

Perceived Needs of At-Risk Families in a Small Town: Implications for Full-Service Community Schools

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Abstract

Researchers agree that a needs assessment is a critical first step in designing a full-service school, but the large task of orchestrating the necessary community collaboration for such projects has occupied most of the literature to date. This study examines the process of planning and implementing a needs assessment for a rural school serving low-income students. It illustrates how needs assessments necessarily reflect the planners' assumptions about at-risk families. Caseworkers interviewed 13 at-risk and 16 not-at-risk families. Rather than finding the need for improved delivery of services that is commonly reported, especially in urban areas, what families most sought was respect. In addition, teachers and parents held different perspectives on many issues, and a successful project would need to address those differences directly.

Key Words: full service community schools, needs assessments, rural, families, low-income students, family, respect, perspectives, teachers, planning, services

Introduction

Schools that serve a preponderance of at-risk students struggle to educate them because of the students' multiple and interrelated needs. The adverse impact of problems such as poverty, violence, substance abuse, and lack of affordable medical and mental health care takes its toll on children's daily lives

and hinders students' ability to benefit fully from their education (Barton, 2004; Cummings, Dyson, & Todd, 2011; Dryfoos, Quinn, & Barkin, 2005; Marks & Lawson, 2005). A promising approach for schools that serve these at-risk students is to collaborate with community agencies and programs to provide a holistic and integrated approach to meeting students' needs. Such approaches are described variously as full-service community schools, collaborative community schools, or as schools with school-linked or integrated services. The interest in this approach to ameliorate what have often seemed to schools like intractable problems is evidenced by a growing literature about such efforts. In fact, several journals have devoted issues to articles about community-school collaborations [*Educational Leadership*, 53(7), 1996; *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin*, 83(611), 1999; *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2005(107), 2005; *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 11(4), 2003].

The relevant literature provides many accounts of individual full-service school projects (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Deslandes, 2006; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; O'Donnell, Kirkner, & Meyer-Adams, 2008; Oppenheim, 1999; Paige, Kitziis, & Wolfe, 2003), as well as projects involving entire districts (Bundy, 2005; Diehl, Gray, & O'Connor, 2005; Ferguson, 2009) and multiple sites in a variety of cities and states (Dryfoos et al., 2005; Tagle, 2005). To date, many articles have focused on the complex task of project planning and implementation. They discuss the need for collaboration among multiple community entities, the many challenges of orchestrating such collaboration among bureaucracies (each with its own objectives), qualifying criteria, application processes, regulations, and the elements that promote success.

In addition, there is evidence that the outcomes of community schools justify the considerable effort involved. In 2002, Dryfoos reported that much of the data about project outcomes was in the form of unpublished project reports; she located 49 such reports. She acknowledged that much of the assessment data was preliminary and often collected using inadequate research designs. However, she found encouraging signs of effectiveness in terms of improved student attendance, greater parent involvement, and increased student achievement. Cummings et al. (2011) reviewed the outcome reports of community schools internationally, and in England, specifically. They characterize the evidence on outcomes as "reasonably consistent," including improved achievement and school climate and increased attendance and parent involvement. However, they acknowledge that results are variable. Several reasons for this variability have been suggested and are supported by research. First, two studies report that the greater the extent and fidelity of implementation, the greater the positive outcomes (Comer & Emmons, 2006; Kalafat, Illback, & Sanders, 2007), and Anderson-Butcher, Stetler, and Midle (2006), in surveying teachers

at schools with school–community partnerships, found that often partners did not engage in sufficient communication and coordination to maintain a genuine collaboration. Third, Dryfoos (2008) and Smith, Anderson, and Abell (2008) point out that achievement outcomes develop slowly, only after a successful project has been in place for a number of years, so evaluation data from the early years of a project may not be an accurate estimate of the project's full potential. Fourth, Comer and Emmons (2006) and Dyson and Todd (2010) argue cogently that typical input–output research designs are not adequate for evaluating full-service school projects which involve multifaceted treatments in complex family, school, and community contexts, and their insensitivity may lead us to abandon strategies that are actually promising. They recommend a theory of change approach.

In 2003, Elias, Zins, Graczyk, and Weissberg suggested that future research needs to provide more detailed descriptions of project elements and examine linkages between specific elements and outcomes. Sanders, Sheldon, and Epstein (2005) agree and add that we also need to know more about the basis for selecting project elements. That is, which elements address which needs?

Needs Assessment

Many authors and resource organizations such as the Coalition of Community Schools strongly assert the necessity of doing a needs assessment in order to plan services and activities that the constituent families truly need and want (Cummings et al., 2011; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Pryor, 1996), not just ones that schools and health and welfare professionals think the families need. Anderson-Butcher, Lawson, and Barkdull (2003) and Gardner (1993), among others, emphasize that full-service schools should not be one-size-fits-all programs, and most projects do begin with a needs assessment. However, with the exception of a study by Novins, LeMaster, Thurman, and Plested (2004), studies typically do no more than name the method or methods used and describe a few general areas of need. This lack of detail gives the impression that collecting information about needs and then planning a project to address those needs is straightforward. It also makes it difficult to understand the relationships between specific project elements and particular needs. In the present study of a needs assessment, the steering committee found that even the process of designing the needs assessment was anything but straightforward. The process raised policy and programmatic questions that had implications for the as yet unplanned project.

Methods that have been employed in doing needs assessments include using public statistics on variables such as local family income, youth crime, confirmed child abuse reports, and numbers of teen mothers (Abrams & Gibbs,

2000; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002) or school statistics on variables such as student attendance, referrals for behavior problems, parent–teacher conference attendance, and weapon confiscations (Harris & Hoover, 2003; Paige et al., 2003). Projects have also used focus groups of parents (Cummings et al., 2011; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Pryor, 1995), parent interviews done by a principal (Dryfoos, 1994; Hatch, 1998) or caseworker (Jehl & Kirst, 1993), and surveys of parents (Maguire, 2000; Paige et al., 2003) or teachers (Jehl & Kirst, 1993). Another form of needs assessment is for agency representatives to share information about their individual efforts and challenges in assisting low-income families (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003; Jehl & Kirst, 1993). When parents serve on a project planning committee, they are another source of information about the needs of school families (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000). Although most projects begin with a needs assessment, they typically provide little information about its effectiveness or the reasons for choosing a particular method. Only Pryor's (1996) general discussion of the pros and cons of various methods provides guidance for selecting a method. However, Cummings et al. (2011) have a helpful discussion of obstacles involved in what they characterize as the “boundary crossing” work of getting opinions from parents and community.

Parent Involvement

A critical focus of full-service school projects is that of increasing student achievement by increasing parent involvement in their children's education (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Gardner, 1993; Smrekar, 1993; Williams, Horvath, Wei, Van Dorn, & Jonson-Reid, 2007). Anderson-Butcher and Ashton (2004) call for a relationship in which the school views parents as the experts on their children's needs and on what should be done to address those needs. Others describe the desired collaborative relationship with words such as partnership, empowerment, joint ownership, and power-sharing.

