PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN AN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SETTING

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Abstract

Many independent schools today struggle to engage parents in ways that meet parents' needs, particularly as these critical stakeholders have become more demanding and involved in recent years. Parents assume multiple roles. Even in schools that enjoy a healthy relationship with their parent body, the evolving role of private school parents can present a source of significant conflict, necessitating a negotiation over the extent to which parents should participate in, sway, or control school policies, procedures, and decisions. Because independent schools rely heavily on parents to further their mission; foster community; and contribute their time, energy, and money to the school, it is critical to understand not only what motivates and satisfies parents, but also how parents forge collaborative relationships with administrators and other parents and participate in community life.

This qualitative study explored how parents and administrators view the role of the parent, with the goal of ascertaining meaningful and mutually-beneficial ways to engage parents in the life of the school through the lenses of parent involvement literature and negotiated order theory. Individual and focus group interviews with parents and school leadership in this independent school case study led to nine findings and three recommendations for school leadership.

Keywords: *independent schools, parent engagement, parent involvement, parent-teacher association, negotiated order theory*

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Executive Summary

Many independent schools today struggle to engage parents in ways that meet parents' needs, particularly as these critical stakeholders have become "more demanding, vigilant, and involved" than ever before (Lewis & Wilson, 2012, p. 2). Depending on the issue, the school setting, and the moment in time, parents may assume one or more of the following roles: supporter, helper, fundraiser, passive recipient of information, paying client, purchaser of educational services, (unconditional) advocate for their child, collaborator, or full-fledged mission-partner (Lewis & Wilson, 2012; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001).

Even in schools that enjoy a remarkably healthy relationship with their parent body, the evolving role of private school parents can present a source of significant conflict, necessitating a negotiation over the extent to which parents should participate in, sway, or even control school policies, procedures, and decisions (Berggren, 2003; English & Goodman, 2020; Lewis & Wilson, 2012). Because independent schools rely heavily on parents to further their mission; foster community; and contribute their time, energy, and money to the school, it is critical to understand not only what motivates and satisfies parents, but also how parents forge collaborative relationships with administrators and other parents and participate in community life.

The focal organization of this study, Southeast Preparatory Academy (SPA; a pseudonym), is a PK-12 independent, college preparatory day school located on the East Coast. Like many independent schools, SPA is challenged by parent expectations and seeks to identify the most effective means of engaging parents and building their identification with the school.

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This study explored how parents and administrators view the role of the parent, with the goal of ascertaining meaningful and mutually-beneficial ways to engage parents in the life of the school. Although the extant literature on parent involvement focuses primarily on public schools, this research contributes to the generalizable knowledge of effective practices for parent engagement and informs the recommendations, strategies, and change initiatives that are recommended to the focal organization.

Parent involvement literature and negotiated order theory assisted in the examination of the following research questions:

1. What does the term parent engagement mean to parents and school administrators?

2. How do parents who participate in the parent teacher association perceive parent engagement compared with parents who do not participate?

3. What forms of engagement help to build parents' identification with the institution at large?

These questions are important not only because parents are critical stakeholders within the organization, but also because their involvement affects student outcomes and contributes to the overall culture of the school.

To answer these questions, a qualitative case study design was employed to explore the complex phenomenon of parent engagement in a private school setting (Ragin et al., 2004; Warren et al., 2009; Yin, 2013). Data collection included purposive sampling, a site visit, one-on-one interviews, and focus group interviews.

Findings

The data revealed that SPA invites parent engagement through a wide array of volunteer opportunities, special events, and programs, including those sponsored by the PTA. The PTA operates as the primary engine for parent engagement and its meetings provide a venue for parents to meet each other, plan events, share information and concerns, and raise essential issues with school leadership. SPA has displayed a welcoming attitude toward parents that parents have embraced. This culture of openness, mutual respect, and trust contributes not only to the way these stakeholders understand what parent engagement means, but also to the order they have negotiated regarding expected behaviors within the community.

Finding 1

Parents used "engagement" as an umbrella term that encompasses a broad range of activities and attitudes.

Finding 2

Administrators' definitions of parent engagement incorporate the belief that parents should be informed and involved in school life within expected limits.

Finding 3

Stakeholders have a shared understanding that parents have a voice but no direct input into school decisions.

Finding 4

The order that exists around parent engagement has been negotiated through various practices that build a strong foundation of trust within a culture of knowing and valuing parents.

Finding 5

Parents who participate in the PTA view engagement as a means of contributing to the school community. Parents who do not participate relate engagement to sharing in their children's experiences.

Finding 6

Parents who participate in the PTA value it as a socially-nourishing conduit for relationship formation. Parents who do not participate rely on self-initiated ways to build social networks.

Finding 7

The PTA does not currently attract a diverse body of parent participants.

Finding 8

Parents seek educational opportunities beyond those currently offered to assist with parenting and apprise them of issues facing their children.

Finding 9

Parents value opportunities to connect with the student body.

Finding 10

Parents and administrators perceive a need for engagement modalities that capitalize on parents' professional skill sets and enable parents to share their knowledge and expertise.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and drawing on the relevant literature and frameworks described above, three evidence-based recommendations to enhance the robust program that SPA currently has in place to engage parents are made.

