

Faith-Based Organizing for School Improvement in the Texas Borderlands: A Case Study of the Texas Alliance School Initiative

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Abstract

This multi-site case study examined the relationships and interactions among school professionals, parents, and a faith-based institution striving to create viable learning communities in the Texas Borderlands. Through a school-community partnership known as the Texas Alliance School Initiative, two sample schools collaborated with the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization, a local faith-based institution, to facilitate parental engagement with the school and to meaningfully connect the school to its community. This yearlong study sought to examine the impact of the Initiative as a conduit for school improvement and constructive partnerships. Qualitative research methods were used to collect and analyze the study data. Results indicate that the Initiative significantly impacted parent leadership, self-confidence, and community activism. School personnel reported strengthened bonds with parents and the community. Parent centers, parent academies, and parent educators were described as integral to the Alliance School concept. Research participants also cited institutional borders, such as contrived collaboration, constrained professional discretion, limited institutional capacity, and conflicting organizational agendas as potential problems with the Initiative.

Key Words: Faith-based organizations, school-community partnerships, learning communities, parental engagement, school leadership, Latino education

Introduction

But governments can and should support effective social services provided by religious people, so long as they work and as long as those services go to anyone in need, regardless of their faith. And when government gives that support, it is equally important that faith-based institutions should not be forced to change their character or compromise their prophetic role.

The preceding statement from a speech given by President George W. Bush to a gathering of religious broadcasters in Tennessee in 2003 exemplifies the current movement toward faith-based organizations assuming a significant role in the revitalization of America's communities. It points to the enduring vitality of the neighborhood church, synagogue, temple, or mosque in service to the people of their communities. It also signals a willingness on the part of the federal government to bring together a diverse array of social institutions whose missions, be it job training, community development, or public education, can be supported by local faith-based organizations (FBO) associated with these diverse faiths.

With the advent of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, promulgated by the Bush administration on January 8, 2002, there are significant, long-term implications for how the public school interfaces with external constituents. Two of its major reform efforts speak directly to the development of viable school-community partnerships both with parents and community organizations. First, with its emphasis on parental participation in the educative mission of their neighborhood schools, the *No Child Left Behind Act* facilitates connections among school constituents. Second, provisions that enable FBO's to function as supplemental service providers for local public schools legitimates their inclusion in the school's educative mission.

The impetus for this study was predicated on this revival, in terms of our common school traditions and sense of democratic renewal, of faith-based support in the education of a community's youth. I believe that in this way, we are renewing our vision of a more communitarian approach to public schooling that was once the lifeblood our first common schools (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Until recently, there have been relatively few studies exploring faith-based organizing in our public schools as a venue to not only enhance student learning, but to also revitalize the community by connecting its social institutions (Epstein, 2001; Hatch, 1998; Shirley, 2002). To inform this evolving knowledge base, this study's overarching goal was to explore the participant perceptions and organizational practices of a school-community partnership between a faith-based, interreligious organization and two public schools in the Texas Borderlands.

Study Setting and Background

The two schools of this multi-site case study, Mountain Vista Elementary and Sombra del Norte Middle Schools, have been in partnership with the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization (EPISO), a local FBO, since the early 1990s. (Note: Both schools and all participants are referred to by pseudonyms throughout this article.) This partnership, called the Texas Alliance School Initiative (TASI), is a purposeful attempt to connect schools with their constituents, with singular emphasis placed on engaging parents in their children's education. Both schools are located in El Paso County and traditionally have Latino enrollments exceeding 90% of the student population. The socio-economic status of the students in the sample schools mirrors many schools in this county, with over 70% of students listed as economically disadvantaged.

Both Mountain Vista Elementary and Sombra del Norte Middle Schools were selected in the early 1990s for participation in TASI through a competitive grant process funded by monies provided by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Certain criteria already manifest in the school are considered as prerequisites for successful implementation of the Alliance School Initiative. Of paramount importance is a willingness on the part of faculty and staff to engage the community in conversations about school reform and governance.

In 1993, TASI initially received 2 million dollars from the Investment Capital Fund managed by TEA. This money is allocated directly to public schools that must apply and compete for this funding. Indicative of the success of the Alliance School Initiative in Texas, funding from TEA for TASI has significantly increased over the last 8 years. The Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (TIAF), which is the state level faith-based organization that sponsors TASI in Texas, worked with legislators to increase TASI funding from 5 million dollars in 1995 to 8 million dollars in 1997. The appropriation of 14 million dollars in 1999 is further evidence that Alliance Schools across Texas are working towards constructive school reform that enhances student academic performance (Rips, 1999).

The Alliance School Initiative: Building Civic Capacity

As part of a larger strategy of community renewal and leadership development, the Alliance School Initiative is part of the systemic approach of the TIAF and its local affiliate EPISO to improve low-income, predominately minority communities across Texas. The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) is the national organization founded by Saul Alinsky in 1940 in an attempt to organize low-income communities in south Chicago and draw public attention

to the city's urban plights of economic malaise, infrastructure deterioration, and social degradation (Finks, 1984).

The IAF sponsors a number of community-based and faith-based organizations across the United States; the TIAF and EPISO are the state and local affiliates, respectively, of the IAF in El Paso, Texas. Regardless of the location, the IAF and its affiliates organize in communities that are economically, politically, and educationally marginalized. From the social injustices of south Chicago in the 1940s to the diminished educational outcomes of Latino students in the Borderlands, the IAF has historically been committed to working with impoverished and neglected communities.

Saul Alinsky actively pushed for a participative democracy as a political process to catalyze civic engagement and create a localized conduit for people to decide what is best for them. Civic engagement, wherein local community members and indigenous social institutions participate in the decisions and activities of relevance to them, is at the heart of the IAF's vision of participative democracy. Enabling the community to address, resolve, and evaluate their own social problems and solutions emboldens the democratic processes in these communities. According to Alinsky (1969), the emplacement of social networks among families, community organizations, and local institutions is a quintessential feature of truly democratic communities:

That kind of approach is actually the only kind that would be truly representative of the people and truly in keeping with the spirit of democracy. A People's Organization actually is built upon all of these diverse loyalties—to church, to the labor union, to the social groups, to the nationality groups, to the myriad other groups and institutions which comprise the constellation of the American way of life. These loyalties combine to effect an abiding faith in, and a profound loyalty to, the democratic way of life. (p. 88)

This approach to social change, be it school reform, community development, or democratic renewal, is rooted in community relationships that bolster the civic capacity of its members to act independently, relying on their local social institutions instead of governmental bureaucracies or politicians. By developing relationships through the social networks and institutional interfaces among families, faith-based organizations, and mediating social institutions, the IAF catalyzes one of its primary objectives “to build the competence and confidence of ordinary citizens and taxpayers so that they can reorganize the relationships of power and politics in their communities, in order to reshape the physical and cultural face of their neighborhoods” (Cortez, 1993, p. 295).