A common challenge to developing the desired parent–teacher relationship is that parents and teachers do not necessarily have the same vision of what a school–parent collaboration would look like (Baker, 1997; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007). Baker asked focus groups of teachers what they wanted from parents. Although the teachers used the language of collaboration in talking about the ideal relationship, when they elaborated on their vision, what they most wanted to come out of the collaboration was for parents to recognize the teachers as skilled professionals whose decisions were in the best interests of their child. They wanted parents to follow through at home to reinforce the teachers' instruction and disciplinary decisions and felt that the resulting continuity of messages would communicate the importance of education to the child. Moles (1993) reports that this attitude is widespread among

teachers of low-income students, and Pushor (2010) says that in U.S. school culture, we privilege educators' professional expertise over parent knowledge. Parents, on the other hand, may expect that collaboration will give them more direct participation in their child's education. For example, the parents at the Vaughan Center Project (Oppenheim, 1999) insisted that parents were the experts on their children's needs. Likewise, parents in the project studied by Abrams and Gibbs (2000) expected to have a voice in which types of instruction would best meet their children's needs, while teachers saw instructional decisions as the teachers' purview. Ideally, the needs assessment process would be a positive first step in developing the desired parent-school relationship and would avoid making assumptions solely on the viewpoints of school personnel.

Rural Schools

The literature on full-service schools suggests that while project elements should differ from school to school, the basic concept of developing a school that is a one-stop shop (Dryfoos, 1994; Oppenheim, 1999) in terms of providing integrated services to families is an approach that is widely applicable. However, the preponderance of data comes from urban schools (e.g., Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Dryfoos, 2005; Ferguson, 2009), often with substantial minority populations. Low-income, rural, White populations have not received as much attention, although many of them also struggle with low student achievement. It would be useful to future projects in the many schools that serve rural populations to know if the needs of their families vary in predictable ways from those of urban families.

Goals

The current study examines the process by which a rural elementary school developed its needs assessment, including an analysis of the steering committee's consideration of the possible effects of the method they chose and the underlying assumptions of the questions they planned to ask. Then it analyzes the themes identified from the needs assessment interviews and discusses their implications for project elements. The results include information from at-risk and not-at-risk families.

Method

Overview

The method for this study is that of participant observation. As the research consultant for the project, I was asked by the school principal to provide advice and assistance to the project steering committee as it planned a needs

assessment of school families. The data were notes I made during committee meetings and my written summaries of those meetings that were then sent to the project leaders: the school principal and the representative from the county Community Action Agency who were the authors of the grant requesting funds to do a needs assessment. Those summaries served as the basis of the work that I did between meetings, the major task being to draft a set of possible survey items based on the committee's discussion of the kinds of things they wanted to know from parents. The principal and I met at least once between committee meetings to review my summary and make sure that he and I agreed about my understanding of what transpired at the meeting and to discuss what I should do before the next meeting. The several possible surveys that I drafted as the committee's ideas developed were another source of data documenting the committee's ideas. Once the committee had decided on a survey protocol and questions, the principal and I met with the social workers who were to do the interviews, and I subsequently collected the recorded interviews from the caseworkers, talked with them about their interviews, and analyzed the interviews to identify themes.

School and Project

Fuller Elementary School (pseudonym) is located in the low-income neighborhood of a small, rural Iowa town of 9,000 people. Of the roughly 240 children Fuller serves, about 80% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Over 90% of the school's families are Caucasian, and many have a multigenerational history of low socioeconomic status. About 20% of Fuller's students are bused in from the surrounding countryside. While the low-income families are concentrated in one neighborhood, everyone in the community shops in the same few stores, and all the town's adolescent children attend the same middle and high school, fed by Fuller and two other elementary schools.

Fuller School received a grant from the New Iowa Schools Development Corporation to do a needs assessment. The results of the needs assessment would then serve as the basis for future program development.

Steering Committee Participants

The principal began the needs assessment work by inviting representatives from a variety of community organizations, services, and constituencies to serve on a steering committee. The committee's task was to plan and oversee the needs assessment and then use the results to make recommendations for a project that would address the identified needs of at-risk students and their families. Among the committee members were three Fuller School teachers, two parents from families the principal considered to be at risk, several

school- and area-based psychologists and social workers, and representatives from the county Community Action Agency, the county extension office, the Department of Human Services (DHS), a neighborhood church, and law enforcement. The committee also included a research consultant whose primary responsibility was to draft and execute the needs assessment planned by the steering committee.

Interviews

In the past, the school had had very poor return rates on written surveys. They had tried getting parents to complete brief multiple choice surveys during parent–teacher conferences with pick up and return boxes prominently placed at each school entrance. Despite the fact that attendance at the fall conferences was often over 90%, the return rate for the surveys was less than 10%. Although some schools have reported acceptable return rates with written surveys (Clark, 1993; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Pryor, 1995), Pryor (1996), in her summary of assessment methods, says that low rates of response are common even for something like focus groups where families initially respond that they will attend. Given the previous experience of Fuller School and the decision to use open-ended questions, the committee decided that interviews would give the best response rate.

The steering committee asked the principal to make the initial contact with the families to describe the project and request participation. He explained that the interviewers would be from out of town, the information given would be confidential even from school staff, and participation was voluntary. Families were given a choice between being interviewed in their home or at the school.

The principal arranged for five caseworkers from Community Action Agencies in adjoining counties to do the interviews over several weekends, and the grant compensated them for their time and mileage. The committee felt that caseworkers' experience in developing rapport with low-income families and being sympathetic and nonjudgmental listeners would be helpful. Pryor (1996) recommends their use for similar reasons. The interviewers had an orientation meeting with the principal and research consultant to review the interview protocol and come to agreement about anything they felt was unclear in the questionnaire. The interviewers were not aware that the families were in different risk groups, and every caseworker interviewed families in both groups. The caseworkers audiotaped their interviews.

Participant Families

The steering committee wanted to get information from at-risk and not-at-risk families, so the principal developed a checklist of the following indicators

of risk: (a) more than five absences in the first semester, (b) more than three tardies, (c) receiving Special Education or Title I services, (d) not living with two natural parents, (e) suspected child abuse, (f) suspected substance abuse, (g) classroom behavior problems, (h) frequently not completing school work, and (i) qualified for free lunch. He asked the teachers to check all the characteristics that applied to each of their students, and students with three or more risk factors were considered to be at risk. The principal was prepared to use his own judgment in cases where students in the same family were rated differently by their teachers, but that happened in only one case. Teachers identified between 35% and 50% of their students as being at risk. Given that 80% of the school's children qualify for free and reduced price lunch and what we know about the high likelihood of co-occurring risks in that population (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003), those estimates seemed reasonable. A random sample of 20 families was taken from each risk group.

