Comprised of grades seven and eight, it was the only middle school in a city system serving approximately 3,700 students. Although system per-pupil expenditures for 2003-2004 were almost $1,000 below the national average, they were also approximately $1,000 above the state's average. This was due in large part to a local share of funding at 54.2%. All schools within this system were accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Mr. Roberts was beginning his first year as principal of Clark Middle School. He was, however, very familiar with the school's community and its challenges because he had for served several years as assistant principal. As I arrived at the school for our interview, he was conducting a tour of the school for a new student and her mother. A very kind and personable man, he was eager to share with me the influence that educators had represented in his own life.

Clark Elementary School was one of six feeders to the middle school. For several years, Dr. Joy had served as principal. An energetic and enthusiastic leader, she was most eager to share with me her staff development plans for the upcoming year. More than two thirds of her school's enrollment qualified as economically disadvantaged. Ethnic minorities made up approximately one fifth of the enrollment.

Fairfield Elementary and Middle Schools

Fairfield Middle School had an enrollment of approximately 675 students. Configured to serve grades six through eight, it was the only middle school in a city system of approximately 2,700 students. Like all schools within the system, it was fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Fed by four elementary schools, Fairfield had a student body that included approximately 36% economically- disadvantaged students. Approximately 10% of the school's students were in an ethnic minority group the largest of which was African American. Per-pupil expenditures for 2003-2004 were over $8,000, a figure more than $1,000 above the state's average and only $665 below the national average.

Dr. Morgan had served as principal of Fairfield Middle School for six years. As described by her director, she had earned the admiration of her faculty and staff through effective leadership and innovation. Under her leadership, the school recently had been the recipient of a very comprehensive and prestigious national award.

Mr. Patrick had served Fairfield Elementary School as principal since coming from the county system several years ago. He, too, was an innovator as evidenced in part by his school's year-round calendar. Located in a part of town characterized by lower socioeconomic levels, Fairfield Elementary School had become over the years a "school of choice" attracting families from other parts of the town and county.

Sunnydale Elementary and Middle Schools

Sunnydale Middle School was one of 17 schools in a county system that served almost 5,900 students. Accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, it served approximately 500 students in grades five through eight. Only about 3% of Sunnydale Middle-School's students were non-White. Slightly more than half were economically disadvantaged qualifying the school to receive Title I funds. Local funding constituted slightly less than one

fourth of the system's funding. In 2003-2004, the per- pupil expenditures were approximately

$6,800, slightly less than the state's average and almost $2,000 below the national average.

Mr. Woods had served as principal at Sunnydale Middle School for seven years. A

pleasantly unassuming gentleman, he appeared to be very positive and approachable.

The principal of Sunnydale Elementary School was Mr. Ellis. Relatively new to his

position (beginning his third year), he explained that his late entry to the profession was

influenced greatly by people other than his parents. Serving students in the first five grades, the

enrollment was almost 600 of whom 98% were White. A Title I school, Sunnydale Elementary

had almost 60% of its enrollment on free or reduced-price lunches.

Typologies of Parent Involvement

In the process of examining the perceptions of parents and educators regarding parent

involvement, I sought to determine what the participating parents viewed as the basic elements

of their involvement. As described in Chapter 3, these parents were selected on the basis of a

referral from their child's elementary-school principal, one that was based upon an observed

previous high level of parent involvement. In questioning the parents regarding the major ways

that they had been involved in their children's elementary schooling, I hoped to be able to draw

some conclusions regarding what activities they viewed as basic elements of parent involvement.

Additionally, I hoped their responses might provide an indirect "window" to the thoughts of the

referring elementary-school principals.

As previously referenced in Chapter 2, Epstein and Lee (as cited in Staff Matters Web

Based Resources, 2005) identified six typologies of parent involvement. They were:

1. Type 1: Parenting: Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, and setting
   home conditions that support children as students at each grade level. Assist schools
   in understanding families.

2. Type 2: Communicating: Communicate with families about school programs and
   student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school
   communications.

3. Type 3: Volunteering: Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.

4. Type 4: Learning at Home: Involve families with their children in learning activities at home including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions.

5. Type 5: Decision-Making: Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations.

6. Type 6: Collaborating with Community: Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community. (¶ 9)

These typologies adapted for grade eight by Catsambis (1998) were:

1. Type 1: Parenting: Expressing expectations about student's education; limiting television viewing; supervising time use and behavior.

2. Type 2: Communicating: Parent-initiated contacts about academic performance; school-initiated contacts about student's academic program (courses, placement)

3. Type 3: Supporting school: Volunteering at school and fund-raising.

4. Type 4: Learning at Home: Academic lessons outside school, music or dance lessons, discussions about school, and plans for future.

5. Type 5: Decision-Making: Taking part in parent organization.

6. Type 6: Collaborating with Community: Using community learning resources (like museum visits); taking part in community groups (scouts, sports). (p. 12)

When asked to describe the major ways that they had been involved in their children's elementary schooling, most parents initially responded with examples of volunteering or other means of supporting the school (Type 3). With regard to volunteering in the schools, Mrs. Ward gave several examples, stating:

> I was a room mother for several years and helped with all their holiday parties and all that. Of course, [I was] a member of the PTA and worked at the spring festival every single year, which was a big fund raiser for the PTA. I chaperoned trips when I was needed; just anything they needed, they just called.

Mrs. Jennings noted that her volunteering to help ultimately led to a job at her daughter's school. She explained:

I volunteered for eight years and when my youngest one was in elementary, I got a job (at the school) the last year she was down there. So, I started working but I was still in school and I could see her in the lunchroom and I could still eat lunch with her. But, from kindergarten to third grade, I was just a volunteer at the school so I could kind of do more.

Mr. Price began by describing his involvement in the "fun days" at his children's elementary school, saying:

We had fall festivals and things like that. We volunteered to serve popcorn or to make food for the different activities, after school activities and stuff like that. Our children also kind of expected mom and dad to be there--for mom and dad to get involved on fun days. At the end of the school year, they had fun days, to be there just to kind of pass out food at a picnic and things like that.

He went on to describe more "strenuous" activities such as helping to build a playground at the school. He recalled:

I've held dummies for the football team; I let them run into the dummies. I just helped if the school needed someone to work; they built a playground three or four years ago. I actually went over and helped erect the playground. I felt like that was part of my role as a parent, to be involved with my children.

Some parents were eager to support the school through volunteerism from the very beginning and at any level within the school. Mrs. Keys had a unique family in that she had daughters who were born quite a number of years apart. Her older daughter was in high school when her younger daughter reached school age. She explained her earlier involvement in her older daughter's classroom by advising, "The first thing is starting in the classroom. She [older daughter] started kindergarten; I started doing volunteer work--helping with the parties, helping run errands for the teacher, that sort of thing." When her younger daughter began school, Mrs. Keys discovered that her own reputation as a volunteer heralded her daughter's enrollment in the elementary school. She explained:

Then, because of my past history with my 20-year-old who was in school at [name of school], they had realized before I ever got to Adams Elementary School that I had been on the PTA board four years there. So, I was asked to be on the board right from her first year in kindergarten and was on there every year … I started when she was in kindergarten at Adams Elementary and it has carried through; she is going into the eighth grade now. So, this makes 15 years of volunteering.

Others were more interested in a particular type of volunteerism. As Mrs. Cameron said:

I've been room mom before, but not for years, I didn't care about being room mom. I didn't care about being involved in PTA; I got dragged and drafted on that. I was more interested in the actual education process. I found myself able to come in and help in the centers in kindergarten, help in the reading labs in second grade. That was more appealing to me than organizing the classroom parties. In other words, the teachers tailored what the parents wanted to do to a need they had in the classroom. They matched them up very effectively.

Also very high on the list of parent responses was the process of communicating with teachers and principals (Type 2). Mr. Price explained his methods of communicating with his sons' teachers, stating:

I think early in kindergarten through third grade, it may have been on a daily basis. And not necessarily just formal, but just kind of touching base with the teachers. How was [First Son] today, how was [Second Son] today? Did they behave themselves? Did they get their work done? Is there anything we can do? There was just a lot of basically touching base with the teacher--if you have any problems or anything, give us a call.

Mrs. Walker also described several informal methods of communicating with her children's teachers:

Well, when I was there with the PTA and other volunteer things, there were opportunities, like if I was in the workroom area volunteering, if a teacher had their break and came up, I might have been able to speak there briefly, but you could always say, I need to talk with you about this. Sometimes they would even call at home. They would just call to say I wanted to tell you this child's doing a really good job. . .

Mrs. Rivers shared her methods of communicating by saying:

Every day I would run into them at some point during the day. That was my intent. I didn't necessarily go hang out in their classrooms, but I would run into them sometime during the day. So, you might say I was overly involved.

Mrs. Keys was eager to maintain communication within her daughter's elementary school for many reasons. She acknowledged:

They said they never had a parent come to conferences when their child made straight A's. I said, well I want her to be a well-rounded child. Just because she makes straight A's doesn't mean that she's fitting in this classroom. She may be having bully problems or she's not eating right. So, therefore, by going to parent-teacher conferences, they're saying, yeah, she's doing fine.

She continued by admitting that she found ways to communicate with all the school personnel who influenced her daughter's life:

> I would even talk to the cafeteria worker; does she seem to be eating her food? Is she doing okay? Yeah, she comes through and she gets this . . . You would be surprised how well your janitors and cafeteria workers know the children in the school.

Few parents initially noted activities associated with learning at home (Type 4) as being functions of their involvement; although, when specifically asked, they readily affirmed their importance in their child's elementary-school experience. Mrs. Rivers described:

> Oh yeah. In the evenings our routine was when we came home from school we had a snack and that's when we started homework, and what do we need to do to prepare for the next day and do you have something to read? That's what we did at home and, of course, there were a lot of after school activities.

Another parent saw her involvement in learning at home as a crucial form of intervention when her daughter's motivation had waned. Mrs. O'Brien described some methods she used to motivate her child to read:

> Well, she got to where she didn't want to read, so we would sit down together and read. That seemed to help her, to motivate her. I would read a page and she would read a page. I know that's what helped her to get through--you know with the little prizes and things they would have. I know that if I didn't do that, she wouldn't have met her goal. There's a lot of kids who don't get that.

Mrs. Cameron viewed learning at home as a natural extension of both the family and the school. Her enjoyment in being with her family became evident as she described:

> Well, as a family we do everything together. Drop by our house and you'll see us playing croquet in the front yard this evening. Also, my husband and I both have advanced degrees; we're both attorneys. We're both big believers in education. We're both avid readers--newspapers, magazines, books. I did end up going to the Johnson City library today with the kids. Our family vacations are often educational. Saturday night we went to see the [name]. We've spent two summers going to Williamsburg. We like to keep learning ourselves and that's just something that never quits. It's kind of like why wouldn't we be involved in the school, we're involved in everything else. My husband has coached the little league, we both teach Sunday school. I'm my daughter's Girl Scout troop leader. I still have 12 scouts even though they're going into the eighth and ninth grade. So, we want them to succeed in life and I think getting a good education is part of that.

Parents who listed decision-making (Type 5) as a parent involvement activity were usually referring to their participation in the school's parent/teacher organization. Many noted that they had served on the executive board of their PTA/PTO. Others, such as Mrs. Michaels, referred to their service on school improvement teams:

> I served on the school improvement team for a total of six years because my daughter also went there. I served as the president for four of those years and then as volunteer fund-raising coordinator for two of those years. In that position, we served, the school improvement team's main purpose was to, it was developed half staff/half parents and our primary focus was to the benefit of the students and the school, whereas a lot of your teacher/parent organizations are more teacher benefits instead of students. That's the one thing I like about Fairfield Elementary--we primarily focus on the students; what we do is for the students not the school itself or the staff. There would be lots of fund-raising events that we would host; there would be lots of documentations that would need reading and proof-reading and we would always bounce it off of each of us whenever Mr. [Principal] had any type of forms he would fill out or to meet our school improvement plan, or any state requirements. We would all proofread it to make sure everything sounded the right way and we would bounce ideas off each other.

When asked whether she had had the opportunity to help in the process of decision-making for school policies or procedures outside the realm of PTA, Mrs. Barnett responded:

> No, I might say that has been a limitation. I think you can voice an opinion to a teacher but as far as decisions at a higher level past the teacher, there's not a whole lot of opportunity to help with decisions or have input. It's kind of like here's the rules, here's what we do, and this is expectations. That's how a lot of things are but that would be one thing I think could be improved as far as school boards and different levels of administrations. Principals meeting with parents and those kind of issues. There are the PTA meetings and we would go to those. But those are kind of a formatted meeting with lots of people there, so there's not always a way to discuss things.

Mrs. Walker was pleased to note that her child's elementary school had given parents an opportunity to participate in decision-making within their PTA. She related an example, stating:

> As a matter of fact, I can think of one episode. It was the prayer in school thing, we did the--at a PTA meeting, we had a prayer before we started and from what I understand, I don't know who the parent was--I think they had just moved to the area--had gone immediately afterwards to the principal and complained. She wanted names of the board members of PTA and I do remember being called into the office and all of us saying look, this has happened. What do you all want to do? If you want to continue having the prayer, we know what your rights are. We will stand with you all if you choose not to. I was really pleased that we were given that choice.

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Most participating parents did not include parenting activities (Type 1) in their responses concerning parent involvement in schooling. Child-rearing skills, setting home conditions, expectations for behavior, or supervision of time were not elements that readily came to mind in most cases. Mrs. Anderson, however, described quite well the place that parenting had in her definition of parent involvement, saying:

> First, I talk to her. I mean, I say, "Did you do this? Did you try your best? Did you do that?" Such as math. I never was that great in math, but she will let me know, "Momma, that test was really hard." And, I understand that and will say, "Well, let's try to pull it up within the next grading period. You got time; I'm not saying you're going to make perfect A's or B's, but you've got time; let's pull it up the next time. Don't just let it sit there." I'll have her go over it. I'll ask if the teacher went over it and she'll say, "Yes, ma'am, we went over it in class." Then that tells me that she's doing her job. Go over it and let her know what she done wrong. Don't just mark it wrong and then not tell her what she's done. Help her out; help me out; help me know that you're doing what you got to do. Then if she's not doing what she's supposed to do, well that's when Momma steps in. And then if you've done the best you can do, then, I'm satisfied. But, don't halfway do it; do the best you can do and that's all Momma asks.

The least mentioned form of parent involvement among these parents was that of collaboration within the community (Type 6). Although these parents and their families were involved in the use of community learning resources and community groups, few seemed to recognize these activities as a form of parent involvement. An exception was Mrs. Cameron, who said:

> I'm still very involved in her life and friends with her peers…I started the Girl Scout troop when she was in fourth grade. I kinda thought when those girls started middle school, it would fall apart; instead, it grew, so that told me something. It told me they had a greater need for a place where they felt they belonged and they had a niche. So, we grew from 6 girls to 12 and we've maintained that level. . . Also, I have always taught Sunday school at my church for the middle-school and high-school-age group. So, when she was promoted, she was promoted into my Sunday school class. I became more involved in those two areas, the spiritual and social guidance.

The Parents' Role

It is assumed that perceptions regarding parent involvement in a child's schooling are an outgrowth of beliefs about the parent's role. An analysis of responses from parents and

principals could reveal areas of agreement or disparity among these stakeholders. In an age when many educators feel the pressure of being "all things to all people," responses from highly involved parents were revealing.

To Mrs. Ward, the first responsibility of the parent was as basic as being sure that the child's desk was not empty. She acknowledged that her role as a parent was "to get him to school, to make sure he's in school. I think the number one priority is getting them there on time and prepared."

Mrs. Barnett's priority was to have her child ready to attend school and to get the most from it. As she said:

> The biggest thing is letting kids know they need to be ready for school. You need to have your work ready and your things cleaned out and your pencils sharpened and your paper and books and be organized. That you don't always agree with what your teacher may say and the rules that are out there, but you have to abide by them anyway.

Mrs. Walker seemed eager to take final responsibility. In fact, she said she saw her involvement as an obligation. She pointed out:

> It is my children and their education, and that was my goal: to make sure my children were educated well and doing what they were supposed to. I know the school has a responsibility but I felt like ultimately my children were my responsibility.

Although in Mrs. Michaels' view she had the first responsibility in meeting her child's needs, her response also contained the added dimension of assuring that the school was accountable as well. She explained by stating:

> You know, so many people want to push things off on teachers and faculty. Parent support and guidance is our responsibility. It's not your responsibility; it's my responsibility to make sure my child gets what he needs. Now if that means that I need to come to you and talk to you and challenge you to do things, that would be my job as a parent. It's my sole responsibility to make sure my children are getting what they need at their school.

