

# Challenges Balancing Collaboration and Independence in Home–School Relationships: Analysis of Parents’ Perceptions in One District

*Carolyn L. Wanat*

## Abstract

Research has documented the important role that parental involvement plays in children’s learning. Yet, it can be challenging for schools to establish appropriate relationships with parents. Is there an optimal balance of collaborative and separate relationships between parents and schools? Twenty parents in one K-12 public school district in the U.S. participated in semi-structured interviews to share their perceptions of ways in which their children’s schools encouraged their involvement or created barriers that discouraged them from taking an active role through communication, volunteering, and other school-sponsored activities. Parents who had both positive and negative experiences with schools shared their opinions. This study is organized around themes from parents’ comments: types of involvement that parents found meaningful; ability of all parents to contribute to schools; parents’ involvement in decisions about student learning, curriculum, and classroom policies; and home–school relationships. Epstein’s (2001) six types of parental involvement and the theories of social networking and influence provide a framework to explain the different experiences of parents who were satisfied and those who were dissatisfied. Satisfied parents’ involvement focused on school activities and policy decisions, and they tended to have networks that led to greater influence of school practices, while parents who were dissatisfied with home–school communications valued involvement with their children at home. Implications for greater involvement of parents is discussed.

Key Words: parental involvement, home–school relationships, communication, social, influence, parents, networking, collaboration, schools, perceptions

## Introduction

Parents' collaborative relationships with schools have a positive impact on academic achievement. Extensive research has documented parents' critical role in children's school success (Epstein, 2001; Henderson, 1987; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Establishing relationships between families and schools is an ambiguous process. Lightfoot (1978) labeled parents and teachers as "worlds apart" because they had different, often conflicting feelings and responsibilities for children. Ogawa (1996) noted that schools "bridge and buffer" themselves from "uncertainties that parents might introduce" (p. 3). Yet, Comer (1980) advocated for parental involvement in decision-making and advisory roles to bring parents and teachers together. Epstein (1990) described interactive relationships between home, school, and community as having "overlapping spheres of influence" (p. 100) on children. Other researchers have identified challenges establishing collaborative home–school relationships, among them parents' balancing work lives and school involvement (Smrekar, 1996), teachers' sharing power with parents (Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997), and schools' overcoming bureaucratic structures that hinder collaboration (Henry, 1996). Educators acknowledge the importance of reconceptualizing home–school collaboration (Crowson, 2003) to recognize and include heterogeneous characteristics and abilities of parents (Goldring, 1990).

A qualitative discussion of parents' influence on other parents' involvement complements quantitative studies of parent groups (Griffith, 1998; Sheldon, 2002). Studies of parent–school partnerships that use parent groups as the unit of analysis show improved student attendance (Sheldon, 2007), greater parental involvement (Sheldon, 2005), and more parent participation on decision-making committees (Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004).

This paper describes parents' perspectives about their involvement in school-related activities and participation in policy decisions in one K-12 school district. The specific research question that guided this study was: Is there an optimal balance of collaborative and separate relationships between parents and schools? I defined an optimal balance as occurring when parents and school professionals respect one another's knowledge, identify areas for collaboration, and recognize their unique roles to help children. Due to different characteristics, talents, and areas needing improvement, optimal balance is dependent upon each school's circumstances. I was interested in discovering what parents perceived as incentives and barriers to their involvement. I interviewed parents,

conducted a focus group of Parent Teacher Association (PTA) officers, and observed activities that involved parents. In this paper, I describe types of parental involvement; parents' perceptions of their ability to contribute; participation in decisions about student learning, curriculum, and classroom policies; and home-school relationships. I conclude with a discussion of parents' relationships with one another that influenced involvement.

## Theoretical Framework

Three theories provided perspectives to explain parental involvement in this district: Epstein's (2001) framework of six types of involvement, social networking theory, and social influence theory.

Epstein's (2001) framework provides a structure to categorize specific ways parents were involved in school-related activities. Based on extensive research, Epstein's (2001) framework delineates six types of parental involvement. Type 1, parenting, focuses on an appropriate home environment for children to be successful students. Type 2, communicating, stresses effective school-home and home-school communications about school programs and children's progress. Type 3, volunteering, recruits and organizes parent volunteers at school. Type 4, learning at home, educates families to help children with homework and other curriculum-related activities. Type 5, decision making, encourages parents to participate in school decisions as parent leaders and representatives. Type 6, collaborating with the community, calls for integrating community resources and services to create stronger school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. All six types of involvement were present in this district, but parents varied in practicing them.

Social network theory explains relationships between parents and parent groups. Adults use social networks to secure benefits, or social capital, for children's upbringing (Coleman, 1987; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2001). Middle class parents typically relate as a collective unit to schools in contrast to working class and poor parents who are less likely to form social networks (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2000, 2003). In this district, active PTA members had well-defined social networks of middle class and working class parents. Apparently, class did not account exclusively for parents' decisions to be involved in PTA.

From social network theory, concepts of network density (McNamee & Miller, 2004) and structural holes (Burt, 2001) helped describe the structure and influence of parents' social networks. Network density exists when members have strong, multiple ties with other group members. Individuals in structural holes establish and actively maintain ties with individuals who do

not have ties with one another. Besides being connected to principals, teachers, and other parents, parents occupying structural holes were well connected in their neighborhoods, churches, and community organizations and used their connections to support schools.

Rashotte (2007) defines social influence as changing individuals' "thoughts, feelings, or behaviors as a result of interactions with other individuals or groups" (p. 4426). Individuals make real change in their feelings and behaviors after interacting with others viewed to be similar, desirable, or expert (Rashotte, 2007). Individuals are influenced by the majority. Two areas of social influence theory help describe parent leaders' influence in this district: minority influence (Nemeth & Kwan, 1987), and expectation states theory (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980).

Minority influence occurs when a subgroup tries to change the majority (Rashotte, 2007). Every member of a group can influence others, particularly if the minority group is consistent in its presentation to the majority (Rashotte, 2007). Minority groups often provide more creative thinking and better solutions to tasks (Nemeth & Kwan, 1987). Parents who networked were a subgroup that influenced school activities and policies. Principals and the superintendent responded more favorably to parents' suggestions for change when they spoke as a group. Active, well-organized building PTA organizations had greater influence than individual parents.