Guiding Principles and Practices of TASI

The TIAF's guiding document on educational reform, *The Texas IAF Vision for Public Schools, Communities of Learners* (Texas Interfaith Education Fund, 1990), stresses the importance of inclusion, participation, and empowerment of all school constituents in their efforts to improve student learning. Central to the TIAF's vision for public schools is the development of attitudes and values that bolster the creation of school and classroom learning communities as a means to promote school improvement and student learning:

We envision that the local "culture" of attitudes, values, and understandings will be characterized by three key orientations: 1) an understanding of the school as a "community of learners," 2) a commitment to empowering parents, teachers and administrators, and 3) a commitment to support children's families. (p. 9)

The success of the Alliance School concept is based on transformations of school authority and relationships wherein:

Principals learn to see themselves not as compliance officers of the district, but as leaders of a team. Teachers learn how to negotiate rules and regulations and contribute their creative ideas to the classroom. Parents become equal decision-makers at the table with teachers, principals and district officials. They are no longer peripheral to changes taking place in their public schools. They have become the true leaders of education reform in their communities. (Rodgers, 1990, p. 5)

To accomplish these ends, TASI provides a range of activities and venues aimed at educating parents, teachers, and the community on how to become leaders and effective advocates of improvement within their neighborhood schools. Through provisions for family education, parent leadership training, and a community-wide organizing ethic, TASI endeavors to build an informed and activist community that is able to make localized decisions about how school improvement and, incidentally, community development should be undertaken.

Parent academies are central to the vision of TASI, which views educating families as imperative to the academic growth of all students. Parent academy training seeks to broaden parents' institutional literacy through classes on student learning, effective teaching practices and research, parental leadership in the school and community, school-community advocacy, child intellectual development, and other related topics. Parent educators, hired at each school from TASI grant money, and EPISO organizers were often the facilitators for parent academy instruction conducted in each school's parent center.

A common thread woven through the content of many parent academies concerned the development of effective school leaders who can carry the banner of school reform to all segments of the community. Creating lay leaders for present and future organizational needs was indispensable to effective organizing in the school. Leadership development included skills associated with identification and recruitment of potential leaders, team building, and the competent use of conversation, negotiation, and compromise.

Parents also received valuable information on how to assist their children's learning at home. As co-educators in the classroom, parents were able to see firsthand how children learn and how instructional methods impact this learning. Through the parent academies, they were able to connect their academy learning experiences with what was ongoing in the classroom. From this, parents were better equipped to assist their children at home with their learning and also to coordinate with the school for additional support when needed.

The parent educators at both schools of this study were veteran teachers who now worked full-time to facilitate student achievement through the activities of the parent academies and other school community venues. Parent educators served to coordinate parent activities at the school, provide family education, facilitate community outreach projects, and visit parents in their homes to discuss individual students. Parent educators served as the focal point for parent engagement at the school, assisting the administration in its efforts to strengthen the school's connection to its parents.

Models of Community Organizing: Building Civic Capacity and Social Capital

School-community partnerships, be they attempted by a community-based organization or a faith-based organization, are described by Crowson and Boyd (1995) as of either the coordinated professional service model or the community development model. These organizational models look to the community and its social, health, and educational institutions for both human capital resources and as a holistic approach to address localized needs and services.

The coordinated services model locates a variety of related social services at the school site. In effect, these become full-service schools that not only provide academic instruction on campus, but medical, social, and economic services as well. The inclusion of non-educational resources through the coordinated services approach blends the disparate social services into a contiguous whole, thereby avoiding fragmented or piecemeal attempts at service delivery to children. Efforts to coordinate and integrate these human services in the school are being touted as essential elements of learning, especially in

poor borderlands communities that lack accessibility to basic health and social services (Cibulka & Kritek, 1996). Accordingly, a major focus of the professional coordinated approach has been how best to facilitate the integration of and collaboration between these social service agencies and the local school.

The community development model focuses on building the human and social capital of disenfranchised neighborhoods. Social capital, as explained by James Coleman (1987), refers to “the norms, the social networks and the relationships between adults and children that are a value for the child’s growing up” (p. 36). Coleman identified three forms of social capital, each contributing to how individuals associate and form relations with the larger community and its indigenous social institutions. The first, social trust, is manifested by long-term relationships premised on mutual commitment to and respect of other group members. Second, access to information, both institutional and cultural, affects how individuals are able to negotiate the bureaucratic infrastructure of both local and distant political, educational, and economic institutions. Third, community norms and sanctions, describes knowledge about the normative practices of a particular community; this knowledge dictates how individuals interact and cooperate as an organization, neighborhood, or public school.

In marginalized communities, the development of social capital is integral to the growth of institutional and community “funds of knowledge” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Stanton-Salazar maintains that there are institutional funds of knowledge that are accessible to middle-class families in support of their child’s education. Conversely, working-class, minority families lack access to these institutional funds of knowledge and, consequently, are unable to use them to their advantage when negotiating institutional support from and access to community institutions such as the public school.

In this same theoretical vein, Enrique Trueba (1998) has contended that the success of Mexican-American adaptations to the novel institutional and cultural networks in the United States is predicated on acquiring “literacy” regarding how social institutions function. According to Trueba, gaining this literacy facilitates “their understanding of complex social systems and their ability to handle text related to those systems (contracts, government documents, banks, hospitals, the immigration office, etc.)” (p. 258). This knowledge allows individuals to more effectively negotiate this system to advocate for various needs.

Community development models invest in the human and social capital of the neighborhood using local knowledge and resources to energize its growth, be it economic, political, or development of infrastructure. This model best represents the philosophy and goals of TASI with its emphasis on educating the individuals of a school’s community so that they in turn can advocate for localized reforms or additional resources in their schools.

Purposes and Significance of the Study

The purposes of this study are threefold. First, the primary intent of this study was to explore the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators regarding the impact of TASI on parental engagement within their schools. Since the expressed objective of the Initiative is to develop and maintain parental engagement within the school, then a focus on how this impacts relationships and interactions among study participants resonates as the guiding principle for this study.

A second purpose of this study was to determine how TASI influenced student learning in the classroom. While student learning can be conceivably influenced (both positively and negatively) by a myriad of school programs and instructional strategies, a broader indication of how the Initiative impacted classroom instruction was desired. In other words, based on the views of parents, teachers, and administrators, this study sought to determine how those involved with the Initiative believed it affected student learning and the resources that support the school.

Finally, the third objective of this study was to explore how the Initiative changed the governance dynamics within the two sample schools. Another goal of TASI was to serve as a catalyst for change from traditional, top-down forms of school governance to those more representative of learning communities. As expressed by several guiding documents of the Initiative, building learning communities within our public schools is essential to affect positive change in the relationships between families and schools, especially minority families. In turn, this will have a sustainable and positive influence on student learning for minority students who have typically experienced failure or sub-standard academic achievement in traditional school settings.