These change initiatives are designed to strengthen and deepen the relationships among parents, as well as those between parents and administrators:

Recommendation 1

Enhance existing support systems within the PTA by adding affinity groups to diversify and expand parent engagement and aid in relationship building.

Recommendation 2

Offer informal, school-facilitated discussion sessions in intimate settings on topics of importance to parents.

Recommendation 3

Offer opportunities for parents to "pay it forward" by serving as mentors to students in the SPA community.

Promoting these relationships should not only reinforce parents' connections to and enhance the overall sense of community at SPA (Mapp, 2003; Povey et al., 2016; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Warren et al., 2009), but also increase cooperation and decrease conflict between parents and administrators (Labianca et al., 1998).

Introduction

The independent school world views parent involvement in education as essential. However, many independent schools struggle with managing parents who seek to participate in their children's educational lives in a variety of seemingly overbearing ways. As independent school parents have become progressively more demanding in terms of their attempts to influence school policies and procedures, it appears that the divide between parents and independent school administrators has widened (Berggren, 2003; English & Goodman, 2020; Lewis & Wilson, 2012). Fundamentally, it is crucial to understand how these stakeholders view the role of the parent in terms of engagement in school life and the school decision-making process.

The archetypal vehicle for parent participation in independent schools is the PTA. With PTAs, parents are often the passive recipients of information disseminated by school administrators and faculty. At some independent schools, administrators appear to hesitate to promote more active forms of parent engagement (English & Goodman, 2020; Lewis & Wilson, 2012). This phenomenon in the independent school setting stands in contrast to what scholars discuss in the literature concerning public and urban school settings, where parent involvement is more actively promoted in the face of other impediments to parent involvement that exist outside of school (e.g., racial, cultural, and socio-economic barriers; see Epstein, 2001;

Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Research suggests that higher socio-economic status equips parents with more resources such as association from education, work experience, and social connections to intervene in their children's schooling (Hausman & Goldring, 2000; Kohn, 1998; Lareau, 1989; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999b).

This project focused on the expectations for parent engagement in an independent school setting and the forms of engagement that help build parents' identification with the institution. Based on the findings from qualitative interviews with parents and school administrators, evidence-based strategies were developed to help the organization strengthen parent engagement across a broader population and negotiate a more unified community to better leverage the stakeholders' shared goal of promoting student learning. At their core, these recommendations embrace the notion that parent participation "represents a powerful and potentially vital mechanism to enhance the relationships between home and school" (Smrekar & Cohen Vogel, 2001, p. 79).

Context

SPA is an independent, college preparatory day school located on the East Coast. SPA has a rich history of over 100 years, during which time it made various transformations in response to a changing educational landscape. In earlier years, the school operated as a boarding school, but it

discontinued its boarding program several decades ago. Today, with over 850 students in preschool through grade 12, SPA is the largest and oldest independent day school in its region. It offers a comprehensive curriculum, community service opportunities, and a wide array of extra-curricular activities for students.

While approximately 22% of the student body identifies as being students of color (i.e., African American, Asian American, Hispanic, Native American, Pacific American, and Multiracial), SPA serves a predominantly White, middle- to upper-middle-class community, according to one administrator. Its parent body is educated, professionally-accomplished, and active in their children's educational lives. These data speak to the overall privilege of the participants at the site.

A significant number of parents at SPA participate (to varying extents) in the school's PTA that is devoted to sponsoring community-building activities for students, faculty, and parents both on- and off-campus. SPA facilitates various other home- and school-based forms of participation designed to involve parents across grade levels in the school's life.

Like many independent schools, SPA is continuously managing expectations around parent engagement and seeks to identify the most effective means of engaging parents and building their identification with the institution. Although SPA has a parent population that, according to a senior administrator, may be somewhat "less intense" than at other independent schools, it is grappling just the same with how best to manage (and leverage) parent engagement at the site.

Conceptual Framework

Parent Involvement

Negotiated Order Theory
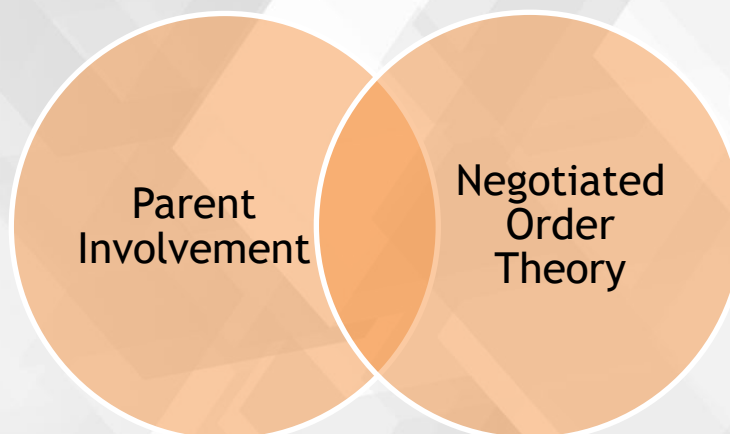
Parent Involvement Literature

Support in the literature for parent involvement is widespread. Influential work by Joyce Epstein and colleagues (Epstein, 1995, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009) identified six different types of parent involvement—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Findings by Epstein and other scholars provide extensive evidence of the value of parent involvement, including its association with a range of positive outcomes for students, parents, and teachers (Epstein, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Higher levels of parent involvement have been positively linked to enhanced social networks, positive parent-school relations, increased understanding of school norms, favorable climate, and a greater sense of cooperation, commitment, and trust in schools (Povey et al., 2016; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001).