Expectation states theory (Berger et al., 1980) proposes that group members develop expectations about performance of all group members that guide and maintain group interaction. Logically, members for whom others hold high expectations will be most influential in group interactions (Rashotte, 2007). Influential parents were expected to express values and concerns of parent groups to school leaders.

## Design

This single-site case study (Yin, 2003) describes involvement of parents who had both positive and negative experiences with their children's schools. To explore parents' perspectives about how schools encouraged or discouraged involvement, I collected data in a district in which there existed both strong support and harsh criticism of the schools.

## Setting

Rolling Hills (pseudonym) was a white working class community. Diversity was by social class, specifically occupation and income. Working class parents were employed at the manufacturing plant in town, fast food restaurants, or as

service providers. Middle class parents commuted to professional positions in the nearest city or were plant managers.

Rolling Hills School District included one senior high, one middle school, and five elementary schools. The district supported parental involvement, having adopted the first policy in the state that advocated parents' representation on district and building committees. Committee guidelines stated, "Parents should be included on appropriate committees." Parents had representation on school improvement teams.

PTAs were active and well-organized. Building PTAs volunteered in classrooms and sponsored events to support schools, including open houses, carnivals, and game nights. Money earned from fundraising provided special classroom activities and field trips. The Citywide PTA Council, consisting of all building PTA officers, met monthly to plan district events, including Reading Is Fundamental days and Families on the Right Track month, and to establish partnerships with local businesses and community groups. Citywide PTA sponsored community-wide family events, including free Saturday movies and "make your own sundae" Sundays. Officers spent considerable time on PTA with several holding offices in state and national PTA.

In contrast to PTA, other residents failed to support schools. Rolling Hills had not passed a bond referendum in 30 years. Having launched an aggressive bond campaign, the district was reaching out to the community through brochures, telephone calls, public meetings, and building tours. Radio and television announcements encouraged voters to support bonds to renovate old facilities and to add classrooms to overcrowded buildings. Bonds passed by a narrow margin. Working class individuals felt schools were adequate. One factory worker expressed a common attitude. Attending a tour of high school classrooms scheduled for remodeling, he commented, "I went to school here. It was good enough for me. This is going to raise my taxes."

Two community groups were displeased with the district's curriculum. Members of a conservative church who had mounted an unsuccessful campaign to gain representation on the school board had enrolled their children in a religious school in a nearby community. Other parents homeschooled 65 children, a large number compared to other districts in the state. Speaking of these two groups of parents, one board of education member commented, "A certain contingency is strongly committed to being involved in educating their children, but have not found the public schools to be their first choice." Rolling Hills included supportive parents and others who felt no commitment. Given these different attitudes, I thought parents would express various perceptions about ways that schools encouraged and discouraged involvement.

## Methods

Data collection included interviews with parents and observations of building and district activities that exemplified parental involvement.

### Interview Participants

Parents participated in semistructured interviews about their perceptions of parental involvement in the district. Using purposive sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), I asked the superintendent and seven building principals to recommend parents for interviews. To get a district-wide perspective, I requested names of two parents from each school, totaling 14 parents, who would be comfortable expressing their views about parental involvement. I was successful in getting permission from 13 parents to interview them. These parents provided rich data about benefits of being involved in the schools. Because their experiences had been positive, they did not have comments about barriers to involvement. To get a balanced view, I requested a second list of parents, specifically asking principals to nominate parents who had made formal complaints or who had difficulty working with teachers. From the second list of 14 parents, I interviewed 7 individuals. While all 14 parents verbally agreed to be interviewed, 7 parents asked to have interviews rescheduled until the time for data collection had ended or did not keep appointments. Results reported here are based on interviews with 13 parents who had positive experiences and 7 parents whose experiences were negative.

### Interview Procedures

I interviewed parents at a time and place convenient for them. Some parents asked me to come to their homes, while others preferred meeting at the school, their place of work, or a fast food restaurant. Use of a semistructured interview guide ensured that interview data were comparable for analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Using open-ended questions, I asked parents to describe involvement in their children's schools and to identify ways Rolling Hills schools encouraged or discouraged them from becoming involved. I asked parents to discuss benefits to children from parents' involvement and to talk about situations in which parental involvement would be undesirable. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, ranging from 45 minutes to one hour and 45 minutes. Assured participation was voluntary and confidential, parents openly shared their perceptions. Interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy.

## Observation Procedures

To triangulate interview data with actual parental involvement practices (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), I observed seven events in Rolling Hills schools that included parents. Principals and parent interviewees recommended activities. I attended three elementary PTA meetings, a high school parents' meeting and building tour, a classroom open house, a district family science night, and a Citywide PTA Council meeting. Observational data made me aware of relationships between parents and teachers. Parents who had been nominated for interviews were active at several events and often had friends who were teachers in the district.

## Analysis Procedures

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After interviews were transcribed and observations were written up, I coded each piece of data line by line, developing codes from language participants used and from interview probes. Next, I compared codes across interviews and observations to collapse, expand, and refine codes (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Then I compared coding categories for parents with positive and negative experiences to note similarities and differences in perspectives. Results are based on major themes that emerged from this coding process.

## Limitations

The small number of interview participants and observations makes it impossible to generalize results beyond this district. However, the study's original intent to describe a balance of collaborative and separate relationships was achieved in hearing parents describe their satisfaction or frustration with involvement. Findings suggest areas of consideration to establish collaborative relationships in other settings.

Another limitation is potential for researcher bias that exists in qualitative research (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). As Eberly, Joshi, and Konzal (2007) point out, it is important for researchers to examine their own personal histories as they examine others' perspectives. I have been an educator, first a high school teacher and now a college professor, my entire career. I also come from a working class family of European American descent. As I interviewed participants, I found myself relating to working class parents who were frustrated and professional parents who were pleased with collaborations. I think my working class background and professional perspectives helped me establish rapport with participants and remain objective as I listened to their stories.

