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# Building a Successful Community & Family Engagement Pilot: Advocating for Student Success

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BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY & FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PILOT:  
ADVOCATING FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

by

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©

SYNTHESIS\*  
MASTER OF ARTS  
CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

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**Abstract:** I am an educator making a career transition from classroom instruction to a community and family engagement role. This synthesis integrates what I've learned about schools, critical and creative thinking and what is known about successful community and family engagement. This synthesis includes anecdotes from my professional and personal educational experiences that have informed my current views on effective engagement. I also describe how my graduate school journey has informed my thinking and professional progress. In building a successful community and family engagement pilot I highlight current engagement practices in Boston Public Schools and the Department of Education. My synthesis includes a ten point pilot program, with examples from my professional work, integrating the Department of Education guidelines on family engagement. The goal of the pilot program is to provide families access to educational opportunities in marginalized social groups and thus help educational resources become more equitable. I hope that the pilot program will help me secure a rewarding job.

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\* The Synthesis can take a variety of forms, from a position paper to curriculum or professional development workshop to an original contribution in the creative arts or writing. The expectation is that students use their Synthesis to show how they have integrated knowledge, tools, experience, and support gained in the program so as to prepare themselves to be constructive, reflective agents of change in work, education, social movements, science, creative arts, or other endeavors.

## Introduction

I became an educator to inspire students to become their best selves and to provide access to educational opportunities limited due to racial disparities in education. The language has changed but the gap in educational resources persists. It then becomes imperative for families to become informed partners in advocating for their student's academic success.

As a child my family and I participated in community activities with my religious organization. We marched in parades, washed cars and performed in community events. My pastor at my childhood mission was a model for developing relationships with families and community partners. As a result of continued community engagement, my mother was informed about educational opportunities for me and my sister to participate in. My mother was regularly active in my school community when I was in elementary school. She would volunteer to go on field trips as well as participate in after school activities. Over the summer my sister and I were sent to two overnight camps. At camp in Maine and Duxbury, MA, I was able to participate in swimming and photography classes as well as horseback riding. As a young girl from the city it was an exciting experience to be in the country. As I got older it became my responsibility to advocate for educational opportunities. In high school I spoke with my guidance counselor and enrolled in Minds Matter, an academic support program.

Minds Matters Boston's mission statement included in *Our Story* (2017) "is to transform the lives of accomplished high school students from low income families by broadening their dreams and preparing them for college success". Retrieved from <https://www.mindsmatterboston.org/our-story/>. In the program I had two female mentors. On Saturdays we would work on various homework assignments and prepared applications for summer schools. Through Minds Matter Boston I was able to improve my essay writing. I

applied and was accepted into Harvard and Choate Rosemary Hall for summer immersion. I chose Choate in Wallingford, CT for the opportunity to get out of Boston. It was an amazing opportunity to engage with students from all over the world. In advocating for myself I was able to experience new environments that challenged my thinking.

I found that engaging with new environments opened me up to new possibilities for myself. In my case I believe Minds Matter Boston achieved their mission. Upon reflection my access to educational opportunities came as a result of effective community and family engagement. I would like to provide families access to similar educational experiences as I transition into a community and family engagement role.

### **Reflecting on my engagement with Christopher**

While working as a long-term substitute in a first-grade classroom I met a seven-year old named Christopher. Entering the classroom in January, Christopher's frequent absences were well documented. From March to June, I worked with the families of two students with social emotional needs assisting them in finding proper classroom placement for the following year. The co-teacher and I discussed Christopher's lack of progress that year, but we hoped for the best as he was promoted to the second grade.

In second grade I began to engage with Christopher's family after noticing a link between his frequent absences, aggressive behavior, and poor academic performance while working as a classroom learning specialist. A learning specialist is the second teacher in the classroom but is not the lead teacher.

When Christopher attended school, I had the opportunity to speak with his family at dismissal. I spoke with Christopher's older brothers regarding academic support by helping him

with his homework. I spoke with his father about his aggressive behaviors toward other students by hitting, pushing, and threatening them possibly due to frustrations completing class assignments. I tried not to focus too much on the frequent absences and more on providing support. To aid Christopher, I began giving his father packets of work for Christopher to complete at home to practice his academic skills. Specifically, reading passages with detail and comprehension questions. As well as math, one and two-step addition and subtraction problems. The packets did not come back. I also recommended Christopher to the school social worker to receive any added services that would allow for family engagement through school partnerships.

By the end of second grade Christopher was only able to complete a quarter of his coursework with support. After many unsuccessful attempts to engage his family in his academic progress I spoke to school administrators. I pleaded with the vice-principal not to promote Christopher. The tears roll down my cheeks as I passionately spoke about two years of observations. First, his lack of content knowledge combined with a lack of comprehension skills. Second, his increased aggressive behaviors due to academic frustration. Lastly, Christopher's frequent absences. I stated that promoting him amounted to *setting him up for failure*. The administration disregarded my concerns and tears. Christopher went into the third grade.

Upon returning from Winter Break, while teaching third grade, I learned that Christopher would be homeschooled the rest of the school year. I was devastated. I felt that the education system let him down in advocating for his overall well-being. My desire to create a community and family engagement pilot derives not only from my classroom experiences but also from my studies in the transformative education track of the graduate program in Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT).

I did not effectively advocate for Christopher. I had not developed the relationships and resources to engage his family in his overall success. Before describing my pilot program, I will review what community and family engagement is and why it is important to student success.

### **What is Community and Family Engagement?**

Community, family, and civic engagement share a critical link. A civic action is motivated by concern for the common good. I believe that equitable educational opportunities to develop prepared students to thrive in this society is for the common good. At this time in education greater access to educational resources is important to student success.

According to the American Psychological Association report, *Ethnic and Racial Disparities in Education: Psychology's Contributions to Understanding and Reducing Disparities* (2012) discusses the disparities in education outcomes.