There is an ongoing need for a variety of sustainable school reform approaches to the educational problems and inequities experienced by Latino students in the Texas Borderlands. The urgency for a number of complementary school reforms is manifestly demonstrated by Latino students' historically low academic performance in our public schools, their continued high dropout rates, and their lack of participation in higher education (Fisher, 1998). Standards-based reforms have been pursued in Texas focusing mainly on increased school accountability through standardized testing, on more rigorous teacher preparation and certification programs, and on state-mandated curricular objectives and goals (Educational Economic Policy Center State of Texas, 1998). While these reforms have been hailed as important contributions to the academic success of Latino students, their academic performance

and post-secondary participation remains low when compared to other student populations in Texas (Fisher, 1998).

In El Paso, Texas, and other urban centers with large numbers of low-income, minority families, TASI complements efforts at community renewal and school improvement. Many of these communities have been historically “shut out” of the policy dialogues and decisions regarding their neighborhoods and its institutions. Of greater concern, their silence effectively negates any aspirations or goals of improving their schools or community from within.

Study Methodology

As part of this educational case study, I utilized a triad of qualitative methods to collect and analyze data: open-ended interviews, participant-observations, and document analysis. I chose these naturalistic inquiry strategies in order to provide a comprehensive account of the research setting from the participants’ viewpoint (Eisner, 1998). Utilizing a triad of qualitative methods bolstered this study’s investigative rigor through the triangulation of data sources (Patton, 2002). The qualitative texts produced through these methods allowed for a closer approximation of the social reality as envisioned by the research participants.

Open-ended interviews were conducted with 4 administrators, 12 teachers, and 15 parents from Mountain Vista Elementary and Sombra del Norte Middle Schools. I selected an open-ended interview format to obtain spontaneous and meaningful remarks from the interviewees (Kvale, 1996). Copies of the transcribed interviews and my interview analyses were provided to each research participant. As part of my study’s collaborative research approach (Page, 2000), participants were encouraged to make changes to their interview comments and to my interview analyses that more authentically captured their perspectives and experiences with the Initiative. Interview data were also organized and analyzed using the *ATLAS.ti Visual Qualitative Data Analysis* software (Scientific Software Development, 1997).

I conducted participant-observations to acquire further research data at a variety of TASI meetings, both within the school and the community. I was a participant-observer in 15 parent academies where families received classes on wide ranging topics concerning student learning, school policymaking, and community activism. I also attended monthly school/grade level meetings where parents, teachers, and administrators collaborated on school issues and problems. In the community, I participated in a number of organizational meetings between EPISO and the schools and in other EPISO community meetings where political and developmental concerns were discussed.

As part of the third element of this methodology, I analyzed key Alliance School documents that guided participants concerning the philosophies and practices integral to its success. Selected internal documents and external communications were analyzed for major philosophical themes and guiding principles that informed participants' activities and beliefs (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992). These documents were informal and formal written communications, such as administrative memos, minutes recorded from meetings, statements of philosophy, policy documents, newsletters, and newspaper articles.

Results

School Reform: From Traditional to Alliance Schools

The subsequent analysis of interview comments and fieldwork notes found that research participants believed collaborative relationships are the heart and lifeblood of the Alliance School experience. This was clearly evident in the comments made by the teachers, administrators, and parents who maintained that TASI enhanced their conversations, bonds, attitudes, and personal exchanges. Constance Aguilar, a middle school teacher with 22 years of experience, described TASI as creating a classroom and school that is invitational:

With the Alliance School Initiative some of the first things that we did was make sure that we were very invitational. First thing we did with parents and teachers was to hold round table discussions for our parent night. That was a big shift for us where before in all of my years of teaching parent nights were parents sitting in auditorium style seating and we would stand up and shout information to them. We were really trying to be inviting to the community. It was a very positive thing. And out of that we learned our parents' concerns.

As a way of describing the development of this faith-based initiative at their schools, other research participants also compared past school practices of involving parents and the community with those of TASI. Ana Torrez, another middle school educator with 7 years of experience, credited TASI with increasing parental participation at her school:

I see people like these parents that are so involved and making a difference in the community especially for our kids in this area. The parents come into the school, and they speak to the kids and help us out with whatever we need. The involvement is just unreal here at this school. I think that this all happened because of the Alliance School Initiative; without it, I don't think our relationship with parents would be

as strong. Previously, I don't recall ever seeing any parents here at the school. Compared to now I mean, when we have something having to do with the Alliance Schools, the gymnasium is standing room only. We had never been like that before. This has maybe been in the last two or three years since the Alliance School Initiative started here. This is when we started having really good turnout of parent involvement.

Martha Mann, a middle school administrator, described the changes in school-community relations since the inception of TASI as a transition from traditional school governance to a more collaborative process:

A traditional school, it's very top-down. Ours was traditional in the true sense of the word in that we had those eight or nine classes just like we did four years ago. Decisions were made at the top by the principal and you just did what you are told. You didn't ask questions. You didn't do any training, reading, educating. So, basically, what we started doing in terms of changing the school from a traditional school to an Alliance school is fostering agreements with our community based on common issues, values, and concerns. Building these school-community ties involves the local school, the state agency, for us the Texas Education Agency, the parents, and the family. It also includes the Interfaith organization under the umbrella of the entire community.

Sara Soles, a sixth grade teacher who had been involved with several different Alliance Schools over her 18-year teaching career, made a noteworthy distinction encapsulating the transition of her school from one based on centralized, bureaucratic decision-making to a more decentralized, collaborative undertaking. She intimated at the status of teachers in a traditional school:

I like working with an Alliance School simply because when I started teaching, the places that were not Alliance Schools were extremely traditional, to where teachers didn't make decisions on anything. You were told what to do and that is what you had to do. In other words, as a teacher I felt like I was babysat all of the time, being told what to do and what not to do.

She continued in this vein asserting that parents have also been held to specific, traditional roles in other schools with which she has worked:

I have also worked in those school where parents were not involved. Parents would be kept outside of the school. One thing that I never understood because there was this kind of wall where people had built—this wall between teachers and parents. It was almost like teacher against parents and parent against teacher.

Finally, Sara clarified how the Alliance concept, as facilitated by EPISO, transcended traditional school-community relationships in that teacher education and personal ownership of decisions at the school were paramount:

As I became more involved with the Alliance School Initiative at this school I started noticing the difference of how EPISO started training teachers, taking us to workshops and talking more in a sense of having ownership of the school itself.

This school transformation from traditional school practices to those informed by Alliance School concepts is also evident from participant observations and field notes taken during Alliance School meetings and educational activities at the school site. For example, parents and teachers were represented on various school-based committees, such as the Campus Education Improvement Committee, grade level committees, and ad-hoc school teams/committees assembled for a particular school project or issue. I attended a variety of school meetings where teachers and parents were engaged with a school issue, planning for school functions, or working together on grade level projects. Discussions among parents, teachers, and administrators were often candid and open, indicative of a genuine respect for the ideas of others. Decisions made at these meetings were arrived at through discussion and consensus. There was no vote taking, at least at the meetings I attended, but more of a mutual agreement among the members of that school committee or ad-hoc group.