As Rapp and Duncan (2012) explained:

> Parents are not disinterested bystanders. They want to know that schools are preparing their children with a high-quality education. They also want to know how to connect with teachers and administrators (Epstein et al., 2009). Parents are their children's first educators, and they remain their life- long teachers. The question is not if parental involvement is an essential aspect of education; rather, it is how do educational

establishments create a system that fosters and encourages strong partnerships that include all parents. (p. 2)

The literature suggests that various factors influence parents' decisions on whether to get involved in school and to what extent. These factors include parents' socially-constructed beliefs about the role they should play in their children's educational lives, as well as their feelings of self-efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). As Smrekar and Cohen (2001) noted:

> We understand that an exploration of the relationship between parents and schools is, by definition, dually formed; that is to say, how parents perceive their role in their children's schooling may be a function of how the school organization treats them. (p. 76)

The subsequent work of other scholars corroborates the idea that parents are motivated by their perceptions of how receptive the school is to their involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mapp, 2003). Practical life circumstances such as socioeconomic, work, and familial status, which may encourage or inhibit involvement, also influence these decisions (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Studies show that the social capital parents gain through networks at school contribute to their involvement, and parents with greater access to social capital are more likely to participate (Sheldon, 2002; Smrekar, 1992).

However, as Ogawa (1998) observed: "The assumption that more parent involvement of all types is always

better has gone largely unexamined and unchallenged" in the literature for years (p. 8). Ogawa argued that "even excessive amounts of oxygen or water can be toxic" (Ogawa, 1998, p. 8). Earlier, Casanova (1996) had called out Epstein's framework on parent involvement for its lack of attention to the types of participation that may have negative consequences for schools and children, counseling that "we cannot romanticize parent involvement and proclaim its virtue without also acknowledging its excesses" (p. 31). Thus, when examining parent involvement here, we must be careful not to overlook the various studies highlighting the turf battles, power struggles, and individualistic motives that are sometimes associated with parent involvement (Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009; Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008; Dom & Verhoeven, 2006).

Lareau and Muñoz (2012) noted three further limitations in the research: (1) most studies have focused on parent involvement with individual children, downplaying the role of parents who collectively participate in PTAs; (2) many studies that stress the power of cooperation have underestimated the enduring nature of conflicts between parents and administrators; and (3) most studies focus on parent involvement in low-income schools, with far fewer studies taking place in middle-class communities. In the context of this study, it bears noting that "parent income level [i]s a powerful predictor of parent involvement at school, although it is not necessarily associated with parent satisfaction" (Hausman & Goldring, 2000, p. 118). "Upper-middle-class parents, especially White upper-

middle-class parents, tend to have more success in making their voices heard in schools because they have political power and because they carry an implicit threat of flight" from schools (Kohn, 1998, as cited in McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999b, p. 605).

Researchers have suggested that parent involvement may inadvertently reproduce socioeconomic privilege because upper-middle-class parents often have considerable power, educational advantages, and more robust social networks with parents and school staff upon which to draw (Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Shumar 1996). In private schools, "parental involvement has become remarkably more aggressive among a small but significant percentage of…upwardly mobile and well-educated parents" who bring their professional skills to bear on the school setting (Berggren, 2003, p. 15). Within a highly competitive marketplace, private school administrators dependent on enrollment numbers tend to worry that parents who disagree with school decisions may leave (Bushnell, 1997). This fear can operate to create an "organizational imperative which exacts a level of accommodation from the school and its faculty" (Smrekar, 1992, p. 158).

At the same time, schools sometimes marginalize the voices of parents, treating parents as intruders and delimiting communication with them by adopting a "provider-receiver" model in which schools expect parents to function as the passive recipients of information that they provide (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001, p. 92). Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001) explained how these socially-constructed roles and

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norms might develop in a school setting: "Parents learn over time the circumscribed roles that they are expected to assume. They learn to think of themselves more as supporters, helpers, and fundraisers than decision-makers, partners, and collaborators" (p. 87). Pointing to traditional practices and understandings underlying the notion of parent involvement in schools, these scholars posit that "different definitions of appropriate parental behavior held between parents and between [school] stakeholders are keeping parent involvement from being woven into the institutional environments" (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001, p. 97). They suggest that the term parent involvement may itself be incomplete and that schools should consider "deconstructing the age-old scripts that delimit interaction" by embracing alternative approaches that embody "mutual, communal, and equitable exchange" between parents and schools (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001, p. 98).