Stating that:

African American, Latino, and Native American children, as well as students from some Asian American subgroups, demonstrate consistent underachievement in academic performance from prekindergarten through twelfth grade, and are concomitantly underrepresented in high school graduation rates, placement in gifted and talented programs, and admission rates to postsecondary education, when compared to their White and other Asian American peers. (p.14).

Racial disparities are also evident in socioeconomic status, health outcomes and care in low-income communities. Community engagement addresses collaboration with diverse communities to address issues affecting the community's wellbeing. Family engagement

concerns stakeholders collaborating for student success. The goal of community and family engagement is to be an advocate.

The US Department of Education (2016) recommends that schools invest in family engagement by “hiring a family engagement specialist to be responsible for ensuring that family engagement plans are well managed, executed, and improved across the system” (p. 11).

The role of a family engagement coordinator (FEC) is to work within schools and nonprofits to support the needs of families. In researching my family engagement pilot, I spoke with Ms. V, a family engagement coordinator at a small elementary school in Boston, to observe family engagement strategies. I learned that depending on the school environment a FEC can support families with student absenteeism, health and wellness, academics, etc. An FEC is also responsible for developing partnerships within the community for the wellbeing of students and families that support student success.

### **Why is family engagement important to student success?**

Studies have shown a correlation between family engagement and student success. In Texas at Alliance Schools, the Texas Network went into low income communities to engage with parent and community stakeholders in an effort to obtain data to improve student achievement (2013). A study done by the Annenberg Institute, Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture (2009) credits the community partnership of Austin Interfaith and Alliance Schools with “increasing student achievement on standardized tests by an average of 15-19%, as well as for improving professional culture and parent involvement” on their campuses (p. 29).

Organizations issue policy statements to give its members direction. In 2016, The US Department of Education issued a policy statement on family engagement. It said that students



in the early grades are more successful when there is family investment in their educational progress. Believing that:

The lives and experiences of young children are intertwined with those of their families... Strong family engagement in early childhood systems and programs is central—not supplemental—to promoting children’s healthy intellectual, physical, and social-emotional development; preparing children for school; and supporting academic achievement in elementary school and beyond. Research indicates that families’ involvement in children’s learning and development impacts lifelong health, developmental, and academic outcomes. Family engagement in...programs supports families as they teach, nurture, and advocate for their children, and in turn, family engagement supports and improves... systems that care for and teach children. (DOE 2016, pp.1-2)

As young children have no control over their environments, it is the duty of their families to invest in their education. Education is not equitable for all students. I believe that successful community and family engagement can be an equalizer in the battle of education disparity for all students to have access to educational opportunities.

Currently family engagement primarily concerns families of young students in need of clear and consistent information to guide child development and well- being.

The US Department of Education states that:

Family well-being is also a strong predictor of children’s school readiness. Financial stability during the early childhood years has been found to improve children’s academic achievement, promote positive behavior, and foster mental health. Parents’, in particular

mothers', educational attainment is predictive of children's future economic mobility. Families' with secure housing, healthcare, and access to nutritious food have positive effects on children's development and lack of access to these basic resources can have adverse effects (p. 3).

A healthy family environment is a predictor of student success. In the field of community and family engagement stakeholders work for the benefit of students and families. As previously noted health and wellness is an engagement necessity in a school organization. In the sections that follow, I provide background related to my passion for community and family engagement. While working towards my master's degree in the CCT program, I took part in courses that built upon my knowledge of community and family engagement.

### **What CCT Courses Have Manifested My Thinking?**

I knew I wanted to attend graduate school, but I could not find a program that met my needs. I had previously enrolled in a Master of Education program, spring of 2012, to teach English 8-12, at the University of Massachusetts at Boston (UMB), but had withdrawn from the program soon after beginning. I wanted a program that would inform and expand my thinking to provide me career insight.

In October of 2015 I received an email from the Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT) Program at the University of Massachusetts at Boston inviting me to a CCT Community Open House. The email informed me that the event focus was "presentations by students completing projects in the areas of "Reflective Practice" and "Criticism and Creativity in Literature and the Arts". In addition to learning about some of the ways that students extend critical and creative thinking to their work, you will also have a chance for casual conversation with faculty,

graduates, and others and be able to learn more about program options, courses, and other information”. I listened and found the presentations diverse in topic and student-driven.

At the conclusion of the Open House I had a lengthy conversation with Jeremy Szteiter, Assistant Director and former graduate of the CCT program. For over an hour we talked about my classroom experiences and my genuine passion to make an impact in the field of education. Jeremy told me the benefits of a program based on reflection to promote personal and professional growth. By the end of the evening I was excited to participate in a graduate program that would allow me to explore my individual goals. Jeremy told me that upon completion I would have a Master of Arts (MA) that would not limit me but provide me with opportunities I had not previously considered. Similar to my previous experiences in education opportunities I was excited by the possibilities open to me through participation in the CCT program. Upon reflection I am aware of my professional and personal growth over the past two years. I can now articulate my passion for education and my individual goals as I transition from classroom instruction to a community and family engagement role.

My goal is to create a community and family engagement pilot that highlights what I have learned from personal and professional school observations and the Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT) program. It is my intention to secure a job where I can adapt and implement the pilot program for the benefit of students and families.

The CCT program has given me the opportunity to question my own abilities and assumptions. I have learned more about myself as a lifelong learner, educator, and advocate. I will briefly detail the expansion of my critical thinking skills that has informed my community and family engagement pilot program.