Alliance Schools: Not a Program—A New Way of Thinking

A number of research participants provided vivid and compelling personal narratives about how TASI transformed the culture and governance dynamics within their schools. They described the processes underlying its concepts and provided personal insights into the novel relationships created among all educational stakeholders as a result of their involvement with the Initiative. Marta Gonzalez, a parent educator at Mountain Vista Elementary School, insightfully described the Alliance School concept:

The Alliance School Initiative is not a...people refer to it as a program. It's not program; it's a new way of thinking; it's a new way of acting. It doesn't come with a teacher's manual by no means. It requires a lot of vulnerability. Going beyond your convictions I guess you would say. And that is the difference. You've got to act on it and when you have a program, you don't have to act on it really. I mean it really acts on you. You pick up the manual and there it is. But, this is not that sort of thing. It is something completely different.

These comments have implications for the types of relationships established through the Alliance School process. Research participants, especially parents and administrators, characterized these school-community connections as positively influencing the interactions and bonds among administrators, teachers, and parents. Authentic, extensive change was especially apparent among parents, who were provided a larger role in the affairs and vision of the school. As a middle school teacher with over 16 years of teaching experience, Pamela Jones described the evolving role of parents and faculty at Sombra del Norte this way:

The Alliance School Initiative has done two things: first, it has provided the training on how to be invitational and how to facilitate conversations between faculty and parents. Secondly, it has also empowered and provided parents the opportunity where they can come in and be assertive and they can almost demand that you sit at the table and answer their questions, and they hold us accountable. So it's between the two things, between us being more educated and parents being empowered, that we have to become invitational.

Parent empowerment was a central component in the relationships established between teachers and parents. Other teachers commented on how parents have become increasingly involved in the classroom, both as volunteers and co-educators. Roberto Cruz, a middle school educator, noted how teacher-parent relations have changed with the advent of the Initiative:

The Alliance School Initiative has helped parents become empowered, how parents can now walk into the classroom and talk to their teacher about concerns, about what is going on in the classroom even if they don't agree with it. Or if they do, that they can sit there and talk to a teacher and have a conversation with that particular teacher and be able to come up with a plan for the student, which is something that I didn't see before.

Carmen Figaro, a fourth grade teacher in her ninth year of teaching, realized how the relationships between teachers and parents benefited from the Initiative:

Well, I try to get parents to go to these Alliance School meetings, and because of that one of the parents that goes is now feeling more comfortable coming into the classroom and saying, "I feel that my son should be challenged here, can you help me challenge my child at home and at school." She would never have been able to say that otherwise. She didn't feel that she had the right because in some communities teachers are considered as a little bit higher than parents because they are the

teacher. So on the part of the parent, I feel that it empowers them to give me input, and as a teacher I need that input. They also feel more comfortable telling me what is happening at home which is important when I am trying to teach. Its just getting them into the classroom is so important to me.

Maria Acio, a veteran elementary school administrator with over 11 years of experience, maintained that her work with TASI changed her expectations about the roles of parents and teachers at her school:

The work with Alliance Schools for me kind of gave me a very different view of what I believe school ought to be about. Its important...in order to improve student achievement that parents be very much part of the process. Alliance Schools have helped me to see that if parents begin to understand more about their role in education that they pretty much begin to see that it isn't just about their role in the school, but their role in life and the model that they can be for their children.

Parents also stipulated that their relationships with the school and its faculty are unlike those experienced in other schools their children attended. Specifically, parents noted that with the Initiative they were petitioned for their opinion on matters dealing with the school and their concerns about the school's instructional program. Yolanda Silva, who has a son attending Sombra del Norte Middle School, compared a traditional parent organization with that of the Alliance Schools:

I know that several times when you attend in a regular school, when you attend a PTA meeting they don't have parent academies, right, they have PTA meetings. When you have the PTA meetings you just receive information, they give you information, but you don't give your opinion. As a parent you don't talk, you just receive all the information. What I noticed with the Alliance School Initiative at Sombra del Norte Middle School is that they were asking the parents questions. What is your opinion? Why are you here? Well, I thought that this is different. This is different from the regular meetings that I was used to going to, and I liked it.

Another parent, Juana Ortega, who has two children at the elementary school, related how involvement with Mountain Vista changed her relationship with the school:

The Alliance School Initiative is about bringing everyone together. And within, I would say, a month or two I saw myself in a different light. I didn't come into this school as just a volunteer. I came into this school

as a partner in my child's education. There was no longer drop them off, I will see you this afternoon. It's no longer just sending her to school and let's see what happens. It's how can I ensure that she is going to get a good education? I found out it's just not the teacher's responsibility. I can have a stake in this too. But I have to be held accountable for what my daughter learns, not just the teachers.

These parents recognized not only changes in the way the school solicited their concerns and opinions, but how they also evolved in response to their heightened parental role in the school. Each of these parents commented on the enhanced personal confidence and growth within themselves and with others because of their involvement with TASI. Each also realized that they have a role to play in their child's education, both within the school and at home. No longer is it strictly the province of the teacher to educate children, but because of the transformation in relationships with the school's faculty, it becomes a collaborative effort among administrators, teachers, and the community.

Parent Education and Leadership

Parent Centers and Parent Academies

A cardinal Alliance organizing strategy to engage and educate parents is through the establishment of parent centers and the use of parent academies. Both the schools of this study provided family education and parent leadership training that enabled families and school faculties/staff to implement and sustain the Alliance School concept.

Rita Palacios, volunteer coordinator at Sombra del Norte Middle School, likens parent education at this school to a "mini-university:"

The Alliance School Initiative is like my mini-university because here is where I learn things like leadership skills, English, and computer skills. I have learned how to write. I have learned how to read better. I have learned all through the Alliance Schools since I was here four years ago. I am not finished learning because I still have trouble writing or putting the reports together. I have to ask questions. But, at least I can write or work on the computer and do a lot of things on my own.

Other parents commented that parent academies helped them with both academic and personal growth in their quest to become school leaders. During parent academies, conversations are encouraged as a means to share diverse perspectives and personal narratives that help parents develop relationships with one another and with school personnel. Alicia Sanchez described her experiences with parent academies as a forum for sharing stories:

We have these meetings for Alliance Schools called parent academies. In the parent academies we were in small groups, and we were talking about our different stories. Somebody was talking about her story, and it sounded like me, the same. I was hearing her and other people, and I was getting the idea like what am I doing? I am not doing anything with my life. With my kids, I am not helping them. That is what helped me a lot because we were in groups, and we were sharing everybody's conversation. Parent academies helped me understand more my role in the school and how I can help the teachers and students.