Mrs. Keys said, in her opinion, the home and school had a partnership in which both parties were teachers. She noted, "You've got your teacher at school; you've got your teacher at home. The teacher can't do it all. You've got to reinforce it at the house and a lot of kids don't get that." Mrs. Jones' expressed similar views by saying, "I think the parents should provide the

basic needs, of course. And then I think parents should help them with their homework, if

they're having a problem. I think the parents should meet the teachers halfway."

Mrs. Rivers painted a picture in which the parent was almost a part of the school staff,

albeit, in a supporting role. She considered:

> I think we're a support staff. We've got to make sure homework is done; it's our job--to make sure those things are done and that kids have what they need to complete assignments and projects, they get plenty of sleep, and they have a routine so they can perform well the next day. I think that's our job--supporting the schools.

> However, she was quick to separate the roles of parent and school by adding:

> It's not the teacher's job to raise our kids. And it's not their job necessarily to deal with the socialization of our kids and their manners. A lot of parents leave that to the schools and that's not the school's responsibility. That's our job.

> Mrs. Jennings saw communication as a centerpiece of the parent's role:

> These kids who come home and complain about their teacher, I believe it's the parent's responsibility not to jump to conclusions. To talk to the teacher and if there is a problem, get to the root of the problem and don't start calling around within the community because 99% of the time that's not the real story. Parents need to sit down and communicate with their children and not assume. Parents have warned me about certain teachers and I haven't had a problem. If I had listened to other parents and negative people, I learned from that. Used to, they could reel me in. I believe it is the parents' responsibility to communicate. You've got to parent at home, too.

Communication with the school was of similar importance to Mrs. Henderson. She

expressed it this way:

> I think it's our job to support the teacher. If my child comes home and says, "Mrs. So and so made me do something today." It's not my job to just go, well, we'll go and have her fired or whatever. It's our job as adults to think this is a child who is mad and to work with that and support the teacher in decisions of discipline or learning.

For Mrs. Cameron, communication with child and school was essential. Although she

expressed the importance of supporting the school, she wanted staff members' support in offering

recommendations based upon their professional judgment. She revealed how she went about

acquiring information from her child's teachers:

> I think they should be involved. I've been told by teachers that I'm like their dream parent because I support them. Apparently though, they run into a lot of my child isn't at fault or my child doesn't deserve this B or this C, and my child doesn't lie or my child

doesn't hit. When I go in to see a teacher, my question is: You're a professional; tell me how I can help my child finish his homework before 10:00 at night. Give me suggestions. Is it okay to put them on a timer at home? I think their role is to be supportive to the professionals in the system.

Ms. Anderson emphasized the importance of communicating with her daughter.

Referring to the instructional materials sent home, she said:

It's my responsibility to read them and not just glance over and sign them. I want to know what she has done every day. I need to know what's going on. Like, "Are you sitting there twiddling your thumbs? Are you listening? How far back do you sit? What's going on?" I need to know. She can come home with a stack of test papers this high. I want to know. That's my role because when I send her there, I want them to test her to her best ability. Don't let her sit there idle. That's my role--to look, to see that the grades are being made. I know they're doing their job as well as I'm doing my job by looking over what she has accomplished within that time period.

Views among the middle-school principals provided little contrast. In Mr. Woods' response, he first concentrated on the basics and then branched out, saying:

Well, physically safe at home. Well nourished. To get them here to school. To check daily or as often as possible what their homework is, what they're studying. Contact the school when you're in question about something. Keep the student involved as much as possible, especially after reaching middle-school age in some sort of extra curricular activity to make them more well rounded whether it's sports or music and band to cultivate the student.

Mr. Jeremy described a bleak picture of what he saw as the typical family situation. In the final analysis, he saw the family as the crucial element. He described his opinion of the current situation, saying:

I think, though, that it's falling more on educators because parents aren't doing that for the most part. You have very few traditional mother/father sit down and eat dinner together, work on homework together--that's out the door. You have a lot of kids that go home and they're on their own until 10:30 or 11:00 because mom's got a second-shift job. So, it puts more of the burden on us. But if a child is really going to be successful, it's got to start at home. And end at home. We can do what we can do here, but if there's nothing at home to support that, then we're fighting a losing fight.

The critical element in Mr. Roberts' view was character. He observed:

I think parents are the primary teachers. I'm not saying necessarily the primary academic teacher, but if we have a child who starts school in kindergarten and comes to us in the seventh grade with an attitude of willingness to learn, an attitude of respect for the adults and the jobs that they're trying to do, and a respect for other kids, we can really teach that

child a lot academically. So, I'm not so much worried about the academics as I am the intrinsic, the goodness within the child. So, in my opinion, the critical component from a parent is in raising a genuinely good person. If they can send us a good person, we can go a long way.

Dr. Morgan placed major importance on the parents' support not of the school, but of the child, by saying:

I think as educators and administrators, sometimes we get defensive when parents get on our case once in a while. But you've got to remember, that's their child. Their job is number one to look after the best interests of their child and our job is to look out for all our children so sometimes you have a little bit of disagreement on that and you try to balance the individual's need to the whole."

She went on to describe her opinion that when the parent and school have differing views, the child should be shielded from such disagreements. She illustrated:

Even if they disagree with the teacher or the school, please don't say that in front of the child. Come talk to us first; let's work this out as adults. We all have the same purpose and that's for the success of that child.

Parents' Motivation for Involvement

In the process of exploring the perceptions of highly involved parents, I wished to know more about what had motivated them. Each had been identified by an elementary-school principal as having been keenly interested in their child's elementary-school experience. With that element in common, would the factors that had motivated them be held in common as well?

For Mrs. O'Brien, the overriding reason to become involved was an interest in her child's success. As she said, "Testing tells you that when parents are involved, children are successful." Mrs. Ward, however, seemed to be motivated by something entirely different. She acknowledged, "Well, for one, I enjoyed it myself. I got to know a lot of his friends and these have been friends he's had since kindergarten. I got to know a lot of teachers real well and I was impressed with them."

For several, the primary reason that emerged was a sense of accountability for the school. "I guess one of the reasons is that I wanted to see how things ran. I wanted to see how the school

ran on a day-to-day basis. And, boy, did I find out." Such knowledge only served to make Mrs.

Keys appreciate her child's school all the more. She pointed out:

> Our receptionist at Adams Elementary is not only the receptionist; she's the nurse. She's your psychiatrist. She's the momma when the kids are not around. I wouldn't have known that if I hadn't done so much volunteer work. I realize the librarian was overwhelmed. She needed help in the library when the books--at the end of the year. You get to know the teachers; they get to know you.

Mrs. Garcia was able to gain what she described as a more accurate picture of the school

by being highly involved. She stated, "You can hear all kinds of things about schools that are

not accurate so I like to find out what's going on myself."

Mrs. Jones' interest was also initially spurred by a desire to know more about how her

child's school operated. That motivation soon changed to a sincere desire to help. She added, "I

want to know what's going on. But then number two, I know that they need help and a lot of

parents just won't volunteer, to be honest."

Mrs. Jennings' interest was significantly influence by her own childhood experiences in

school. As she said:

> Well, to be honest, when I was growing up my mother and father got a divorce when I was only 11; my mom could never be involved because she worked a lot. It was like nobody even knew my mother at school. She done the best she could at the time, but I always said if I had children, I wanted to be involved. I wanted to know who their friends were; who their teachers were; I wanted to get to know the school. I just always had that back in my mind if I ever had children.

Similarly, Mr. Price described the effect that his own situation in school had had on his

decision to be highly involved:

> Because of my lack of education. I graduated high school, but the more I worked--I'm a laborer, I'm just a plain laborer, but the more I see over the past 10 years, if you have high school or less, the chances of advancement and of having a good paying job really depends on education. The last company that I worked for closed their doors two years ago. If you didn't have at least two years of college, you weren't even considered for a promotion. So, that's a lot of my motivation. My wife, on the other hand, she's got two to four years of college, she went to Bristol College. And really, in most of the work places, it doesn't matter what the college is, they want to know that you have college above and beyond high school. And that's why I push my kids, to make the grades.

Ms. Anderson's values regarding parent involvement were influenced by her own mother. She explained:

Mainly, being a single parent, I wanted to be involved. I wanted to be there for my child. I wanted to know that she was all right going to school. I just wanted to be in it because my mom raised us by herself and she didn't have a lot of time. But, she let it be known that she was there for us, even though she had to work. I wanted to be there for my child also. She raised seven of us by herself, so, for me to be there for my child--my mom was there for us with seven; I want to be there for one. I just wanted to let her know that I was there and she wasn't in nothing by herself.

Ms. Anderson went on to give strong testament to the support that she considered essential for her daughter:

Everybody needs to stay involved with their child, but in the sense that she wants to be able to apply everything she's learned, everything that I've taught her, everything the teachers have taught her--she wants a chance to let it shine on her own. She knows momma's got her back. If she falls, she knows I'm there, so to speak. I'm always going to ask what's going on. She's never too far out of my eyesight and she knows she can't put nothing over on ol' momma. I'm going to give her a rope and see what she does with it. But, she always knows that I'm not too far out of earshot. Everybody needs to stay involved with their child--nowadays until they're 50, I guess.

Student Success

It was assumed that both parents and educators viewed students' success as the basis for parent involvement. In working toward that end, however, I considered it important to determine what views the participants possessed regarding the definition of student success. Additionally, I wished to know the perceptions that participants possessed regarding the effects of parent involvement upon students' success.

Defining Student Success

Research has also strongly suggested that parent involvement significantly affects students' success in school. Of course, it was an assumption on the part of the researcher that all parents and educators held students' success as a goal. Without some discussion of what

constitutes students' success, however, it could not be determined whether participants saw themselves working toward the same goal.

Some parents saw academic progress as the first measure of their children's success. Mrs. Michael's described her first concern this way:

> Well, his midterms. Actually, at Fairfield Elementary, we got Monday folders for the week prior to. All of that work will be in that Monday folder and we go sheet by sheet and we examine what was wrong versus what was done correctly. That would be my first focus. Then when the midterms come out, and I would see that we're lagging, I could go to the teachers and say we need some extra work; he's not developing this correctly. They would be good about giving us extra worksheets to we could work on it at home and I have no problem. And, of course when report cards comes out, that would be the ultimate of whether he'd achieved it or not.

Mrs. Barnett described the inevitability of grades as a measure of student success when she said, "Grades is one and that, I guess, will always be a requirement because you always have to maintain a certain level of are they learning what you're trying to teach them. It's hard, other than grades, to do that."

In the same conversation, however, Mrs. Barnett struck a theme that emerged in one form or another in interviews with almost every participant. She explained:

> Both my husband and I were graduates from college and hope that our child will pick that. But I also see a lot of people who may not go on to college but are also very good citizens and very good people in how they treat others and being responsible to their work and doing a good job. So, even if I had a child who was maybe a B-C student, as far as grades, but was always obedient, always participating, helpful to other kids, and caring and respectful to adults and teachers, then that child probably will go further than a child may that makes straight A's but lacks people skills and can't get along with teachers and students, or is standoffish.

Mrs. Henderson expressed similar opinions this way:

> Not taking TCAPS (laughs). I think student success should not necessarily be measured by test scores but producing a child who is able to function, and hopefully, move forward and become a contributing adult to the community. It's a long way off, but that's your successful student. Not necessarily pushing and pushing toward grades and things.

She went on to describe an example of nurturing student success in one of her daughter's elementary years:

It was an interesting class to watch because they were a community. They took care of each other and they problem-solved within their own group. If Johnny was over here and he was struggling with something, they were a very loving group and would help him. So I think a lot of those things make for a successful student. We sometimes get really caught up in those test scores and that's maybe not what we need to be looking at.

Mrs. Garcia explained that she put major emphasis upon her daughter's attitude as a measure of her success. She said she considered:

The first thing is attitude. If her attitude is poor about something then I know there is a problem. She's a very positive little person but if she doesn't like something, she's very willing to try anything, but if she doesn't like it, I know there's a problem and I need to investigate what's going on.

Mrs. Anderson expressed similar thoughts, saying:

Attitude; the way she carries herself around other people; the way she acts when I'm not around. It's people coming to me and telling me how my child acts. I can't be around her all the time, but I know from other people's reactions, that she's all right. I can't be around her 24/7 but how she carries herself when I'm not around lets me know that I'm on the right track. My momma raised me like that. You respect your elders; you don't disrespect nobody because you never know when you're going to need a grown person. So you treat them like you want to be treated. Even when I'm not around, I tell her, "Momma can't always be around you; but you carry yourself as if I were around you." People come back to me and say, "You've got the sweetest child." That's what helps me. That lets me know that momma raised me right and I'm on the right track with her. I'm not saying that she won't make mistakes, but I'm on the right track. Respecting elders and treating others like you would want to be treated, regardless of whether momma is around or not.

Others, such as Mr. Armstrong, said he considered that students' success could be measured in terms of whether or not they enjoyed school. He added:

Well, I think that as far as school, it should be, if they get up in the morning and absolutely dread going to school and hate it, there's something wrong somewhere, you know? Here in the middle of summer, [daughter] says she can't wait until school starts back. And I think that's pretty good; she's wanting to go back to school. So, I think that's very successful.

For Mrs. Jones, the importance of relating well to others was a close second to grades as a measure of students' success. She stated:

Well, I feel like grades. But, then, number two, having friends and having a good relationship with the students and teachers. I think they both go hand in hand. The good grades, but then you have to have a good outlook and you have to get along good.

Even in this age of ever-increasing accountability for academic achievement and growth, middle-school principals expressed similar views. According to Mr. Woods, the best measures of student success were:

> How they get along with other students and other adults. Manners, courtesy. Those are things where parents need to be involved. You can teach but you have to be there sometimes to look over their shoulder to see if they're doing it.

Dr. Morgan's definition could be described as a very balanced view taking into account the school's primary mission to promote academics while striving to meet the needs of the whole child. She focused first on testing, saying:

> Well, standardized testing is only one small piece in my mind. It's there and it's something we all deal with. It's a valid piece I believe, for schools to use, for us to be able to evaluate how we're doing.

She continued addressing further measures of students' success by acknowledging:

> There are many other measures of student success… we look at how active our kids are in extracurricular, which is a huge piece. It's our responsibility to find opportunities for the athletes to offer as many sports as we can. For the kids who are interested in music and drama and art, to offer all kinds of things for them. Service learning is a huge piece. Our kids who may not be musical or athletically inclined, a lot of them love being service oriented--they can earn a G for their G jacket with their service hours. You've got to have lots of different opportunities--we really want to have every child involved in some kind of extra curriculum.

Mr. Roberts expressed his views this way:

> Well, students' success isn't primarily measured by grades or test scores--TCAPS, or whatever. I go back to that personal sense of accomplishment. A lot of kids struggle to make a C, but that's huge for them. Success is being able to move onto the next level with skills that are appropriate for the next level. But, also, one of our missions here is to provide mechanisms not only for academic success but also for social success and emotional success. That's tough. Most 12-, 13-, and 14-year-olds are in such emotional turmoil much of the time that it's hard to see. One minute you have a child and the next minute you've got a young adult and it's the same kid standing in front of you. So, success is maturation.

He went on to describe what he perceived as his school's role in promoting such a definition of success, saying:

> Again, success isn't just measured on paper; it's measured within the heart. That's my opinion. Within the heart. If we see a kid who can come to us who has trouble relating

to other kids or is picked on a lot or who bullies other kids, and becomes a young person who has empathy and cares for others, I think we have accomplished a great success in that person's life because they will go on and become successful. We want to build character; we want to build a caring atmosphere in our school among our faculty and our kids. And if we can do that, we're going to be successful. We'll all be successful because it's a byproduct. Success is a byproduct of stability.

The Effects of Parent Involvement on Students' Success

As previously stated, the effects of parent involvement upon students' success are well documented and positive. The views of the participants in this study were not inconsistent with those findings. Nevertheless, there was one emergent theme was not entirely anticipated by the researcher. Many of the participating parents expressed the belief that their children would have been successful academically with or without their high degree of parent involvement. As Mrs. Ward said, "I think it made some difference. He's real outgoing and he's just got this personality; it didn't matter to him a whole lot whether I was there." Mrs. Richards expressed similar opinions by saying, "Well, I had a child who is pretty successful anyway. She's very studious, so I think she would have [succeeded] regardless, because school work is very important to her." Mrs. Jones' confidence in her daughter's ability seemed to minimize the importance that she placed on her efforts to be involved. She pointed out:

> I think she would have done just as well. She's one of those kids who doesn't have to study hard to make good grades. My first daughter, I helped out a lot then too, but either one of those, I don't think my being involved really helped them.

> Similarly, Mrs. Garcia said, "I think she would be successful no matter whether I'd been involved or not. Maybe. That's just the kind of person she is; she's very self-motivated and gets things done."

