

# The Impact of Race on School Change Teams

*Alison A. Carr-Chellman*

## Stakeholder Participation

The idea that various individuals or groups who have compelling interests in schooling should be involved in changes affecting them or their families is reaching new levels of popularity with the onset of systemic change methodologies which emphasize stakeholder participation. The terms “community participation” and “stakeholder approach” have several meanings and interpretations but are rooted in stakeholder evaluation (Stake, 1986). Mauriel points to stakeholders as “those attempting to influence the allocation of resources or intended direction of the school system” (1989, p. 147). Power is central to the definition of stakeholder, though oftentimes stakeholders, other than professional educators, are not given substantive power (Rogers, 1968).

Within a school community, major groups have interests in the school or are affected by the educational system. Such groups can be considered the major stakeholders in the community of interest (Reigeluth, 1992). Among these groups are the political, religious, and commercial leaders in the community, the social service and educational personnel, as well as the student and parental populations. This listing of stakeholders is certainly not exhaustive, and it is recognized that each school has its own context and its own set of stakeholders. Early identification of stakeholder groups is crucial in order to avoid the misperception that change is a top-down mandate (Stevenson & Pellicer, 1992; Havelock, 1973).

### Systems Theory

The essence of systems theory in current public school change efforts is summed up by Waller (1961): "As a social organism the school shows an organismic interdependence of its parts; it is not possible to affect a part of it without affecting the whole" (p. 6). A systems approach to schools, then, identifies interdependencies and designs new systems of learning that more adequately advance the human condition. While systems theories are based heavily on military-industrial approaches to the creation of instruction and the current TQM movement, systems thinking as it applies to the current wave of school change is more interested in holistic thinking, stakeholder participation, local control, and equity than previous movements of systems technologies.

One notable agreement in educational systems design literature is the importance of community participation. Reigeluth (1992) and Banathy (1991) express concern over the state of community "buy-in" at the outset of design efforts. Reigeluth points to the importance of fundamental support for change efforts: "The change process is far more likely to be successful if there is grass-roots community support for fundamental change" (p. 120). Banathy echoes the importance of community support, writing that "[support] has to be generated by inviting and encouraging a genuine involvement of representatives of the community in the design activity" (p. 168).

Aside from the political benefits of community support, stakeholder participation in systemic change pays off with more powerful ideas for creating a new school environment. Systems theory emphasizes stakeholder participation because bringing those with competing ideologies together over a problem is more likely to expose important interconnections among system components. Group-based collaborative design, while more difficult to accomplish, is also more likely to highlight effects that changes in one part of the system have on other parts of the system.

Decision-making powers should be shared equally with parents, social service agents, government leaders, business constituents, religious leaders, minority groups, even students where possible. Historically, community participation and community control movements have not delivered significant shifts in school-based power structures (Daresh, 1992; Fantini, Gittell & Magat, 1970). The potency of community participation lies not in its ability to co-opt political support for already-made decisions. Instead, the power of community participation in the change of our public schools comes from shifting power and responsibility to members of a community who are all invested in educational outcomes. The current structure of public schools places much of the power in the hands of boards of education and educational administrations who some theorists view as perpetuating

the hegemony of the current educational system (Dawson, 1982).

In addition, parental and community participation *invites* ideological conflict among divergent community factions which can be both a source of energy and a source of vexation. Koetting (1994) explains, "Working through the conflict, struggling and negotiating meanings on the contested terrain can leave one unsettled, experiencing a feeling of 'chaos'" (p. 55). The collaborative development of school and public policies, however, is the hallmark of our democratic society (Giroux, 1992; Crowson, 1992), and true stakeholder negotiation creates in the school a space for contestation. As Cohen (1983) puts it so aptly, "if one believes that there are important differences of view, it seems sensible to want the views to be articulated in the process of policy argument and political decision" (p. 79).

## Race, Class, and Gender

The importance of social stratification cannot be underestimated when considering stakeholder participation in school change. The fact that power is an immutable force in public school policy-making is unavoidable. As Counts (1932) succinctly puts it, "on all genuinely crucial matters, the school follows the wishes of the groups or classes that actually rule society" (p. 25). The power that individuals wield as a result of their social status based on race, class, or gender identity has an impact on the resulting plans for school change that emerge from the team's efforts.

Most of the research conducted in education about race, class, and gender has focused on the students in the school environment (e.g., Grant, 1985; Sadker & Sadker, 1985; Moore & Smith, 1986; Velez, 1989). A few important sources of information do exist with regard to race and parental participation (e.g., Collins, Moles, & Cross, 1982; Epstein, 1987; Becker & Epstein, 1982; Lightfoot, 1978). Comer (1988) explains that some parents, ashamed of their speech, dress, or failure to hold jobs, maintain a defensive posture which can lead to hostility and avoidance of any contact with schools. Comer suggests that a mutual distrust builds among populations who are unfamiliar with one another, leading to alienation between school and home. This alienation in turn produces a difficulty in nurturing a bond between child and teacher that can support development and learning. The child becomes disappointed in school and risks dropping out of the educational system entirely. This is a vicious cycle which repeats itself; too often students who drop out of school become parents who cannot walk school halls with dignity because of their shame about dropping out. Fliers sent home to invite parents to become involved will not break through these difficult walls of dissonance, shame, and alienation.