## Creative Thinking

In the spring of 2016 I entered my first CCT course. I had never thought of myself as creative though I had created some engaging lessons and implemented them with satisfaction. Through course experiences I came to believe that I was not a good judge of my own creativity and product. I then began to challenge myself by using a creative thinking tool, SCAMPER, to substitute, combine, adjust and modify my creative efforts during my lessons (see Appendix A). I remember working in a trio to find a solution to a problem that *bugged* us. We were able to communicate effectively to design a product so that drinks would not spill in a club setting if you were bumped into. We created and marketed the Tap Top Tip cup. First, we identified the problem, spilled drinks. Next, we researched popular anti-spill designs. Then we used SCAMPER to substitute, combine, and modify our design. A summary of our thinking follows.

During class my trio discussed products that already existed that met our needs. Sippy cups and cups with straws help to minimize spilling but visually drinking beer out of a straw is not ideal. There are cups that resist toppling when bumped on a table but drinks are often spilled on the dance floor. Cups with small openings in the lid are also good but spill quite easily when tipped over. The *Wow* cup is really cool, it requires sucking like a straw, but the liquid passes through a silicone piece that goes back into place and involves a lot of materials. We decided it was not simple enough for a bar setting.

During the course I began to question and challenge my methods of teaching. I believe my lessons became more creatively expressive. I began to ask students to question themselves as well.

Becoming more open minded towards classroom engagement I began testing new classroom practices. For fifteen minutes after recess students were given time to reflect upon

their day with the lights off and soft music playing. Students were asked to put their heads down to calm their bodies and their minds. Another addition to the classroom was a compliment box to promote classroom kindness. I will not say that each creative product or process was successful, but it gave me the opportunity to think outside of the box. I will continue to use creative thinking tools to make changes to my creative product and environment.

### **Dialogue Processes- Learning how to Listen & Lead**

The longer I worked in school communities the more feelings I buried regarding how to effectively advocate for students. It was a part of my role as a learning specialist to support students with social emotional needs. “Support” could mean taking them out of the classroom for a break to settle any anxieties. As well as work to de-escalate students, depending on the severity, with the help of colleagues. Not all interactions with anxious and escalated students resolved peacefully but that did not stop me from attempting.

During the workday I saw the abuses as a part of my job, but I would go home and feel battered in that environment. I would attempt to speak with caring friends, but they did not work in school environments. My friends did not understand the struggles that educators and students face during a school day. I then turned to my colleagues. I found that I was not the only educator that felt abused. We decided to gather together to listen to each other.

Through the tools I learned in dialogue processes, I was able to form the Learning Specialist Support Group (LSSG), for educators in my role within the school community. In the group we worked to create a container of trust and to become active and empathetic listeners in support of each other. Integrating Richard Salem’s (2003) goals for empathetic listening we focused on “listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding and trust”. In the LSSG we came to share our needs, wants, and dreams. We met once at least once

a month from January until June. We learned from each other the tools necessary to support and de-escalate students before the student becomes physical.

### **The Learning Specialist Support Group**

The original goal in creating the Learning Specialist Support Group was to enhance conversations and empower those in a stressful work environment. All paraprofessionals and learning specialists were welcome to join. The role of a learning specialist requires a lot of patience and talking tough to be successful. The stress and pressure to support students can be overwhelming and exhausting. In creating the support group, I wanted to gather a group, like the Circle of Seven, to discuss personal and professional needs. I sent an email to all interested participants with possible topics and based on the responses created a free flowing agenda. Agenda ideas could change based on the feelings of the conversation. I printed out the agenda for all participants. I provided light snacks to munch on after a long work day.

One of the goals that came out during our conversations was to create a learning specialist job description (see Appendix B) and submit it to the principal for potential hires. As a group, we found that misleading potential hires about the role would lead to higher turnover rates during the school year. It would leave the school community vulnerable without stability. If better informed of school challenges, educators will be better prepared for success. Each participant approved the job description via a shared Google document. The job description was then sent to the school principal for use at their discretion with future hires. Through dialogue processes my colleagues and I felt relief that we could talk to each other, process, and work towards another school year.

Dialogue processes and the LSSG has given me tools to build meaningful relationships that I have used to engage families, participate in stakeholder conversations and build my pilot on community and family engagement.

### **Critical Thinking- Questioning Myself**

Critical thinking promotes reflection, and reflection promotes social justice. When I first enter the classroom as an undergraduate student teacher I remember thinking *those poor marginalized children!* In my education courses I learned about the extent of racial disparities in education. Through hands on teaching experiences I knew I needed more engaging strategies to help students reflect on their learning. Student reflection is essential in building student ownership and their ability to advocate for themselves.

It is my hope that critical thinking and reflective skills will foster an environment that values education and advocacy promoting social justice. Cultivating an environment that fosters reflection and critical thinking provides students and families with a voice in taking ownership of their learning.

### **Metacognition- Thinking about Thinking**

In the fall of 2016 I was able to learn, reflect, and see metacognitive strategies while in the CCT program. I learned that metacognition consists of two basic processes “monitoring your progress as you learn and making changes and adapting your strategies if you perceive you are not doing so well” (Winn & Snyder, 1998). I also learned that metacognition is then self-reflective and depends heavily on self-regulation to be successful.

In reflecting on cognitive and metacognitive strategies students can become independent as learners, take ownership of their work, and realize that their learning is not dependent on teachers but find they can seek out their own intellectual needs (Halter, 2008).

The importance of student ownership, described in my community and family engagement pilot, is based on my observations of student thinking during that time. I found that when students can think critically and reflect on their learning, they can begin to articulate and assess their learning needs. A student must be able to assess what knowledge is useful to solve problems and apply it later. For students to be successful, application of cognitive and metacognitive strategies is necessary in the classroom so that students make connections and acknowledge how those connections affect their thinking. Students must be aware of what they know, plan how much time an activity might take, check their progress and be reflective to know when a strategy is not working and seek out assistance. Through metacognitive reflection I noted how the classroom and school environment can enhance student thinking and problem solving leading to student ownership of their work.