Mrs. Henderson said she saw the importance of her involvement as having different effects for each of her two children, especially because one had special health needs. She acknowledged:

> I think particularly for [Daughter] it's been more crucial. [Son] has a different personality; he's going to succeed, I think, no matter what he does. He's just; he has that

kind of personality. He might have struggled somewhat, but I think they both have benefited from it. I think even though [Son] at 15 now, won't admit it now, but I think that sense of security of knowing that someone is available or around is a helpful thing. For [Daughter], I think it's been very important in dealing with the diabetes. But I think it's knowing that we're available and a lot of times I may volunteer with the middle-school band and sometimes I'll do paperwork. I'm just kind of there; not necessarily in her presence, but I'm around. I think that's a security thing for her diabetes, just knowing that I'm there.

Although Mr. Price expressed confidence in his child's ability, he said he was not going to take any chances. He considered:

I feel that, I believe that my boys are capable of making good grades whether I'm involved or not. But at the same time, I want them to know that I'm there if they need me. If they have problems with something, bring it home. I'll sit down and do the best I can with them. If I can't give you an answer, we'll find somebody who can. I think that as long as I show an interest in their education, and not just the athletic but the academics because the athletics only last a short period of time. Academics is forever.

Mrs. Michaels said she was confident that in her son's case, the high degree of parent involvement had been important to his success. She explained:

Well, because I had been friends with all of his teachers, his teachers knew that they could push him because we would have conversations. One teacher in particular, his fourth and fifth-grade teacher [Name], we were personal friends, and I could tell [Teacher], I need you to push him as hard as you can. And she was really good; he's lazy but he's really smart and he could be a straight A student if he's pushed just right and she knew how to push his buttons. I think, because of my relationships with all his teachers, [names], we could communicate and they could tell me their concerns and I was able to push him to learn those multiplication tables, to do that cursive writing a little better because the teachers and I were able to communicate and I think it was to his benefit to make him, and you can tell by his report card from elementary to middle school, a big difference.

Mrs. Jennings said she believed that her high degree of involvement was instrumental in combating peer pressure:

Peer pressure is bad at this age about getting them to do things they shouldn't do. It's really bad. I went through that with my oldest one. I will honestly say she never strayed but she could have if I hadn't been involved. I feel if I had not been involved, she could have strayed.

Elementary-school principals were of like mind regarding the effects of parent involvement on students' success. Indeed, most said they knew of nothing that could be described as more crucial. As Dr. Joy expressed:

> I would say to you that if I had a caring adult for every struggling learner that I had, I would probably not have the same percentage of struggling learners. I have some children who are brilliant, but because they do not have a support system, they struggle in school. But, I think even children who are average performers, perform more to their ability level knowing that mom could be here tomorrow checking to see if their homework was turned in. When children know that mom and dad and the school are working together, they look for fewer avenues of escape. They really know that the buck stops here and they apply themselves much better.

In contrast, she added:

> Whereas, there are some kids that we have to run down and they may be putting their head down on a pillow in a different location four nights out of five; they can't keep up with their book because they don't know whose car it was in last that dropped them off at this location. It's hard that children learn early in their career that number one, I can't keep up with it and number two, the school can't either. So, the gap's just getting bigger.

Mr. Ellis said he viewed parent involvement as having a significant effect upon student behavior as well. He described:

> If you've got a disruptive child that is here, they're probably disruptive at home; they're the boss at home. Usually the ones with concerned parents, I don't want to say good, all parents are probably good in their own way, but the more caring parents who want their children to behave, I can tell when I call them if there's a problem--I'll take care of it, I'll help. That's usually all I have to do with the parents who are involved. They take care of it and it doesn't happen again.

Mr. Johnson gave parent involvement preeminence among all the factors by stating:

> I think parent involvement has the biggest influence on whether a child will be successful or not. By parent involvement, I'm not necessarily talking about parents coming in and volunteering to grade papers or run off papers, or those type tasks. I'm talking about parents being connected with the school. I'm talking about a parent's staying in contact with the school, communicating with the teachers, coming to parent-teacher conferences, and knowing what is going on—keeping tabs on their child. To me, it's the most important influence, or indicator, that a child will be successful.

Among the participating middle-school principals, Mr. Roberts held similar views:

> Well, parent involvement is critical to a student's success. Parents who are involved and on top of things are not willing to listen to all the stories--I mean if a student comes home and says he doesn't have any homework and he does that for three weeks in a row, a

sharp parent will catch on to that. Parents who are involved generally pass that desire on to the kids. Kids really want to be successful, but I think an involved parent, and, a smart parent will be involved to the point of encouragement, participation, acknowledgment, and knowing who their child's friends are. I think that's important.

At Fairfield Middle School, Dr. Morgan described the effect of parent involvement on students' success as a matter of attitude:

I really believe that the research is very clear on that. It is not necessarily the parents' level of education, but their attitude toward their child's education. If they believe their child's education is important, then that makes a difference in students' achievement.

Benefits of Parent Involvement

Given that each of the participating parents had been identified by an elementary-school principal as having been highly involved in his or her child's elementary schooling, I wanted to examine the factors that motivated them toward such involvement. Although it seemed clear that parental involvement offers benefits to students, parents, and schools--benefits that are inexorably linked--I thought it important to explore the participants' views in each category. I also wished to examine the degree to which the factors that motivated the parents coincided with perceptions held by the principals.

Benefits for Students

Although much research has focused upon the academic benefits that students accrue when their parents are highly involved, it was significant that none of the parents who participated in this study *directly* focused upon this potentially motivating factor. Of course, all factors that were mentioned by the parents can be assumed to have a significant impact upon students' achievement.

The student benefit most often identified by these parents was *confidence*. As Mrs. O'Brien said, "I think it gave her more confidence, maybe, to know that I was there. It had a calming effect on her." Mr. Price's perceptions were very similar. As he put it:

Well, I think confidence is the main thing. I think no matter how much you learn, if you're not confident, you're almost fighting a losing battle. And a little bit of pride. It makes a child feel good to know that their parent is there backing them up, helping them. They get frustrated and they get angry at times because we do push them. But I think in the long run, they're going to look back and say, you know that's really cool what mom and dad did. They pushed me and I succeeded because of that and because they were involved.

Although Mrs. Keys did not expressly identify confidence as a student benefit, her words conveyed much the same meaning when she said:

I think it made her feel more comfortable and more comfortable with herself. It allowed her to be more outgoing at times because I was there. I don't mean stand up in class and interrupt. I mean, mom's here; I know that sounds crazy, but she just felt she was in a safer environment because her mother was there.

Several other parents used the word "security" to describe the major student benefit that they had observed. As Mrs. Michaels said:

As far as my children, it's a security issue knowing that mom is there pretty regularly. Luckily, for my children's teachers, they're really well behaved when mom is there; they don't act out. So, for them, it was somewhat of a sense of security knowing that mom was there.

Mrs. Cameron described the main student benefit as a security issue that eventually affected the student's development of character. She explained, saying:

Well I think a child is more secure when they know they're loved. That's one way you show your love by supporting them in whatever they set out to do. But, it's a part of supporting and loving them to know what's going on in their lives. It's kind of sad; in elementary school, you can tell which kids are neglected. I think all of that is tied more to their emotional happiness and their success; even though I'm raising them to set them free, they're too young to be set free right now.

To some parents, the major benefit of parent involvement for students was found in the building of character. In Mrs. Jennings' experience, parent involvement has had a positive influence in her children's values and behavior. As she said:

In my opinion it does. But, I know parents who have done the best they could and were involved and their children and they still get messed up in drugs, alcohol, and things like that. I'm very fortunate that that has not happened to me. I've tried to really enforce my kids; I tell them everyday that I love them and how proud I am of them in school. I really believe with parent involvement, you see a difference in children. My family says I do too much. But, I'm doing what I feel in my heart that I needed to do with my children.

Responses from participating elementary-school principals seemed to focus more heavily on the academic outcomes of parent involvement. As Mr. Patrick said, "Probably the greatest benefit of parent involvement is for students' academic success." Dr. Joy went on to describe one very interesting underlying reason, saying: "Training parents in the teaching techniques that we're using in the classroom can give them the same vocabulary and give them a way to reinforce what we're doing with their child." Mr. Johnson seemed to sum it up well when he said:

> They're going to benefit because their parents are keeping tabs on them. Their parents know what's going on and they know what the expectations are and they're going to see that their children are meeting those expectations…They know that their parents want them to do well, they love them and want them to do well.

As with those of the parents, most beliefs expressed by the middle-school principals did not specifically reflect a direct link to student achievement. Mr. Woods said he viewed parent involvement has as good way to fill in gaps that schools might not be able to address. He pointed out:

> Well, for the student I feel the gain is a better education, a more complete education. There's so many things at school that a teacher can't cover as well as he or she should. A parent being involved and knowing what's going on can reinforce, give more detail, more explanation, life experiences to help the student understand how that does apply to life.

Likewise, Mr. Jeremy gave primary importance to the parent and brought another perspective to the table. He stated:

> I think that sometimes parents can bring in a different perspective than that of the teachers. I know we've had that situation in a couple of cases where parents came in, and their attitude towards helping sometimes is better than actual teachers' would be because they want to be here; they're volunteering to be here. Sometimes you may have teachers who have been here for so long they're just mired down with it. So, sometimes parents bring a fresh approach by coming in and helping.

With regard to the academic benefits, Dr. Morgan stated it most forcefully:

> The research clearly shows that it affects achievement levels for kids when their parents are involved--even for parents who have fears of school based on their own experiences. It's not the parents' levels of education that makes a difference; it's the parents' attitude toward their child's education that makes the difference. So, you want them here, you want them involved, you want them to be sending positive messages to their children

about their school. That's the biggest and most important thing; that's our mission--achievement for children.

Benefits for Parents

When parents were asked what benefits their involvement provided them as parents, their responses were varied. Several said they thought first of accountability. As Mrs. Rivers said, "I think them knowing that I was there and knowing I knew what was going on probably held them to a greater accountability. And I think that's a positive."

Mrs. Michaels held similar views. She stated, "It's important to know what is going on with your children. For me, the benefit is knowing exactly what's going on; I know what my child is supposed to be learning."

As an elementary-school principal, Dr. Joy had similar concerns. She explained:

I also think if you can bring the parents into the school where they can see the structure of the classroom and how teachers work so hard to plan and orchestrate the lesson, it gives them a real respect for what we do.

Mrs. Garcia expressed her desire to know everything from "…what the curriculum is to what's on the lunch menu. I don't think there should be anything left to guess." Of course, this requires a high level of communication between the school and the parent. Such an emphasis on communication was important to several parents. To describe the degree to which Mrs. Henderson viewed the importance of communication, she used a poignant personal example, stating:

I know when [Son] was in sixth grade, after long discussions and many prayers, we decided that I would quit work and this was the time that it was going to happen. [Son] had become withdrawn and his grades were dropping a little bit and two of the teachers were very concerned about it because it wasn't like him and they were concerned about drugs and so they called one afternoon and asked if we could come for a conference. We did and the bottom line was [Son] was really worried about mom quitting work because he didn't know whether we'd have enough money to live.

In a similar vein, Ms. Anderson described the sense of security that her involvement afforded her. She said she appreciated "…knowing that my child was safe in school, knowing that they cared about spending time with my child, knowing that you didn't have to worry about her while she was in school."

Mrs. Richards said she saw her involvement as a way to participate in school decision-making. She pointed out:

> Personally, being on the PTA, I always liked being a part of that so I would know how the money was being spent or I had a vote on what the money was being spent on so I could see it was benefiting the school and the children.

Two parents referred to "fun" as a benefit of their involvement. For Mrs. Cameron, the joy was in problem solving with her children. As she said, "They talk a lot about things, they share their problems and that gives you a chance to help with the problem solving and it's just a lot of fun."

For Mrs. Barnett, her involvement permitted her to concentrate on another side of her daughter's personality. As she put it, "She's definitely a type-A personality, so she really goes at things hard. It's helped us to almost relax a little bit and have fun with her and those kinds of things."

Middle-school principals echoed many of the same themes. Dr. Morgan described two ways that parents could gain a sense of security through their involvement. First, they could gain the knowledge that middle school is "a safe place for their children to be." Once parents gained this perspective, she said she hoped that they would communicate a message to other parents of students transitioning from elementary to middle school. That is, "Don't be afraid for your kid to go to middle school--my kid loves the middle school."

Secondly, Dr. Morgan expressed the hope that parental involvement would help parents to overcome any fears that they might have based upon their own unpleasant memories of school. As she expressed, "You want to break down those barriers so that they will come to

school and see their children perform and be involved in their children's activities. That sends a huge message to their child."

Benefits for Schools

Parents and principals agreed that high degrees of parent involvement could hold benefits for schools as well. Most parent responses focused upon the help that parents could offer to teachers and principals who were already overworked. As Mrs. Ward put it, "The teachers have enough to do the way it is." Mrs. Michaels expressed her very close relationship with staff members by saying:

> One teacher that I'm really close with, she knew that she could count on me whenever she needed anything. She could call on me and say, '[Name] can the school improvement team help us out with this?' We had a relationship where we could communicate with each other and she knew I would do whatever it took to get her class or any other class there what they needed. As far as Mr. [Name], I think he knew that he could count on me, that he had somebody to fall back on if he needed somebody to do something.

Mrs. Walker said she saw schools' benefiting from involved parents who communicated positive messages to others in the community. She described instances in which other parents would express fears based upon rumors they had heard about particular teachers, saying, "I could say, 'Well, mine had this one and it wasn't like some of the things you hear.' I could explain it. And they were okay." Speaking for Clark Middle School, Mr. Roberts said he saw similar benefits:

> There's nothing worse than an uninformed or an under-informed parent standing in line at Food City saying things about the school simply because they've heard it from so and so and not knowing, in truth, what's going on. Many of our parent volunteers are able to counter some of the things that go on out in the community because they actually are here and they see what goes on daily and they see things as they actually are.

Elementary-school principals expressed beliefs that focused on the positive results of highly involved parents working together for common goals. Mr. Patrick, in referring to the Fairfield Elementary school improvement team made up of parents and school staff, said, "That

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group is very powerful here. It has been tremendous--the work that comes out of that group and all the parent involvement. It's great."

Likewise, Dr. Joy described school benefits as being that of parents working toward common goals:

 Parents can network and they can accomplish more in a group moving in one direction for the school than any individual parent might be able to by themselves. If it's a playground update that's needed, or, if they're watching what you're doing in the classroom and they see that the children are struggling in a particular area, or they're in a classroom and they see a great presentation that a teacher uses, some type of graphic organizers, then when that comes up to the PTA, or some other decision-making body, or a group that would have access to resources, funds, or training, then they're going to support the principal's suggestion for that material or equipment expenditure based on experiences they've had in the school with their child.

Encouragement at the Elementary-School Level

In seeking to answer the second and third research questions posed in this study, I believed it to be important to determine to what degree parents felt encouraged to be highly involved in their child's elementary schooling. Three sources of encouragement were identified. They were: students, the school community, and more specifically, the elementary-school principals.

Encouragement From Elementary-School Students

Overwhelmingly, the participating parents agreed that their children were not only receptive to their involvement, but would have been hurt had their parent not chosen to be so involved. As Mrs. O'Brien said, "Well, it was everyday. She would say, 'Are you coming to my school today?' Or, "Where are you going to be?' No, she was thrilled." According to Mrs. Jones, "It was definitely positive. She liked the fact that I was helping out or I would volunteer."

Similarly, Mrs. Walker described her child's way of communicating approval by saying:

Well, it was always, "Did you see me do this?" If I would say, "Oh, I saw that." Just the beam on their face, when they knew you saw them do that. That has to mean something to a child.

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Mr. Price's son may have been a bit more subtle, but the message remained clear. He explained:

> Well, I never got the feeling--they would have little programs and we would go to his classes and things of that nature, and he never mentioned, "I really wish y'all wouldn't come today" or anything like that. At award ceremonies, if we were already seated, the first thing he would do is throw that hand up and wave, you know. "That's my mom and dad." So, no, I never thought that [Son] was uncomfortable with us being there. The only time he might have been uncomfortable is when he had gotten in trouble. I'm pretty sure he was uncomfortable then. But, overall, no. I think our boys were really glad to see us at all their functions. I think they enjoyed it.

For Mrs. Henderson, the experience was summed up with one example that she described this way:

> Well, I go to Mexico to work once a year and [Son] has been very excited that I could come and share with his class about going to Mexico and sharing whatever I bring back so they can look at it. To me, that's a positive thing. He says, number one he's proud of his mom, but also that it's important to share that with his friends.