In the initial contacts, two of the at-risk families and one of the not-at-risk families declined to participate. However, others who agreed to be interviewed failed to meet the interviewer at the scheduled time. The caseworkers doing the interviews tried to reschedule missed interviews, but that was often not possible. In the first round of interviews, thirteen (65%) of the families in the at-risk group, and nine (45%) of the families in the not-at-risk group completed interviews. The committee decided it wanted ideas from more than nine families in the not-at-risk group, so another eight families were randomly selected to add to the original sample. Seven of those eight completed interviews, so the sample of families with children deemed not at risk was 16 out of 28 (57%).

Instrument

After much deliberation, the steering committee decided to address six broad areas in the needs assessment: (a) child growth and development, (b) schooling, (c) neighborhood, (d) mobility, (e) community services, and (f) specific ideas about family needs and how to meet them. The Appendix lists the open-ended questions that the interviewers used, along with the follow-up questions to address any areas not mentioned in the initial response. The questions were carefully phrased so as not to imply criticism. For example, the questions about child discipline began with an acknowledgement that all children from time to time argue or misbehave. Another example is the questions about reading in the home. Rather than asking parents how much they read to their children or what reading materials they had in the home, the questions asked for a description of a typical day, what kind of books their children liked, and whether the children had a preference between active play and reading. In the process of responding to such questions, parents typically volunteered information about their literacy practices.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed in two ways. For those questions that lent themselves to tabulation, the responses were categorized as affirmative, negative, or maybe for each risk group. For the responses to the more open-ended questions, the project consultant used grounded theory to code the responses into themes that emerged from the data. In addition, after the caseworkers completed their interviews, the consultant asked each of them what they considered to be major themes from the six or seven families they interviewed. These caseworker interviews served as a check on the consultant's ongoing coding and contributed to the refining of the coding categories.

Findings and Discussion

Committee Deliberations

The following account of the steering committee's deliberations illustrates the ways in which a needs assessment necessarily makes assumptions about the nature of the existing problems that will be identified and shapes the project even before any information has been gathered. Further, it demonstrates how the data collection is also the beginning of the relationship between the proposed school project and parents. The committee's conversations developed in three distinct phases, each one characterized by a different set of assumptions.

Phase 1

The steering committee quickly and unanimously adopted the project goal of insuring that all Fuller School children would come to school prepared to benefit fully from their education. Then the committee began discussing what kind of information they needed to obtain from the needs assessment. The representative from the county Community Action Agency was a proponent of the view that the primary problems causing children to be at risk were the various systemic problems that affect low-income families. She suggested it was important to know the extent to which families were experiencing substance abuse, domestic violence, divorce, unemployment, poor nutrition, lack of health care, and other factors commonly identified in the research literature as risk factors. She had had experience with a full-service school project in a neighboring town in which the major community services had collaborated to establish offices in the school. That project provided caseworkers who met with families to develop family goals and then connected them with services that could help them achieve their goals. Initially, her ideas influenced the kinds of questions the committee considered asking, and much of the discussion

focused on the best way to obtain accurate estimates of such sensitive information and how to do so in a way that was ethical and would not alienate families.

Phase 2

After discussion at several committee meetings about various risk factors and how to measure them, some committee members began to express their discomfort with the assumption that these risk factors directly and inevitably caused children to be at risk of not benefiting from their education. They had some intuitive ideas about the concept of resilience that is shown by some children and families despite adversity (Anthony, 2008; Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Allen-Mears, 2002). The principal, in particular, related several of his experiences with children who lived in circumstances that suggested they should be at risk but who were not. Eventually this view was generally accepted by the committee and led the committee to turn its focus to parenting skills such as parents reading to their children, the amount and kinds of television children watched, latch key children, and child discipline. However, as the committee began drafting specific questions they wanted to ask, some members of the committee, in particular the school psychologists, felt that such questions still made too many assumptions about the causes of children being at risk, although most felt that parenting practices were more directly related to risk than the economic and family risk factors they had originally discussed. The committee also became concerned about whether questions about parenting practices could be phrased in a manner that asked for information without implying criticism. For example, the importance of parents reading to their children and limiting television viewing are questions to which the right answers are a matter of public knowledge.

Phase 3

Finally, the committee decided to address several broad areas with a set of open-ended questions that asked parents to describe their children's experiences and identify concerns they had about their children's development and schooling and what things they thought might be helpful to improve readiness to learn. The proposed questionnaire also asked families about the presence and effectiveness of services already available in the community and what else they would use if it were available or more accessible. The questions still reflected the committee's underlying assumption that the proposed project would be some variation on the full-service school model, but the open-ended questions left more room for parents to provide their perspective on what problems they saw and possible ways to address them.

Cummings et al. (2011), who used change theory to evaluate a number of community school projects, found similar differing theories among project

leaders, even within the same project. Additionally, they found that some project elements had no logical reasoning behind them and were considered beneficial in and of themselves.

Participation of Committee Members

The committee drew members from a variety of constituencies in order to get as broad a perspective as possible and to lay the ground work for future collaboration on the proposed project. To some extent, that did happen as is illustrated by the various views expressed in successive iterations of the needs assessment planning. However, there were voices that did not get heard, mostly because their representative members either stopped attending or attended only occasionally. Meetings were held during the day, and school personnel (teachers, psychologists, and social workers) attended as part of their jobs. The grant paid for substitutes for the teachers. These people attended regularly. Representatives from other organizations such as DHS who could count meeting attendance as part of their work day also had good attendance. Others like the county extension representative and the local minister never spoke and stopped attending after a few meetings, perhaps because they saw themselves primarily as helping with future programming after the needs assessment was completed. The participation of the two parent representatives was also limited. There were two parents: (1) a young married mother of two boys with ADHD who had had her first child while in her teens, and (2) a single father of three young children who was receiving assistance to attend a job training course at the local community college. Several studies report that it is more affluent, middle-class parents who are the most likely to involve themselves in their child's education, and that lower-class parents serving on project committees or coming to the school to volunteer need a clear welcome and lots of encouragement in order to participate (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The parents were infrequent participants in the committee's conversation, which was not surprising since they were significantly outnumbered by college-educated professionals. The principal chaired the meetings and made a point of occasionally asking the parents direct questions, especially in areas where he knew they had opinions or experience, and then they would speak. However, as time went on, both parents had irregular attendance. Unfortunately, the committee was too involved in planning the needs assessment to give official attention to the fact that their first effort to collaborate with parents had failed. Instead, the spotty attendance of the parents likely confirmed the belief of many committee members that these parents did not really value and support education. In turn, the experience likely confirmed for the two low-income parents what they already believed—committee members viewed them as people in need of fixing and

were confident that the answer was some combination of improved services and parent education. Pryor (1996) suggests that parents be paid to participate, and, in retrospect, since the other committee members served as part of their work responsibilities, that should have been done in this case.