Negotiated Order Theory

Negotiated order theory (Strauss, 1978) articulates a situated understanding of organizational life that provides an overarching framework for this study of parent engagement at the site. Strauss (1978) argued that social order is a negotiated order and that there can be no organizational relationships without some negotiation element, which provides a means of "getting things accomplished" (p. 11). According to

Strauss (1978), the negotiated order is "the sum total of the organization's rules and policies along with whatever agreements, understandings, pacts, contracts and other working arrangements [are] currently obtained" (p. 5). Thus, negotiated order theory depicts organizations as fluid, continuously emerging, and subject to "the changing web of interactions woven among its members" (Day & Day, 1977, p. 132).

To understand a social phenomenon like parent engagement from the perspective of negotiated order theory, one must examine the negotiations' structural context and the aspects of the structure that affect the negotiation (Fine, 1984). For Strauss (1978), this context includes the number of negotiators, their relative experience, and whom they represent; the frequency of negotiations; the relative balance of power among the parties; the nature of the stakes; the visibility of transactions; the number and complexity of matters involved; the clarity of boundaries of issues; and the existence of options to avoid or discontinue negotiations (Dom & Verhoeven, 2006; Fine, 1984; Medved & Heisler, 2002). As Bechky (2011) observed, this theory roots itself in organizational dynamics by underscoring how structure and context influence, and are influenced by, negotiation. The importance of organizational dynamics and the relative balance of power is evident not only as these key stakeholders negotiate over the role of the independent school parent, but also in the context of the PTA, which may be "fraught with potential landmines…and source[s] for significant conflict within

the school setting" (Lewis & Wilson, 2012, p. 2).

Corbin (1991) maintained that conditions at the site may "facilitate or constrain actions" and affect the extent to which negotiations occur and how successful they are (p. 26). For example, if stakeholders are satisfied with present conditions, there may be fewer negotiations; conversely, if there is dissatisfaction on any end, more negotiations may be geared toward change (Barquist Hogelucht & Geist, 1997). Generally speaking, negotiations occur in situations involving "uncertainty and ambiguity, disagreement, ideological diversity, newness and inexperience, and problematic coordination" (Hall & Spencer-Hall, 1982, p. 340). Nadai and Maeder (2008) articulated three defining conditions of negotiation: the existence of tension, conscious or openly-declared antagonistic interests, and opportunities to give and take in the interactions.

Negotiated order theory emphasizes how these negotiations occur in a temporal process through which negotiations are "renewed, revised, and reconstituted over time" (Fine, 1984, p. 241), as part of a continuous "evolution and revolution of social order" (Nadai & Maeder, 2008, p. 4). To be fully understood, negotiations must be construed within the broader temporal and historical context in which they are embedded (Barquist Hogelucht & Geist, 1997; Maines & Charlton, 1985).

Because stakeholders construct the negotiated order perpetually, they learn what they are expected to do through their communications and interactions, not from a fixed organizational chart or formal hierarchical structure. Individuals continually make adjustments to their expectations based on these ongoing exchanges (Fine, 1984). The perceptions of individuals in association with one another are vital to the negotiation (Fine, 1984; Maines & Charlton, 1985). Indeed, "the most direct line into practice and meaning [within the organization are] the people doing the work and interpretation" (Bechky, 2011, p. 1163). Thus, as Corbin (1991) highlighted, the researcher's consideration of multiple stakeholder viewpoints is essential to an accurate and rich understanding of the phenomenon under investigation—in this case, negotiations concerning parent engagement in a private school setting.

The process of negotiating an order may include communication to control, resist, or encourage change. Negotiated order theorists depict power and power relationships not in an absolute or fixed sense, but rather, as situational, contextual, and contingent, much like the negotiations themselves (Day & Day, 1977). Different participants' ability to control the course of actions and events is a function of the power of the role itself, as well as the individual or shared beliefs about what power exists, who has it, and how much they possess (Fine, 1984). The exercise of power may hinder the occurrence and results of negotiation. Participants are more likely to negotiate in systems where power is more dispersed than in those where it is concentrated (Hall & Spencer-Hall, 1982).

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Administrators, teachers, and parents are all actors in a school's negotiated order. The structures, conditions, and balances of power they negotiate influence the nature of the relationships that exist among them and their ability to get things accomplished (Dom & Verhoeven, 2006). The perspectives of school staff responsible for an entire group of children may, at times, conflict with those of parents who tend toward individualist concentration on their own children's educational experiences. (Kiumi, 2017; Vincent & Martin, 2000). Lareau (1989) found that faculty members wanted a professional-client relationship with parents in which parents respected teachers' professionalism and expertise as a source of power and autonomy in the classroom, as opposed to an equal partnership with parents (see also Lareau & Muñoz, 2012). In public schools (where there is arguably more support for parent involvement), Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001) observed the existence of an "institutionalized social order" built on the "inscribed assumption of educators as the 'providers of knowledge and opportunity' and parents as the 'receivers'" (p. 97). These institutionalized understandings of behavior in schools convey to parents, "even in the context of parent-attracting policies and gimmicks, that their input and participation is not valued" (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001, p. 97).

Several ethnographic studies (Ball & Vincent, 2000; Birenbaum-Carmelli, 1999; Lareau, 1989) demonstrate that parents may be willing to apply their social, economic, and cultural resources to promote their agendas and hold administration and faculty to account to them. When parents are dissatisfied with their personal experiences at school, they can use their "voice" to influence operations; they may also leverage the "exit option" if the school fails to respond to their satisfaction (Hausman & Goldring, 2000, p. 119). The research shows that the higher the socio-economic status, the more resources parents use to back their demands (Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009; Dom & Verhoeven, 2006).