Mrs. Ward described the delight that she takes in her child's sharing memories of her involvement:

> He told me. And a lot of the other kids, too. And they still come up to me and say, "I remember doing this with you." We got a spring festival fifth grade. We done a couple of the numbers from *Grease* and we done the dance steps with them and this whole production thing. And some of the kids still talk about that.

Mrs. Barnett expressed her confidence by saying, "She loved it; she would love it if I was there everyday."

Encouragement From Elementary Schools

For parents who participated in this study, the key to their encouragement from elementary schools could be described in one word: "ask." As Mrs. O'Brien said, although she was relatively new to the area:

> I could just be walking down the hallway and one of them would grab me and just ask, "Could you come to my classroom at a certain time?" Or, "Could you run off papers for me?" Like I said, it helps when they come right out and ask.

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Another parent at Adams Elementary School, Mrs. Keys, described her experience in similar terms. She said teachers solicited her help, "By just asking. Or, saying, 'You are going to help with this?' That's the good thing at the grammar school level; there's a lot of encouragement. You have a volunteer base and it starts at the grammar school level." From Clark Elementary School, Mrs. Jones received this clear message:

> Well, even when we were talking to the people in person like at open house, the teachers in their classrooms would say how important it was or how much they needed parents to volunteer during the year for different things. I felt like the teachers talked about it, plus they sent home forms. Of course, the school would talk about it at PTA meetings. So, I think at the elementary school, at Clark Elementary that is, they try to get you involved. And, sometimes it was hard to turn them down.

> At the same school, however, Mr. Armstrong had a somewhat different experience. As

he said:

> Well, the first few years it really wasn't (encouraging). We just kind of got involved because they just needed somebody so I volunteered to do it. Then, once we started getting involved, it was really encouraged that we stayed involved then. Until we actually made the first step, we weren't encouraged to. But once we did, they just kept coming wanting us to do more and more.

> The staff at Sunnydale Elementary School communicated encouragement to Mrs. Walker.

She related:

> At all the PTA meetings, they would say sign up--we need volunteers. Each classroom would have a classroom mother for parties. That gave at least one parent per classroom and then she would have a list to of people to call within that classroom, so there was a large opportunity for volunteers. You could tell from the volume of volunteering, even if they were outside, there was quite a bit of volunteering and participation.

> Mrs. O'Brien said she was particularly impressed by Adams Elementary School's

system-wide Parent Involvement Resource teacher. She described some of the benefits of having

this person as a resource, saying:

> One of the things that it's helped that I really enjoy was Mrs. [Name]; she is the parent involvement person here. Every month she would send home the little weekly reader and they would always have things that were really helpful. She's just wonderful. The kids love her. She's like a child herself.

When asked to elaborate upon the kinds of resources that were provided, Mrs. O'Brien continued by saying:

Well, like once a month she will go to each of the schools and she does a little thing called "Bingo for Books" and another one, Read, Make, and Take. Of course, all of this is after school in the evening. Like, for the parents to get involved with the children, to have something to do. They would have all the kids bring in a used book, and then if they got bingo, they would get to go pick out a new book. She made sure all the kids won. Nobody was to leave without a book. The kids love it and she would bring suckers for the parents, and the parents were not allowed to give the suckers to the kids. That was one of the rules. In the Read, Make, and Take, it would be like a little skit. She would have the parents come up and act out whatever she was reading. She was the narrator, and she would have us act out. Of course, the kids loved that because we looked like idiots.

Responses among the elementary-school principals regarding methods that their school uses to encourage parent involvement varied greatly. According to Mr. Johnson, Adams Elementary begins by emphasizing the importance of Open House. As he said:

I've told my teachers that may be the most important activity we do the entire year. That gets teachers, parents, and students started off on the right foot. It gives the teachers and parents an opportunity to meet each other. Teachers are able to give their expectations.

Dr. Joy said she initiates such encouragement even earlier at Clark Elementary School. At the time of enrollment, her school conducts an intake procedure. She explained this procedure saying:

[It's] aimed at conveying a group climate, to get as much knowledge about their child as we can get that might not be on a written record--their favorite subject, any bad previous experiences they've had, what their forte or main interest outside of school--things that may not come in on that form. I think that establishes with the parent the interest we have with their child, not just as a student.

At Fairfield Elementary School, parent involvement was encouraged through a series of parent-training sessions conducted four times per year. As encouragement to attend, free childcare services were provided. Parents were divided into groups in order to attend various academic stations. Mr. Patrick described some of the activities at the parent-training sessions, saying:

We teach cursive writing or manuscript. We do things for letter formations for kindergarten. PE? We take them in there, especially primary. We show them what their

kids are going to be doing every day--stretches and things like that--and explain the program. Computers? Parents love those computer classes. When some of them first started, they were really scared of the computer; but now they come right in and basically know what to do. We have a program called home-link. If a parent cannot afford a computer, then we use old computers and they're reworked and put into the homes with free Internet access but there's lots of things that prevent them from going to inappropriate sites. Parents or grandparents have to come in for training and then we email them every once in a while to make sure they're still in contact with us and they know how to operate things.

He went on to describe the logistical support necessary for such an undertaking:

[Name] is our family resource coordinator here and she plans everything. I give teachers credit for coming in and doing those sessions. We try to do something each term to bring parents in. They really like it; we give door prizes and every 20 minutes we move them to a different class. That's worked very well.

Mr. Patrick also described ways that Fairfield Elementary maximized community

resources to encourage parent support, explaining:

The big thing that brings parents in as far as involvement is our fun festival for education. It's a big fundraiser that we have in the fall. We'd never had it before and some parents got together and said let's try this. Wal-Mart is our partner in education, and they let us come on their property once a year and we have a big carnival. We have inflatables and games. Our parents have actually made the games and some of them are just quality. You wouldn't go to a real carnival and see nicer games. We bring in community people. Our parents come in and they man the inflatables; they monitor that. Tusculum College's women's soccer team is coming this year bringing 31 people to help. It's a big deal--a really big fundraiser. We make about $4,000 to $5,000 and that's a lot for this school. I would say we average 60 to 70 parents there throughout the evening--not just to come, but working. We have the kids to sing at the beginning to the parents. It's just little tricks like that we do.

Encouragement From Elementary-School Principals

In questioning parents regarding the primary source of encouragement for high levels within an elementary-school community, one theme emerged: "It begins with the principal." It was evident from the parents' responses that in schools where parent involvement was successfully encouraged, the welcoming message came from all employees at the school. As Mrs. Ward said:

To me, it's the principal, the teachers--even the custodians there. They knew each kid by name. It's a combination of all of them working together. And, the kids sense that. They know that they care about them and want what's best for them. It's just the people there, I think.

She went on to say:

I just want to wave that magic wand and clone Mr. Johnson and those teachers at Adams Elementary. I think the administration and the teachers have a lot to do with it. You know whether they want you there or not.

Mrs. Cameron described the Mr. Johnson's role as principal with these words:

The principal is the most open, welcoming individual I can imagine for parent involvement. You're always greeted with a smile; you're always made to feel welcome there. It's not just a note sent home during American Education Week.

Mr. Price placed even more responsibility upon the principal when describing Dr. Joy.

He shared:

Dr. Joy, she was very active with all the parents. I don't know how the woman did it, but she knew everybody's name. She either called me Mr. Price or [First Name]. But, that woman--I don't think there was a parent over there that she didn't know. And the teachers were the same way. It's a small school; maybe 300 students, but the teachers and the principal and the whole faculty made it feel like a family. I think that was one thing. And, they constantly were asking parents to be involved with their children and help with school functions and programs and things of that nature. I guess everybody lives in this area close around and that helped as well. But, I give [Principal] a lot of credit for that. She really and to this day she still does. My youngest son just graduated from sixth grade and I get a phone call in the middle of the summer saying, hey, I need your help. So, she not only keeps you involved as a parent, she assists in that. She tries to keep you involved even after you're gone. A lot of the teachers were the same way. We've got to give the staff and the teachers aides, because a lot of the teachers' aides were volunteer parents. So, it was a great environment for the kids and for families.

Mrs. Jennings expressed similar thoughts about the previous principal at Sunnydale

Elementary School:

Well, I mean, Mrs.[Name]--she was there 15 years--the principal we have now, he's been there going on his third year. But, she had been there 15 years. She was super nice about parental involvement. Her door was always open.

Mrs. Barnett used these words to describe the same situation:

The principal at that time, when she was in elementary was very open to parents and very much a people person. A lot of communication was through the teacher through handouts and things like that. They had an open door policy environment where you did

feel like you could go and talk to them at any time. I can't recall ever needing to use that other than the teacher, but you knew it was there. That's not always the case.

Most elementary-school principals' responses indicated that they, too, appreciated how crucial their leadership is in making parent involvement a part of their school's culture. As Mr. Johnson said:

I hesitate to say this because I'm the principal, but I think the principal is the key to that. I think if the principal has that expectation and models that to the teachers, then the principal is the key to that. I think the school will take on the principal's personality. If the principal shows that parent involvement is important, and conveys that to the teachers and they know that's an expectation, then that's going to carry over to the teachers. They're going to be open to more parent involvement.

Mr. Patrick described the nature of change as it pertained to establishing a culture of parent involvement by saying:

I'm on the system's family engagement team as a principal representative. We've had to go through and look at what we provide parents to try to encourage parents' participation. We made a whole list of things and 11 years ago when I came here, basically, parent involvement was not here. That's one thing that we've tried to change; it's been a slow process. Once we got our school improvement team going and got some parents there who were active, and who could work, then things just started rolling.

In addition, there were instances in which Mr. Patrick's active intervention provided the message to everyone that parent involvement was an expectation at Adams Elementary Schools. He described one example:

In grades three through five, we have student planners. If a parent can sit down and even sign a piece of paper, that's the first step to being involved in the school and in that child's learning. So, we send those home daily that the parent must sign and have returned. That's been one of my pet peeves. I check on that regularly. If the parent doesn't sign it for two or three days, I'll make the child call home and the parent has to come in to sign it. So, the parents learn that they have to do that. Being involved is a learned thing, I guess.

Perceived Changes in Involvement From Elementary to Middle School

As reviewed in Chapter 2, researchers have strongly suggested that parent involvement typically decreases as students transition from the elementary grades to middle schools. The experiences described by the participants in this study were no exception. Although some

parents described ways that particular types of involvement had increased or remained unchanged, the overwhelming number of comments described significant decreases. Regardless of the degree to which the school was perceived as responsible for the change, the adjective that emerged in several cases was "nonexistent." Mrs. Cameron stated her perceptions of the difference between elementary school and middle school, saying:

> Yeah. Well, in terms of school, it became almost nonexistent. There is nothing that indicates that you are welcome at this school. The principals are very friendly individuals, but there is nothing that communicates to parents at all in terms of information or letters going home from the teachers or administrators here. When you do get communications, they have angered me. Last summer, they had dramatic changes to the dress code and it came out on a Friday before the fourth of July weekend with no return address and no name or telephone number. To me, it was a very clear message that you were not to complain, you were not to call, and you were not to ask questions. It was meant to be sent right before everyone got the month of July off from vacation.

Mrs. Ward agreed, saying:

> It was nonexistent. I mean, I don't know if they didn't need the parents or they didn't want the parents. I think in the whole three years that he was here, I might have brought a cake for teacher appreciation day. That was it. I know a lot of kids, after they get to middle school, they don't send notes home saying we need this and we need that, and they'll just tell them. Usually he was pretty good if anything needed done, he would come home and tell me. I don't know if it was just not wanted, not needed; I don't know…. I said, "Ever since he started the sixth grade, it's daylight and dark between Adams Elementary and the middle school."

Mrs. Rivers granted the same impression when she stated:

> Oh yes. It's changed quite a bit. It's probably a lot less at school. As a matter of fact, it's nonexistent at school. Probably not because there's not opportunities, more because I've gone back to work, because it's much--all of these parents groups from all of these elementary schools have now conglomerated into the middle school and you have lots of parents there who are not working at this point and can do a lot of that stuff during the day. There are still lots of opportunities in the evenings to do those things--send food, help support this, or one thing or another. The parent involvement at home is the same. That hasn't changed. I'm still in contact with their teachers quite a bit. One way or another--email, or I'll see them at school or out in the community, and how's things going, that kind of thing. But, the amount of time I'm actually in school has certainly decreased.

Some parents who said they thought opportunities for their involvement had decreased were quick to point out causes that justified such decreases. Mrs. Walker viewed the students' maturation and level of responsibility as underlying causes for the change. She pointed out:

I felt it decreased simply because there's not the field trips that parents have to chaperone. There's not a lot of the things that are done at the elementary level like the fund-raising things. Here, it's not something a parent has to do; the kids are naturally taking more responsibility in what they're doing and where most of that comes in, is if there's something special like T-Caps where they have to have the parent proctors, it's just naturally because of the way the kids are maturing and there's less opportunity. You don't have classroom parties anymore or field trips where parents have to chaperone. A lot of those activities are not there, so it's going to naturally make less opportunity, so I think where the parent involvement comes in then is on the outside. The extra things like the band. So, that's where we've been really involved. Where there's been an opportunity.

Mrs. Jennings saw the increased need for school security as a significant factor in the decrease of parent involvement, stating:

I'm not near as involved as I was at the elementary. It's like when she gets up here, in a way, like they want them to be older--they can't be a kid anymore. I'm not necessarily saying that I'm not welcome or whatever, but I reckon--like I said, when you go to the elementary, you can go in and sit and talk. When you come in here, you go in the office and kind of check in or whatever. That's fine; I love that part for the security and stuff; I'm not knocking that. People have to realize you have to have security.

Nevertheless, her words gave a clear indication that she missed the opportunity to be a part of the school family. She admitted:

But, with some of the teachers and stuff, with what I've experienced so far, she's just going to be in the seventh grade--it's like they're not as parent oriented. Maybe I'm just used to the elementary. The teachers down there really want to talk to you and tell you things. I just don't get that from here for whatever reason, I just don't get that from here.

Mr. Price, however, had a completely different view. Smiling, he said, "Things pretty much stayed dead-on. I mean, when I get something in my mind and I'm determined, it's going to go the same way all the time, so I think my involvement has not wavered, not once."

Mrs. Michaels contrasted the differing approaches that she perceived in Fairfield Elementary and Fairfield Middle Schools, explaining:

This is the difference, I think, between middle and elementary school. Elementary school wants your physical help; middle school wants your support. They want you to be their

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cheerleaders and if they need something, if they want you to drop something off, if they want you to participate in teacher appreciation, you get a message on your machine: drop off a pound of meat in the front office; you don't need to come in anywhere else; just drop that meat off in the front office. Whereas in elementary, it's bring that pound of meat, come in and make the sandwiches, socialize, and serve as a hostess. That's the difference between supporting: they want your support at the middle school. The elementary wants your active involvement.

The expressed views of the participating middle-school principals were quite similar in many regards to those of the parents. Dr. Morgan pointed out that the decrease began not just at school, but also even in how students got to school. He explained this difference:

I think, too, when children reach that age, they are more inclined to maybe ride a bus, or the parents feel safer about their after-school activities and stuff. The parents don't have to be quite as directly involved with transportation and pickup and after-school programs as far as daycare and those type things. It gives parents a different level of freedom to maybe work another hour or to not have to make those kinds of arrangements. They're not as hovering with their children before and after school.

Principal Woods suggested that the logistics of students and parents attempting to communicate with several teachers could be a contributing factor to a real decrease in parent involvement. He explained this viewpoint:

At the elementary level, they're basically dealing with one teacher. Here, at the fifth grade, they're dealing with three and then after that, they're dealing with five or more. I think that communication makes it harder to keep up and do. Plus, I think it's the inconvenience of having one person to communicate with, and then more than one. I think that's a little bit of it.

Principal Roberts saw a decrease in parent involvement concerning PTA and conferencing with teachers. He stated, "I think a lot of the involvement in, say, PTA meetings will drop. Many conference days--you'll see that drop. The areas they do fall off tend to be academic or social areas."

Principal Jeremy said he perceived the issue as a trend throughout the child's school career when he said:

I think there's a decrease. Just in talking to principals in our school system, in elementary school, parent involvement is better in elementary schools. Elementary school, especially early elementary, you've got a lot of involvement and as you go up the education ladder, it goes down. To the point where in high school, there's hardly any.

Encouragement at the Middle-School Level

The degree to which the identified parents felt encouraged to be highly involved in their children's elementary school has already been considered in this study. Further examination of the degree to which these parents felt encouraged to remain highly involved as their child transitioned from elementary to middle school is central to all four of the research questions. If, indeed, there is a significant change in the level of parent involvement as students move to middle school, the degree and source of encouragement to be involved is very relevant. If such encouragement is considered as being necessary but lacking, it could be useful to determine the degree to which this barrier is under the school's sphere of influence. Finally, in seeking to improve the level of such encouragement, it could be useful to compare and contrast the perceptions of middle-school parents and their principals.