## The Parents

Interviewees included parents of varied backgrounds. This section provides an overview of participants' sociological characteristics, family backgrounds, involvement in schools, and children's school performance.

### Sociological Characteristics

All interviewees were White. Several parents were life-long residents who attended Rolling Hills schools. Participants' lack of racial diversity and experience outside the district reflects the community's stability. The 13 satisfied parents included one father and 12 mothers; the seven dissatisfied parents included one father and six mothers.

Social class of interview participants included a broad range of educational attainment and occupation. Both supportive and disgruntled parents included high school, college, and vocational levels of education. Of 13 satisfied parents, four had college degrees and nine had high school degrees. Of the nine high school graduates, five had vocational training. Three of the seven dissatisfied parents were college educated; the other four were not.

Parents were employed in working class and professional positions. Nine satisfied parents were working class; four were professionals. Nine satisfied parents worked outside the home. Working class occupations included manager of a fast food restaurant, barber, church secretary, factory worker, farmer, classroom aide, and office employee. Professionals among satisfied parents included a church youth director/teacher, two nurses, and a business owner. Two satisfied college-educated parents were staying home with young children. Four dissatisfied parents were working class; three were professionals. The three dissatisfied professional parents included the pastor of the conservative church, a nurse, and a human resources director who was staying home with four young children. Working class dissatisfied parents included a beautician and retail store employee. Two dissatisfied participants did not discuss employment but were described by the superintendent as "blue collar." Administrators identified three of seven professionals and four of 13 working class parents as having challenged the school.

### Family Background

Participants had family members who were teachers. Of 13 satisfied parents, five had parents and siblings who were teachers. The satisfied father had a brother who was a high school principal. Of seven dissatisfied parents, four had siblings who were teachers. Based on participants' comments, all parents with teachers in their families understood challenges their relatives faced, but

these relationships did not help dissatisfied parents understand teachers' lack of cooperation.

Participation of interviewees' parents in school activities (when those interviewed had been students) varied, but did not appear to affect satisfied parents' involvement. Both satisfied and dissatisfied parents had mothers who were active, while other participants in both groups reported that their mothers either could not be involved because they had to work or chose not to be involved. Satisfied parents included PTA officers: four currently were PTA presidents, and four were past presidents. All but one satisfied parent volunteered regularly. Of seven dissatisfied parents, none were PTA officers or active volunteers though three had volunteered in the past. Their frustrations with the schools had led them to quit volunteering. Twelve of 13 satisfied parents talked about working with other parents in PTA or other activities; two dissatisfied parents talked about working with other parents.

### **Participants' Children**

Interviewees had children at all three school levels: 14 had children in elementary schools, two in middle school, and four in high school. Satisfied parents included nine at the elementary level, one at middle school, and three at high school. Five dissatisfied parents had elementary-aged children, one a middle school child, and one a child in high school. Parents of older children shared stories of involvement at all grade levels.

Most parents talked about their children's school success. Only two satisfied parents had children with special needs, but four dissatisfied parents had children with special needs identified through testing. Satisfied parents thought the school had responded appropriately to help their children, while dissatisfied parents were frustrated with the schools' response. The remaining 14 participants stated that their children did well or excelled in school.

## **Results**

Data are organized by general themes from the interviews. Parents described types of involvement in school activities and the ability of all parents to contribute. Participants thought parents should be involved in decisions about student learning, curriculum, and policies that affected classroom visits. Relationships with teachers and principals encouraged parents' involvement or sent the message that they were not welcome.

### **Types of Parental Involvement**

Parents thought their involvement helped children, and participants wanted to know, in the words of participants, "what's going on" in the classroom.

Satisfied and dissatisfied parents disagreed on meaningful involvement. Satisfied parents described meaningful involvement as occurring at school; dissatisfied parents valued involvement with children at home.

Satisfied parents thought involvement meant volunteering at school and in PTA. They welcomed opportunities to volunteer. PTA officers said involvement gave them a “sense of worth.” Being at school allowed them to observe children’s social relationships and, if needed, an opportunity to request additional assistance. Working parents, including an office manager and her husband who worked nights, arranged their schedules so they could volunteer on lunch breaks or eat with their children. Some parents felt “pressured” to do more. One PTA president-elect at an elementary school told the principal she was “very concerned that [she] was not volunteering more” even though she volunteered daily. She was a professional woman staying home with young children and spent several hours at the school each week.

Dissatisfied parents rarely volunteered, concentrating on involvement in their children’s lives outside of school. Home schedules centered on children’s sports, ballet lessons, church activities, and other community events. In fact, they thought that family time spent on children’s activities limited the amount of time parents could volunteer at school. One mother of three elementary children talked about balancing their schedules: “It’s not school. It’s everything. There are just so many different things pulling at people.” She thought her children’s participation outside of school enriched their educational experiences, which was important to her since she was not college educated and thought that teachers did not respect her because she lacked an education. Her feelings are particularly interesting since her sister was a teacher in another district, and the interviewee “saw both sides” of responsibilities of parents and teachers.

Dissatisfied parents whose children struggled academically spent considerable time and effort helping their children. They monitored school work daily. One working class mother who was not employed outside the home reinforced extra assistance her third-grade daughter received in resource room for reading. The mother would not allow her daughter to play after school until she had practiced spelling. This mother set a regular schedule:

We work on five words Monday, five words Tuesday, five words Wednesday, review Thursday, and hope on Friday we get 100%. We have to do the five words, we have to do this, and then we can play.

A widowed mother of a nine-year-old boy who received reading support set an even more demanding schedule. After she was home from her job managing a fast food restaurant, she helped her son with school work: “Every night is spent dealing with something with school...usually for about an hour and a half.”

As these examples show, involvement at home with school work usually meant working on practice and drill activities.

Parents who helped their children at home asked teachers for advice. They were frustrated when they felt their questions were not being heard. A nurse who worked night shift at the local hospital, a divorced mother of two elementary-aged daughters, asked her daughters' teachers for extra assistance, particularly for her daughter who had been in resource room. The mother described the frustration of dissatisfied parents:

It boils down to brass tacks—your kids and you. If my kids have trouble, I'm there. If they don't, I back off. They don't like my nose being stuck in the classroom door, and maybe that's part of it. Maybe they know if they do better, Mom's not going to go in and talk to the teacher.