In large measure, the parent academies served as the primary vehicle for parent education at both of the schools in this study. Parent academies cover a wide spectrum of subjects that are both of interest and value to parents and school faculty. Over the course of this study, I attended 15 parent academies conducted in the parent centers and libraries of both schools. Each parent academy was predominately attended by parents; however on several occasions teachers and administrators were also present. Topics covered during the parent academies included: the theory of multiple intelligence, student learning styles, story reading, Latino economic and cultural issues, and the institutional processes at work in schools and other public institutions.

Educators were not excluded from attending parent academies but were encouraged to participate for the learning experience and to build relationships with the parents of the school. While professional educators are trained in instructional methods, curricular design, and the institutional process of public education, they "often do not have the training or experience in collaborating with parents and communities, especially those of a different culture or economic background" (Texas Interfaith Education Fund, 1990, p. 12).

Parent centers established within the school walls were also central to the success of enhancing parental engagement. These dedicated facilities were used for a diverse range of activities that included parent education classes, Alliance School meetings, and other formal and informal gatherings. As a resource for both parents and teachers, parent centers often contained instructional materials, children's literature, assorted supplies, computers with Internet connections, a telephone, a television, a video cassette recorder, office/classroom furniture, and sundry storage areas. In this way, the parent centers served as both a physical space for parents to occupy and a psychological space for parents to call their own within the confines of the school.

Developing Parental Efficacy and Confidence

One of the most salient and profound themes that emerged from both the participant interviews and the researcher field notes was the absolute

transformation of parents involved with the Alliance School Initiative. Each parent interviewed related an example of a “before and after” scenario which, based on their previous school experiences and activities, they could not believe the things that they are doing now. They spoke of parental leadership development not only at the school site, but in the community as well. Parents would compare their levels of self-confidence and leadership skills, continuously remarking how much they have grown in these areas. Rita Palacios, a parent volunteer coordinator at Sombra del Norte, related how she has changed as a result of her participation in the Alliance Schools:

I started organizing here at Sombra del Norte Middle School, making phone calls, trying to learn English, trying to learn the computer. I am learning, and I know God has something for me and my kids. I really like it. Four years ago I didn't see myself doing this...I would never see myself like that if it weren't for the Alliance School Initiative.

Margarita Alvarez, who has two children attending Mountain Vista Elementary, comments that her leadership skills have been honed through her participation in the learning community of this school:

In my mind, an Alliance School means that it's not only educating the kids, but educating the parents as well through training. I think our individual growth has a lot to do with it—as leaders, as not only school leaders, but community leaders. It feels so good to have other people look up to you and ask you questions in regards to the school. They ask you when they have a problem or whatever, they come to you first.

Parental leadership was a concept that permeated both the stated philosophy and actual practice of TASI at these schools. Parents recognized that TASI provided a multitude of opportunities to contribute to the school's quest to grow as a learning community. Juana Ortega, a parent, provided salient examples of her activities as an advocate for her school, never previously imagining herself interacting with decision-makers on the school board and other legislative bodies in El Paso and the state of Texas:

I have been part of teams going to Austin to speak to senators, to representatives. I never thought I would see myself sitting in the senator's office telling them that we need more money, or we need to save this program because otherwise what is going to happen to our kids? I never saw myself talking in front of a school board at a school board meeting saying, this is what our kids have done, we need to acknowledge it. I never saw myself talking to candidates for school board saying, are you willing to help us keep this at our school? Or even telling them, hey, what are you doing out there? You are not there to help us. You are there

to do what you want to do. You need to start listening to the people who elected you. I never thought I would hear myself tell someone to be quiet and let me finish before he started speaking.

Rita Palacios acknowledged that parent education not only honed leadership skills to be used at the school, but also enabled her to use this knowledge in other community settings. This allowed her to tackle other community issues as the coordinator for a local community-based health organization:

By developing my leadership, EPISO and the Alliance Schools helped me identify the needs in the community. That is why they hired me to be the coordinator for this community-based health organization, because I already had the experiences in the community working with parents, working with youth, and that helped me a lot.

Clearly, parent education had a positive impact on parent self-esteem, institutional knowledge, and the quality of their relations with other parents and faculty. All parents interviewed hailed the education provided them through TASI as integral to redefining their roles as parent leaders in the school. Randy Gomez, one of the few fathers regularly involved with TASI at Sombra del Norte Middle School, touted his new leadership skills and how it has changed his relationships with school faculty:

I have learned more about leadership because they sent me to leadership seminars. We spent some time last year in Dallas at a seminar. We spent a whole week in San Antonio. Both seminars focused on leadership, leadership, leadership, and it was pretty intensive because that is all we talked about for the whole week. At the seminars I learned leadership starts at the bottom, really. They kind of give us leadership skills to talk to other parents, and also with other teachers we can talk more on an eye level. Because a lot of parents feel that teachers are too high to talk to, and some teachers feel that they are too high for any parent to talk to them.

The IAF maintains that “an investment in leadership training is a critical component of successful, effective organizing. The IAF believes strongly in the Iron Rule: ‘Never do for others what they can do for themselves’” (Texas Interfaith Education Fund, 1994, p. 11). The constant development of new leaders ensures that a wide spectrum of community members will be available to maintain momentum and serve as mentors for other potential parent leaders.

EPISO’s Role as a Faith-Based Organization

EPISO proved to be indispensable to the goals and successes of TASI at the sample schools. Without EPISO’s support, both in terms of its organizational

network in the community and the efforts of its community organizers in the school, many research participants believed that an Alliance School learning community would not be possible. EPISO's organizational network provided parents, teachers, and administrators direct access to city and state legislators, local businesses, and higher education institutions. Their untiring efforts to bolster parental engagement with the schools, educate parents and school faculty, and advocate for school reforms or increased school resources were made evident through research observations at the school sites and through participant interviews.

In collaboration with EPISO, school constituents advocated for additional school resources, physical improvements to the school, instructional changes, and other issues relevant to facilitating student achievement. This collaboration with EPISO strengthened the bonds between the school and its community, thereby accumulating valuable social capital through these relationships. By collaborating with EPISO on school issues of relevance, parents and the school faculty were able to use this evolving social trust and cooperation in other community arenas.

EPISO's organizational resources and networks allowed the sample schools unprecedented access to other public and private institutions that impact school reform and student learning. Research participants recognized the importance of EPISO, frequently citing it as indispensable to building lasting relationships among school constituents, be it within the school or between the school and other agencies or organizations. Alicia Marte, a teacher at Mountain Vista Elementary, described the incisive role of EPISO in furnishing community arenas for the creation of school leadership and facilitating "networks of relationships:"

EPISO provides a community arena for activism. For example, we participate in their accountability sessions held in the local community. Now, without the organization providing that arena, then you don't have the capacity to build the leadership potential of the people on campus or the networks of relationships among parents, school faculty, and other community organizations. You need an outside organization that has a different perspective that can challenge your usual way of thinking or the traditional state of affairs in the public school. You need an outside organization that can make you think differently. I don't think [the Alliance School Initiative] can function without the community organization.