## **Project Description**

This study represents a post-hoc analysis of data which emerged from a study (Carr, 1993, 1994), the purpose of which was to examine membership selection criteria for school teams. In this investigation, six schools were followed for six months during the process of selecting and initiating parental and community involvement on advisory councils. The schools were located in a major urban city in the Midwest (we will call it the MidWest district). Personal and telephone interviews were conducted with minority parents and with parents who had not been active in the school. These follow-up interviews sought to identify parent perceptions of team membership issues and power. Questions centered on: 1) why members did or did not attend meetings, 2) why members did or did not participate in meetings they attended, 3) perceptions of team power, 4) positive and negative team member characteristics, and 5) aspects of the experience that would draw parents to more meetings.

## **Results**

The most startling finding is perhaps also the most predictable. The participation rates and attendance rates among minority participants were lower than non-minority participants, and father populations were markedly underrepresented (see Tables 1 & 2). Attrition rates among minority participants, however, were higher. In all six schools African-American students represented approximately 48% of the total student population; minority parent participation on Parent/Community Advisory Committees (PCAC's), however, reached a high of only 31%. Fathers seemed to be more active and remain active when substantial power was invested in the team. Fathers did not want to spend their time raising funds or baking cookies, but when given the opportunity were interested in curricular and school policy issues that would impact their children.

### **Follow-Up**

Follow-up interviews showed that most parents cited time constraints such as job conflicts or just being too busy as the primary reason for the absence (44%). Other reasons included family obligations, lack of information from schools and illness. Several parents identified feelings of "being out of it" or lacking motivation.

### **Obstacles Parents Face**

There are many causes for the lack of minority participation, including transportation to and from school, child care during meeting times, work

Table 1

Category		Total	Minority	White	Total %	Minority %	Non-Minority %
Initial Roster	6 cases	108	29	79	100	27	73
1st Meeting	6 cases	73	20	53	100	27	73
2nd Meeting	5 cases	48	15	31	100	31	69
3rd Meeting	3 cases	35	4	29	100	11	89

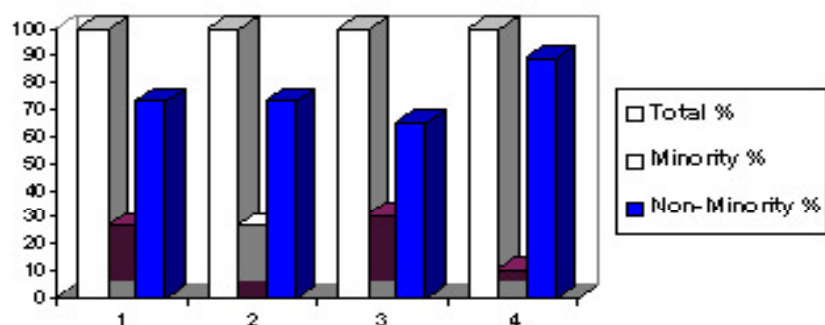
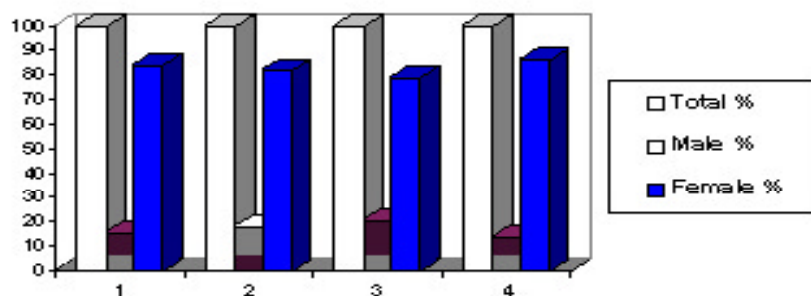


Table 2



obligations, and lack of time. Race, class, and gender all interact in this study to produce high attrition and low participation among minority and father populations.