Her attitude was common among parents who felt that they got help only when teachers wanted them to stop complaining.

### **Parents' Ability to Contribute**

Asked if parental involvement always should be encouraged, all participants agreed that any parent could make positive contributions. Parents who did not volunteer talked about the value of helping children at home, and actively involved parents spoke emphatically about potential contributions uninformed parents could make. One elementary PTA president very forcefully claimed, "Everybody has something they can do. I truly believe that. There is something that everybody can contribute." Her comments were meaningful because as owner of the local McDonalds she hired many high school students and got to know their parents. She also was a regular guest speaker about careers at the high school. She thought that she had good opportunities to observe parents' strengths and limitations. Other participants agreed that all parents had unique talents and resources to share.

Despite their stated beliefs about including all parents, volunteers and PTA officers found it challenging to encourage uninformed parents to come to school. Involved parents thought many parents waited to be invited to participate. One PTA president elaborated on the importance of soliciting parents' help. One mother who was staying home with elementary-aged children had worked with parents formerly as a special education teacher. Looking at involvement from a parent's perspective, she recommended parents invite others to events:

Parents want the invitation. They want to maybe feel like they are being singled out to be specifically asked for something. If you say, "I think this would be really good for you to do." Then they think, "Gosh, you're probably right. I've got some worth."

All PTA presidents struggled to encourage involvement. One president at an elementary school in a higher income neighborhood thought that it was difficult to “find a specific thing that each person could do.” Other presidents also were frustrated in not soliciting greater involvement.

A mother, a business owner serving as PTA president in a lower income neighborhood, attributed parents’ reluctance to volunteer to community values, attitudes, and lack of confidence. She stated, “It’s a blue collar community here and people don’t give themselves an outlet to grow. They have such a small scope of what they see that it affects how much they think they can do.” She said teachers reinforced working class parents’ limitations:

Even a teacher, being in a teaching situation is seeing through their own little tunnel. They are seeing these classroom kids in situations that maybe are getting out of control. They wonder, “Don’t their parents make them do anything, be responsible for their actions?” After a while, both sides can only see their own situation. That’s why people should be a lot more open to exploring other things than just what makes them feel comfortable. When that happens, they fail to see where other people are coming from.

Parents who were not active in PTA did not agree that all parents’ input was welcome. Many non-members felt decisions about how parents could be involved were made by a few active PTA members. One father who was a member of a district committee described this perception, saying he came away from meetings feeling he had little opportunity to contribute:

What has happened in this district is that basically the same people all the time make the decisions. There has not been any purposeful reaching out to get input from people who would have some very significant input for the school.

His comments are particularly interesting considering his experiences with the district. He had served as a member of the board of education, had been one of the few fathers to hold office in an elementary PTA, and was now on the Citywide PTA. Yet, he recognized lack of initiative to reach out to all parents. Several participants echoed his feeling that all parents’ participation was not equally welcome. One particularly frustrated mother labeled PTA “exclusionary” and “political.” She thought other parents did not respect her because she was not college educated. Having dropped out of PTA, she expressed her complaints about the school at board of education meetings. Other parents simply dropped out of participating.

An exception occurred in two low income elementary schools where active parents welcomed input from everyone. One volunteer expressed the attitude

of the principal and volunteers in the lowest income school that parents who needed assistance with parenting skills and personal issues would benefit from involvement. She commented, "It might help bridge things a little bit if people knew that there was a place to go without somebody pigeon-holing them into a certain group." This mother might have been pigeon-holed if one simply looked at her background. Both she and her husband worked on the production line at the local factory. She worked the night shift and slept in the day while her two children were at school. Yet she helped run the school store with the guidance counselor and assisted both of her children's teachers. Despite her lack of a college education, low paying job, and initially "being leery" of being involved in the school, she was "one of the best volunteers," in the principal's words.

Another mother who volunteered at another low income elementary school, while having a higher income level than the previous mother, agreed that all parents should be encouraged. She worked in an office while her husband worked at the factory. She thought communication would result in more parent participation:

It's the interaction of finding that balance between home and school and seeing that you can mesh. There are different ways to do that. Sometimes you have to be creative and try a little harder, but I always felt that what was important was to keep those communication lines open, regardless of what it is.

It is interesting that low income schools were welcoming of parents with few resources to contribute while PTA organizations in schools with higher socioeconomic status struggled to increase their membership and participation.

### **Involvement in Student Learning**

Parents of special needs children were most actively involved in children's learning. Two satisfied and four dissatisfied parents had special needs children. Satisfied parents volunteered in the school, but dissatisfied parents did not. Volunteers were more satisfied than inactive parents with schools' responses to special needs and willingness to communicate with parents. One PTA president in a low income school was the mother of two children with speech and language problems. She praised testing and extra assistance her children received. She was well versed in specific strategies teachers used with her children, particularly her eight-year-old son. When she was in the building to volunteer, she asked teachers about her children's progress. Like other satisfied parents, she had established communications to monitor her children's progress.

Parents of special needs children who did not volunteer talked about creating a "personal curriculum" to "make up deficits" in student learning. All four

inactive parents of special needs children provided extra instruction and drilled children on assignments at home. Many parents got materials from their children's teachers or from the public library to supplement classroom materials. Some parents thought teachers were uncooperative in recommending materials. The single mother who was a night nurse had made repeated requests for ways to help her daughter. This nurse expressed frustration:

If I don't have a resource to go to, how am I supposed to help? You know, as a parent, we need to help. And if we don't have the resources to go to, we're left in the cold. If she's not getting it at school and she needs more help, and I go to the teacher and can't get anything from her, I feel like my hands are tied.

This mother's experience was typical of parents who were not in the school on a regular basis based on comments of all seven dissatisfied parents.