Comparison of At-Risk and Not-At-Risk Families

Gardner (1993) suggests that it is a practical and financial necessity for projects to identify their target group, because it is not feasible to provide services for everyone in a school. The committee for the Fuller School project had this in mind when they planned to distinguish between at-risk and not-at-risk families and provide what the at-risk families most needed. If they had fully discussed the ramifications of this idea, they might have considered the political difficulties of serving some children and not others and of labeling a subset of children and their families as being at risk, issues Gardner identifies as creating problems for projects.

In any event, the steering committee did not have to face this problem, because the analysis of the interviews showed few differences between the two risk groups. One likely reason for a lack of differences is that the interview questions deliberately allowed families not to volunteer information about the full extent of the challenges they faced. Families did talk openly about financial and family relationship difficulties and various parenting concerns, but the only accounts of problems like substance or physical abuse were those that had been resolved. Even though families knew the information they provided would be confidential, some information may have been too personal to reveal to anyone. In addition, even at-risk families genuinely seemed to believe that on the whole they were all right and wanted to convey that to the school.

Resilience may also have contributed to not finding differences. Research has established that some children, for a variety of reasons, are able to weather adversity (Anthony, 2008; Benard, 2004), so some children may have been categorized as not at risk by virtue of resilience rather than because they experienced fewer stressors than others. Lastly, we know that some of the students who seem not to be at risk in elementary school will become more vulnerable in adolescence and move into the at-risk category (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1996).

Given the finding of no differences and the problems of singling out particular families, especially in a small town, the steering committee could decide—project element by element—who would be served. Some services have their own well-accepted qualifying criteria. For other project elements, like programming for preschoolers and parent support groups, it might be desirable to include families from both risk groups, as those not at risk might serve

as role models or as sources of ideas. Also, for some programming, including families not at risk might not require additional expense.

Themes Identified From Interviews

Eight themes were identified from the interviews: (a) respect and acceptance, (b) ambivalence toward school, (c) professionals' attitudes, (d) normal childhood concerns, (e) neighborhood influences and family values, (f) mobility, (g) opposition to locating social services at the school, and (h) specific programming ideas. Most of the themes are related to specific sections of the interview, but the themes of respect and acceptance and of the attitudes of professional staff ran across sections of the interviews. Because the results for at-risk and not-at-risk families were more similar than different, the results are reported by theme, and any differences between the two risk groups are discussed with the theme.

Respect and Acceptance

The central theme of the interviews, expressed in a variety of ways and across many questions, was that what families most wanted was to be respected and accepted. The salience of this theme was also mentioned by all of the interviewers when they summed up their interviews, and several commented that they saw this same issue in their daily work with low-income families. Families felt that they were too often disrespected, and they felt that this lack of respect had a detrimental effect on their children's success at school and created barriers to the family's participation in many types of school and community activities. From the denigrating looks given them in the store when they used food stamps to assumptions about inadequate parenting based solely on their low income, Fuller School parents felt that the community looked down on them, and it rankled. They believed that open invitations from the school or community organizations were not really for them, and that while their participation would be tolerated, they would not really be welcomed. Two interview quotes illustrate these views: "What I think people really need is just plain respect for each other. Just respect and accepting people, living your own life," and "If you don't have a lot of money or a nice house, they [Child Protective Services] can be quick to take your children away for normal things like spanking or accidental stuff." Another quote illustrates how an organization like Little League can unwittingly be viewed as disrespecting families who hold other values: "I don't know why softball is about the shirts, attending practice, parents, and winning. I wish it could just be about some kids getting together to play ball."

The steering committee had expected families to describe myriad needs and frustrations with accessibility and coordination of services. In fact, much of the

committee discussion could be characterized as taking what Keith (1996) calls a service provision perspective with the underlying premise that the goal is to fix broken families by providing more or better services. They had not considered that the families might resent being characterized as needy. Nor had they anticipated that respect would be so universally important to these families.

This yearning for respect is not prominent in the full-service school literature, probably because much of it focuses on organization, leadership, and implementation, but the same desire underlies the views of the Mexican American parents at the Vaughn Family Center (Oppenheim, 1999). They did not want handouts. They acknowledged having a variety of problems in their community, but they believed they had the capacity to help themselves and provide for their families. In contrast, the literature focused directly on parent involvement does identify respect as an important aspect of school–parent relationships that parents too often feel is lacking (Lindle, 1989; Ramirez, 2003). The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) provides resources, training, and support for schools wanting to develop school–family partnerships, and its director, Joyce Epstein, has developed a framework of six types of parent involvement that is used by network schools. The framework lists as a desired outcome for teachers, “Respect for families’ strengths and efforts” (Epstein et al., 2009). Although many schools have benefitted from participation with the NNPS, Lopez and Stoelting (2010), in the same vein as Oppenheim (1999) and Cummings et al. (2011), are critical of an approach that is not respectful in that it attempts to change nonparticipating parents into the White, middle-class view of properly involved parents who support school operations as they are currently. They contend that this type of thinking benefits schools because it allows teachers to believe that there is nothing they can or should do about the poor achievement of the children of uninvolved parents.

Oppenheim (1999) suggests that a community development approach is more productive and sustainable over the long run than a service provision approach, because it develops community leadership and builds capacity rather than maintaining the dependency that characterizes the continuous receipt of services. Cummings et al. (2011) express a similar opinion about England’s full-service schools. They say that no matter how caring and respectful service providers are, there is an inherent inequality in the roles of provider and recipient, and they believe that community development is key to lasting change. The clear implication of this theme is that the Fuller School Project should not think solely in terms of providing services. Instead, the planned project should be explicit that its goal is to promote self-governance and leadership in the Fuller neighborhood so that families, teachers, and the community work together as equal partners to support Fuller children.

Ambivalence Toward School

The teachers on the steering committee said that one of the biggest problems at Fuller was that parents did not value education. They based their opinion on what they perceived to be a lack of parental concern and support in terms of homework completion, responses to notes sent home, and a lack of follow through in reinforcing the importance of school rules, especially when children broke rules. They believed that addressing this problem of uninterested and unsupportive parents was crucial to improving student achievement.

The school portion of the interview began with an open-ended question asking parents to describe the school experience of their oldest child who currently attended Fuller. Parents were universally positive in their initial responses, saying that Fuller was a good school and that their children liked their teachers. Parents were not asked directly whether they valued education, but nearly all spoke positively about the benefits their children derived from education, and a number even used the phrase “valuing education” in describing themselves.

However, as parents elaborated on their responses or responded to follow-up questions, their ambivalence came through in several ways. Parents were not asked about their own school experience, but they repeatedly brought it up. Both at-risk and not-at-risk parents admitted that they did not get as much out of their schooling as they could have. Most blamed themselves in part, but they also blamed the schools for favoring more intelligent, more affluent, and more athletic students. As one parent said, “School was a place for the kids who were bright or athletic. They didn’t really care about me.” Therefore, while parents asserted the importance of education, they were also understanding of their children’s school problems, since they had often experienced similar problems themselves.