In my third-grade classroom I observed lessons where metacognitive questions are asked of students to enhance their thinking. Metacognition strategies ask students to reflect on the process not the answer. Once students understand their processing, they can apply it to other problems. An example of a metacognitive question is: what process did you use to come to this conclusion? In a classroom metacognitive practices are incorporated into all contexts of learning. Students receive encouragement to propose alternatives to solve problems.

In creating my engagement program, I also reflected on learning not limited to the classroom environment thus encompassing the importance of family engagement. How students



solve problems at home can affect how they solve problems at school, and vice versa. I then became interested in how a community can affect a student's academic progress.

### **Higher Education 622 Community Engagement-Promoting Social Justice**

My past experiences in education and metacognitive strategies increased my desire to promote access to educational opportunities. Through community engagement course readings I have a better understanding of the idiom *it takes a village*. It applies to the tools and people necessary to have an impact on just one student, let alone an entire school. With that said, I wanted to know more about the impact of effective community partnerships within schools. Teachers should not feel alone in the mission to educate students when communities and families can become valuable partners.

I discovered that an effective community partnership takes genuine commitment to learning the needs of the community from the community. Only when you listen to the needs of a community can you create a relationship of trust and work together to be effective. With this mindset I concluded that social justice would be a vital component of my pilot.

Before describing my pilot program, I need to review what is known about community and family engagement and what is mandated by the US government and Boston Public Schools. As well as what limitations have been observed by others and myself. That then sets the scene for building my CFE pilot. After describing the progress, I discuss the steps ahead to keep improving my ability to contribute in this field. I hope to secure a rewarding job.

### **Current Community and Family Engagement Practices in Boston Public Schools**

Within Boston Public Schools there is an office of engagement dedicated to supporting families. The Boston Public Schools Office of Engagement (OOE) mission is to:

Promote welcoming environments in BPS, build capacity for authentic engagement and support effective partnerships among students, families, schools and the community to ensure student readiness and achievement from birth to graduation. Boston Public Schools and each of its schools will welcome every family and every student actively engaging them in student learning and school improvement. (BPS OOE 2018)

Each school in the BPS district must have a school site council made up of parents, teachers, administrators, and students that work collaboratively. As well as a parent site council where parents create the agenda. They also let the school know the dates and times of their meetings but do not invite school personnel to attend. Each site should hold a meeting once a month. The goal of the councils is to bring together participants that engage in open dialogue for their school communities. At some schools, most fundraising efforts are the responsibility of the parent council. With the support of the school community, space and participation, the money collected goes to a predetermined school need.

The Boston Public Schools Office of Engagement is also responsible for Parent University. In BPS Parent University is an opportunity for parents to sharpen their skills... Information sessions may focus on child development, what children are learning in schools, advocacy, parent leadership and effective parenting skills. The goal of Parent University is to empower parents/ guardians as school partners. The University knows that family engagement at home is invaluable to student success. Creating parent leaders is a priority in my family engagement pilot and a guideline in federal education policy. The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) requires that:

States and school districts engage parents and families in the work of ensuring positive outcomes for all students. School districts that receive Title I funds are required

to have written parent and family engagement policies with expectations and objectives for implementing meaningful parent and family involvement strategies. They are required to involve parents and family members in jointly developing district plans and to provide technical assistance to schools on planning and implementing effective parent and family involvement activities to improve student academic achievement and school performance. (p. 6)

What follows is my first -hand experience attending a community engagement event to inform and involve families at a local high school within BPS.

On Saturday January 27<sup>th</sup> I attended the Parent 2 Parent Conference hosted by the Boston Education Justice Alliance (BEJA) and the Boston Teachers Union (BTU). BEJA is a group of students, parents, educators and community members working together to create schools our communities deserve. The BTU represents over 10,000 teachers, paraprofessionals, and retired educators within the BPS district. The BTU is committed to building our Boston community for a more just and equitable education system, city and state. I believe the priorities of the event were to inform, listen, and learn from each other regarding the needs of BPS students.

Upon registration for AM and PM workshops I was given a folder containing a schedule, pamphlets with district data and informative papers related to the AM and PM workshops, in English and Spanish, to digest and respond to. There was an introduction given by BTU president Jessica Tang as well as BEJA director Ruby Reyes to welcome and orient participants to the event's goals.

Before the workshops began I participated in the *World Café* discussion stations to start the event. I had the opportunity to speak with educators and parents about their children's

schools and overall sentiments of the district's educational progress. Overall there was a feeling of comradery among participants.

The experience became overwhelming for me as an educator. My AM session on SPED/Inclusion was very informative and full of parent anecdotes. I enjoyed the positivity in the environment. The PM session on the BPS Opportunity Index was more disruptive. BPS Opportunity and Achievement Gap Assistant Superintendent Colin Rose and Office of Engagement manager Jonathan Sproul ran it. The focus of the workshop was how the new Opportunity Index is useful in schools to promote equity in school partnerships. The index keeps track of how much money is given to community partnerships and correlates with the follow through on services to see if there are other partnerships that would benefit school communities. Not surprisingly parents began to ask questions not related to the official topic. Mr. Rose and Mr. Sproul tried to answer what questions they could, but they were unable to complete their presentation. To become more informed, I asked and received the presentation from Jonathan Sproul to review community partnerships on my own. Overall the Parent 2 Parent Conference was successful in bringing together stakeholders to learn from each other.

### **Current Limitations Found in Engagement Practices**

In transitioning from classroom instruction into a role in community and family engagement I researched current policy publications and have observed different engagement practices across the district.

As an educator I have had the opportunity to work in different environments with diverse student populations. As I gained more interest in community and family engagement I sought people who work in the field of engagement for information. First, I spoke with an engagement

coordinator, Ms. V at a small elementary school in BPS, to gain insight into current school site practices.