Encouragement From Middle-School Students

Several of the participating parents were very confident in their belief that their child still wanted their parents to be highly involved. As Mrs. Garcia said:

> I have two girls and one is in high school now. I've heard that some children don't want their parents involved. So, I've always asked them, "How do you feel when I come to school?" And they always say, "Oh, we love you being there Mom." So, I think they like it. They've always told me they like it. I think it makes children feel good if they know their parents come to school.

As an example of middle-school students encouraging parent involvement, Mrs. Barnett cited an incident that occurred in the school's cafeteria:

> A lot of the kids when we come, it's like, "Come to our table!" We're waiting for all that to change but right now, they seem open to it. Another example is that one of the kid's youth minister comes and eats lunch. There are several of the kids that go to that particular church and he'll come and eat with them. It's a huge thing. To them, it means that somebody cares.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Barnett said that she was careful to watch for cues from her daughter. She explained:

I keep waiting for the day she's like, "Oh, mom, please go over there," you know. We've not hit that day yet. I can definitely tell when she wants to go it alone and maybe just have us in the background. And that, to me, doesn't mean any less involved or anything. To me, that just means she's getting a little bit of the "I can do this and I want to try but don't go too far."

Because Mrs. Michaels had one child at Fairfield Elementary and another at Fairfield Middle School, she was able to observe the competition for attention between the two. Of the older one she said:

He has mentioned many times, "Mom, how come you don't come do this or that at the middle school? Why are you always with [Daughter]? How come you don't come over here and do book fairs, or how come you don't come and do teachers' luncheon?"

Mrs. Jones, however, said she had an entirely different experience. As she put it:

Kids don't want you around the older they get. So, I think that she saw this as I really wasn't needed. She didn't even ask me to volunteer for anything. I think they do get to a point where they start wanting to get out from under your wing and I think middle school is that point.

Most of the participating parents had received very mixed messages from their children. In such cases, they were rarely surprised or hurt. In fact, most saw it as a natural progression in the process of maturation. Although Mrs. Henderson said she thought that her children viewed her involvement "probably not as positively as they did at the elementary," she did note, "They really do appreciate the security of knowing that you're there; you're available."

Mrs. Keys described a unique way of handling her presence at the school in this way:

I'm not going to say that she's just as positive. It doesn't bother her that I'm there but she's getting older and she doesn't want mom hanging around all the time. I've learned as a parent to still stay involved but to keep a distance. Don't smother her. If she's walking in this line coming through here, I'm sitting at my table; I don't even look up to see who's coming. I know it's her class. I think, if she wants to speak to me, she will. I don't want to say hey every time she comes by there. You can really embarrass your children; so, unless she acknowledges me, when I'm here at the school, I don't make a fuss. At the grammar school level, I would say, "Give me a hug. I'm going and I'll see you this evening." I think they need affection at that age.

Mrs. Jennings noted completely different levels of encouragement between her two children. She pointed out:

My oldest one, she was more or less like, "Mom, you don't have to come as much or do as much because I'm up here with my friends." But, my youngest one--she still wants me. She's a whole lot different. My oldest one is all girl--she was a cheerleader; my youngest one plays basketball and is more laid back and she still wants her momma. Last year she would want me to come up here and eat lunch with her and if I took a day off, I would come up here. She wanted that.

Mrs. Henderson's experience with her two children was similar. She shared:

[Daughter] has actually pushed a little more than [Son] did of not wanting me to be in the room and things, which is fine. But, I think even with that, she appreciates the fact that we're available and helping out and doing things. It gives her a little more clout if her mom and dad are doing something at the school.

Based upon the responses of the participating middle-school principals, it was evident that they perceived that their students generally did not encourage their parents to be highly involved. In some cases, the principals said this fact is not generally recognized by the parents. As Mr. Woods put it:

I think parents don't understand that. When the students get up here, they don't want the parents here as much. They're trying to be independent, to grow up. And, you tell a parent that and they don't want to hear that. A lot don't; a lot understand; a lot are young enough to remember. It (involvement) gets less every year. The fifth grade doesn't mind as much, but by the time of eighth grade, it's hard to get a lot of them here. From fifth to eighth, there's a big gap in parent involvement.

Mr. Woods went on to recount some of his observations that supported his views, saying:

Some will even come in holding hands with parents at that fifth grade level. Come in the front door. We haven't had but maybe one or two criers since I've been here. But, of course, it is moving schools and things. The security they had down there--they were top dogs there, now they go back to the low end of the totem pole and start again. From that security and having the parents come in and eat lunch with them. Very seldom will an eighth grader want his parents to eat lunch with him.

Mr. Jeremy said he had talked with parents who said that their middle-school children did not want them present at school. He pointed out, "I've had parents tell me that, "They didn't mind me being here last year at the elementary school, but when we came to the middle school, it was like a stigma kind of thing." He deemed freedom and independence as the underlying motive of those students, saying:

Just wanting to be independent--feeling like they know it all and don't need the parent anymore. I see a big difference when kids come in for their seventh- grade year versus

their sixth-grade year. And, of course, in eighth grade, you can see it as they get older. But, by sixth grade, they're a little bit more mild and meek. Then the same students who come in as seventh graders, you see a big change over the summer. Physically, they've changed a lot, which probably makes them feel a little bit more confident about their behavior.

Mr. Jeremy mentioned that he had parents who asked for advice when they felt as though they were "losing my kid." He said he told them, "There's not a magic formula to solve it. It's just something that happens and it's a challenge for parents for sure because it is for us. So, I know it is for parents." Dr. Morgan referred to that challenge as well when she said:

> The challenge that I find at the middle school is finding creative ways of having parents involved that is acceptable to their children. It's different from elementary; you don't have birthday parties or homeroom mothers, or those kinds of things. You have to be more creative in finding ways to get parents in schools that's cool--so the kids will allow them to be there.

Mr. Roberts offered some reasons for such variances among middle-school students' attitudes:

> It depends on those family dynamics; it depends on the hormonal level at that time. Some students come here as still kids, they're still elementary students and they are still attached to those parents at the umbilical cord. It's still there. Other kids come to us and they're more mature than others are. Of course, we see those differences between girls and boys. A lot of kids want the parents here. They want the parents to fight their battles. They want the parents to take up for them. A lot of kids don't want their parents involved at all. Again, it depends on the maturity level and the family dynamics and how the kids will perceive parental involvement.

Interestingly though, Mr. Roberts went on to reveal what could be termed as real ambivalence when he said:

> In my opinion, kids really want their parents around; they really do. Unless there's a really unfortunate situation at home, they really do. They may act as if they don't to save face in front of the others, because that's what they're supposed to be like; but, I watch these parents when they come to eat lunch with their children and the parents are like magnets. A parent can sit down with a child and the next thing you know, the kids are sitting down at that table where the adult is. They're just there. I think kids do want their parents around even though they may act as if they don't.

Dr. Morgan recounted an observation that described the students' ambivalence as well, saying:

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One of the sweetest things I ever saw is I was coming to work early one morning and topped the hill here and there was a big 'ol eighth-grade football player and his mom in the car in front of me. She was dropping him off early; she worked for the factory and had to bring him in at 6:15. I was behind them over here in front of the school next to us; he leaned over to her in the car and gave her a kiss on the cheek. But, he made sure he did it way before he got to the school and in the parking lot to be let off. So, they want their parents involved but they don't want to admit it. They need their parents involved and they want their parents' support. It's really important for the parents to be at the school when their kids are involved in that sort of thing, to see them perform, to see them compete and to be there to support them. I think, secretly, the kids like it; they just don't want their friends to find out about it.

Encouragement From Middle Schools

Overwhelmingly, the participating parents perceived that their involvement had been strongly encouraged by the elementary school. A central purpose of this study was to examine the degree to which these parents perceived a similar level of encouragement from their middle school.

Although not all the parents held the same opinions, most said they perceived a marked decline in the level of encouragement from their children's middle school. Mrs. Rivers' experience at Fairfield Middle School was to some degree an exception. When asked if she thought the middle school had encouraged her to be involved, she replied:

I think so; I really do. At the beginning of every year, there is a parent night and there is a group there ready to take your name and what you will do. The principal talked with us; she's very open and very talkative with parents and encourages us to contact teachers at anytime and it is not us that don't want you to be involved. It may be your child. It's not us; we'd love to have you; please come in. We'd love to have you come visit. Come have lunch; work in a committee. Whatever you'd like to do, we'd love to have you, so I think it's encouraged.

Ms. Anderson expressed similar views about Fairfield Middle School:

Oh yeah, on that level they want you to attend functions like the dances and what not. Dr. Morgan is always trying to get somebody to come in and dance and be involved with the kids.

Although she had initially heard quite a bit to the contrary, Mrs. Henderson's experience at Sunnydale had been positive. As she said, "Other parents said that they didn't want any parent

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involvement. There's still sort of an air of that but I think for a parent that has been persistent,

it's been a positive--we've done well with them."

Nevertheless, when asked if she had been encouraged by teachers to be involved in the

classroom, Mrs. Rivers' response was not as positive. She confessed:

> I never have been invited to come into a teacher's room during the school day for any reason. I'm very open to discuss my child's progress. We made appointments; they'll meet with me. I've never had a problem with that and I've done that several times. But, I've never been involved in a room activity. At this point, they take their seventh and eighth grade end-of-the-year trips that are pretty significant. The seventh grade goes to Nashville for three days; the eighth grade goes to Charleston for three days. No parents are invited. And that's a little disconcerting for me because I would have liked to have been around for those; but, I suppose it's part of that cutting the strings. And they handle it well; I feel comfortable with my child going--but they said no parents.

> Among the parents who perceived little or no encouragement from the middle school,

Mrs. Michaels was one of the more adamant interviewees. She said, "No. Nope. No

communication at all." At the same school, Mrs. O'Brien had encountered similar experiences.

She shared her experience, saying:

> No, it all decreased. We were new coming in and he started in sixth grade, so of course we didn't know anybody. I didn't know anybody and I would leave my name and number and say if anything was ever needed, I would be available. Nobody ever called.

> Mrs. Jones' experience at Clark Middle School was described in these words:

> I don't think it's encouraged. This is one thing I've talked about with several parents and I think they feel the same way. There is just no communication. I feel like I went through these two years here not really getting to know the teachers. I knew some people here in the office because I came into the office, but as far as the teachers? I really didn't get to know them.

> Mrs. Armstrong, a substitute teacher who sometimes worked at Clark Middle School, had

markedly similar perceptions. She related:

> The only teachers that I really know from Clark Middle School were the times that I was substituting. I couldn't even tell you who my kids' teachers were this year, for the most part. If I was to walk up to them, I wouldn't know, okay this one was [son's] teacher and this one was [daughter's] teacher, because I had two at Clark this year.

> When asked what factors she thought brought such a situation about, she replied:

They really made no effort to--you know, they would send a thing home, if you want a conference, this is it, but it's not required, it's not needed, whatever. So, it wasn't really anything about we want you to be involved on this board or we want you to do this or this--except for their fund raisers. Then, they were always sending stuff home; you know: sell, sell, sell . . . which we never did because there's more ways to get involved than in selling stuff.

Mrs. Garcia reflected upon her views about communication at Fairfield Middle School. She expressed:

You know we talk about having an open-door policy? I truly don't feel the door is open. I think they want parents there when they want you there, but only when they want you there. I really don't think the school wants parents there unless they're invited.

Regarding telephone communications with the school she said, "Sometimes I think that they are just telling you stuff to get you off the telephone--to kind of get rid of you a little bit."

She went on to explain more fully, saying:

I honestly think that communication at the middle-school level is nothing like the communication at the elementary schools. I don't know, it's probably just a "me thing" but once a student leaves fifth grade and they become a sixth grader, they're expected to be these incredibly grown-up people. And, they're responsible for everything. Where in the fifth grade, they're talked to more, encouraged more, and at the middle school, that just stops. I think we could handle the transition a little bit better by giving them more responsibility in that fifth-grade year so they can handle those things once they get to middle school. They'll tell you, I'm not going to handhold your child and walk them through; this is okay, but we need to begin transitioning them. I think a lot of students aren't.

Although Mrs. Keys expressed satisfaction with regard to Adams Middle School's encouragement of her involvement, she offered her perspective about factors that might cause others not to share her view. She pointed out:

They're very selective in who they let in this school. You have to be. And, the people that I see are people who come from good families--not well-to-do-all the time, that's not what this is all about--I see single parents come and help. I think they're picking and choosing. They have to. I think at the grammar school, they have to have more help. There's just too many things going on. They start in kindergarten; if you're a good volunteer, you're going to be asked to come back year to year. If you're a troublemaker, or talk about people, you're not going to be asked. You'll want to come but you won't be asked. I think that's the way that works.

Mrs. Henderson expressed the belief that because of a relatively new principal, encouragement of parent involvement was improving. She gave an explanation:

> I think that it is increasing. I think maybe the teachers are actually realizing the benefit of parents being there. That's my perception. I know last year I graded papers for one teacher because when I get off work at 2:00, I'm sorta hanging around until they get off, so I can go in and do something for a few minutes before they get out of school. She said, "I haven't had this in so long." I said, "Well, I always felt like we weren't supposed to be doing this kind of thing."

Among the middle-school principals, responses varied greatly. Having previously served as assistant principal at Clark Middle School, Mr. Roberts was beginning his first year as principal. When asked if he perceived that his school actively encouraged parent involvement, he responded by saying:

> We do. We do it several ways. We have a large core of parent volunteers. We have parents who come in and act as, for lack of a better term, secretaries--both dads and moms. They do a lot of our receptions for us, those kinds of things that would distract our secretaries from being able to carry out their duties as efficiently as they do. We also have parents who get involved in our band boosters and our athletic boosters. We have parents who, many times, are active behind the scenes. If they can't be physically active, they may send a check for $50 and say use this wherever you need it. They belong to our PTSA board. We have what we call our leadership team and we have parent volunteers who are active on that. They actually help us to shape the vision and missions of our school from a parental perspective. A lot of times--those different perspectives--as educators, we may not really see--they can help us form what we do in a better way or that's better for everybody involved.

He continued by sharing his plans as a new principal, saying:

> We encourage our parents to be involved on many different levels. One of the things as a new principal that I plan to do this year is to have a paint-up/fix-up weekend at our school. A lot of parents can't be involved during the week and they feel like they may not have skills they can lend as an advisor, but they certainly can pitch in and paint some doors or a handrail, get out and pull some weeds, or whatever--but, I plan on getting parents involved in as many different levels as I can. They will respond. Some feel more comfortable in some areas than in others, and I just want to reach out and provide as many opportunities as possible for our parents. They will respond if given the opportunity. I truly believe that.

When asked to discuss some of the ways that Clark Middle School communicated such encouragement, Mr. Roberts pointed to a variety of methods including notes carried by students,

the school's web site, telephone calls, letters sent in the mail, school and system newsletters. He

added, "So, we do our best to keep parents informed as to what's going on."

Mr. Roberts also emphasized the fact that teacher teams had been structured to positively

affect parent involvement. He relayed:

> We've made an attempt when we structured our teams to put teams together where we've always had one or two of those encouragers--those go-getters--people who absolutely reach out. We're all different personalities. We have teachers who go the extra mile reaching out to parents, trying to provide ways for parents to be involved.

He went on to say that the school setting was not the only place that Clark Middle-School

teachers promoted parent involvement, adding:

> You can reach out to a parent in line at Wal-Mart. It doesn't have to be a phone call from our school. Our teachers are visible in our community and they encounter parents all the time. Our teachers do a good job of letting parents know what our school is all about, what the program is all about, what the kids are all about. I'm not saying we're successful 100% of the time, but I'd like to think that our teachers really reach out to parents.

At Fairfield Middle School, Dr. Morgan seemed hopeful, but less sure. He hesitantly

admitted:

> I hope so. I worry about it. I think any administrator should actively reflect on what they do and what's important in their school and how they're achieving those goals. I survey parents, if not every year, every other year--and students nearly every year. My survey from the year before last was excellent. We had a 99% satisfaction rate from our parents--I was blown away--in every area of our school, so I was very pleased and proud of that.