In explaining their views, some parents stressed the importance of loving and accepting their children despite their weaknesses or faults. Others acknowledged their child’s difficulties in a subject and then excused it to some extent by saying the parent had had similar problems. Still others believed that their major focus in raising their children should be on teaching responsibility, so at home they emphasized doing household chores and helping parents. A few expressed the view that education was the school’s responsibility, and the parents’ job was to deal with the child the rest of the time. These families felt they had little influence over their child’s behavior at school.

With respect to homework completion, the responses of at-risk families differed somewhat from those not at risk. A number of the at-risk families said that when they asked their children about homework, the children claimed not to have any or to have completed it at school, and they had no way of knowing otherwise. Parents also talked about the importance of spending time with

family, including extended family, and saw this priority as a legitimate reason for occasionally not completing homework. An indication of the importance of family at Fuller was an event called grandparents' day when grandparents ate school lunch with their grandchildren and visited their classrooms after lunch. Often as many as 70% of the children in a classroom would have at least one grandparent in attendance. Similar to the low-income parents surveyed by Chavkin and Williams (2001), Fuller parents said that they would spend time helping their children with homework if they knew what the assignment was and what kind of help they should provide. They wondered whether they should correct wrong answers or if that would be cheating.

The needs assessment only asked about the elementary school, but families with middle school children frequently mentioned that their most serious concerns and problems were at that level, and they felt the problems were a consequence of the larger, more impersonal middle school. They found communication difficult and intimidating when their children had so many different teachers and felt the school rules were more arbitrary and rigidly applied than at the elementary level. Some complained that their children were treated unkindly by middle school peers and that the school culture was overly concerned with social standing and appearance. Alexander et al. (1996) note that the decrease in some students' academic engagement and self-confidence coinciding with the move to middle school has been well documented. During steering committee meetings, the principal and teachers said that when they move to the middle and high school, Fuller Elementary students rarely participated in extracurricular sports or activities and were rarely on the honor roll. They believed this was an indication of the students' at-risk status. Nonetheless, no one anticipated that the transition to middle school would be of such concern to parents that they would bring it up unasked.

These disparate views between teachers and parents about the extent to which low achievement is due to home problems and whether the school has some culpability is reported in the literature (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Baker, 1997) as a source of conflict that creates a serious obstacle to developing collaborative school–parent relationships. Clearly this is the case at Fuller. More and better communication is needed, especially with respect to the regular education program and homework, to increase parent knowledge and promote better understanding between teachers and parents. In addition, grandparents and other extended family may be an untapped resource.

Professionals' Attitudes

Families made it clear that they were sensitive to how they were treated by school and social service agency staff. In their description of their child's school experience, many parents spontaneously cited the principal, who was often

in the halls greeting parents before and after school, as contributing to their positive attitude toward Fuller. Parents felt the principal would always listen to them and were confident that whatever the concern, it would be addressed in a fair and caring manner. Parents claimed to feel respected even when the principal initiated conversations about problems, such as a child's poor attendance or misbehavior. They described the principal as friendly and caring but never, in the words of one parent, "pulling any punches." Several families related how the principal had used his community contacts to obtain assistance for something like a child's glasses, winter clothing, or participation in an extracurricular activity. The principal and the committee viewed these individual efforts as stop gap measures and envisioned that the proposed project would provide a better organized and integrated system of assistance. However, the families who gave these examples seemed to benefit as much from the caring expressed as from the assistance received.

The six families who had children with learning disabilities were similarly positive about the special education teachers. Parents talked about Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings, individual notes sent home, and phone calls from the teacher as keeping them well informed and providing a means for them to respond with their concerns or ideas. Several said that the special education teacher viewed their child as an individual and described how parent and teacher worked together to develop strategies that would benefit the unique needs of their child.

Parents were positive but much less fulsome in their praise of the regular classroom teachers, and after some thought about follow-up questions, such as those about parent-school communication, many said that they really did not know much about the regular education program. They reported that their major communication with the school was the semiannual parent-teacher conferences and routine notes sent home about things like the annual music program and candy sale. When specifically asked about it, they acknowledged that their children brought home graded schoolwork, but they did not initially consider this a means of communication. They claimed to look at it but seemed uncertain as to what information they might get from it, especially if it had a number wrong or percent right rather than a letter grade. None had visited their child's classroom except for their turn to bring food for a class party, and few expressed the desire to do so.

The contrast between the parents' relationships with the principal and special education teachers on the one hand and the regular education teachers on the other corresponds to the two types of school-parent relationships characterized by Smrekar (1993), one of which develops truly cooperative relationships with parents and one which outwardly seems to do so, but in reality does not.

Smrekar says that too often schools send mixed messages. For example, they might encourage school visits in their print materials but require advance notice and limit the times and length of visits. Fuller's approach to parent-teacher conferences seemed to be an example of mixed messages. Conferences were scheduled from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and the school expressed its desire to meet with all parents by encouraging those who worked to take time off work to attend. Some parents complained that while they could leave work, they were not paid for the missed time. In addition, notes sent home urged parents to arrive promptly, plan their questions ahead of time, and not go over their allotted fifteen minutes. At the conferences, teachers showed examples of the child's work, often without evaluative comment, and left little time for questions or an exchange of information.

Smrekar (1993) contends that parents and schools need to engage in frequent informal as well as formal communication in order to develop the trust that is necessary for effective collaboration. Fuller could benefit from developing opportunities for informal communication, especially between regular education teachers and parents. This will take special effort because classroom teachers serve as many as 30 students and families, and their days are tightly scheduled with less flexibility than other school staff.

Families were also outspoken about their treatment by various agencies. For the most part they found the staff at the town's agencies to be compassionate and respectful. In particular, they appreciated the public health nurse who ran the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition and health program and in whom clients confided and from whom they sought advice on a variety of family concerns and problems. The receptionist at the Community Action Agency—by design a former client of the agency—was also singled out as being understanding and providing helpful advice.

In contrast, the staff at Job Services and Child Protective Services were viewed negatively. Job Services was perceived as disdainful and doing little more than processing unemployment applications. Families expressed frustration with Job Services while acknowledging that a lack of jobs was not their fault. Families universally supported the existence of Child Protective Services, but they were fearful that children who were not actually being abused might be removed from their homes. One mother deeply resented the accusative attitude of the investigators when she was investigated, and the finding that she was not guilty did little to make her feel better.

On the whole, the community has many professionals who are respected and effective and can provide project leadership and training for others. Families spoke in terms of the attitudes of the professionals they dealt with, but it is likely that circumstances and procedures also contribute to client perceptions.

For example, the required procedures of developing individual and specific goals, describing specific accommodations, and including the parents' vision as part of the IEP seemed to promote communication and develop a collaborative relationship between the special education teacher and parent. In addition, in situations such as unemployment or accusations of child abuse, it may be more difficult for staff to appear compassionate and respectful.