The family engagement coordinator, Ms. V, has worked in BPS for twenty-eight years and the role of family engagement coordinator for twenty-four of the twenty-eight. A limitation I found was that Ms. V had no connection to any department within the BPS Office of Engagement (OOE). The OOE has greater resources than an individual school but not all families of OOE partnerships. It would be beneficial to make connections within the OOE to better support school families.

According to the US Department of Education (2016) engagement policy a major challenge or limitation is that:

Many State, program, district, and school policies make ambiguous reference to “family engagement” but provide few requirements and limited official guidance at the State and local levels to support implementation of family engagement policies and practices.

Early childhood systems and programs may not have sufficient resources or appropriately allocate available resources to adequately support systemic approaches to family engagement (p. 7).

In current engagement practices there is a lack of consistency in the job requirements due to the ambiguity of the role. In each Boston Public School, there may be a Family Engagement Coordinator (FEC) or a Community Field Coordinator (CFC). A CFC is responsible for building relationships with parents, students, and community partners (see Appendix C). The position is also responsible for providing consistent communication with partners to develop trust. A CFC may also disseminate newsletters, support students’ emotional needs, coordinate events, etc. Ms. V., mentioned earlier, is a family engagement coordinator. Her main obligation is to students

and families. She does not work in individual classes as a paraprofessional or teacher. A CFC may act as a paraprofessional within a school community.

Through conversations with those in BPS, I have learned that the principal of each school decides if a community field coordinator is responsible for developing relationships with community and family partners. Some CFCs act as paraprofessionals or disciplinarians. The ambiguity of the role makes it difficult to remain consistently dedicated to students and families' well-being. If schools do not place a priority on family engagement and hire qualified candidates to fill that role, they limit student success. It does not affect community change if a CFC is in a school building without the time and resources to build partnerships.

Another limitation of family engagement is the mentality that it is a low priority compared to academics. Federal and state funds do not go explicitly for school engagement services. Funds go to the schools that are successful on standardized tests. This mindset highlights that “despite the demonstrated importance of family engagement and the emphasis placed on it across statutes and policies, family engagement is not equally valued or implemented across... systems and programs” (DOE, 2016, p .7). This mindset is a point of contention among educators as well. Some educators believe that they are in the school building only to teach their subject. These limitations only inspired me to build an effective engagement pilot based on my classroom and CCT experiences.

### **Building a Successful Community & Family Engagement Pilot**

The limitations reviewed in the previous section motivated me to build an effective engagement pilot program which would draw on my classroom and CCT experiences. I will also attempt to follow the policy statement on family engagement released by the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (May 2016). It is my intention to

create a community and family engagement pilot dedicated to building relationships with community and family engagement partnerships.

In January of 2018 I began a long-term substitute teacher position in a first grade classroom. My goal during this time was to promote social justice and academic success through consistent and informative family engagement. I wanted to teach students to take ownership of their work, believe in their abilities and know that there is a community supporting them. The teacher I was substituting for had left a comprehensive academic plan during her absence. The students were to create a book on a chosen creature's features. What follows is how my time in first grade is a miniature implementation of my community and family engagement model. Each section corresponds to an educational experience of mine and a principle from the US policy guidelines on family engagement to provide students access to educational opportunities.

### **1. Create continuity and consistency for children and adults.**

The goal of this principle is to “promote a vision for family engagement that is consistent across systems and programs, and that can set the stage for families’ involvement in their children’s development and education at all ages” (DOE, p. 8). In my educational experiences I have learned the importance of continued and consistent communication with families to promote a welcoming environment for family involvement.

A consistent form of family engagement in this elementary school are Family Fridays twice a month. All families are welcomed into the school community by administrators and educators. In the three months I taught first grade I did not see many families come into the classroom on Family Fridays. I believe that though the invitation was open to all families most were unable to attend due to work.

The intention of Family Fridays is to provide families the opportunity to observe and engage with their students during the school day. I continued to encourage families to come into the classroom on Fridays in the absence of the regular teacher.

To remain consistent in this classroom I continued sending home weekly newsletters to keep families informed of their student's coursework. The newsletters highlighted the upcoming week's topics in math and reading, homework tasks, vocabulary words, vital information, etc. The newsletters were one form of consistent family engagement I continued but I did rely on it alone to communicate with families.

When I could I also spoke with families at drop-off and pickup to keep them informed. Though few students were walkers, I wanted to engage families beyond the official school memo communicating my long-term substitute position. It was important for me to engage with families as a way for us to get to know each other in support of our students.

## **2. Value respectful relationships and trusting relationships between families and professionals.**

The goal of this principle is to:

Promote shared responsibility for children's healthy development, learning and wellness by valuing families' experiences and strengths, and providing opportunities for shared learning. Encourage two-way communication by welcoming information from families on all aspects of the child's life and development, including their culture, traditions, and home language. Encourage two-way learning...including their culture, traditions, and home languages. (DOE, p. 8).



Ms. V noted that in the community and family engagement role, an individual must be *open minded and respectful of all families* to be effective. Like my work with students, I believe in mutual respect. Upon first entering a classroom I introduce myself to students with a clear voice. Then I inform students of my belief in respect: *I listen to you, you listen to me*. I let them know that if we listen to each other *we'll have a great day*. This is an effective strategy in building trust as well introduce classroom and behavior management. I understand that respectful relationships are not formed overnight.

When I worked as a second grade learning specialist at the Holmes Elementary school I participated in a successful family engagement multicultural event. Each grade was tasked with researching a country and decorating the hallways to illustrate what their knowledge. My second grade classroom created the Sydney Opera House out of cardboard pieces taped to the walls. They also illustrated the Great Barrier Reef and the importance of tourism in Australia. An added element of the event was the passport system attached to a potluck dinner that many families and staff members contributed to dishes from all over the world, reflective of our students' background. Families were asked to get a stamp from every country before heading to the cafeteria for the potluck. Many families shared stories of their cultural backgrounds, it was a time for shared learning. The event was a great way for me to build relationships with the families of my second grade students.