The primary obstacle cited was work priorities and obligations. The following statement by one school staff member illustrates the feeling of many professional educators trying to increase participation:

*First, parents have less energy... I guess that translates to less time. They're paying more attention to their careers and jobs, because of the economy, I suppose. Both parents are working, and Mom doesn't have time to come here anymore.*

Child care becomes an issue when working mothers cannot find sitters (or cannot afford them) in order to attend an evening meeting. If the team meets during the day, the mothers cannot attend because they are working. If the team meets at night, parents who may not have the financial ability to hire sitters may have to leave their children home alone. The following parent comment reflects this inherent conflict:

*The time they set was bad. My son would have had to stay at home until after the meeting. I didn't like this time. If it had been during school, or when someone was home to just, you know, be around . . . but this neighborhood is not good enough to leave him alone in the house.*

### Obstacles Schools Erect

While parents face a variety of obstacles in their own environment, schools also erect certain blocks to full participation. In this case, most schools engaged in open membership, but focused on certain parent groups. Parents who had exhibited high levels of activity in the school in the past were valued participants and at times were personally encouraged by the principal to become members of the PCAC. When asked about selection criteria, one principal offered the following:

*Past involvement with school programs. Basically band, yeah, hey, Booster Parents are your best parents. I guess those are the available parents. You know, they give their off time.*

This focus on available parents may increase the feelings of inadequacy among lower-class populations who often were working two jobs to get by. It is difficult to hear unheard voices when the only ones being targeted for inclusion are those who have been involved in the past. Therefore, membership on the team, while pledged to be "open," was really full of

hidden obstacles for populations that were previously uninvolved. One principal identified both the pro and con of engaging active parents.

*On the plus side, you get people coming in who have worked on these kinds of teams before, so you get experienced members. On the other hand, those members also come with a set of preconceptions about the school, about how to conduct the process. They aren't a blank slate, and sometimes that can be better if you are trying to design something new.*

Administrators in the study identified the difficulties certain parent groups face when they come to school. One administrator said:

*Some of these parents are overwhelmed by teachers. They may have been dropouts or delinquent when they were in school. They don't want to be talked down to – they want to be able to walk in these halls and maintain their dignity and pride. Schools should encourage parents to come in.*

A common trend in many schools is to involve school personnel in a decision-making team (teachers, administrators, staff) while relegating parents and community members to advisory boards where professional educators are often also represented. One decision-making design team met during the school day when it was almost impossible for many underrepresented populations to attend. Businesspeople, working single mothers, and most fathers were not able to attend regularly-scheduled daytime meetings unless they obtained work release or suffered lost pay. These models encourage differential power distributions skewed toward non-working mothers, upper- and middle-class fathers, businesspeople (who are willing to invest time and money into educational outcomes in the hopes of cutting retraining costs in the future), and professional educators.

Differential power distributions which stem in large part from feelings of professionalism among school faculty and administration can be another obstacle erected by schools (Rogers, 1968). Outcomes-based education, systemic change, and educational design can be used in ways that exclude those who are not familiar with the educational literature base. The lack of minority and male representation on these teams and high levels of attrition among these groups were common difficulties, and strategies for dealing with this absence of balance varied from buddy systems and baby-sitting services, to town meetings and home visits. The idea that imbalances on the team represented a threat to the designs produced by the team occurred to

only one principal. That principal stated:

*For whatever reason, segregation, desegregation, reassignment, whatever, parents have been taken out of the process, and they need to come back in. We need the parents who are uncomfortable, our Chapter I parents, as many parents from as many different backgrounds as possible. We need to bring them here, or else we won't be addressing all the issues of parents.*

## Discussion

Generally speaking, where empowered teams do exist, we see an overwhelming number of participants from the middle-class white mother population. This is in substantial disproportion to the general school or community population. What is the impact of this disproportionate representation on the team that will be charged with visioning the future of schools in their community? There are two important impacts on design teams that are imbalanced: 1) lack of broad-based stakeholder commitment to change efforts, and; 2) skewed designs. It seems apparent that if stakeholder groups are disproportionately represented on powerful teams, decisions made by those teams will not gain broad-based public support or favor. The primary advantage to having stakeholder participation is the political cover that it offers; without this benefit, the pain of collaborative design should be heartily questioned.

Perhaps the more important implication of imbalanced design teams is the tendency for the status quo and current system to be perpetuated. Here is a simple example of this problem: One obstacle for poor parents in schools is that they may have failed at their own education. They are uncomfortable with the idea of returning to an institution that was less than helpful to them. What perspective is lost when people who have failed in the system are unrepresented on decision-making design teams? The perspective that is most likely to offer us substantially-altered visions of schools is lost. It has been noted that the toughest parents to convince about change are parents of gifted and talented learners. Their children are succeeding in the current system and will reap the benefits of a society in which schools sort individuals instead of developing them.

It is imperative that all members of a community feel empowered, feel that they have something substantial to offer to these new visions, that their opinions count even if they do not have a teaching certificate, college degree, or even a high school equivalency. It is important that we address the issues of all stakeholders in truly systemic change or else the resultant designs and new systems of learning will represent only the visions of a select few.

How can we rectify the situation? There may be several alternatives, including public relations campaigns, careful recruiting and selection of design-team members, attention to monies spent by various factions to ensure equity, and careful de-expertising of the change processes to make them accessible to all stakeholder groups. And perhaps we need to take design- and change-process competencies to underrepresented populations first so they can see these skills as an empowering tool they can use to their advantage.

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Alison Carr-Chellman is an associate professor of education at Penn State University