Normal Childhood Concerns

One might expect that families concerned with respect and presenting themselves in a favorable light would not admit to many concerns or problems with respect to their children, but that was not the case. Families were asked about a list of possible childhood concerns in four areas: (a) child behavior (responsibility, obedience, activity level, tantrums, and friendships), (b) development and learning, (c) family relationships, and (d) child care and basic needs. Families in both risk groups reported concerns about their children. More than half of the families interviewed had concerns about child behavior, and the patterns were similar across risk groups, with the exception that more at-risk families expressed concern about hyperactivity, with one at-risk family characterizing their child as violent. Parents said they would be interested in suggestions and support to help them address these parenting concerns.

Overall, the parents' attitude toward their children's rate of learning and development was that differences were normal and not matters of concern unless extreme. Most had no way of judging what was outside the range of normal. Almost all of the concerns in the areas of learning and development had first been noticed by health professionals, preschool screenings, or Fuller staff. In most cases, parents shared the school's assessment of their child's problems, but a number had been surprised at first. Families whose children received in-home services prior to formal schooling were overwhelmingly positive about the caring shown by the child development workers and genuinely enthusiastic about their children's progress. Families who qualified for Head Start were also positive about that program, and most praised the related parent participation aspects, although a few complained about them.

Parents uniformly said that their children liked books and that they had read to their children when they were young, but few mentioned reading to older children in their descriptions of a typical day. Some characterized their children as more interested in active pursuits than reading, and some said that reading was difficult for their children and so not a common pastime. The most common pastime was watching television.

The one area of difference in childhood concerns between the two risk groups was that the not-at-risk families more often reported trouble finding affordable daycare, and their biggest concern was cost rather than the quality

of child care. Fuller did have an afterschool program, but even its sliding scale rates were steep for some families, leading to latch-key children. The greater concern for affordable daycare among the families not deemed to be at risk was not explained by the employment rate, which was similar in the two risk groups. The fact that afterschool care is primarily a concern of families whose children are not at risk argues for making it a low priority for the Fuller project. However, since afterschool care could be designed to serve other needs of at-risk students, such as homework help, it might be included for that reason.

Neighborhood Influences and Family Values

Housing in Fuller's low-income neighborhood consists of small, single-family dwellings interspersed with a few larger homes, many of which have been converted into apartments that are minimally maintained. In addition, the town's two aging trailer parks are in the neighborhood, and there is one modern apartment complex that offers subsidized housing. Inexpensive rentals, often with inadequate insulation or other amenities, are also available in the country surrounding the town. When asked about their neighborhoods, mothers and fathers described themselves and their neighbors as holding to what several called "family values" or "decent living." Most of those who lived in town described neighborhoods where their children had playmates and in which residents respected and looked out for one another. Country families were more isolated.

In contrast, families in or near the town's subsidized apartment complex had many concerns about their neighbors. They complained of drugs being openly used and sold, fights, undisciplined children, and teen mothers who served as poor role models. One mother talked of being upset at a neighbor's lack of cooperation in the control of lice. The steering committee had expected the proposed project might address a lack of neighborly cohesion and support, but it had not anticipated the magnitude of the problems reported at the apartment complex. It was discouraging to learn that housing designed specifically for low-income families actually provided an incentive for moving to less adequate housing. A clear need was identified, and addressing it would require the kind of collaborative effort between residents, law enforcement, apartment management, and social service providers that was originally envisioned by the steering committee.

Mobility

Teachers on the steering committee felt that changing schools during the academic year was a chronic problem that put students at risk, especially since it seemed that those least able to adjust were the ones most likely to move. The teachers expressed frustration that they had no advance notice of a child being

added to their class and that records from other schools were of limited use since they did not provide information about specific skills. Because the moves were seldom related to better employment, the teachers saw the moves as another indication that parents did not value education.

The literature makes it clear that student mobility is a universal problem in schools that serve low-income children. The positive correlation between high mobility and low achievement is well established (Rumberger & Larson 1998; Smith, Fien, & Paine, 2008), as is the fact that those in the lowest income brackets have the highest mobility (Engec, 2006; Offenber, 2004; Smith, Fien et al., 2008), although the likely confounding among the variables of low income, low achievement, and high mobility makes attributing causality to high mobility problematic. Further, the moves of low-income families are typically short distances and are necessitated by financial or family crises rather than better employment (Longoni, 2000; Schaft, 2008). While mobility is a problem in both urban (Alexander et al., 1996; Nelson, Simoni, & Adelman, 1996) and rural (Schaft, 2008) schools, Schaft believes that rural schools are less able to meet the needs of incoming students because they have fewer administrative and fiscal resources.

Since a major focus of the proposed project was to improve the school readiness of incoming kindergarteners, it was important to know how many of them lived in the Fuller School neighborhood prior to kindergarten. Interviewers asked families about their moves into or out of the neighborhood between the birth of their oldest elementary-aged child and the child's entrance into school. The results showed that 46% of the at-risk and 50% of the not-at-risk families had resided in the neighborhood for all five years prior to their child entering kindergarten. That is comparable to the rate found by Engec (2006) for the state of Louisiana, and somewhat less than those reported for some inner city districts (Alexander et al., 1996; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990; Offenber, 2004). Similar to the studies of Longoni (1990) and Schaft (2008), the primary reasons given for moving were family circumstances such as divorce or unemployment. This mobility rate of several students a year per class does not seem like a lot, but when Lash and Kirkpatrick (1990) interviewed teachers, they found that from a teacher's perspective, each incoming student requires considerable teacher time to teach new routines, assess achievement, and fill in gaps due to curriculum variation between schools.

The parents surveyed were concerned that adjustments to a new school might be difficult especially since moves were often related to other stresses the family was experiencing, but they either thought there was not much they could do besides sympathize with their children or they chose actions that teachers viewed as counterproductive. One parent expressed the opinion that

giving her children a break from school for a week or two during the move had been helpful. Another parent reported she did not want her child's records transferred quickly because she wanted her child to have a fresh start at a new elementary school.

It is unlikely that Fuller School can reduce the mobility rate among its families, although better delivery of community services might prevent some moves. However, knowing that most moves are to and from neighboring school districts suggests that sharing curriculum guides that detail the sequence in which skills are taught for each grade would be helpful. In addition, Fuller could routinely educate parents about the best ways to ease the transition to a new school. Planners must weigh the relative merits of providing services as early as possible against the percentage of children that will eventually attend Fuller.