### **Involvement in Curriculum**

Parent representatives sat on curriculum and textbook adoption committees, but participants disagreed on how they should contribute. Otherwise involved parents were uncertain about their role in curriculum decisions. A mother who was an elementary PTA president and volunteer for high school business classes responded "Absolutely!" when asked if parents should have a voice in curriculum. When asked how, she almost shouted, "I haven't a clue!" Her answer alludes to the attitude of satisfied parents about being involved in the school's curriculum. While they felt that parental involvement was important, they thought the school should set limits to involvement in curriculum. One mother who had volunteered at her children's elementary, middle, and high schools suggested using what she called "expert parents," or parents who were teachers, to give input on curriculum. By volunteering, she had become acquainted with what she called expert parents. Other parents were happy to let teachers make curriculum decisions because "it's what we pay them for." Interestingly, this blue collar mother who had served a term on the board of education couched teachers' responsibility for curriculum in terms of salary.

Parents who were happy with the curriculum thought that parental involvement should be limited to receiving information and being able to ask questions. Parent representatives on committees served as communication liaisons who explained how curriculum decisions were made. Describing parent representatives as "conduit[s] to the outside," one mother with children in elementary, middle, and high school observed that:

The buzzing always exists, and if a person who's on this committee is out there in proximity to the buzzing, they can say, "I was there, and that's

not the way that happened.” Or, “I was there. Here is how this decision was arrived at.” Accurate information, you can’t beat it. There’s more benefit than liability to having parents involved.

This mother had been a PTA president at each of her children’s schools, volunteered for Camp Fire Girls, helped vocational teachers, and was well known in her neighborhood as being knowledgeable about the schools.

Despite participants’ willingness to let the school take the lead on curriculum decisions, parents were dissatisfied with their input in three situations: adopting new textbooks, including conservative parents’ values, and integrating PTA activities into the school day.

Recent adoption of new mathematics books had stirred controversy among parents and, according to interviewees, teachers. A textbook selection committee had spent months reviewing materials. According to several parents, after the committee made its recommendation, the curriculum director “sprung” a new textbook on them by announcing it would be adopted. Parents struggled to help children with assignments and complained to teachers about the books. Several participants said teachers had confided they did not like the books either but were afraid to complain. Participants felt that parents’ opinions had been ignored by the curriculum director.

Members of the conservative church in Rolling Hills were displeased with how the district received their input. For some time, members of the congregation had questioned the curriculum. In his interview, the pastor stated the school did not have a curriculum. He would not be more specific about what he meant by lack of curriculum. Feeling “disenfranchised” by the district, he said district administrators would convey an attitude that said, “Thank you for your input. Now leave us alone.” According to the pastor, three of seven principals were members of his congregation and had to “walk a tight rope” between their personal views and professional responsibilities. Growing numbers of the congregation were withdrawing their children from public school because they were displeased that their ideas were excluded from the curriculum.

Parents who did not attend the church thought all views needed to be represented but that no one particular philosophy should determine the curriculum. One mother, who had lived in Rolling Hills since childhood and watched the conservative church increase in membership, worried that “the ideologies of on the edge [conservative] parents” not dominate the curriculum. Other participants spoke about the possibility of parents using the school’s curriculum to express church and personal agendas. A mother who had been a teacher and now stayed home with her children gave an example she had observed while volunteering at her son’s elementary school. She thought that a substitute teacher had attempted to integrate the church agenda into the curriculum.

A member of the conservative church, the long-term substitute had taught material that was not part of the curriculum, including a lesson in which she claimed that dinosaurs had not existed. Another mother of two elementary-aged children, who was also youth director at another church in Rolling Hills, agreed that too much parental involvement could lead to an unbalanced curriculum that reflected views of special groups. Speaking of the desired curriculum of the conservative church, she noted: "They would want a curriculum that is pro-creation, anti-abortion. As you get older, no sex education, no cultural diversity type of thing. You have other people who would probably want to push too much the other way." She added:

Parents should know what is being taught in their child's class, but they can teach a lot at home if they don't necessarily agree 100% with the school's point of view. I'm not sure school is the place where we should fight the battle for our own personal beliefs.

She and her husband, the pastor of their church, had talked about maintaining a balance between conservative and liberal views, such as those in their church's more liberal philosophy.

A different perspective on involvement in curriculum dealt with PTA's national curriculum. PTA officers were dissatisfied if their materials were not welcome in the school. The national organization provided materials to enrich school offerings, in the opinion of local officers. Yet PTA curriculum usually was provided in evening meetings. Building PTAs presented programs about parent education, health care, and academic achievement. These meetings were poorly attended with only active PTA members, often teachers in the district, present. At one PTA meeting I observed, a dentist talked about dental health to an audience of 12 parents.

Occasionally, PTA requested class time to offer lessons; principals did not always welcome these requests. One past PTA president described a conflict between the current president and principal. The PTA leader had volunteered in the school but did not have the close relationship with the principal that the previous president had enjoyed. PTA had a handwashing curriculum for elementary students. The president asked permission to teach the lessons during school, but the principal did not want to take time away from regular instruction. Eventually, the principal gave PTA time to teach the lessons. This example illustrates how challenging it may be to involve parents in curriculum.

### **Classroom Visitation Policies**

Parents criticized policies that restricted classroom visitations. Of particular concern was one school's notification policy. Required to contact teachers 24

hours before visiting, parents felt they were unable to observe what typically happened in a classroom. In another school, parents were not allowed to visit classrooms during the first week of school. One mother who experienced conflict with her daughter's teacher the previous year criticized the policy because she wanted to see how her child was adjusting to the new teacher. Interviewees expressed a feeling that both schools were trying to hide something.

Some parents agreed that restricting parent visits was necessary. One parent commented that teachers' duties made it difficult to talk with parents unless visits were scheduled:

A parent stops by the classroom right at the end of the school day, and the teacher's saying, "Yes, Bobby. See you tomorrow, Bobby." The parent is saying, "I need to talk to you about..." But the teacher's going through her ritual of sending the kids off the way they need to be sent off. But the parent feels like they're not communicating. The parent may be on the way to work and only has limited time. The parent really wants to know something, and it just doesn't work because the teacher only has so much time.