Upon entering the first-grade community for my long-term substitute position, I listened and observed the environment before beginning instruction. In my effort to build respectful relationships with families and professionals, I did not go into the environment assuming I knew everything about the community. I spent my first week listening and learning from families and school professionals. I valued the insights of all stakeholders to support student development.

When I communicated with families and professionals it was important to me that I show my commitment and passion to our students. The use of the term *our* promotes community.

I truly believe that genuine interest and concern in families' experiences and strengths builds respect and trust. An opportunity for shared learning occurs when all stakeholders are able to come together in support of students.

### **3. Develop goal- oriented relationships with families that are linked to children's development and learning.**

The goal of this principle is to “develop ongoing relationships centered on children's well-being and success. Jointly work with families to identify specific strategies that support children's development and learning at home and in the classroom and community” (DOE, p. 8). While in the first-grade classroom I spoke with families regarding the progress of their students work on the creature features book.

Each student had writing goals ranging from capitalization to punctuation and followed through with vocab sentences for homework. Either I checked the homework daily or the classroom student teacher, Ms. W check it. I would routinely request that students review their checked homework for further learning. In math, as a form of family engagement, I sent home instructions for games that families could play with students to practice their skills. We would play the games in the classroom before I sent the instruction home. The students can then instruct and play with their families. My intention was to engage families in the academic success of students.

With the support and encouragement of a veteran reading specialist, I had the opportunity to speak with some families about their personal goals for students and what strategies would be

useful to support success. I spoke with a mother, of two, who wanted her child to enroll in an after-school program so that they would not *grow up too fast* being around too many adults at home.

In the classroom the student began talking back to adults and bossing around other students causing some conflict. I learned from our conversation that at home she had many responsibilities in caring for a younger sibling. We discussed how being asked as a first grader to take on those responsibilities affected her relationships with others. In conjunction with another educator we worked on enrolling the student in a local community center swimming program. Our conversation was productive because we can together for the student's well-being at home and at school.

#### **4. Engage families around children's health, mental health, and social emotional well-being.**

The goal of this principle is to:

Engage families around children's development, learning, and wellness, including physical and mental health, and social emotional needs. Ensure that programs and families know about child development related to these areas and have access to the tools they need including concrete strategies to promote child well-being at home and in the classroom. Ensure that families and staff are connected with relevant community partners. (DOE, p. 8).

In my time at the Oliver Wendell Holmes elementary school I was inspired by the work of a social worker from City Connects, a community partner that focused on providing students with access to family wellness resources. City Connects can best be explained as a research

experiment. Dr. Mary Walsh the executive director of City Connects is a professor at the Urban Education and Innovative Leadership at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. Dr. Walsh's research consists of studying interventions that can enhance the academic and healthy development of students. Dr. Walsh worked to establish community partnerships to support not only students but families and to reduce the out of school deterrents to academic success. Data from City Connects have proven success in their mission to support student success. Their data from students in grades 1-12 illustrates that City Connects students have a lower probability of chronic absenteeism, defined as absent 10% or more days a year.

Similar to City Connects, my community and family engagement pilot has a social justice component in overcoming student educational barriers continuing educational disparity of *marginalized students*. Providing information to families regarding helpful academic and well-being opportunities is a part of the engagement role I look forward to perform.

**5. Ensure that all family engagement opportunities are culturally and linguistically responsive.**

The goal of this principle is to “ensure to the maximum extent possible, that the environment, children’s curricula and learning, and all family engagement opportunities respect, reflect, and embrace families’ cultures, are devoid of bias, and are linguistically accessible” (DOE, p. 8).

I am currently learning Spanish to engage with students and families within BPS. To aid in my continued learning I try to include Spanish in my classroom practices. When students say the date, I ask whether they can say it in Spanish as well. I have also seen in classrooms during morning meeting student’s greeting each other in other languages: French, Spanish, American Sign Language (ASL), Vietnamese, etc. There are a number of ways to include culture and

language in daily classroom practices, but I can admit that these observations are not consistent in all school communities and organizations.

When I attended the Parent 2 Parent Conference in January I was intrigued that headphone systems translated for English and Spanish speaking participants. There were volunteers from the BEJA to translate. As a native English speaker, it was extremely helpful to use the headphone system to understand comments and questions posed by native Spanish speaking participants and engage in conversation. It was very encouraging for me to observe culturally diverse viewpoints included in conversations related to student advocacy and family engagement. The use of the headphone system was a helpful tool in support of families to share their experiences.

#### **6. Build staff capacity to implement family engagement practice principles.**

The goal of this principle is to “prioritize professional development opportunities that support staff to view parents as capable, competent partners. Strengthen staff’s ability to form positive, goal-oriented relationships with all families” (DOE, p. 8).

Through my professional development experiences, I understood the need for the creation and effective implementation to build staff capacities on family engagement strategies that support student success. In a community and family engagement role, I will organize professional development workshops for parents and educators centered on parents as partners.

Together we can build a container of trust, LSSG reference, to build positive and collaborative relationships. I have participated in professional developments that are informative but did not meet the needs of the school community. A trauma-sensitivity professional development (PD) I attended while working in an inclusion elementary school fit the bill. I

appreciated administrators noting the need to provide the opportunity for staff to become familiar with trauma sensitivity. A non-profit known for working with trauma-sensitive students hosted the PD. I found the PD informative on the brain activity of children who display trauma related signs.