Opposition to Locating Services at the School

The section of the interview that asked about existing community services began with a broad question asking families what services were available and whether they felt the services were sufficient, accessible, and responsive. This initial broad question was then followed with questions about any community services and programs the family did not mention initially. The committee expected to hear some of the frustrations commonly reported in the literature of a piecemeal approach with too many agencies with differing qualifying requirements, duplication in terms of paper work, and a lack of accessibility or responsiveness. However, they found that those problems were not foremost among the families' concerns. Instead, families in both risk groups opposed locating offices of social services at the school. Such resistance is reported in the literature (Black, 2004; Dryfoos, 1994), but the major objection is usually that such noneducational services should not be the purview of the school and would dilute its educational mission. In contrast, the major objection of Fuller School parents was that it would jeopardize a family's privacy. Perhaps a family resource center like those in other full-service schools around the country (Dryfoos, 1994; Oppenheim, 1999; Strahan, Carlone, Horn, Dallas, & Ware, 2003) would bring parents into the building for so many reasons that those coming for some sort of financial assistance could not be singled out, but privacy was a strong concern, and that concern is consistent with the families' desire for respect. One of the few parents who favored having offices at the school was a doctor's wife who volunteered regularly in her daughter's classroom. Her attitude was one of service provision, and she explained her support by saying, "Fuller school has so many kids with so many problems. Anything to improve the delivery of community services would have a positive effect."

Families strongly asserted that they would and could access services when they needed them. Most were familiar with the available services, but the

fact that some were not suggests an ongoing need for publicity. Services were deemed to be accessible, although a few said that evening hours would be helpful. In addition, several said that the location of mental and public health agencies on the outskirts of town created access problems. A few families expressed concerns that not knowing whether they would qualify prevented them from applying and that some families lied and received services for which they did not qualify.

Families favored locating health, recreation, and adult education services at the school. They were relatively satisfied with the availability and accessibility of health care, although several families characterized themselves, as one father said, "not running to the doctor for every little thing." This satisfaction was unexpected, because the teachers on the steering committee talked of families who could not afford their child's Ritalin or glasses or failed to follow through with health referrals. While families did not express a need for additional health services, they did report relying on the school's vision and hearing screenings and favored expanding the school nurse job to full time. Despite their claim of satisfaction with their health care, the interviewers characterized many families who did not qualify for Medicaid as doing no more than getting by with a combination of free services, postponing care (especially dental), and paying medical bills in installments.

Opinions about recreation ranged from too much to not enough and from very interested to not interested at all. Expense was the most often mentioned barrier to participation in recreation opportunities. Families were unaware of or unwilling to inquire about fee waivers, a problem that should be easy for the project to address. Those who wanted additional recreational activities mentioned a need for family activities, teen activities, and noncompetitive activities.

Specific Programming Ideas

When the interviewer asked parents about what problems Fuller School families faced and what services might be helpful to address them, most did not see any pervasive problems. Parents were asked their opinion about nine ideas suggested by the committee: (a) cooperative preschool where parents pay by working one day a week; (b) assistance with school transfers; (c) home visits to help parents promote development in preschoolers; (d) general classes in child development; (e) school organization for parents; (f) parent organizations by grade; (g) neighborhood support groups; (h) parent–infant classes; (i) small parent support groups organized by topic. The interests of the two risk groups were similar, and the ideas that were most favored were parent support groups (16), home visits by a child development specialist (14), cooperative preschool (14), and parent–infant classes (14). In addition to these affirmative responses, others responded to those four ideas with a maybe. Although the

existing Parent Teacher Organization was actually a committee of six parents that primarily organized fundraising and did no public programming, many parents said that there already were parent organizations, and more were not needed. Only two parents knew about existing parent–infant classes offered by the Area Education Agency (AEA), and no parents reported having attended. Clearly, there is a need for more and better publicity about parent education and involvement opportunities.

In the interviews, families indicated that they would participate in those activities they favored, but there was always a proviso about the convenience of the meeting time. Unfortunately for the sake of project planning, there was absolutely no consistency in the days or times that parents suggested as being convenient. Parents did express interest in home visits which have the advantage of flexible scheduling and an opportunity for informal conversation, but those advantages would need to be weighed against the costs.

Conclusion

The needs assessment results pose questions of how the teachers and parents could have such different perspectives and which view is more accurate. Fuller families see themselves as good parents who love and care for their children despite limited material resources. They say that they value education, consider any problems they have to be the kinds of things that could happen to anyone, and feel capable of obtaining assistance if necessary. The teachers, on the other hand, see struggling families who do not value education and have unmet needs that prevent their children from receiving the full benefit from their education. Developing a community school project requires considerable human and financial resources, so planners would like to be as certain as possible that the programming will make a difference. Therefore, while there is merit in the advice that it is not sensible or effective to provide services that parents do not want or need, it is also important to ask whether parents' views should be the only consideration. Certainly the teachers need to understand how their students' parents view themselves and school and how their views are shaped by their past schooling experiences as well as their current relationships with school staff. Parents might also benefit from hearing the teachers' views if they can be presented in a way that is not blaming or demeaning.

Much of the literature on parent involvement is enthusiastic about its potential benefits (Chavkin, 1989; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Moles, 1993; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004). However, Lareau and Shumar (1996) are more cautious. Based on their in-depth study of middle- and lower-class families, they say that the social inequality of low-income parents creates differences

that cannot be ignored and must be addressed directly. This seems to be the case at Fuller, where it is likely that there is truth in both parents' and teachers' perspectives that cannot be resolved by discussion and better understanding. Instead, the project needs to recognize the differences and somehow accommodate them.

The needs assessment yielded much useful information. However, the results did not lead as clearly to courses of action as the steering committee anticipated. Families identified two specific needs: (1) improving the quality of life for those in or near the subsidized apartment complex, and (2) a smoother transition to middle school. Neither of those needs can be addressed primarily by providing more or better-delivered social services. Nor is either directly related to the goal adopted for the proposed project, although improving the conditions at the subsidized apartment complex is more nearly like what was envisioned. In addition, both of those problems apply only to a subset of parents, although all families will eventually face the transition to middle school. Families also professed an interest in information and strategies they might use to assist with the daily challenges of parenting including providing homework assistance. They view such education as something any parent could use rather than a particular need of Fuller families. In contrast, the teachers' ideas about critical programming was something that would address unmet needs and change the behavior of Fuller families so they would provide the environment and supports their children needed to be successful at school. The committee must decide whether to begin by tackling a parent-identified need or to work on something more directly related to the teachers' concerns.

Hatch (1998) provides an argument for beginning with a parent concern and gives several examples of successful projects that began in this way. Working on a parent-identified need (over more immediate teacher concerns) demonstrated the project's willingness to listen to parents and laid the groundwork for further school-parent collaboration. Another project focus that might more directly achieve some of the goals of the teachers and that parents favored was the idea of a cooperative preschool. This approach to educating children and their parents also has research support (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001; Schweinhart & Wiekart, 1999). In the course of training the parent volunteers, the preschool teacher could teach about developmental benchmarks, demonstrate strategies for teaching preschoolers, and begin the collaborative relationships the school wants to have with its parents. The teacher would also be in a position to refer families to community resources. Eventually, experienced parents might assume some of the responsibility for recruiting and training new parents, and with additional education, some might move into paid paraprofessional positions at the school. In these ways the project would be building the capacity of its parents.