This parent who worked the night shift at the factory herself had limited time to talk with the teacher. As these examples suggest, parents were interested in school policies that affected their involvement with their children's teachers and classrooms.

### **Parent–Teacher Relationships**

Participants thought that parents and teachers should have equitable relationships. Whether or not they were satisfied with communications with teachers, participants had strong opinions about how to create equitable roles. They felt that it was important for teachers and parents to agree on how to work together. One parent summarized both satisfied and dissatisfied parents' perceptions that equitable relationships put teachers and parents "on the same page."

Most parents thought that parents and teachers should maintain separate, complimentary roles. Both satisfied and dissatisfied parents thought that teachers were trained to make decisions about what was best for children, and parents could offer input to help teachers decide. The working class mother who was past PTA president and former member of the board of education best expressed the attitude of parents about the collaborative role of teachers and parents:

I want those who are trained professionals to actually determine what's going to work. That's what we pay them for, to teach our children. I want

the parents in there learning what's going on and absorbing information, but I want professionals to make the final determination.

Her comments echo her previous comment that teachers are paid for their expertise. Other participants agreed that if teachers and parents did "their job," children would learn.

Participants thought teachers' attitudes could discourage parents from being involved. Both satisfied and dissatisfied participants described situations in which teachers gave parents the impression that their involvement was undesirable. Parents thought some teachers judged parents by education, occupation, or personal habits. A mother of three elementary school children was a beautician; however, she felt that her input was not valued because she did not have a college degree. When she expressed concerns to teachers, she observed that: "They [teachers] look at me and don't really come right out and say it, but hint around that 'You don't have an education and we do so we know really what's best.' I have a big problem with that."

Both satisfied and dissatisfied parents criticized teachers for making comments that judged parents' lifestyles. They thought teachers' casual remarks could convey the message that some parents were not "good parents." A mother, a PTA treasurer and volunteer at the highest poverty elementary school in the district, overheard a teacher make the comment that she did not want her child to "end up being a factory worker." Neither this woman nor her husband was poor, but she resented this comment that was made within hearing of parents who were employed at the local factory. The PTA president at this same school reported a similar incident. She overheard a teacher make a comment about a father who was visiting the school:

I heard a comment here when school started. It really bothered me, and it's probably because I'm a long ways from being mother of the year. I yell at my kids, you know. I'm not perfect by a long shot. One of the things that bothers me, I smoke. My husband smokes. I do have that nasty habit. When I was sitting in the hallway doing some stuff, selling memberships [to PTA], it was the night when the parents came in and the teachers told them what to expect for the year. One of the parents walked by, and I heard one of the teachers say, "Oh, he just reeks of cigarettes." I instantly saw red. I thought, "Why do you care? He's here."...I think that teachers sometimes think that way....The parents are judged like that. It was such a turnoff for me. It's like, but you got him here. You got him in this school, and it shouldn't matter if he's got dirt under his fingernails or what. He's here.

This participant's reaction is understandable considering her situation. She was the town's barber, and her husband worked at the factory. Their home was very small; her son slept on a rollaway bed in the living room. Despite their income level, this mother was respected by teachers and other parents in the district. Yet she heard teachers make derogatory comments about other parents whose challenges were similar to her own. Her story exemplifies the way teachers' comments may discourage parents from feeling welcome to collaborate with teachers.

Parents thought it was teachers' responsibility to maintain professional roles when collaborating with parents. Parents who were dissatisfied, particularly those with special needs children, thought that teachers failed to fulfill their responsibilities. If their children were having difficulties in school, parents felt that teachers did not want a collaborative relationship. One father met weekly with teachers to discuss his son's poor grades and behavior in middle school. The father was a widower, and his son had begun acting out after his mother's death. When his grades suffered, his father initiated weekly meetings with his son's teachers. He was frustrated that not distinguishing between teacher and parent roles was standing in the way of helping his son. He described one weekly meeting as an example:

At one meeting, we weren't clicking, or something wasn't going right. There were a lot of different opinions as to what are we going to do here. So I spoke up. I said, "Hey, just make sure the kid learns. I'll teach him how to succeed."

When parents thought teachers were not fulfilling professional responsibilities, they wanted more input into the teacher–parent relationship. One mother had asked to have her daughter tested for special placement for months. A first grader, her daughter was struggling with reading. While the mother was not college educated and was working class, she thought parents should be allowed to monitor teachers: "Parents should be able to go to school and sit in the background and observe what's going on." Other parents shared her feeling of helplessness when teachers did not respond to their requests.

### **PTA-Principal Relationships**

PTA officers and principals worked together on numerous projects in Rolling Hills. While these parents made positive comments about their relationship with principals, they worked together most successfully when they maintained separate roles. When PTA wanted to begin initiatives that might become regular activities, conflicts arose. Principals maintained the right to approve activities in their buildings. If a principal refused to permit PTA to begin

a new initiative, experienced PTA leaders would challenge the principal's decision. For example, elementary PTAs published monthly newsletters. When PTA asked permission to have newsletters, all but one principal agreed. Instead of accepting his refusal, the current and former PTA presidents sought the superintendent's approval. The superintendent overrode the principal's decision and recommended a compromise. Following the superintendent's advice, PTA officers and the principal agreed PTA could publish a newsletter after the principal approved articles. This arrangement worked, and the principal never vetoed an article. This situation is interesting considering that the former PTA president was the board of education member who remained active in this elementary PTA after her children no longer attended there. She used her relationship with the superintendent to override the principal's refusal.

Another example of disagreement between PTA officers and a principal happened on the middle school's Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) day, a PTA-funded activity at which all students received free books. RIF Day had been scheduled on the day an eighth grade computer project was due. Students were hurrying to complete their work and did not select books. When asked to reschedule the event, the principal refused, commenting, "They've had their opportunity." The PTA president wanted to compromise, saying, "I wish that maybe he had called me and said, 'Can we reschedule it for another time?'" However, she had never been active in PTA until she was asked to be the middle school president. She also had not been active in other community groups. College educated and outspoken, she thought she had been asked to serve as a "troubleshooter" but did not challenge the principal's decision.