The relationship between the PTA and school brings even more to bear on these discordant perspectives, with the PTA often serving as a special interest group that may wield whatever power it has to advance its members' shared views regarding the rights of parents and children within the school (Dom & Verhoeven, 2006). According to the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), a PTA is:

> [A] somewhat odd and awkward organizational unit: it is an attempt to formalize the relationship between the customers and the "product" they are purchasing, where the consumers assume a great deal of authority and responsibility for the advancement of the school's program and mission without the typical supervisory oversight, and where the customers are also expected to assume a supportive yet subsidiary role. (Lewis & Wilson, 2012, p. 3)

Even outside of the PTA, parents may constitute "the most powerful and potentially disruptive constituency within the school," depending on the

school context (Lewis & Wilson, 2012, p. 4). The differences in vantage points and power positions led Waller (1932) to classify teachers and parents as "natural enemies" nearly 100 years ago (p. 68).

In the school setting, the conflict that naturally arises between parents and school may weaken parents' confidence in the school and cause stress for all stakeholders; however, if managed wisely, conflict can present an opportunity for improvement, growth, and positive change within the community (Dom & Verhoeven, 2006). Kiumi (2017) observed:

> Since the power struggle is a typical feature of educational institutions, the most efficacious way of enhancing stability and thus positive learning outcomes is [the] promotion of a culture of dialogue…to ensure that different parties satisfy their interests for the common good of the school community. (p. 42)

School leadership (the school head in particular) can minimize the power struggle between school and parents by striving to create a culture of negotiation characterized by openness and trust, where parents feel respected, valued, and heard (Dom & Verhoeven, 2006; Goldring & Shapira, 1993; Kiumi, 2017; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Parents also learn from one another the "knowledgeable skills" related to their participation and the organizing principles of the school community (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), the learning that occurs within a community of practice is a situated, co-constructed social phenomenon whereby "newcomers" become

experienced members, and ultimately "old-timers," by participating in ways that become progressively more central to the functioning of the community of practice (p. 29). Expanding on this theory, Greeno & Gresalfi (2008) wrote:

> Lave and Wenger (1991) outlined a situative framework on learning by considering the trajectories of individuals' participation as they become members of a community of practice. As individuals initially join a new activity, their involvement is limited to peripheral participation. Learning occurs as individuals participate in the practices of the community; changes in their participation reflect their increased capabilities and "know-how" as they are entitled and expected to act with greater initiative and responsibility. In other words, learning occurs as individuals' participation becomes increasingly similar to that of experienced old-timers….The individual's trajectory of learning can be considered in terms of his or her engagement with the community's practices as he or she moves from peripheral to more central participation. (pp. 170-171)

This study employed Lave and Wenger's (1991) old-timer terminology to refer to parents with three or more years of experience at SPA and the term newcomers to denote parents who have recently joined SPA.

In terms of the negotiated order, the communities of practice theory

suggests that new parents or infrequently active parents may have only peripheral participation, as they are more passive recipients of information and have less power to take an active role in negotiating relationships with SPA. As parents become more established in the community, we would expect their engagement to become more productive and be associated with better positioning in the negotiations.

Along these lines, some authors have distinguished between the terms engagement and involvement, using engagement to signal "a more active and powerful role for parents in schools" (Warren et al., 2009, p. 2211). Goldring and Shapira (1993) argued that "parental involvement is without power," (p. 398) using that term to refer to parents who volunteer without any influence. They contrasted parental involvement with empowerment, which they used to refer to "the parents' role in exercising control within a school, typically through decision making" (Goldring & Shapira, 1993, p. 398). According to Goodall and Montgomery (2014):

> "Engagement" would seem to encompass more than just activity—there is some feeling of ownership of that activity which is greater than is present with simple involvement. This means that parental engagement will involve a greater commitment, a greater ownership of action, than parental involvement with schools. (p. 400)

In every school, there is a negotiation over the parents' role, including the field for which parents may be responsible and the area that the school controls. Continuous growth within an organization requires stakeholders to embrace their differences (Mawhinney, 1994). Along these lines, Fullan and Fullan (1993) noted:

> Learning organizations neither ignore nor attempt to dominate their environments. Rather, they learn to live with them interactively. Continuous change is built into the relationship because widespread interactions under conditions of dynamic complexity demand constant attention and movement. Change forces are seen as inevitable and essential to learning and growth. (p. 84)

Through the lens of negotiated order theory, this study sought to understand how negotiation over the imaginary line separating these fields takes place at SPA, which has aided in the identification of opportunities for organizational improvement. In examining these issues, this study employs the term engagement, as opposed to involvement, to signify "a range of orientations, attitudes, and activities through which parental interest in and engagement with their children's education may be expressed" (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014, p. 2; see also Warren et al., 2009).

Within this independent school setting, this study explored what parents' and administrators' goals and expectations are regarding parent engagement and what these stakeholders regard as effective vehicles for participation. Fundamentally, this study sought to identify any existing gaps between what parents want and what they are receiving from SPA. This understanding informs the evidence-based change initiatives that are recommended to SPA to implement to enhance the robust program it already has in place in order to further engage parents in the life of the school.