When asked to consider parent involvement in her school, Dr. Morgan went on to say

that she perceived a continuum of ways that parents chose to be involved. She gave examples of

several levels, saying:

> It seems like you have different levels of parent involvement. The first level is what I call the queen bees--that kind of want to come in--they've been very active in elementary school--they don't want to give up being very directly hands-on involved in classroom instruction and those kinds of things. That doesn't work quite the same at the middle-school level. I don't mean this in a negative sense--they mean well; but they kind of want to come in and tell teachers how to do things sometimes, or be involved at that level. Then, you have kind of like your worker bees and those are the ones that you want to get a big group of--as many as you can, a cross-section of the ones who are just there to do whatever they can to support the school, to support their child's education. They're not afraid to get their hands dirty. They'll do anything that needs to be done. Then you have

a group of parents, as I referred to a few minutes ago--they just don't feel good about school. They didn't feel good about school when they were in school, and they just don't like to come to school. So, you have to reach out in a different way to them--make home visits and find ways for their children to present or be involved in some kind of concert or presentation, or athletic event to get those parents to come support their children.

When asked to describe some of the methods used at Fairfield Middle School, she emphasized direct contact with parents. As she said:

I encourage home visits to my teachers; it's not required. Positive phone calls are required of my teachers and teams. We do a really good job of that. Of course, we use a lot of technology communication, web pages and a lot of emails with parents and news letters and things, mailings, but we also have a family resource specialist and we if have a parent that we just can't get in for a conference, or we have concerns that we're just not getting a lot of support, we go to them.

Dr. Morgan was eager to describe the benefits of positive personal contact from the teacher:

Since I've been here, I'm starting my sixth or seventh year, I require positive parent phone calls, or emails, or a letter, or whatever to catch a kid being good and contact that parent and just say, you've got a great kid. Let me tell you what he did today. Don't mention grades, don't mention a behavior problem--nothing like that--just, I want you to know that your kid's great and I love having him in my class. Let me share with you what he did today. Period. That's the end of the conversation. That's the end of the contact. Don't go anywhere else. Just a positive contact. That blows parents away. Blows them away. It's like, nobody's ever called me and told me my kid's doing a good job, so I feel really good about what my teachers do with that.

When asked if Sunnydale Middle School encouraged a high degree of parent involvement, Mr. Woods responded, "Not all kinds. Many. Not as well as we should." He went on to explain the situation as he first found it when he came to Sunnydale:

When I came here, in talking with some of the teachers who had been here longer, they were telling me that a lot of teachers resented a lot of people coming in; they felt like they were observing them, looking over their shoulder, going out in the community and talking. It was difficult to get those teachers involved.

He explained that currently he still finds a real mixture of attitudes among his faculty and staff:

We have some that love it--love the help, love the in-school help. We do have, as far as extra curricular, in sports, this is a big sports area, and we do have quite a bit of

involvement that way. But as far as classroom volunteerism, a lot of the teachers resent having somebody come in and work with them.

Mr. Woods said that he believed some of his veteran teachers who resented parent involvement had attempted to influence the younger teachers as well. He pointed out:

I think there was a group of parents who came in who tried to tell teachers what to do. That resentment from some of those teachers who have been here 20 years is still there. They do want to try to influence the younger teachers with their opinions.

Another negative force that Mr. Woods described regarding the encouragement of parent involvement had to do with teachers' attitudes about students' maturity. As he said:

Well, another thing--I hear this quite a bit--I'll throw it out. The teacher says the student's got to grow up, got to be more mature. Well, we all want help. And I can't get some of these teachers to understand that. I've got about three that really give me a fit that way. If you did some of the same things to their own child that they're doing to get that student mature, I'm sure they'd be down talking to the administration.

Mr. Woods went on to describe another limitation upon his efforts to promote parent involvement. At one time, the system provided Sunnydale Middle School a mentor teacher position. One function of that position was to encourage and foster a higher degree of parent involvement within the school. Mr. Woods detailed the duties of this mentor teacher, saying:

She worked with parent involvement. I guess after my first year, we lost that position back into the classroom. The system had those for about four or five years and then lost those positions back into the classroom. Since that, our parent involvement has declined. There's just no one--we haven't taken the time to do all the duties she was doing in that position.

At Adams Middle School, Mr. Jeremy had observed similar attitudes from some of his teachers. He admitted:

Some would just probably rather have their door closed and teach their kids and not have any outside influences at all, whether it's parents, administrators, or whatever. They just want to do their own thing. Then we have some that really actively pursue it and look for it. I would say, I don't know--about 50-50, but there are definitely some that do and some that don't want anything to do with it, I'm sure.

In describing what he noted to be the source of teachers' fears of parent involvement, he said:

I think that type of teacher probably is in education for the wrong reason. Maybe they want to hide their obvious feelings towards students and education in general. They just want to shut their door. Some would be like, I don't want them in here because I don't want them to necessarily see what I'm doing or not doing, as the case may be.

He continued by stating that others might have different reasons. He explained, saying, "And, in some cases, the teachers that don't want that (involvement), feel very confident in themselves, and they just want to take care of their students. So, I don't think it's necessarily a negative thing." Concerning those who were open to high levels of parent involvement he said:

The teachers that want parent involvement, I think they're the kind of teachers who just want to do whatever; you know, the more people the better, do whatever we can to help the kids and to get as much support from parents or whoever will support them, as possible.

<center>*Barriers to Parent Involvement*</center>

Evidence strongly suggested that there were significant barriers to parent involvement, especially among secondary schools. An examination of the perceptions of participating parents regarding factors that have inhibited their involvement pertained directly to the second, third, and fourth research questions. In this study, I sought to learn from participants which barriers they perceived as being outside the school's sphere of influence and which ones were perceived as being inside the schools' control. It is important to note that while a given factor may be generally perceived as outside the school's control, real success in fostering uncommon levels of parent involvement may come as a result of educators being creative and persistent enough to find solutions that positively influence barriers thought to exist outside the school's control.

Barriers Outside the School

Overwhelmingly, the barrier outside the schools' control that was most often mentioned by participants was *time*. Mrs. Rivers seemed to speak for the majority when she said:

Time--it's time. Most households have both parents working now. They're not working typical days; many of them are working 12-hour days. And they've got three children who need too be three different places at the same time. Or, they're caring for parents. With some groups of parents, school involvement is kind of low on their priority if they're trying to get the light bill paid and children fed and worrying about school supplies and new shoes next week. That may be lower on their agenda.

Mr. Armstrong iterated the choice that he and his wife had made for her not to work outside the home when the children were in elementary school. As they moved on to middle school, she took on other jobs and found that there was less time in which to be involved at school. He explained their philosophy, saying:

Well a lot of it is not having enough time. We had the philosophy that even if it made it harder on us, we preferred that she didn't work while the kids were younger. She was free to go to the school and do things like that and was here when they came home and we've really seen the difference that makes. During that time when she would work for a little while, we did see attitude changes during those times. Now that the kids have gotten older and don't need us there all the time like they did, they're getting more independent. She's working pretty much a full-time job now and she doesn't have time to run to the schools that often.

Mrs. O'Brien said she made a similar choice regarding full-time work outside the home. She acknowledged, "I know if I worked full time I couldn't be as involved as I was. That's one of the reasons I chose not to work full time because I do want to stay involved." Mrs. Jones remarked, "Yeah. I think it's very hard anymore to allot time. I think time would be the number one thing with me."

Mrs. Richards pointed out that involvement during the school day was particularly difficult for working parents. As she put it:

I would say just working, in itself. Because a lot of the things they need involvement with or volunteers for are during the day. If you work, you can't. So, there's not a lot they want you to volunteer for at night other than PTA or being on the board and having monthly meetings.

Mrs. Garcia mentioned parents who might work second shifts, saying, "They can't be here during the day when they have to sleep, or when they could be here in the evening, they're at work. That doesn't mean they don't care."

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Some parents considered the time needed for increased student activities to be a barrier outside of the school's control. As Mr. Price said:

They're doing more. I think in elementary, it's school and home, school and home. Where they get to junior high, it's school, it's home, it's the theater. It's school, home, and a baseball game, a football game, or whatever where they meet and interact. I don't think that parent involvement is as important to them as it was in elementary because they're getting older.

He also noted that a marked difference in his son's attitude was another barrier outside the school's control, explaining:

They don't want their parents hanging around. At the same time, I think if [Son] really needs help, he'll do that in--I guess the comfort of his own home. He doesn't want anyone to think that he's vulnerable. I think they still want the parents to be involved, just not at certain times. It's like his momma would drive him to school of the morning and before he got out of the car in elementary, the last thing he did was give his mom a bye kiss. Well, that don't happen over here; "I'm a seventh grader; I can't kiss you now, mom. All the girls are looking." I think some of it is self-induced by them; they don't want that involvement; they don't want the kids at school to think they're a momma's boy or whatever. I think it's also a part of growing up and becoming independent.

As Mrs. Rivers explained it, some parents were apt to turn loose too soon:

There may be a sense that they are older and don't need it. I think in some cases that may be it. Middle-school children seem to have more freedom and more time on their hands. That may or may not be good. That's not just from a parent's point of view; I see a lot of these kids in my job--I'm a nurse. They get too much free time unsupervised.

As an employee at Fairfield Elementary School, Mrs. Garcia was attuned to other barriers for some parents such as a lack of ability in English or literacy. She gave examples, saying:

If we send things home in English, how will they know how to be involved and that they can be involved? It doesn't mean they don't care; it means they don't understand. Sometimes we have parents who can't read. I can think of a lot of families where I've had to read things to them and get them to sign them. Or, they would just put an X on it. It's not that they didn't care about their child's educational success, they just couldn't understand how they could help or be a part of it.

Among the middle-school principals, viewpoints were strikingly similar. Time was seen as the major impediment outside the school's control. In some cases, time was the umbrella issue under which other influencing factors existed. Mr. Woods explained, "Working outside [the home], the parent's occupations, single parent homes, grandparents raising grandchildren."

All of these were seen as time-related factors that inhibited high levels of parent involvement. He added, "There are so many things involved in the family's dynamics that sometimes prohibit parental participation." Mr. Roberts added:

> I'm not saying that they choose not to; I'm saying they just can't--especially in single-parent homes. If you have single parents, chances are they're not as involved as they wish they could be. We've got moms working two jobs and they just can't do it.

Another time-related factor pointed out by Mr. Roberts was associated with parents trying to meet the needs of more than one child. He noted the fact that "there may be younger or older siblings--If there's a high school child who has a soccer match that night, and a PTA meeting."

For Dr. Morgan, the major issue seemed to be communication. As she so colorfully described:

> Well, communication is the key to it all and it can be the biggest impediment because middle schoolers wouldn't get home with their head if it wasn't attached at the neck some days. I can run these newsletters, and they don't go home. It's almost like you need to go back to kindergarten and pin it to their sweaters. We find them stuffed in lockers and all over the halls and parents say we didn't get the newsletter. So, we have to find other ways to get it to them; again, we use the web page, emails, and make sure parents know when those things are coming home. We put them on colored paper and we mail the grade cards now. Communication, I think, is one of the biggest barriers of all.

Drug and alcohol abuse was viewed by Mr. Price as a barrier outside the school's control. He felt very strongly that in such cases:

> If they have a child and they're not involved, I kind of question whether they love their child or not. That's just me. If you're not involved with your child, if there are other things in this life that are more important than your child, then you are not a parent.

Barriers Within the School

When considering barriers within the school's sphere of influence, parents mentioned a multitude of factors. The theme that emerged most strongly, however, seemed to be a strong concern--at times a resentment--regarding the limited number of leadership roles available to interested parents at the middle-school level. In several instances, parents whose children had

left elementary school and who had qualified for Title I funds found themselves "crowded out" of leadership opportunities within the larger middle school. Frustration on their part was almost palpable. Mrs. Richards appeared to be one of the more understanding parents who had experienced this as she explained, "Well, I guess when you get to middle school, you have all the elementary-school parents trying to be involved, like on a board, so there's not that many positions open so they get filled pretty much."

Mr. Armstrong expressed more frustration. Although he had served at Clark Elementary School as parliamentarian and his wife had served as PTA president, once at the middle school, he said they felt left out and unwanted. He recalled, "You had one little group that said, 'Okay, we're the PTA; we're running it, and so it was just kind of like, 'Fine. You do it then.'" Mrs. Armstrong added:

> I think a lot of it at Clark Middle is because there's so many elementary schools coming together. It's a much larger pool of parents and as he [husband] mentioned, you've got this little clique of parents who say, "Well, we're the PTA board and we don't need anybody else."

Mrs. Garcia had a very similar experience at Fairfield Middle School. She explained, "I'm not an officer at the middle school. They always have elections but usually you seem to feel like they're already filled before you even put the slate out there."

Another parent at the same school, Mrs. Michaels, recounted a similar experience. After becoming convinced that her involvement was not welcomed or needed at the middle school, she was surprised to be invited by another parent to help with decorations for the eighth-grade dance. In the same conversation with the other parent, she was asked to help with ideas for a bulletin board in the teachers' lounge. The admitted the parent had surprised her by saying, "Sometimes I'm having a real hard time coming up with ideas to put on that bulletin board and I'm wondering if you could share some of your ideas that you've gotten here at Fairfield Elementary." Mrs. Michaels pointed out, parenthetically, that at the time, her involvement had been so limited that she did not even know where the teachers' lounge was. She went on to explain:

I looked at her and I said, "How is it that you've gotten involved in all of this stuff?" She said, "Why, I don't know." Well, somebody had to have come to her and said . . . but who are those people? I don't know. Is it staff? Is it the GSIA, the other parents who are . . . you know, the PTA is just a small group of people--you have a president, a vice president, sometimes they're co-, so you might have two of those, but at the most you might have 10 people on your PTA. Well, I know who those 10 people are, but how is it that they got in the circle? I don't know; I'm not really sure. Are they hand-picked? Or, did they just happen to be in the right place at the right time? I honestly don't know.

She summed it up in these words, "Fairfield Middle is a bigger school. There's more parent involvement; there's not enough jobs for all of us parents. The bottom line is that they don't ask. You don't just go and push yourself on people."

According to the Armstrong's, however, the problem seemed to be one of class, affluence, and political clout. Mr. Armstrong pointed out, "They essentially will push the people out from the poor schools, the families who are not in the Chamber [of Commerce] or own their own businesses." He also expressed his belief that the school did little to change the situation, saying, "The schools look at it as--well, the ones who have their own businesses can contribute more to the school. So, we'll cater to them a little more."

In the same school system, Principal Patrick viewed socioeconomic status as an important barrier. In his view, the barrier existed not because of money per se, but rather in parents' lack of understanding regarding how they could contribute. He was very quick to point out that parents from the housing project that his school served cared very deeply. He remarked, "I know a lot of people think, you know they're over here in the projects, and they don't care about their child enough. But, they do care." He went on to say that the school must take the first step:

It's our job to train them how to care and how to work with their children. I have found out working here that most lower socioeconomic parents will not volunteer. But, I can call them and say, will you do this and they will do it. I have to do the calling. Many teachers can't do it because there's just something about me calling or making a home visit. But, you have to ask; they won't step forward.

Adams Middle School's principal had a similar outlook. He explained:

Well, I think a lot of them don't know how. The ones that are not involved, maybe they want to help but they just don't know how to do it. I think that's where we come in by being more clear about what they can do and what they should do and have more communication with them on that. I think all parents care about their kids; some of them just don't really know how to do it. It may be that they didn't have it when they were growing up or whatever. I think us just doing a better job of reaching out and encouraging it more.

In the view of many parents, an important factor was the attitude of personnel within the middle school. For Mrs. Jones, this attitude became clear during parent-teacher conferences. She recalled, "I came to the first parent-teacher conferences for my first daughter and they said she wasn't having any kind of problems and I really didn't have to come. That's what one teacher told me." She contrasted that with her experience at the elementary school, saying:

Whether she was having a problem or not, I came to every conference. But, that remark, "She doesn't have any problems" was like, "Don't take up my time if she's not having a problem." So, I really didn't go to any parent conferences when my second daughter was here at Clark Middle School because she was a straight A student and wasn't having any problems. I thought, well, from the comments about my first daughter who was here, I just felt like I was just taking up their time if she wasn't having a problem.

For one parent, a major factor was her initial encounter with the person who usually makes the school's first impression with the public--the school's secretary. She said she thought improvements could be made:

. . . in making that a more welcoming kind of thing instead of saying you can't talk to-- there's a different way of wording that--or, you can't do this, I don't know. There's just better wording that would say "Come in," or "We want you here."

Parents clearly expressed the belief that the principal's perceived attitude was of tremendous importance. As Mrs. Armstrong said, "I think a lot of it has to do with the attitude of the principal." Mrs. Barnett expressed similar sentiments by saying:

It's the personality of the principal and how he relates with the children and the teachers-- if your child comes home and they're talking about their teachers and their principal in a positive manner, saying he did this so good and that so good. Because if you don't feel like the principal is involved with the kids, then you don't feel like you can be involved with the principal, either.