Alicia's comments reinforce this study's findings that EPISO played a crucial role in the Alliance School learning communities at both schools. Without its organizational capacity and networks, building viable connections between the school and other community organizations may not have been feasible.

Educators and the Alliance School Initiative: A Narrower Road Traveled?

The newfound growth and involvement of parents initiated concurrent changes in the perception of teachers concerning roles in the school and classroom. Several teachers admitted that their position as the professional educator or the expert in the classroom could alienate some parents. Distinctions in status between teachers and parents, where teachers are the leaders and parents are the followers, were cited as a source of contention that kept parents out of the classroom and consequently out of the school. Conversely, other teachers offered comments that defined the parent's role much more narrowly. These teachers wholeheartedly supported TASI and parental engagement; however, they were not so confident that parents could assume more complex roles dealing with teaching, curriculum development, or discipline management.

Constance Aguilar, a teacher with almost 22 years of service at different schools in El Paso County, had a clear idea of how these new identities for parents, teachers, and administrators impact relationships in the school:

My experience with the Alliance School Initiative has convinced me that the role of all the teachers and the administrators on this campus is to begin to look at how we develop relationships with parents. I think in general most of us have never had a course on how to deal with parents. Most of us assume the teacher is the expert, yet the parent has a lot of expertise, a lot of profound thinking. They have their own ideas and we need to build a relationship with them where we are able to talk to each other and the teacher does not look down on the parent. Where the parent doesn't walk in timid, so the parent has that space, that arena to really question what is going on in the school and classroom.

As a teacher at Mountain Vista, Constance astutely tapped into part of the reason why teachers hesitate to completely involve parents in the classroom, and are consequently disinterested in the Alliance School Initiative:

I think a lot of teachers are very threatened by a parent walking into their classroom and telling them what to do, because after all they supposedly are the experts and parents are not. So it's very threatening for someone to come and tell you my daughter and son need this, so what are you going to do about it? I have seen it here and in other Alliance Schools. Those teachers are the ones that get turned off by it and don't participate.

Anita Charles, a teacher with 10 years of experience at Sombra del Norte, affirmed that the role of parents in the classroom has specific limits. While a

supporter of the Alliance Initiative, she asserted that it's not necessarily a positive thing to have parents determining curriculum or teaching methodologies:

I think that parents have a role in supporting their students. I think they have a role as far as having expectations of what their kids should know or what they should be taught. But, I don't necessarily think that they should be the ones to tell us what our curriculum should be or what strategies or methodologies we should use unless they are up on the research. As teachers, we do a lot of training. We really are the experts. For somebody to come in that doesn't know about curriculum or methodology and try to tell us what we should be doing, no, I don't necessarily think that is a good idea.

These findings suggest teachers, unlike the parents interviewed, are less clear about their role as a collaborator with parents as pursued by TASI. Their role as a public educator is much more complex and fraught with institutional and professional issues not confronted by parents, and in some cases, administrators. Professional preparation and certification lend teachers a certain modicum of authority and expertise difficult to share with parents or the uninitiated. Hence, teachers like Anita Charles understand the importance of involving parents, yet not in the realms traditionally occupied by classroom teachers. Constance Aguilar described this as threatening to teachers, but I would argue that it's more complex than just being threatened by parents. Like the parental education component of TASI, teachers require additional training and experience collaborating with parents in the classroom, school, and community. Without this professional development in and experience with collaborations, it would seem highly problematic for teachers to be actively engaged in the school's learning community.

Another finding of this study was that some teachers didn't entirely understand the rationale or goals of TASI. For some educators, their role in and general understanding of TASI seemed vague or not necessarily part of their professional responsibility. Conversely, other teachers readily understood the relevance and urgency of building learning communities in the school.

When asked about her involvement with TASI, Patricia Ramos, a third year teacher at Mountain Vista, replied:

I really don't know what [EPISO] is trying to do exactly. I understand that they are teaching us that we should be better educators, and they are trying to train us on that, ok. But, with the parents, what are they trying to do with the parents? Tell them to help us? Ok, but I am lost after that.

Ana Torrez, a teacher with 7 years of experience at Sombra del Norte Middle

School, indicated that building TASI learning communities is a process that should be specifically connected to the life of the classroom:

I'll be honest with you, for the first few years I really didn't understand what it was all about, and I know that we are an Alliance School. I know that we got a grant that helps send parents to training, and it's an initiative trying to get parents involved with the school. I know the IAF is just an organizing group that tries to organize the community and the schools and bring them closer together. But, I didn't know that until this summer. I'll be honest with you, I thought it was kind of a bad deal because they were really pushing us to participate. We were participating, but none of the teachers, as far as I could tell, really understood what our purpose was, what our goals were. We knew that we were supposed to be helping them out, but we really didn't know what our role was.

My own participant-observations of parent academies revealed that, even though well attended by parents, there were few teachers in attendance. To ensure accessibility, parent academies were conducted in the morning and early evening at both schools. On several occasions teachers led parent academies, however on average they did not attend them in large numbers. This is of significant consequence since much of what TASI is about, its vision and practices, are presented at these meetings. Without teacher representation at these academies, it is doubtful this information will be available to them.

Teachers also perceived getting educators to "buy in" and become engaged was paramount to TASI success at their schools. Some teachers felt that engagement with the community was not their province, nor should they be compelled to participate in non-academic activities. Meanwhile, other teachers embraced their role as community activist and believed teachers should be involved both at the school and within the community. Anita Charles recounted her experience of having to involuntarily attend Alliance School meetings that she believed were not part of her role as an educator:

We were forced on several occasions to attend these Alliance School meetings, after school, outside of school, beyond our contract with no reimbursement whatsoever, but were told we had to be there. And so I think a lot of the teachers took that as meaning, hey, wait a minute, this isn't something that is part of my job description, and you are telling me that I have to do it. I think that they approached it in the wrong way, and so a lot of teachers backed away from it at that point.

Another veteran teacher at the middle school, Pamela Jones, stipulated that teacher engagement with the community should be voluntary and not mandated by the school or other community-based organizations:

I think the Alliance School Initiative is helping us, along with the parents and the community, to become more involved. But, I don't want people telling me that I have to do anything. Like we had to go to that assembly last year, we had to. I know that a lot of my colleagues called the local teacher union and asked, "why are we having to do this?" I don't think that we should have to go. I don't think that should be part of our job or what we should be doing as teachers. I think we should go if we want to or if we are an involved community person, but I don't think we should have to go.

Based on these study results, a number of teachers are unclear about the roles and responsibilities assumed when they are part of TASI. Additionally, there are concerns by some teachers about whether they should be involved in activities external to the classroom, especially those that are in the community outside the province of the school and academics.