Drawing on the relevant literature and frameworks described above, the following research questions were analyzed:

1. What does the term parent engagement mean to parents and school administrators?

2. How do parents who participate in the parent teacher association perceive parent engagement compared with parents who do not participate?

3. What forms of engagement help to build parents' identification with the institution at large?

These questions are important because parents are critical stakeholders within the organization, and their involvement affects student outcomes, parent-administrator relationships, and the overall culture of SPA.

Qualitative Case Study Design and Methods

The Approach:

- *Identify core themes*
- *Assess overall goals of stakeholders*
- *Develop an improvement plan*

While parent engagement is the subject of extensive research in the public school context, far less in the literature explores parents' and administrators' expectations in an independent school setting. For this reason, a case study design was selected to uncover the uniqueness and complexity of parent engagement in a particular private school context (Ragin et al., 2004; Warren et al., 2009). A case study design allows the researcher to explore an evolving phenomenon and elicit a narrative using open-ended questions (Yin, 2013). In this study qualitative methods were employed to achieve an in-depth understanding of the meanings SPA stakeholders ascribe to the term

parent engagement in all its various forms and how different kinds of engagement may affect parents' identification with the institution (Lareau & Muñoz, 2012; Mapp, 2003). As Yin (2013) noted, "The events and ideas that emerge during qualitative research may represent meanings given to real life events by the people who live them" (p. 15).

Participant Recruitment and Sampling

SPA was selected as the site for this study because it serves a vast population of students from PK to grade 12. Levels of parent engagement have been connected in the research to a student's trajectory from primary to secondary school, with forms and levels of engagement changing over time (Povey et al., 2016). Thus having a pool of potentially diverse participants in terms of parents whose students represent various grade levels was important. In addition, SPA describes itself as having an active parent body and it has existing structures in place geared toward involving parents in the life of the school. The existence of these institutional supports enabled probing for aspects of the program that stakeholders perceived as useful and what SPA might add or change to improve upon what is already available.

Participants for this study were targeted and recruited using purposive sampling strategies (Posey-Maddox, 2012; Warren et al., 2009; Yin, 2003). Based on specific criteria developed by

the researcher, SPA explained the study to potential interviewees who satisfied the criteria and invited them to participate. Relying on SPA's assistance, the researcher targeted parents based on whether or not they participated in the PTA, the extent of their involvement in the PTA (if any), and the number of years of connection to SPA. The objective was to compile a participant sample with a range of backgrounds, perspectives, and school experiences.

Regarding PTA participation, parents were grouped into the following subcategories, consisting of those with:

1. Extensive participation in the PTA (e.g., PTA board members and frequent volunteers);

2. Medium participation in the PTA (e.g., parents who participate in some, but not all, meetings and PTA-sponsored activities); and

3. No participation in the PTA.

By interviewing parents who participate in the PTA to varying degrees, this study aimed to capture the perspectives of parents who have served as crucial parent leaders (current and former PTA board members) and those with lower levels of involvement in the PTA. The idea behind interviewing parents who do not participate in the PTA was to gain insight into the ways those parents define parent engagement, as well as

the reasons why they do not participate in the PTA and the extent to which they involve themselves in other school activities outside of the PTA. An additional aim was to understand the power and positioning that each of these groups has in terms of negotiations with SPA, as well the point at which new parents move from peripheral participation with more limited input to fully contributing members of the parental community of practice.

Scholars have observed that as parents are more actively involved in school matters (both in and out of the PTA), there are more opportunities for conflict to arise between parents and school staff (Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009; Lareau & Muñoz, 2012; Posey-Maddox, 2012). The chance of conflict at the site that exists by virtue of this involvement sheds light on the parent-school negotiation. Of course, as Anderson and Minke (2007) observed: "Parents with low levels of involvement are difficult to study because of the very nature of their uninvolvement" (p. 321).

For administrator participants, the criteria were administrators who interact with parents and are active in the primary parent activities sponsored by SPA (e.g., Head of School; division heads; and school leaders from key operational departments such as Admission, Communications, and Advancement). Based on the criteria provided by the researcher, the site recruited and selected administrators who had the time and ability to participate in the study.

Although faculty members are also critical stakeholders within the organization who frequently interact with parents and participate in the negotiation of order around parent engagement, this study focused on administrators in leadership positions to provide the school's perspective of the research questions. The primacy afforded to those voices is consistent with the literature emphasizing the importance of school leadership in setting the culture for parent engagement and fostering (or hindering) parent-school interactions (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Povey et al., 2016; Rapp & Duncan, 2012). This selection was appropriate to inform the role that SPA administrators currently play in engaging parents at the site.

Administrators (n = 9)	
Title	Years at SPA
Head of School	15
Director of Enrollment Management and Alumna	32
Director of Communications	8
Lower School Head	7
Middle School Counselor	6
Volunteer Liaison & Events Coordinator	5
Director of Alumni Relations	5
Director of Campaign and Major Gifts Officer	4
Director of Summer Programs	3

Participant Sample

The parent sample consisted of 17 women. Of the 17 parent interviewees, 10 participate in the PTA, and seven do not. Of the 10 PTA participants, five are very active in PTA activities, and five are moderately involved but not active. The seven interviewees who were not engaged in PTA activities

were split between parents who self-selected out of such activities (three parents) and parents who had not yet had the opportunity to participate

because they were new to the SPA community (four parents).