Mrs. Jennings held similar views. She described her belief that the new elementary-school principal was improving in this important area by stating:

Like our principal at the elementary, he had always been the assistant principal. He didn't really have people skills; he was dealing with discipline and all this. Everybody gave him a real hard time. I said you've got to give him a chance; he will do better but he's used to this other way. Last year he came along so much. Now he will communicate more when the parents come in. He started calling the children by name and letting them come up and hug him. He was not a person like that. But, he came around.

For Mrs. Garcia, school size was a factor. She noted, "Elementary schools are a whole lot smaller and there is greater opportunity for parents to be involved." She added, "Once they get larger, they have such a greater population that it's probably a lot harder to encourage parents to become involved."

Mrs. Jones was very concerned about what she said she perceived as a lack of communication from the middle school. She shared:

I do feel like there is no communication. I've talked to other parents about this and they said the same, "There needs to be better communication between the teachers and the parents." Especially with sports and the clubs they can join, because my daughter missed out on a lot of that in those years because she missed the sign-up deadline. Maybe we should have been finding out more ourselves, but we just assumed they would send home information, especially when you're a new student. But, they never did send anything.

Mr. Price was disappointed by the lack of communication from teachers at reporting time. He expressed a desire to see not just a letter grade but also more comments from teachers on the report cards. Mrs. Keys described a situation in which she said the middle school had lost a good opportunity to communicate with parents regarding a solution to the overcrowding problem at the elementary schools. The system solved the problem by reconfiguring all schools, moving fifth graders from the elementary schools to the middle school, and moving the eighth graders from the middle school to the high school. Mrs. Keys noted that both parties were responsible for sharing the frustration caused by the adjustment. She pointed out:

There were quite a few irate parents. You know why they were irate? They did not have a clue as to what was going on. If, when their child was at the grammar school level, if they had gotten involved, they would have seen the overcrowding problem right then. I said you all need to form a focus group. You need to pull two parents from each school whether it be a president or vice-president, and form a focus group. You can say this is the problem we're facing right now and in six months, a decision is going to be made. They take it back to their PTA's and have a sounding board. You might be surprised; there's smart people out there. Bring those ideas back, it doesn't mean you're going to use

them, but they are getting some extra help and the parents are feeling like they're being included in decision making in their child's education. I think that was the biggest part of this move; they did not feel like they were involved at any level.

As a middle-school principal, Mr. Woods said he saw security as being a major barrier. As he said, "We can't just let anybody in anymore." He also listed physical space as a barrier. Speaking of parent volunteers, he said, "You can't always work with students while the teacher's doing instruction and having somewhere to take those students and work with them one on one or two on one. Physical space is a problem."

For Mr. Roberts, finding ways to accommodate the scheduling needs of so many parents was a challenge. He explained:

> We'll have the same meeting on more than one night. In the past, we've even altered our conference days. Instead of saying come between 8:00 and 3:00, we'll say come between 12:00 and 7:00. So, we try to do it as much as possible to benefit the parents' schedule. We know we're locked into PTA meetings at night. There's no way around that; you've got to have them at night because you can't have them when the teachers are having class. We try to be as creative as possible to make time available for the parents to be here.

The Relative Importance of Involvement in Elementary and Middle Schools

In considering the decline of parent involvement in middle schools as compared to elementary schools, it could be important to determine the perceptions of parents and principals with regard to their relative importance. One might wonder if the decline happens in part because parents and/or principals view it to be of less importance as students get older. On the other hand, it could be that parent involvement in middle schools declines despite the belief that it is increasingly important as students mature.

Although participants in this study were not unanimous in their opinions, the majority expressed the belief that parent involvement actually takes on added importance in middle school. Their reasons for holding this view varied. Mrs. Michaels said:

> I think the older they get, the more important it is. At least when they're small, you can tell them what to do and guide them. As they get older, they develop minds of their own, and sometimes you need to be involved to say that's a bad choice.

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She went on to explain further:

> A lot of parents feel that once their child is in middle or high school, it will be okay to go back to work now; but my husband and I both feel that our involvement is that we need to stay focused and we need to continue to be actively involved to make sure he makes the right choices, that he keeps up on his grades, and that he doesn't get involved with the wrong group of folks. Once you do that, the rest of your life is ruined. We feel that it's far more important in middle and high school than probably elementary.

Mrs. Jennings perceived involvement in the middle-school years to be the most critical because of increased peer pressure and the "cruelty" that teenagers sometimes exhibit. Mrs. Keys described similar views:

> It's more so to me because they're changing emotionally. Everything is changing with these children; they're influenced more. The peer pressure is more. Not that there's not peer pressure at a young age, but it is major here. This is where it starts. When they get to high school, they mellow out. My other daughter did it. Her and those girls fought their eighth grade year until I thought I would go crazy. She got to high school and they all became best buddies. I thought well, I'm ready for a nervous breakdown, but that's great.

Three of the four participating middle-school principals acknowledged the possibility that parent involvement may be more important at the middle-school level. Mr. Jeremy said, "It's important throughout. But I think maybe as they get older, it's more important." He went on to explain why:

> As they get older, they're having more outside opportunities, things to pull them away from success in education, outside things. Unless you have a parent that's actively involved with their kid, the kids may tend to migrate the wrong way. When they're younger, they don't have those same opportunities. And, it starts in middle school. It's not just high school anymore, it keeps getting younger and younger--the things that they can get into outside of school that's going to have a negative impact on their education. As the parents let loose a little bit, that's probably the worst time they could be letting loose. The middle-school years are the critical years. That's probably going to make or break a kid, I think. If they can get through eighth grade or ninth grade and be on that straight and narrow path, they're probably going to stay there. But, if you lose them at this age, it's going to be hard to get them back.

Mr. Woods' view, although similar, contained the added dimension of divided responsibility among several teachers at the middle-school level. He explained:

> Having three to six different teachers, the teacher doesn't know the student as well versus an elementary teacher who is with the student practically all day. Probably it would be

more because it's easier for that student to fall through the cracks, easier for that student to get with the wrong crowd with the parents not keeping up with things. So, yes it would be more.

According to Mr. Roberts:

This is the most critical time of a child's life. At this time when they're in such emotional upheaval and they're trying to sort out who they are, what they are, who their friends are going to be, I think right now is critical.

He went on to offer advice that he would give to middle-school parents, saying, "I think now is the time for parents to stay on top of things, to really see what's going on, who they're running with, and keep tabs on them. I know that sounds overprotective, but it's really not."

Dr. Morgan's opinion differed from the rest. When asked which she viewed as more important, if either, she paused to think first and then related, "Hmmm, that's interesting. I don't know that the research would support that it's less important. But, I think as students mature and their study habits mature, it can be a bit less." She went on to describe her concern for teaching responsibility by having high expectations and consequences. She added:

I think it's just as detrimental to the child if you've got an eighth grader whose momma is sitting over him every night instead of transferring the responsibility inherently to the child so that it becomes theirs and they have to do it and let them live with the natural consequences of whatever you set up as the parent. "This is my standard for your grades; if you don't meet that standard, then this will be the consequence." Then, give them that responsibility and let them do it or not. If not, an employer is not going to stand over them and make sure they're doing that project. I think it needs to decrease in some way, but kids still need to know that their parents are there to support them and that their parents perceive their education to be a very important part of their lives.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR

FURTHER RESEARCH

Introduction

The cultivation of parent involvement in America's public schools is no longer an option. Under the provisions of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*: *No Child Left Behind* (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2001), it is now a mandate. Moreover, in the current climate of emphasis upon student performance and school accountability, schools need not just the *support* of parents, but also their full involvement in meaningful partnerships.

As one considers the findings of this study, it is important to keep in mind that the participating parents were *not* intended to be representative of the general population of parents. Instead, they were purposefully selected based upon one criterion, i.e. that they had been observed to have been highly involved when their children were in elementary school. It was, therefore, assumed that these parents already possessed a positive attitude toward partnerships with schools. It was further assumed that they were more open to and practiced in the necessary communication skills. Furthermore, the determination that these parents met such standards was in each case, made by an educator who knew them well, i.e. the elementary principal. One might easily assume, therefore, that both of these factors would have had a positive effect upon the degree to which these parents might remain highly involved during their child's middle-school years. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that such was not the case.

Summary of Findings

An analysis of the participants' responses afforded the researcher the basis upon which to draw conclusions regarding the four research questions and several closely associated themes.

The Decline of Parent Involvement in Middle Schools

With regard to the first research question, the findings of this study were consistent with those of many other research studies. The evidence strongly suggests that parent involvement typically and significantly declines as students move from elementary to middle schools. Moreover, several of the participating parents used the word "nonexistent" to describe the level of their involvement during the middle-school years. Some of the parents strongly implied that the middle school bore the primary responsibility for the atrophy of their involvement. In more than one case, their resulting frustration was expressed in angry terms, citing examples of how the school did not want parent involvement. Others, however, were quick to point out extenuating circumstances that made it more difficult for middle schools to maintain high levels of parent involvement. Examples included building security concerns and the need to cultivate students' independence. One parent conveyed his determination that he would not allow his involvement to decline.

The perceptions of middle-school principals with regard to the degree of decline in involvement were very similar. In every case, however, middle-school principals expressed the view that it was natural, though not necessarily positive, to experience such decline in parent involvement as children moved from elementary to middle school.

Factors Perceived to Affect Parent Involvement

A common factor among the participating parents was found in their statement that the parent's role is to see that the child is at school and ready to learn. Indeed, in some cases they used terms that implied almost a support staff or partnership role, e.g., "You've got your teacher at school; you've got your teacher at home." They expressed the belief that the parent should communicate with and support the teacher. They emphasized the need for parents to take ultimate responsibility for the child's welfare and to teach good character traits. Support in learning at home was an important factor common to many.

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Motivating factors for these highly involved parents varied. In several instances, they expressed an initial desire to establish accountability, i.e. to know "what was going on" in the school. Once confidence and trust had been established, however, the overriding motivation for most parents was to convey a message of support to the child and to know more about the child's needs. Some parents saw their involvement as a means to garner more help for their own child. Others saw their involvement as a benefit to all students within the class. In more than one case, they cited their own childhood experiences as factors that had motivated them to be highly involved in their children's schooling. Such experiences included being a child in a family affected by divorce, their own lack of education, and the role model provided by their own parents.

Almost all parents expressed the strong belief that parent involvement positively affects student success. When asked to describe the benchmarks of success for their own child, most parents did not define them in academic terms. Instead, their emphasis was upon personal traits such as citizenship, kindness, problem solving, and attitude. Interestingly, most said that in the case of their own children, they would likely have been just as successful had they not been so highly involved.

With regard to the perceived benefits of parent involvement, three types were considered, i.e. those for students, parents, and schools. When asked to discuss student benefits, no parents emphasized direct academic results. They did, however, value factors that contributed to academic success such as student confidence and security. For the majority of the parents, the main benefit to themselves was viewed as the confidence of knowing what goes on at the school and how their child was progressing. They saw their involvement as a means to effective communication so that nothing was "left to guess."

Benefits to the schools could be characterized in two main categories, support and rumor control. Many parents expressed the belief that the teachers were overworked and needed their help. Fund raising was seen as another important avenue of support. For other parents,

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involvement provided them with accurate information with which to refute misconceptions held by parents who were less involved.

Several of the participating parents expressed the belief that their children were receptive to their remaining involved during the middle-school years. In some cases, the parents said that they were cautious to watch for signs that the students' attitudes were changing. They expressed the desire to be mindful of and responsive to cues that the child wanted more independence. Others who had more than one child noted that such attitudes might vary from one child to another.

Parent responses with regard to encouragement from elementary students, schools, and principals were consistently positive. In virtually every case, they perceived their child as welcoming of the attention. Although they recognized that not all elementary-school teachers possess the same positive attitude toward parent involvement, they said they generally felt encouraged and appreciated. They viewed the ability to communicate directly with the teacher as extremely important. In several cases, they referred to the resulting school atmosphere as a sense of community or family.

Participating parents were just as consistent in their assessment of the true source of such welcoming attitudes within the school, i.e. the principal. They perceived the principal as the person responsible for modeling the openness necessary to make parent involvement a part of the school culture. Many referred to the principal's "open door" as the key to their own comfort level as well as those of the teachers and students. They expressed the belief that the principal's actions set the tone through which parent involvement could be cultivated. They looked for signs of this openness in small things such as knowing names, handshakes, and asking for help.

Most principals in the elementary schools had very similar views. They recognized their responsibility to demonstrate by their own actions the fact that parent involvement improves student outcomes. Indeed, one elementary principal could not have put it more strongly in saying that the school "takes on the principal's personality." Others cited examples of short-

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range and long-range plans to make parent involvement a part of their school's culture. One relatively new elementary-school principal who did not appear to be as adept in modeling such positive attitudes was quickly given credit by one parent as having "come a long way" in a short period of time.

Parent perceptions regarding the degree to which the middle school had encouraged their involvement varied greatly. It was noted that such variance was not just from school to school, but also within schools. Some parents were pleased that they had been asked at open house meetings to sign interest sheets to indicate areas in which they wished to help. Others noted that they had been invited to attend school dances, not as chaperones, but as observers.

Responses from others indicated that they were looking for much more from the school. Some expressed the belief that the middle school wanted their support but not their true involvement. A lack of effective communication between the school and home was a common concern among many. Parents were quick to note that they were no longer invited into classrooms. Instead, they were more likely to be asked to drop off needed items in the office. One parent, an employee in the elementary school, expressed the belief that her middle-school's door was not truly open and that parents were not really wanted there unless invited. Even her telephone communications with the school left her feeling that they were "just telling you stuff to get you off the telephone … to kind of get rid of you a little bit."

These parents' perceptions stood in stark contrast to those of the middle-school principals' perceptions. In general, the principals expressed the belief that their schools were working hard to encourage parent involvement and to effectively communicate with parents. Examples most often cited included newsletters, PTA volunteers, communication through web sites, common teacher planning time to improve parent/teacher conferencing, and satisfaction surveys. In one case, positive telephone contacts were a requirement of each teacher.

In almost every case, however, middle-school principals acknowledged that their schools could improve in their efforts to encourage parent involvement. They expressed some frustration

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regarding the negative attitudes of a few teachers usually based upon fear and insecurity. More often, however, they cited the belief that middle-school students are increasingly uncomfortable with high levels of parent involvement and that the students need room to learn independence and responsibility. They were able to cite examples of their students' struggles with such issues during the difficult period of adolescence.

Barriers to Parent Involvement as Perceived by Parents

The third research question of this study concerned the perceptions of parents with regard to barriers to parent involvement. Specifically, it sought to determine which of the identified barriers are perceived by parents as capable of being influenced by the school. As previously noted, however, the fact that parents perceive a factor to be outside the school's sphere of influence need not excuse schools from seeking ways to positively influence that factor. Indeed, it may be that the schools that are most successful in fostering high levels of parent involvement are actually those with the creativity and drive to find solutions to those barriers generally accepted as not under a school's control.

Overwhelmingly, the major barrier to parent involvement as perceived by participating parents was the element of time. Virtually all expressed the belief that work, single-parenting, the dynamics of family problems, and the characteristics of today's American society have all had ill effects upon the degree to which parents have time to be involved. Additionally, they saw this barrier as one generally outside the purview of schools. Several of the parents said that they had made the choice not to work outside the home during their child's elementary schooling so that they could maintain a higher degree of involvement. It was noted that in such cases, most of the parents had returned to work when the child moved on to middle school giving a possible insight to their beliefs regarding involvement during the adolescent years.

A second barrier to high levels of parent involvement was recognized in the need for improved building security. In the post-Columbine society, schools have tremendous

responsibilities to ensure that access to students is safely controlled. Parents indicated that they recognize and appreciate the difficulties that this poses for schools that want to present a welcoming impression to their public.

Another factor that parents perceived to be outside the school's control was that of changing student attitudes. As adolescents struggle with their quickly changing wants and needs, some parents may be quick to "turn loose" or "back off." One parent saw limited parent abilities in English and/or literacy to be a significant barrier outside the school's control.

Among the barriers that parents perceived to be within the school's purview, the most often mentioned was the limited number of parent leadership roles within the middle school and how schools determined who would fill those positions. In such cases, parents come to the middle school accustomed to having responsibility and a feeling of being appreciated. A significant emergent theme noted in this study was the degree to which many of these parents stated they felt excluded by the middle school in favor of more affluent parents from other elementary schools. It was noted that this feeling was held not only by parents who might be considered "outsiders" to the system but also by one parent who was employed by the elementary school. In other cases, the perception of being "crowded out" seemed to have little to do with affluence. It was merely not knowing how to become a part of the "loop." Regardless of the underlying cause, in some cases, the frustration of such a change in circumstances resulted in anger and resentment. As one parent summed it up, "Fine. You do it then."