Borders to Faith-Based Organizing

A number of research participants made assertions that EPISO's political agenda, religious affiliation, and aggressive approach created borders between the school and this faith-based institution. First, some participants questioned if the school, as a public institution, should be a location for political activism that is sometimes divisive and partisan. Second, EPISO's religious affiliation, mainly with several Catholic churches in El Paso, was viewed as an encroachment on the legal separation of church and state and on the school's identity as being unaffiliated with any church denomination. And third, some research participants maintained that EPISO's aggressive, uncompromising approach to educational reform and community engagement served to alienate them.

Teachers and administrators were especially concerned with the role of EPISO in the school and how it attempted to organize educators and parents according to its agenda. Several teachers commented that EPISO, while endorsing conversation and negotiation as a primary vehicle for positive reform and engagement, has its own agenda to which all others must comply. Carmen Figaro complained that EPISO wants to control, not enable educators:

I have my concerns about EPISO because it has an agenda. When they ask you for your thoughts they really don't want them. They want you to say what they want you to say, therefore you are programmed, and they are looking more for a marionette rather than a thinker. I joined EPISO because it looked like a group of thinkers. But, after observation, I noticed that it was a group of puppets in my eyes.

Carlos Castro candidly remarked that teachers are often hesitant to get involved with any political activity, not just those of EPISO, which may be identified with them or their school. He contended that teachers, as public servants, must be cautious about endorsing anything, be it political or otherwise, in their role as public educators:

Remember, we are state employees, and we have to be very careful in terms of how politically active we become in our school or in our role as educators. I believe that is one of the concerns that the teachers have on this campus, and it's not so much about the Alliance Schools, but more focusing on the activities of EPISO. Some of the labors that they have brought within the El Paso community are very important, yet people are sometimes hesitant with having their name associated with EPISO because of the controversial backlash that it has had at times. They think, why do I need to get involved with the colonia water problem in the valley? Or who is on the school board? I can't endorse some of their issues. That is like cutting my own throat.

In line with these comments, Roberto Cruz explained that EPISO's reputation as a politically active organization in the community, for better or worse, precedes it. He stated that EPISO's reputation as a political and religious organization, whether accurate or not, becomes associated with it:

I think that EPISO doesn't have a very good reputation. When you start talking to people or teachers in particular about EPISO, politics comes to their minds or religion or things like that. And that is the first thing that teachers are wary of, it's too political, or it's a religious organization.

Teachers were not alone in their belief that EPISO has its own agenda of which public education is only a part. Administrators also expressed concerns about the political agendas and religious affiliation of EPISO and how it impacted their schools. Martha Mann understood that schools are highly political institutions and that she must use this to constructively govern the school. However, this is a lesson hard-learned and initially she was hesitant about getting involved with political issues:

I remember when I first got started as an administrator I really wanted to get parents involved through the Initiative, but I didn't want my school associated with politics. I don't want to be on the front page of the newspaper. I don't want to see my name in print. I want to be in the background running my school. So, I don't want to be political.

This same administrator, while recognizing the omnipresence of politics, also clarified that she would be cautious to associate her school with a particular political agenda:

You take a particular issue like Walk for the Vote concerning the school board elections coming up. I am not going to ask my faculty to go to a political action. I am not going to put something like that in writing. It is very politically controversial. I never speak of being affiliated with EPISO. It is just the smart thing to do. EPISO wants to be tough and they want to be in your face. Yet, we are responsible for how the school looks.

Maria Acio also explained why teachers and administrators may be reluctant to participate in TASI or other EPISO activities. She offered that it has been her experience that educators want a role in educational issues, but not necessarily in other, albeit important, community issues:

[The Alliance Schools] and EPISO are about improving the quality of life in a community. I think that [educators] are more ready to respond when it's issues of education. Perhaps they are not as involved with the job training aspect, even though they would like to see their students' families able to do more for themselves. There are teachers that will not be part of EPISO. I think philosophically they have the same values; it is what they would want to see happen for kids and parents. Yet, they don't want to be part of EPISO in that sense.

Lastly, concerning EPISO's religious affiliation, Esteban Hernandez, a veteran administrator with over 12 years of administrative service, admitted he believed that the public school and the church, be it a faith-based organization or otherwise, should remain separate entities, each with its own agenda and turf. He argued that the church has no business in politics and the school should not be associated with a particular political ideology or its activities:

I strongly feel that the church has no business playing politics. The church is for spiritual growth, not political matters. I have a problem walking into a church and hearing about politics. I would be offended by a church telling me who I should vote for. I think that sometimes EPISO uses the [Alliance Schools] to show politicians their power. There are not other churches involved with the Alliance Schools, just the Catholic Church.

While EPISO, as its title suggests, is an interreligious organization, the Catholic Church was often the only religious institution to actively participate in EPISO events and support its agenda in the schools and community. There was a standing invitation and regular solicitation of other faiths to involve themselves with EPISO; however, there appeared to be little interest on their part in doing so.

EPISO's role as an interfaith organization also elicited these comments from

Martha Mann who explained that it created confusion about the separation of the church from the governance of the school:

I think even the fact that it's the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization, the word interreligious is just like waving a red flag in front of a bull. People feel like they don't want the Catholic Church running the school.

The interfaces between the public school and a community or faith-based organization can create both bridges and borders to school-community partnerships. The agendas, professional practices, and organizational activities of either the school or the community organization can be at odds and thus make collaboration, if not controversial, then highly complex. Faith-based organizations, such as EPISO, advocate and work for community revitalization and citizen empowerment, a seemingly congruent mission of the public school. However, educators may not either understand or be willing to get involved with the politics necessary to realize these goals.

Discussion of Results

Parents as School Advocates

The growth of parental engagement at Mountain Vista Elementary School and Sombra del Norte Middle School is a direct result of their participation with TASI. Parent reports of enhanced self-esteem, increased confidence in public speaking, and a broadened knowledge base all speak to their growth as leaders. Their role as a traditional volunteer in school affairs has evolved into one of being a learner with teachers and administrators, an educator in the classroom, and a school advocate in the community.

The recent histories of both Mountain Vista and Sombra del Norte are replete with examples of how parents, teachers, and administrators collaboratively decided what they wanted for the school and together obtained it. At Mountain Vista, parents and teachers on the Campus Education Improvement Committee identified what one teacher called "non-negotiables," those priorities that would not be compromised regardless of the obstacles that lay before them. The parents of Mountain Vista Elementary saw a need for an after-school program to provide a safe and enriching place for their children to go after school. Parents and teachers found funding for an after-school program by combining their Alliance School grant with other district funding.

Parents also played a large role in determining the types of enrichment activities offered during the after-school program. While academics and student tutoring were considered important elements of the after-school program, the

parents at Mountain Vista indicated they wanted a variety of enrichment activities for their children. Consequently, the after-school program offers classes on dance, music, and the arts, as well as student tutoring.