The gender breakdown in the study population may be attributable to the gender imbalance (skewing heavily toward women) that other researchers have highlighted concerning parent participation (Lareau & Muñoz, 2012; Rapp & Duncan, 2012). School engagement studies with similar breakdowns in the study sample have, nonetheless, employed the term "parent" rather than "mother" to denote inclusion (Lareau & Muñoz, 2012). This study employed the same inclusive terminology.

It is important to note that all of the participants in this study are White and mostly upper-middle-class individuals. This composition is not altogether surprising given that SPA is a predominantly White independent school. The literature links upper-middle-class parents, especially mothers, with higher levels of participation in school communities (Lareau & Muñoz, 2012; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999a). White parents with similar socio-economic backgrounds have also been associated with greater success in making their voices heard (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999a). While these salient differences are noted, this study does not seek to address how racial and social class disparities may affect stakeholder perspectives on parent engagement at the study site.

Parent Participants (n = 17)	
Not Involved in PTA (n = 7)	
1 - Newcomer to SPA	1 child in 9th grade
2 - Newcomer to SPA	1 child in 6th grade
1 - 1 Year at SPA	1 child in 7th grade
1 - 1 Year at SPA; Husband is alumnus	2 children in kindergarten (twins)
1 - 3 years at SPA	2 children in 6th and 8th grades
1 - 5 years at SPA, Alumna	3 children in 6th, 8th, and 10th grades
Some Involvement in PTA (n = 5)	
1 - 2 Years at SPA	2 students in 7th and 9th grades
1 - 3 Years at SPA, Husband is alumnus	1 student in 9th grade
1 - 3 Years at SPA	2 students in 6th and 9th grades
1 - 3 Years at SPA	1 student in 8th grade
1 - 7 Years at SPA	1 student in 9th grade and 1 alumnus
Extensive involvement in PTA (n = 5)	
1 - 3 Years at SPA; Current PTA President	2 students in 9th and 11th grades
1 - 5 Years at SPA	1 student in 9th grade and 1 alumnus
1 - 9 Years at SPA; PTA Leaders; Husband is Board Chair	3 students in 9th, 11th, and 12th grades
1 - 9 Years at SPA; Former faculty member	2 alumni
1 – 10 Years at SPA; Past PTA President; Husband on Board	1 student in 8th grade and 2 alumnae

Interview Protocols

Using interview protocols designed to identify core themes and help assess the dynamics of parent-school relationships at the site (see Appendices A and B), formal interviews were conducted with a total of 26 participants. These interviews consisted half-hour to 1-hour long interviews of nine administrators (including the Head of School and senior and mid-level administrators) and 17 parents. All SPA administrators were interviewed individually at SPA. Five of the parents were interviewed individually, four on-campus and one by phone. The remaining 12 parents were interviewed in small focus groups of 3-5 parents conducted on-campus. Each interview was recorded using a digital recorder and subsequently transcribed with an online application (Otter.ai). Audio data were stored on a password-protected computer.

Document Review and Triangulation

During this study, documents and artifacts related to parent engagement were collected and reviewed including postings on SPA's official website and agendas from PTA meetings. These materials were analyzed to gain a richer understanding of school culture and the types of activities in which SPA invites parents to participate. To improve the accuracy of the analysis, data sources were triangulated comparing the contents of published materials against what was learned in stakeholder interviews (Warren et al., 2009).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed for emergent themes with attention to those derived from the conceptual framework of parent involvement and negotiated order theory. Once patterns began to appear in the data, interview transcriptions and secondary materials were manually coded. Interview transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose qualitative analysis software to code a subset of the interviews a second time and distill findings. Throughout the data analysis process, the researcher employed expert per review through discussions with colleagues refine conclusions and recommendations (Posey-Maddox, 2012).

Limitations

Like all research, this study has limitations, one of which is selection bias. As noted above, SPA selected the administrators and parents who were interviewed based upon the criteria provided by the researcher. Although a lack of honesty or openness in any of the interviews was not evident, SPA's influence over the selection process may have created bias. Some of the later interviews conducted included

parents more removed from day-to-day school activities, which potentially motivated them to be more unfiltered in sharing their perspectives and, in turn, may have helped mitigate any effects of selection bias.

This study is also limited in the degree to which the findings can be generalized to a larger, more diverse population. Given that the vast majority of parent participants in the study were White females, the results may not reflect the perspectives of parents and administrators in other racial and gender groups. Broadening the research scope to include stakeholders of different ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, and genders would provide greater insight into expectations regarding parent engagement in independent schools.

Finally, since this qualitative study is based on data drawn from only one institution, it is not driven by a desire to generalize, nor is the wholesale adoption of a specific parent engagement model for all independent schools being advocated. As Peña (2000) noted: "there is no precise method that will automatically lead to enhanced parent involvement" (p. 52). That said, it is the intent and hope of the researcher that the findings will assist other independent school administrators in fashioning cohesive plans to engage parents and broaden and deepen parent participation in their unique school settings.