Several studies discuss issues of power and trust (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Cousins, Mickelson, Williams, & Velasco, 2008) as obstacles to collaboration between schools and parents, but none we found report the strong sensitivity to disrespect that was the dominant theme expressed by Fuller families. This finding could be a function of using interviews, or perhaps this issue is particularly acute in a small, rural, White community where citizens of all social classes meet one another on a regular basis in public places, and some low-income families have a multigeneration reputation in the town. In retrospect, it is hard to explain why the steering committee expected that their needs assessment would reveal the same needs that a neighboring community project was addressing for its Mexican immigrants.

Likewise, the relative satisfaction with social services and health care may also be due in part to the nature and size of the community. Most services are centrally located in a town that is only four square miles in area, and many families have connections with well-liked and compassionate staff, some of whom have been in their jobs for decades. The medical (but not eye and dental) health care community jointly has a policy of providing care regardless of ability to pay. In addition, the presence and policies of the local Community Action Agency provides some coordination of services. Lastly, the strength of extended family ties contributes to families' sense of well-being. Osher and Fleischman (2005) explain how connectedness can act as a buffer to mitigate adverse circumstances. However, strategies such as moving in with a relative are effective for only the most temporary problems and can create additional stress.

The unanticipated findings from Fuller School's needs assessment confirm how essential it is for schools to do a needs assessment. Without the needs assessment, the Fuller project would likely have begun with collaboration among existing agencies to provide integrated social services located at the school building. That approach would have run into strong opposition from Fuller families who resent being seen as needy and want their use of services to be private. This does not necessarily mean that Fuller's families would not benefit from a more holistic and coordinated approach to family development, but any such efforts must first garner families' support and must explicitly espouse the goal of building on family strengths rather than that of remedying deficits and promoting dependency. In addition, using interviews gave an adequate response rate, and the use of open-ended questions revealed useful information that would not have been anticipated and therefore not found with a multiple choice survey or even a short-answer survey.

Three important limitations to this study should be kept in mind. First, although the percentage of responses was adequate, it is possible and even likely that those who either refused to participate or did not show up for their in-

interviews are systematically different from those who did complete interviews. Second, the needs assessment almost certainly did not uncover the full extent of the problems that Fuller families face, particularly in the areas of substance and family abuse. Third, more research is needed on rural children and their families to support or question the tentative findings of the present study. Despite these limitations, the needs assessment provided important information about unexpected strengths as well as problems, and at the same time was a positive first step in developing relationships with Fuller parents.

Recommendations

The present case study suggests several strategies that could improve the functioning of a steering committee as it begins its initial planning and needs assessment:

1. *Use the term “needs and assets assessment” instead of “needs assessment.”* The term “assets” should include strengths of the families as well as community resources. In fact, the Children’s Aid Society (2001) uses the phrase “assessing community needs and strengths,” although strengths refers mainly to community resources rather than family strengths. That small change of phrase, if used consistently, would have altered the initial steering committee discussion by beginning with the expectation of finding family and community strengths as well as needs. In the present study, the open-ended nature of the questions did identify some strengths, but that was fortuitous.
2. *Include more parents on the steering committee.* Since the various stakeholders each had one representative on the committee, having two parents seemed generous. However, from the parents’ perspective, the school had many representatives—albeit only one from each staff category such as principal or special education teacher—and the parents were vastly outnumbered by college-educated professionals. Parents likely thought that their voice would not carry much weight.
3. *Pay parents.* All the other participants were paid because they could attend committee meetings as part of their job, so it was a major oversight not to pay the parents. In addition, depending on need, child care and transportation should be provided, and the parent’s stipend should be sufficient for them to cover any expenses associated with their service on the committee and still earn some money. Paying the parents would have emphasized their importance as members of the committee.
4. *Training for committee members.* In her review of school–community partnership efforts, Sanders (2003) identifies a lack of professional preparation for collaboration to be a common and serious obstacle; Collins, Carrier, Anderson, and Paisano-Trujillo (2010) also make that recommendation

based on their experiences with full-service schools in New Mexico. The current account is a case in point. The committee prided itself on realizing that the needs assessment would be the beginning of its relationship with families but totally failed to realize that the steering committee meetings were actually the beginning of their relationship with parents. Some training should have been done with the whole committee, but to some extent, the parents and professionals needed different training. The teachers needed to develop an awareness of ways in which their views of parents as deficient were disrespectful and likely wrong and develop more sensitive ways to express their real concerns based on their observations of children in their classes. They also needed some training to make sure that they behaved in ways that communicated to the parents that they wanted to hear their ideas and that they listened to the parents' contributions. The parent representatives needed reassurance that the committee cared about their opinions, and they should have had one person on the committee—in this case either the principal or a special education teacher because they had established good rapport with parents—who would check with them after each meeting to make certain they had had sufficient opportunity to express their views. The parents might also have felt more confident if they had been able to meet with other parents between meetings and could then say at committee meetings that they spoke for more than just themselves.

In the present case, all the committee members and the parents who were interviewed genuinely wanted the best for Fuller's children. However, even with the best intentions, there were important differences in perspectives that had the potential to become obstacles as the project moved forward. Such obstacles are not insurmountable, but they require that someone notice them and help participants address them directly. The steering committee did some of this work when, in planning items for the parent interviews, they examined their own ideas about the reasons for low achievement among children living in low-income families. However, other differences were revealed that were not addressed and that could hinder the success of a future project.

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Appendix. Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

Child Growth and Development

1. Describe the growth and development of your oldest elementary-aged child.
2. Who did you turn to if you had questions about your child's development? What do you think would help families address concerns?
3. Describe a typical day for your child. Follow up: friendships, reading, and television preferences

Schooling

4. How has school gone for your child since kindergarten? Have any years been better than others?
5. How does the school communicate with you, and what works best? Follow up: parent–teacher conferences, homework, phone calls, and notes sent home
6. What could the school do to help children be ready for school?

Neighborhood

PERCEIVED NEEDS OF AT-RISK FAMILIES

7. Describe the neighborhood you live in and things that are positive or of concern to you.

Mobility

8. How many times has your family moved between the birth of your oldest elementary-aged child and the time that child entered school?

Community Services

9. If you or a friend needed food or help with energy bills or rent, do you feel it would be easy to access those services in our community? Repeat for mental and physical health care and for child, substance, and sexual abuse.
10. What challenges do Fuller families face? What would make it easier for families to get the help they need? Would it be a good idea for agencies to have offices located in or near the school?

Specific ideas

11. Which of the following specific suggestions do you think are good ideas, and would you participate? (a) cooperative preschool where parents pay by working one day a week; (b) school transfer assistance; (c) home visits to help parents promote development in preschoolers; (d) general classes in child development; (e) organization of school parents; (f) parent organizations by grade; (g) neighborhood support groups; (h) parent–infant classes; (i) small parent support groups organized by topic, such as learning disability