At Sombra del Norte Middle School, parents took a proactive role in decision-making at the school and as advocates for the school in the community. The acquisition of computer technology for all students was the rallying cry for Sombra del Norte parents, who understood the expanding role that technology plays in the success of their children. A corps of parents at Sombra del Norte organized several hundred other parents and community members to attend a series of school board meetings demanding that resources be made available for study probes (laptops) for each student. These laptops are connected to the Internet through wireless technology in each classroom and within select hallways throughout the school. Both Mountain Vista and Sombra del Norte are among the few schools in El Paso County that have study probes and wireless access designed to provide each student with daily interaction with computer technology and information literacy.

As leaders in the community, parents become school advocates who can solicit, cajole, or demand that resources be made available to the school. The school faculty must realize that not only are parents integral to improving student learning at home, but also as advocates who can enhance public perceptions about the school or act as solicitors for needed school reforms or resources. Establishing strong, resilient relationships between the faculty and parents is a worthy goal in and of itself, with manifold potential to impact student learning, school resources, and public relations.

In each of the previous examples, EPISO also played a large role advocating for these additional resources and facilities for both schools. I attended several EPISO accountability sessions where parents, teachers, administrators, and other concerned citizens queried local officials concerning their support for school improvements. Recurring topics discussed over the course of several accountability sessions included local governmental support for new school facilities, technological improvements, after-school programs, and a scholarship fund to provide graduating district students access to higher education. As such, EPISO accountability sessions provided a community venue for schools to petition other government and community-based organizations to support localized, constructive change in the school and the neighborhood it serves.

Parents as School Leaders and Co-Educators

The findings of this study amply demonstrate that the activities and approaches of TASI have initiated corresponding changes in the parent

engagement activities at the sample schools. Parents have not only become more active in their role as school volunteers, but have assumed new roles as school decision-makers and leaders. These results portray the rich variety of parent activities in the sample schools from the most basic forms of parent-teacher communication to the highly complex collaborations bridging the school to other community resources in support of student learning.

Parental leadership progressively evolved with the formal and informal education of parents at the school site and within the community. Parent, family, and community education about institutional processes and policies enabled them to better negotiate the bureaucratic intricacies of the public school. Parents and family members who can speak in institutionally sanctioned discourses are better positioned to effectively tackle school decision-making and policy implementation. Their knowledge of shared school governance and the institutional texts that guide it should be developed if parents and community members are to constructively participate as school leaders. It is incumbent upon individual schools and districts to promote parent access to information that heretofore has been the domain solely of a school's faculty and administration.

The new leadership roles undertaken by parents in the school and community have manifest implications for educational leadership in the Texas Borderlands. Parent and faculty participation on school committees, such as the Campus Education Improvement Committee and grade level committees, facilitated the positive evolution of parental engagement with matters dealing directly with student learning. Without these venues for diverse forms of engagement in school governance, parents and educators are unlikely to acquire ownership for school decisions. Seymour Sarason (1997) characterizes this form of institutional participation as the political principle, which asserts that decision-making should be undertaken at its most representative and local level. In essence, those individuals most impacted by their decision outcomes should be involved in the decision-making or policymaking process. Clearly, parent representation on school committees enhances their voice, thereby legitimating their roles as leaders in the school and fulfilling the precepts of the political principle.

Engaging parents as leaders of educational reform requires a genuine shift from some of the more traditional school governance strategies. While standards-based reforms, teacher professionalism, and school-based management are noteworthy efforts to affect positive changes in school governance, the inclusion of parents in the vision of school reforms provides important guideposts to follow in this journey toward representative, sustainable reform. Without addressing the needs, aspirations, and values of the community, the

public school effectively silences its most important partner in its quest to educate children. The support and participation of parents provides the requisite guideposts that give these reforms meaning and direction. Principals and teachers still have a voice in the conversations and decisions regarding school reform; however, collaborative institutional roles and processes require that they become participants in, not directors of, these reform efforts.

Parent involvement in the classroom must also reflect their new role as school leader and classroom co-educator. As demonstrated in the results of this study, their new sense of self-efficacy accentuated parent self-confidence and potency as a co-educator in the classroom. By directly involving themselves in the learning activities of the classroom, parents realized that they no longer were limited to basic volunteer activities often not connected to student learning. Direct interaction with students in the classroom, such as tutoring, co-teaching, or coaching, transformed parents into active members of the evolving Alliance School learning community.

Faith-Based Organizing in Public Institutions

Faith-based organizing for the teacher participants of this study held both promise and pitfalls. The conflicting roles as the classroom authority, academic expert, and community constituent placed them in a difficult position as a member of the Alliance School learning community. They, like administrators, have to share meaningful aspects of their professional discretion and authority in order to accommodate the new role of parents as leaders in the school. Instilling an ethic of shared leadership, with parents, teachers, and administrators undertaking the complex governance of the school, is integral to the vitality of parental engagement and consequent enhancements to student learning.

There were also concerns expressed by a number of research participants about the conflicting agendas and strategies used by the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization in relation to the traditional educative mission of the public schools. Parents, teachers, and administrators asserted that EPISO's political agenda, religious affiliation, and aggressive approach created borders between the school and this faith-based institution. These borders have ostensive ramifications for any public school endeavoring to partner with a faith-based organization, even one such as EPISO that is interdenominational and, hence, not beholden to any one religion or church. Educators, especially administrators, must be cognizant of the legal and cultural implications that associations with an FBO may generate in their respective schools. By publicly associating their schools with an FBO, they can potentially call into question the legal separation of church and state. Fears of proselytizing and of

associating the school with a particular faith or with sometimes contentious, polarizing social issues were cited as real and potential difficulties with FBO's and their involvement with the public schools.

Administrators and teachers must understand how the FBO will contribute to the mission of the school. There must be a direct, assessable connection between the services provided by the FBO and how these will promote student learning. This being said, it is incumbent upon these administrators, teachers, and informed parents to make this evident throughout the school community. Connections between the school and other community institutions, be they secular or interdenominational, that visibly improve the resources available to enhance student learning or quality of life are defensible. Educators need not shrink from defending faith-based linkages that provide venues for school improvement benefiting all students regardless of their ethnicity, faith, or economic standing.

The Alliance School Initiative provides a unique glimpse into faith-based organizing to enhance parental engagement and student learning in our public schools. School-community partnerships have been pursued by a variety of private organizations and public institutions in a multitude of settings and contexts. Understanding how these various programs, policies, and practices impact the public school and its constituents should prove useful to school practitioners, educational researchers, and government agencies. Further research that examines the potential and pitfalls of school-community partnerships under the spectrum of different community settings and institutional contexts is vital to the creation of a distinctive knowledge base of best practices.

An evolving understanding of how faith-based organizing can best support student learning and community renewal is especially paramount in low-income, politically inexperienced communities, such as those that punctuate the landscape of the Texas Borderlands. If we are to truly embrace sustained school improvement in communities striving for self-renewal, we must understand how mediating institutions, such as the public school and local faith-based organizations, can work together to further this end.

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