Unfortunately, I was more interested in how to support students who displayed trauma-sensitive signs. I know that not all students who have experienced trauma display abusive behaviors, but we had students who were abusive to staff. A common concern during the PD was the lack of strategies provided to aid trauma sensitive students and staff. I found the PD informative but not instructive. In my work at the school I needed practical approaches to engage students and families with trauma-sensitivities. To aid students I found the PD unhelpful in approaches for practical implementation.

In terms of practical implementation, it would be beneficial for educators to have professional development opportunities dedicated to strategies that build community and family engagement. A popular tool to build classroom and school community is ClassDojo. ClassDojo is an app used for open communication. Educators can create video for parents. The students can create presentations for projects. A goal in my community and family engagement model is to embed a systematic approach to communicate with families about student success.

## **7. Support families' connections and capacities.**

The goal of this principle is to:

Provide opportunities for families to build upon their knowledge and skills to foster children's development, learning and wellness; advocate for their child and

family; share experiences and expertise with other families; and take on leadership and advocacy roles in early childhood systems and programs. (DOE, p.9).

In a community and family engagement role it is a priority to build a diverse school and parent site council that will inform, learn and advocate for students. The councils should be as diverse as the school population. The parent council can inform the school site council on the needs of their children and the school's families. This can be related to health and wellness events within the families' community or literacy and math event at the school. Making connections with community partners like City Connects can help inform families.

There are periodic events hosted by Parent University to provide families access to information that supports families. Most recently an event was held in early May at the Northeastern University Curry Student Center. The topics are focused on supporting children's social and emotional development. The morning sessions discussed nurturing fathers, freaking out about middle school, how to look for scholarships. Families are also able to receive information from BPS departments in the OOE. The afternoon sessions discussed strategies for raising Black and Latino boys, and creating the schools our students deserve: advocating and collaborating for our schools.

## **8. Systematically embed effective family engagement strategies within systems and programs.**

The goal of this principle is to “align, integrate, and coordinate family engagement strategies in all aspects of programming, including but not limited to: involving families in governance” (DOE, p. 9) Creating parent leaders means:

Involving families in governance; establishing positions that focus exclusively on family engagement; identifying specific family engagement responsibilities and professional development opportunities for all roles across systems and programs; providing families with multiple and diverse opportunities for engagement; and creating physical environments that are welcoming and culturally and linguistically responsive. (DOE, p. 9)

I believe that it is important to establish student ownership as another means of promoting family engagement. Student ownership is important to my community and family engagement pilot. In my classroom experiences I have observed that when students are able to take ownership of their work from beginning to end they are excited to share that progress with their families. The best attendance for events were because the student was excited to share their work with their families and friends.

During my long term substitute position to build student ownership and enhance student independence the students were taught to recite *Hey Black Child (2003)* a poem by Useni Eugene Perkins to encourage their beliefs in their possibilities due to access to educational possibilities. In the poem students are encouraged to: *be what you can be, learn what you must learn, do what you can do, and tomorrow your nation will be what you want it to be*. Building their belief in themselves is essential to reflecting on possibilities and enhancing their access to learning opportunities. This poem also makes a connection to a student's impact on educational equity promoting social justice.

Invested in their own learning the first grade students were able to research their creatures from books and internet sources. They used a graphic organizer to keep track of their feature facts and then created a draft highlighting their creatures: parts, covering, movement, diet,



habitat, family, interesting facts, and authors' note. The students then revised their work and submitted a final product over the course of the term. The project accommodated all learners.

### **9. Develop strong relationships with community partners that support families.**

The goal of this principle is:

To establish formal partnerships with community partners, such as after-school programs, social service agencies, adult education programs, one stop career centers, medical homes, public housing authorities, and libraries, to promote family wellness and adult learning, and enhance children's learning and family stability. (DOE, p. 9)

While working as a per diem substitute teacher I have had the opportunity to work in an Autism strand classroom. Upon my third time in this classroom I saw a student taking off his shoes and running around the room. I was informed that the student may become more aggressive without shoes on. The classroom teacher visibly sighed remembering the days when the student wore high-top shoes they could not take off on their own. The teacher told me she would spend her own money for her student to have new shoes. I saw the teacher and students' frustration with shoes that were tattered and falling apart. I wanted to help.

I went in search of the school's community and family engagement coordinator (CFC). I learned that the school had no CFC on staff. I was disappointed but not discouraged. As an invested educator I took it upon myself to call area schools during my lunch break to speak with their CFC's about sneakers for the student. I found that no school in the area had formal partnerships with organizations that receive clothing donations. I then walked the area in search of community partners that had formal partnerships. I found most people I spoke with very motivated to support student success.

In my search I contacted the local social center. A place I remember attending after-school events in my youth. I asked to speak with their CFC and informed them of the day's mission as well as my sentiments about community engagement and student success. Our conversation was productive. The center CFC put me on her email blast list so that I can learn of future engagement events. By the end of the day I also received an email that she *had already made a few calls* to assist the student in receiving new sneakers. The conversation alone reinforced my belief that strong partnerships are important for successful community engagement. I also spoke with other community organizers that day and received invaluable information on how to engage the family of this student in the process so that a more formal relationship to aid student success can occur. It is my hope that high-top sneakers make their way to the student and I will continue to speak with concerned stakeholders.

At the end of the school day the responses received from community partners encouraged me. I spoke with the principal of this school about my actions and received support but the principal informed me that CFC position is only open to bilingual candidates. I personally understand that it needs to meet the needs of the school community. After continued conversations with the principal I learned that the CFC position is part-time. The principal acknowledged the restraints of the position, for the following school year, being part-time but said it was a budget concern. As previously noted a CFC is used at the school principal's discretion due to budget restraints. This limitation needs to removal so that community and family engagement can be improved across the district.

#### **10. Continuously learn and improve.**

The goal of this principle is to “improve integrated and systemic family engagement practices by regularly collecting and analyzing data on the effectiveness of the practices, in order

to guide decision-making and policy change and to inform technical assistance and professional development” (DOE, p. 9).