A particularly contentious area was PTA fundraising. PTAs raised money to supplement school budgets. Willing to host some social events for teachers, the organization's mission was to contribute to the educational program. One PTA treasurer explained:

We've been taught in our leadership training from the beginning that we are not a fundraising organization. We are an advocacy organization, and we are there to help the kids. We would still be here if we had two cents in our treasury, and oftentimes I wish that's all we had. It might be easier.

This treasurer spoke with experience of having been PTA president of this elementary school attempting to overcome the perception that PTA's mission was fundraising. In two of five elementary schools, principals and teachers wanted to determine how funds were spent. One principal who had rejected a number of PTA's ideas for activities asked PTA to purchase televisions for classrooms. Teachers in another school asked PTA to buy a laminating machine to replace one they had purchased two years earlier. The treasurer "saw red" because

teachers had assured PTA that they wanted the original machine. PTA contributed to a new machine instead of supporting theater activities for students.

Parents' comments illustrate the challenges of maintaining collaborative relationships between parents, teachers, and principals. Parents' stories highlight the importance of two-way communication, defining parents' and teachers' responsibilities, and being open to new ideas.

## Discussion

Parents' perceptions illustrate Epstein's (2001) framework of six types of parental involvement. However, satisfied parents practiced different types of involvement than dissatisfied parents. Satisfied parents rarely spoke about their own children but commented on school activities and policies. The types of involvement they practiced required direct contact with the school. Satisfied parents communicated often with teachers about their children, volunteered regularly, served as representatives on committees, and collaborated on various programs. Dissatisfied parents concentrated on parenting and helping their children with learning activities at home. Dissatisfied parents did not volunteer in school or PTA activities. Several dissatisfied parents who paid PTA membership dues said they did not think their children would benefit from PTA involvement. It seems unusual that satisfied parents did not discuss their involvement with children at home given their commitment to involvement at school. The open-ended nature of interviews left parents free to talk about the types of involvement they chose. Perhaps satisfied parents' children did not need extra support for learning activities at home. This is a logical conclusion given that only two satisfied parents had special needs children, and these parents talked about monitoring their children's progress. Satisfied parents mentioned that their children did well in school, which gave parents time to engage in other activities.

The type of involvement parents practiced determined their satisfaction with how teachers responded to them. Parents of special needs children illustrate this point. Three of the four dissatisfied parents who had special needs children thought teachers were unwelcoming and not collaborative. Yet, two satisfied parents of special needs children found teachers collaborative and attentive to their children. Parents used two different approaches to ask teachers for help. Satisfied parents dropped by teachers' classrooms for progress reports about their children when they were in the building to volunteer. Dissatisfied parents came to school if they had a complaint. Without another purpose for being at school, they found teachers either unavailable or, in their opinions, unwilling to talk with them. Dissatisfied parents had not built relationships

with teachers through involvement. Teachers had an established role working with parent volunteers that was more comfortable for them than being placed in the role of responding to unhappy parents. These differences echo those noted by Lareau (2000, 2003).

Social network theory (Coleman, 1987; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2001) explains why parents with connections in the school and community had positive working relationships with school professionals. Satisfied parents were members of dense social networks with multiple ties to other parents. They built these networks through involvement in PTA, volunteering in classrooms, and being active in community organizations. Several active parents volunteered in more than one school. Eight were past or present PTA officers. Many satisfied parents were officers in church, theater, and community groups. Other parents had ties with managers of the local factory, chamber of commerce, and League of Women Voters. Perhaps the most connected parent was a former board of education member who volunteered at an elementary school where she was past PTA president, and also in the middle school and the senior high. She no longer had children in the elementary school but wanted to keep PTA “turned around” so the principal was not in control. She had worked for the bond referendum and defended closing an elementary school several years prior. She volunteered with Camp Fire Girls. As she exemplifies, satisfied parents’ connections gave them several possible avenues for communication. They occupied a structural hole (Burt, 2001) that gave them numerous ties in the school and the community.

Dissatisfied parents’ social networks did not include relationships with schools. None of them were active in PTA, calling it “too political” by “pushing its own policies.” They visited school only if they wanted to talk to teachers. Even though she worked nights, the dissatisfied nurse stopped by school to talk to teachers. She thought parents needed to “have their faces known” in case they wanted to complain. A stay at home mom said, “They don’t like my nose being stuck in the classroom door.” While these parents had not established positive relationships with teachers, most dissatisfied parents recognized that teachers were trying to help children.

Dissatisfied parents’ social networks included family members and neighbors rather than other parents they met at school. Ironically, four of seven dissatisfied parents had spouses or siblings who were teachers. Compared to 12 of 13 satisfied parents who talked about relationships with other parents, only 2 of 7 dissatisfied parents talked about other parents: Two dissatisfied parents were advising other parents whose children were having problems. No dissatisfied parents had regular communications with other parents in their children’s schools. As one mother stated, when they needed to ask someone’s opinion or

advice, they had “no recourse” because members of their social networks also did not have connections with the school. These differences in social networks reflect Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau’s (2003) findings.

Burt’s (2001) definition of structural holes explains the influence of parents with multiple connections in dense networks. Parents occupying structural holes were connected to individuals who did not have connections with one another. These parents held positions that put them in regular contact with others in more than one school and the community. One mother was uniquely suited to occupy a structural hole. An elementary PTA president, she also was the barber in town. She cut everyone’s hair including factory workers and professionals. Her success in helping a retired engineer become a tutor for elementary children exemplifies the influence of someone with connections in more than one place. Occupants of structural holes, they also were called upon to influence school decision making, as explained in expectation states theory (Berger et al., 1980).

Some parents in dense social networks were more successful than others in having a collaborative relationships with schools. Social influence theory, particularly minority influence (Rashotte, 2007), explains why some parents were better able to articulate beliefs of groups they represented. PTA influenced school decisions, while the conservative church failed to be influential despite members’ dense social network. One dissatisfied church member exemplifies lack of influence. Her children attended the religious school where she led the founding of a parents’ group. When her children attended Rolling Hills, she was frustrated because she could not persuade the district to listen to her opinions about curriculum. Disregard for her potential to contribute is in sharp contrast to respect accorded the involvement of the parent/youth director at another church. The youth director more closely represented district and community values.