One elementary-school principal pointed to socioeconomic status as a barrier but from a different perspective. In his view, less affluent parents care just as deeply and will work just as hard but will not initially come forward as readily. He said, in his opinion, the key to involving them is for the principal to *ask*.

Another theme that emerged from parent responses could be described as teacher attitudes toward parent involvement. Many parents noted that they were no longer invited into classrooms. This perceived exclusion extended to classrooms with walls and those without (field

trips). Indeed, some of the parents said they believed that they were not truly welcome even in coming to a parent conference because the student "was not having any problems." Sometimes-subtle messages seemed to communicate that the parent's involvement was taking up the teacher's time.

Parents deemed school size to be a contributing factor to parent involvement as well. They regularly cited the lost sense of community in larger schools. Closely associated with size of the school was also the perceived lack of communication within it. For one parent, this lack of communication extended to the reporting of student progress. He was very concerned that his child's middle-school report cards always included grades but never teachers' comments.

Comparison of Parents' and Principals' Perceptions

In the fourth research question posed in this study, I sought to determine the degree to which parents and middle-school principals hold similar perceptions regarding the barriers to parent involvement within the middle schools. The implications that were drawn from the interviews with regard to this question were possibly the most striking of all. The views as expressed by participating parents and middle-school principals pointed to a significant "disconnect" between the two groups.

In describing their schools and their efforts to cultivate high levels of parent involvement, participating middle-school principals referred regularly to active parent organizations such as PTA. In no case did principals refer to problems associated with the limited number of leadership roles within those groups.

For participating middle-school principals, the overriding barrier to parent involvement was found in the changing attitudes of middle-school students. They saw the students' need for independence as a tremendous factor in two major ways. First, they expressed the belief that students have communicated to their parents that their involvement is no longer wanted or

appreciated *by the students*. Secondly, and to a lesser extent, they expressed the belief that educators should help parents to adjust to this natural progression as a part of student maturation.

Likewise, middle-school principals viewed communication with their students' parents as a strength. Citing examples such as newsletters, notes, telephone calls, home visits, web sites, parent organization meetings, and others, they expressed views that were much more positive than did the parents. One principal readily acknowledged, however, that despite her school's best efforts, communication was complicated by the fact that some middle-school students "wouldn't get home with their heads if they weren't attached at the neck some days."

As did parents, middle-school principals said they saw teacher attitudes as a factor that in some cases inhibits parent involvement. Although they described teacher negativity as usually being limited to a few, they still saw it as a significant factor that was sometimes spread to other teachers as well. In many cases, they viewed the newer, less experienced teachers as being more open to high levels of parent involvement. One middle-school principal even questioned whether or not teachers who were resistant to parent involvement were teaching for the "right reasons."

Participating middle-school principals also listed time as a tremendous inhibiting factor that lay outside the school's control. Attempts to mitigate the effects of this barrier included offering conferences on a later daily schedule and/or holding some meetings on two different nights to accommodate working parents.

Security measures were also seen by principals as a limiting factor. The element of security for principals, however, included not only access to students but also access to student information. The need for confidentiality was noted as in issue in selecting parents who work with children or their records.

Other Emergent Themes

An additional theme that emerged from the data pertained to parent and principal perceptions regarding the elements of parent involvement. In virtually every case, parents and principals alike seemed to have a common operational definition of parent involvement based upon only one typology, i.e. volunteering as described by Epstein and Lee (1995). During the interviews, it became quite evident that elementary principals had based their recommendations of participating parents upon this criterion. When questioned about the ways in which they had been involved, nearly all parents responded wholly in terms of the volunteer work on behalf of the school. Likewise, middle-school principals, unless led in other directions through questioning, were usually focused upon the effects of parent volunteers.

Communicating (Type 2) was the second most recognized typology in the context of shared participant experiences. Parents and educators readily recognized the importance of effective communication and often lamented its absence.

Parenting (Type 1) and Learning at Home (Type 4) found their way into discussions to a limited degree but usually only if prompted. Unless they were specifically asked for such, references to Decision-Making (Type 5) and Collaborating with Community (Type 6) were virtually nonexistent among both parents' and educators' responses.

Finally, and perhaps most promisingly, responses of both parents and principals indicated an agreement that parent involvement in middle school is tremendously important. Indeed, when compared to the elementary-school experience, several parents and principals indicated that they perceived the active involvement of parents to be even more important in the middle-school years.

Recommendations for Practice

Based upon an analysis of the finding of this study, the following recommendations for practice are offered:

Middle-schools educators should consider taking additional steps to tap the resource of already highly involved parents as their children transition to these schools. Based upon the responses of parents and elementary-school principals, direct contact from the middle-school principal in the form of a letter or telephone call could provide the middle school with a larger, more eager cadre of parents to serve as the critical mass in other parent involvement initiatives. In preparation for such contacts, middle-school principals should collect from their feeder elementary school lists of highly involved parents whose children are rising to the middle school level. Middle-school faculty meetings should include discussions through which parent involvement resources can be identified and cataloged. Middle-school personnel should consider identifying and visiting elementary and middle schools that have established reputations for their use of best practices in parent involvement. Middle schools should also consider orientation programs that encourage the participation of students and their parents as they begin the transition to middle school. As several elementary schools feed into one middle school, the problem of a limited number of leadership positions being filled by what is perceived as a few more affluent parents is a problem that needs attention.

Middle-school parents and educators should engage in a dialogue regarding best practices and adolescents' attitudes toward parent involvement. Such an initiative could result in an action plan for which parents and educators can both take ownership. In many cases, middle-school students have successfully followed the adage, "divide and conquer."

Middle-schools' staff members should consider other ways to make more *personal* contacts with parents. Responses seem to suggest that more commonly used methods such as newsletters, calendars, and web sites are less effective in actually communicating the message that "Parents are welcome and needed here."

Limitations and Delimitations

This qualitative study was limited by the degree to which the parents and principals interviewed expressed their opinions with candor. Likewise, the responses of the interviewees are open to interpretations other than the author's.

The findings of this study were delimited to a small sample size in four middle schools in Northeast Tennessee. Although the results should not be generalized to other populations or settings, it is hoped that they will have meaning for other parents and educators. Those who wish to improve the degree to which parents are involved in their child's schooling could benefit from the responses given here despite this study's lack of transferability to other settings.

Recommendations for Further Research

One recommendation for further research would be to examine the degree to which parents in private schools have similar experiences as their children transition to middle school. It would be interesting to determine what factors, if any, differ in the private school setting.

Another investigation that might prove useful is one focusing upon the experiences of parents who have had opportunities to take part in making meaningful school decisions as a part of their involvement in their child's schooling. If such a study were to determine that the level of parent involvement is significantly affected by such opportunities, it could have major implications for school practice.

A third recommendation for further research is to examine the related experiences of parents of English Language Learner (ELL) students. The impact of the interplay between cultural differences and parent involvement practices in American schools would be valuable and interesting.

Conclusion

Difficulties are an inherent quality of any relationship characterized by a triad. In the case of parent involvement, the situation is no different. As individuals and as members of a group, all three stakeholders, i.e. students, parents, and educators, find themselves trying to determine the attitudes and needs of the other groups while at the same time trying to meet their own needs. Added to this already tenuous situation is the fact that adolescence is a volatile period in one's life. As one middle-school principal said, "It depends upon the hormonal level at the time."

If parents and educators are going to improve the degree to which parents are actively engaged in meaningful partnerships, they must not leave the question to be decided by students who are struggling to know who they are. Rather, they must work together to learn all that they can about the students' needs and then join hands to work for their benefit. After all, it is the parents and educators who are the adults in this triad. It is they, therefore, who have the responsibility. As one parent put it, "Just stay involved with your child. Let them know that you're there for them. You can't always be seen, but let them know that you're never out of earshot."

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide for Elementary-School Principals

1. What do you believe are the benefits of parent involvement?

2. Do you perceive that your school actively encourages parent involvement? If so, in what ways? If not, why?

3. To what degree and in what ways do you believe that parent involvement effects student success?

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide for Parents

1. Your child's elementary school principal has identified you as having been highly involved when your child was in elementary school. What were some of the major ways that you were involved?

2. What were the main reasons that you chose to be involved?

3. What do you believe are the benefits of parent involvement?

4. Did you perceive that the elementary school actively encouraged your involvement? If so, in what ways? If not, what factors did you find to be discouraging?

5. To what degree and in what ways do you believe that your involvement affected your child's level of success?

6. What do you consider to be the most important measures of student success?

7. How positively or negatively did your child view your involvement in his elementary school? Upon what evidence have your perceptions been based?

8. As your child has transitioned to middle school, do you think that your overall level of involvement has changed? If so, in what ways?

9. Are there certain types of involvement that you find have decreased? If so, what are the factors that have caused such a decrease?

10. Are there certain types of involvement that you find have increased? If so, what are the factors that have cause such an increase?

11. Do you perceive that your child's middle school has actively encouraged your involvement? If so, in what ways? If not, what factors have you found to be discouraging?

12. Is it your opinion that your child's success in middle school is any more or less influenced by your level of involvement than it was when s(he) was in elementary school?

13. How positively or negatively has your child viewed your involvement in his middle school? Upon what evidence have your perceptions been based?

14. What have been the biggest impediments to your remaining involved in your child's schooling? To what degree do you believe the middle school is capable of influencing each of these impediments?

15. Would you describe how you view the parent's role in the schooling of the child?

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide for Middle-School Principals

1. What do you believe are the benefits of parent involvement?

2. Do you perceive that your school actively encourages parent involvement? If so, in what ways? If not, why?

3. To what degree and in what ways do you believe that parent involvement effects student success?

4. What do you consider to be the most important measures of student success?

5. How positively or negatively do you think middle school students view parent involvement?

6. As your students transition to middle school, do you think that their parents' overall level of involvement typically changes? If so, in what ways?

7. Are there certain types of involvement that you find typically decrease? If so, what are the factors that have caused such a decrease?

8. Are there certain types of involvement that you find typically increase? If so, what are the factors that have cause such an increase?

9. Do you perceive that your teachers actively encourage parent involvement? If so, in what ways? If not, why?

10. Is it your opinion that student success in middle school is any more or less influenced by the level of parent involvement than it is in elementary school?

11. Do you believe that students' views regarding parent involvement change from what they were in elementary school? If so, in what ways?

12. What do you perceive to be the biggest impediments to parent involvement in your school? To what degree do you believe the middle school is capable of influencing each of these impediments?

13. Would you describe how you view the parent's role in the schooling of the child?

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent Form

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
East Tennessee State University
Veterans Affairs Medical Center

Page 1 of 2

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: John K. Boyd, Jr.

TITLE OF PROJECT: Perceptions of Middle School Parents Regarding Factors that Influence
Parent Involvement: A Study of Four Middle Schools in Northeast Tennessee

This Informed Consent will explain about being a research subject in an experiment. It is
important that you read the material carefully and decide if you wish to be a volunteer.

THE PURPOSES OF THIS RESEARCH STUDY ARE AS FOLLOWS: I intend to examine the
factors that have influenced parents who have been highly involved in their child's elementary
schooling to remain so when the child moves to middle school.

DURATION: I anticipate that each interview will last approximately 30 – 45 minutes.

PROCEDURES: Participants will be interviewed personally by the researcher using the
interview guides. Each potential elementary and middle school principal participant will be
identified by the director of that school system. Elementary principals who agree to participate
will identify four middle school parents who, when their child was in elementary school, had
been highly involved in their child's schooling. In the interest of privacy, initial contact with
potential parent participants will be conducted by the referring elementary principal. Once
interest has been determined on the part of one elementary principal, four parents, and the middle
school principal, appropriate signatures will be secured from all participants. Participants may
decline to answer any question or end the interview at any time for whatever reason they choose.

AUDIOTAPING: I will audiotape this interview to ensure the accuracy of its transcription.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS: There is a risk that the nature of some question(s) asked
might cause the interviewee to feel uncomfortable. You are free to decline to answer any such
question(s).

ver. 05/11/2005

___ Subject Initials

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POSSIBLE BENEFITS *and/or* COMPENSATION: Although there are no direct benefits or compensation to the participants, there are some potential benefits that may accrue to society.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS: If you have any questions, problems or research-related medical problems at any time, you may call John K. Boyd, Jr. at XXX/xxx-xxxx, or Dr. Nancy Dishner at XXX/xxx-xxxx. You may call the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board at 423/439-6055 for any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Every attempt will be made to see that my study results are kept confidential. A copy of the records from this study will be stored in the researcher's personal work office in a locked cabinet 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 me as a subject. Although my rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board and research related personnel from the ETSU Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis will have access to the study records. My records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above.

COMPENSATION FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT: East Tennessee State University will pay the cost of emergency first aid for any injury which may happen as a result of your being in this study. They will not pay for any other medical treatment. Claims against ETSU or any of its agents or employees may be submitted to the Tennessee Claims Commission. These claims will be settled to the extent allowable as provided under TCA 9-8-307. For more information about claims call the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board of ETSU at 423/439-6055.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: The nature demands, risks, and benefits of the project have been explained to me as well as are known and available. I understand what my participation involves. Furthermore, I understand that I am free to ask questions and withdraw from the project at any time, without penalty. I have read, or have had read to me, and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A signed copy has been given to me.

My study record will be maintained in strictest confidence according to current legal requirements and will not be revealed unless required by law or as noted above.

_____

SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER/DATE

_____

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR/DATE

_____

SIGNATURE OF WITNESS (If applicable)/DATE

ver. 05/11/2005

___ Subject Initials

Letter From Auditor

Rick Spurling, Assistant Superintendent
Mitchell County Schools
72 Ledger School Rd.
Bakersville, NC 28705

July 7, 2004

John Boyd, Supervisor
Johnson City Schools
100 East Maple Ave.
Johnson City, TN 37601

Dear Mr. Boyd,

I hope this letter finds you and your family having a great summer. I would like to congratulate and commend you on your hard work in completing your data collection for your research project, "The Perceptions of Middle School Parents Regarding Factors That Influence Parent Involvement: A Study of Four Middle Schools in Northeast Tennessee. After reviewing your materials, and after meeting with you to discuss in detail your research objectives, it is obvious that your work is reliable and complete. It also is apparent that this research project is valid and verifiable and I have seen evidence that this study was conducted in an ethical and professional manner. This was an interesting topic for me because at the current time we are examining strategies within the Mitchell County School System in how to increase parental involvement within our schools. I trust we will work together again in the future concerning this important topic in public education.

Your interview questions were concise and clear in their objective to the focus of this study. The review of the literature was very detailed and thorough and tied in appropriately with your presentation of data. As your auditor, I took time to investigate your adherence to the qualitative research method standards. I also took time to review your audio tapes, transcriptions, and field notes which were conducted with principals and parent participants during your data collection.

I discovered that your findings were organized and followed the procedures of a qualitative research study. I was impressed that your research design detailed the constant comparative method of data analysis offering you flexibility to change the direction of your research if necessary. After our discussions, it was apparent to me that you have done a good job in balancing member checking and peer debriefing to lessen the chance of bias while ensuring triangulation.

I felt your research showed the perspective of an outstanding former elementary school principal. I congratulate you on your promotion to the central office as supervisor with the Johnson City Schools, but it is also evident that your system has lost a school principal who was a positive difference maker in the lives of children. I appreciate your commitment in providing educators with information on how to better involved parents in the academic lives of their children. I feel that your work experience brought a unique perspective to this study and a deeper insight into this research topic.

It has been a pleasure to work with you and I am honored to be associated with this research study. I wish you good luck in your continued pursuit of a doctorate in educational leadership at East Tennessee State University and your professional career. Thank you for your efforts in completing an important project that will be helpful to any school personnel interested in improving interpersonal relationships with parents and caregivers.

Sincerely,

Rick Spurling, Ed.D
Assistant Superintendent
Mitchell County Schools

VITA

JOHN K. BOYD, JR.

Personal Data:	Date of Birth: March 1, 1949
	Place of Birth: Cincinnati, Ohio
	Marital Status: Married to B. Carol Vicars Boyd

Education:	Public Schools, Greeneville, Tennessee
	Tennessee Technological University, Cookeville, Tennessee; History, B.S., 1972
	East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee; Education Administration, M.A., 1977
	East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee; Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, Ed.D.; 2005

Professional Experience:	Teacher, McLauren Junior High School; Sumter, South Carolina, 1972 – 1973
	Teacher, Central Elementary School; Sumter, South Carolina, 1973 – 1974
	Teacher, Henry Johnson Elementary School; Johnson City, Tennessee, 1974 – 1984
	Principal, Columbus Powell Elementary School; Johnson City, Tennessee, 1984
	Principal, South Side School, Johnson City, Tennessee, 1985 - Present