Once implemented within the school community, the stakeholders can assess the needs of the community and how best the pilot program meets that need. Families, students, educators, and all partners are welcome to join a fun data exploration and sharing session of what worked and didn't work. I have not been successful in all of my engagement efforts.

### **What has been Successful? Unsuccessful?**

The basis of my community and family engagement model is on my classroom and coursework experiences. I have tried to implement and adapt family engagements models as an educator, but I have not always been successful.

While working as a preschool teacher in October of 2017 my organization had its annual open house. As a teacher new to the organization I was excited to engage with families to discuss student progress up to that point. As an all-year program some of the students entered the classroom in August. Upon my arrival I sent out a letter of introduction to families highlighting my contact information. I also engaged with some families during pick-up, so they could get to know me. In anticipation for the Open House I sent home a classroom newsletter, an organizational invitation and made multiple calls to families inviting them to the Open House.

During the night of the open house I planned activities that families could take part in with students. At each activity I placed informative cards allowing families to see how the activity can lead to academic success. Ex: In the dramatic play area I stated how the area allows students to “try on roles” experimenting with societal norms and expectations. I also placed

pictures of students working and their thinking processes around the room for parents to see what students do during the day.

Some families that I had spoken with confirmed attendance but only one family came to the classroom that night. I was disappointed with the attendance, but I enjoyed speaking with that family about student progress. Together we conducted a sensory themed experiment that students had completed earlier that week, replicated at Open House for families. I believe that an effective relationship with that family began that night. From that point on the mother was a welcomed frequent visitor in the classroom. Across the organization my classroom had the lowest family turnout. Based on my observations my approaches to engage families at the event were successful but in getting them to come in was not successful. I learned then that engagement strategies must adapt to meet the needs of the families. The time was not accessible for all families. Some students were taken home by transportation not leaving the center until after five. I can imagine it being difficult to participate in an Open House that begins at seven when exhaustion, time restraints, transportation and family obligations can play a role in their inaccessibility.

When planning the Creature Features Publishing Party for March of 2018, I kept the needs of the families in mind. It was planned for a Friday fun day when parents are regularly welcomed in the classroom. For the convenience of families, I organized two times for the event, 9:30am and 1:30pm. With a classroom of 19 students I based the presentations on both families present for each session and the random selection for students. A few students presented twice for the benefit of family schedules.

The Creature Features Publishing Party was very successfully attended by families and the school community, a kindergarten class attended and the school principal. Out of nineteen

students eleven families came out to encourage students. With the addition of the school community, I believe that all students felt assured that their presentations were impactful.

I believe that my goal for students to feel ownership and belief in their critical and reflective abilities was successful. Viewing the publishing party as a culmination of two months of arduous work on a specific project the students were also highly successful. For my transition from classroom instruction into community and family engagement this was a successful event in implementing, adapting, and building my current community and family engagement pilot.

### **What's next?**

I want to work with communities and families so that all students have access to educational opportunities. Through the writing of this synthesis and the CCT program I have recognized the influence that community and family engagement had on my development as a young student. Through those engagement efforts, I learned how to advocate for myself, take ownership of my education, and participate in cultural and social emotional challenges. My community and family engagement pilot encompass all that I have observed and experienced in education. I have seen and personally experienced the importance of engagement efforts on student success.

Teachers should not feel alone in the efforts to educate students. As an educator, I have worked effectively in several schools and organizations in the Boston area. I have developed positive relationships advocating for students and families. I have also worked with educators, administrators, and community partners to obtain resources for the benefit of students. In a community and family engagement role I want to further develop relationships to advocate for student access to educational opportunities.

The community and family engagement pilot described in this synthesis can be adapted with school and organizational support. I hope to obtain a rewarding position advocating for students and families. I believe, and studies have proven, that successful community and family engagement can give more educational opportunities for disadvantaged social groups and thus help society become more equitable economically.

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## **APPENDIX A SCAMPER**

SCAMPER is a mnemonic that stands for:

- Substitute.
- Combine.
- Adapt.
- Modify.
- Put to another use.
- Eliminate.
- Reverse.



## **APPENDIX B LEARNING SPECIALIST JOB DESCRIPTION:**

- Learning Specialist are required to co-facilitate all classes with the teacher
- Support student behavioral needs
- Confer with students during independent work time
- Lead math and ELA small group instruction with students
- Conduct centers
- Breakfast and Dismissal duty at 9:10am and 3:25pm
- K0-K2 lunch duty (lunch break separate)
- Conduct guided reading groups with higher leveled students
- Lead Read aloud
- Collect informal assessment data
- Build routines for learning and socialization
- Efficiently transition students to and from classes and lunch

Preferred candidates for the learning specialist position will:

Passionately care about students

Have experience working with students with social emotional needs

Have tough skin

## **APPENDIX C JOB DESCRIPTION COMMUNITY FIELD COORDINATOR**

The Community Field Coordinator (CFC) will assist with the implementation of the school-wide support and community outreach program. The CFC develops and implements programs and strategies that will establish partnerships and collaborations with community agencies, corporate organizations and families.

Responsibilities:

1. Initiate and develop a marketing plan for the school newsletter and brochures.
2. Establish formal/informal partnerships with community and corporate agencies.
3. Initiate community outreach using appropriate cultural and linguistic strategies.
4. Coordinate events and celebrations including cultural diverse activities that affirm the international heritage of all students and their families.
5. Develop strategies to ensure parent and family involvement in the school.
6. Assist in the coordination of parent/community advocacy and support for the school.
7. Make phone contact with students' parents/guardians.
8. Identify resources collaborators/speakers to facilitate dialogues and presentations for the student body.
9. Initiate and develop corporate partnerships that will provide additional financial and programmatic resources for the school.