PTA’s strong leaders were able to influence district practices and policy decisions. According to expectation states theory (Berger et al., 1980), PTA leaders were expected to express known opinions of the organization. Spokespersons had been active in PTA for years and had built strong networks with educators in the district. Teachers and administrators reflected and were influenced by their opinions. The influence of PTA leaders is evident in the example of the superintendent overriding the principal’s denial to establish a newsletter.

Social network theory helped to explain challenges to maintaining an optimal balance of collaborative yet separate home–school relationships in this district. As Lareau (2000, 2003) found, parents with social networks most like those of school professionals (and in some cases including school professionals) were productive, collegial, yet respectful of both parents’ and teachers’

autonomy. Parents who were not in parents' social networks, even if family members were teachers, felt teachers did not respect them, value their opinions and concerns about their children, or welcome requests for assistance. Parents who shared teachers' characteristics were happy with the cooperative relationship they had with teachers. Parents whose background and experiences were different from teachers felt isolated and frustrated. The answer to my original question, "Is there an optimal balance of collaborative and separate relationships between parents and schools in this district?" varied by parents' overall satisfaction with how they were treated.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study suggests schools could be more welcoming to all parents. Participants wanted collaborative relationships with teachers and had specific ideas about strategies schools could use to create parental involvement that would help parents support their children.

Participants agreed that teachers needed to be trained to communicate with parents. They thought that teachers should have a positive attitude about children and treat each parent as if his or her child was special. One mother had experienced the importance of positive communication as a former special education teacher. At a parent-teacher conference, she was surprised that a mother broke down in tears. The mother was crying because no teacher had ever said anything nice about her son. Another mother was hurt when it was explained that her daughter had not been tested for special placement because, "She's not top priority," meaning that her reading problems were not as severe as those of other children who needed to be tested. The mother responded, "But she's mine!" These comments exemplify the importance of schools creating collaborations that respect parents from all educational and class backgrounds, as noted by Henderson and Mapp (2002). Principals could establish relationships by connecting parents of academically successful children with parents whose children have difficulty so parents could support one another. This approach would build parents' social connections (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and give parents without social networks more personal resources.

Participants wanted changes in content and timing of communications about children's academic progress to include frequent, specific information. One mother suggested that progress reports be "broken down into smaller chunks" to help parents understand their children's progress. Parents wanted immediate feedback and were frustrated if they did not learn about problems until conferences. They thought they might have helped their children if they had known about problems when they occurred. This suggestion supports

Dearing, Kreider, and Weiss's (2008) findings about long-term benefits of family involvement. Henderson and Mapp (2002) concur, noting continuity in home–family involvement over time helps children succeed.

Parents' recommendations are useful to identify specific methods schools could use to communicate more effectively with parents. Participants valued and desired informal, personal conversation about their children. School leaders and teachers could create regular, advertised opportunities for parents to meet informally with teachers. Classroom teachers could hold "open houses" on a specific evening once a month. Parents could see work their children had completed and ask questions. These meetings would be in addition to parent–teacher conferences because they would be voluntary. Principals could hold office hours in the evening on a weekly basis so that parents could drop by to visit. Superintendents and principals could lead these initiatives by working with teachers' unions to modify the calendar to permit the personalized communication that parents want. Administrators' creating informal gatherings would support Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies's (2007) emphasis on leadership as key to family–school partnerships.

While these meetings would be relatively unstructured, topics that parents would value include information about children's academic progress and social behavior. Parents seek strategies they can use at home to supplement classroom lessons. Teachers could give parents tips about how to help with spelling, reading, math problems, or any other challenging topics for children. They could advertise special topics for specific open houses to encourage parents to attend. Rather than take more time, teachers would find they were spending less time answering parents' individual questions. They would be talking with parents in less stressful situations than is the case if parents come to school when they are upset. Obviously, there are topics about individual children that should be handled privately. This recommendation is in keeping with Henderson and Mapp's (2002) recommendation that programs "address specific parent and community needs" (p. 43).

Personal communication with parents is critical to resolve actual or potential conflict with unhappy parents. In this study, parents of special needs children were upset by lack of information about children's progress. Schools must be proactive in establishing regular communication with parents whose children struggle academically. Most complaints in this study came from parents of special needs children who felt they had not been informed or given suggestions to help until it was too late. While it is well known that parents can feel intimidated by the IEP process, these parents suggest they are comfortable talking one-on-one with teachers. Informal conversations could help parents understand and participate in children's formal IEP meetings. Principals may aid

in creating a process for teachers and parents to collaborate in helping special needs children. Everyone would benefit if parents were taught to appropriately advocate for their children, consistent with Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies's (2007) recommendation.

School professionals are advised to rethink specific strategies to involve parents at schools. While valuable, volunteering at school was practiced by a small group of parents who were not representative of this working class community. Yet, research shows (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Dearing, Kreider, & Weiss, 2008) that involvement at home is critical to help children be academically successful. In this study, PTA officers and school professionals continued to make frustrated attempts to involve all parents in volunteering rather than recognizing the value of home involvement. Uninvolved parents shared the frustration, and both sides felt helpless to improve the situation. Opening lines of communication would result in new, creative ways to make parents feel more welcome and to provide them an opportunity to contribute to their children's school experience. Schools might consider having parents engage in action research projects with children and keep journals with teachers. They also could assign parents a "buddy" to consult for support and advice.

Schools are encouraged to think of creative ways to involve parents. Schools could work with other community groups to tap into unique talents and interests of parents and children beyond the school curricular and co-curricular programs. All parents have something to offer. Schools must value and discover talents that are unique to the parents it serves to create successful home-school collaboration.

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Carolyn L. Wanat is an associate professor of educational administration in the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership Studies at the University of Iowa. Her research focuses on home-school relationships, school leader preparation, and qualitative research methods. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Carolyn L. Wanat, N442 Lindquist Center, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242, or e-mail [carolyn-wanat@uiowa.edu](mailto:carolyn-wanat@uiowa.edu)