Despite these limitations, the extant literature and the results of this analysis support the following recommendations to SPA for expanding opportunities for parents to engage as a means of building parents' identification with the institution.

Background Data

Before providing evidence in response to the research questions, additional context about SPA's culture, structure, and activities and the various ways parents engaged is shared below.

SPA Mission and Culture

The core principles animating SPA's mission are character, scholarship, leadership, and service. Fueled by these principles, SPA administrators endeavor to create for students, parents, faculty, and staff "a community of irreplaceable value" in which each member is "known and valued." They do this by welcoming and affirming community members, showing respect and appreciation for one another, and engaging in a "vibrant exchange of ideas and perspectives." One of SPA's senior administrators articulated his vision for the community in this manner:

> **Personal, face-to-face, trusting, at times messy, encouraging, inspiring, sustaining—one where attention is focused on growth, one where adults see more potential in children than they see in themselves, where adults extend themselves so that each feels he or she belongs.**

This leader proudly maintains that knowing and valuing every member of the community "has become the bumper sticker…[that] pinpoints the culture of SPA and puts it in high relief." Another administrator echoed these sentiments, suggesting that SPA's commitment to these ideals distinguishes SPA and makes its culture "palpable." Parents and administrators used words like "polite," "respectful," "professional," and "appropriate" to describe SPA's culture—attributing some of that culture to its locale. Interviewees highlighted that SPA is nestled in a geographical region of the United States that is "kind of a resort area," which attracts people who value balance, recreation, and a "kinder, gentler" alternative to a big metropolis. One senior leader said this about the way the geographic location of SPA impacts how parents interact with administrators:

> **We kind of have a microclimate here in terms of the fact that people purposely live in [here], and it kind of goes to our culture. And some of the politeness is that people live here…because of the recreation. They may work in [the city], but they bring a balance to their own life, and that balance then enters the schoolhouse. And…you're going to be impacted by the population that you serve.**

Explained in Finding 4, the mission and culture contribute to how parents and administrators in the establish order around parent engagement.

The PTA at SPA

The PTA is dedicated to supporting SPA's students, faculty, and administration. Through a variety of events and volunteer opportunities throughout the year, the PTA helps parents feel "welcomed, informed, involved, and connected." By participating, parents meet new friends, build strong peer networks, and support one another. A philosophy of respect, inclusion, and care for what one parent called a "community within a community" undergirds the PTA and creates a strong feeling of camaraderie among its members. The PTA also creates a channel for communication between administrators and parents regarding school matters (Povey et al., 2016).

Overview of PTA Participants

All parents at SPA are automatically members of the PTA. However, PTA participants are overwhelmingly White, middle- to upper-middle-class women who are well-educated, well-informed, and articulate, according to an old-timer and mother of three students. One administrator highlighted the gender and non-working status of these participants:

> So you have a number of mothers who either don't work or who work but have a lot of flexibility, you know, so that they can stay very involved [in the PTA] and they're here quite a bit of the time. You know, fathers are working and not around as much.

The research suggests that this demographic is common within PTAs at other schools, and, indeed, lends itself to PTA participation (Lareau & Muñoz, 2012; Mapp, 2003; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999a, 1999b; Posey-Maddox, 2012).

There is a dedicated administrator whose sole job is to oversee the PTA and act as a liaison between the PTA and administration, which scholars and school administrators have advocated as a best practice (English & Goodman, 2020; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Lewis & Wilson, 2012). This administrator indicates that approximately 60-100 women participate in PTA meetings and activities during the year, with a smaller percentage of that group being the "go-to" parents who volunteer and run PTA-sponsored events. A former teacher, parent, and PTA participant agreed, stating: "[T]here seems to be this you know, core group. Always from the beginning, there's a core group that ends up being friends. And they make sure certain events happen."

Volunteer Opportunities

SPA funnels the more traditional, time-honored, and archetypal forms of parent engagement through the PTA. One of the PTA's primary tasks is to host the annual Auction, which provides a significant fundraising source for SPA. Volunteers spend much of the year organizing and planning for that event and it is a frequent topic of discussion at PTA meetings. Numerous other forms of volunteerism associated with the PTA are social and public-facing like the Auction but without a fundraising component. They include attending meetings during daytime hours, hosting small social gatherings, engaging in spirit-building activities, staffing the spirit store, selling food at sporting events, assisting teachers with parties and field trips, decorating the campus for the holidays, and socializing with parent participants. An experienced group of parents who have been at SPA for three years or more and are actively involved in the PTA named "working in [concessions] providing food at sporting events" and the "[Holiday] Workshop" as the programs they most enjoy. One of these parents said:

> **I love the [Holiday] Workshop, for example, during Christmas time and stuff, putting up all the decorations, and it's like you're decorating your house almost because this is where [students] spend most of their time….So you're making the environment fun for them too.**

Other forms of PTA participation include "behind-the-scenes" opportunities to volunteer, such as stuffing envelopes or tying ribbons to deck the campus hallways for wintertime. Parents who are less socially-inclined or more limited in terms of the time they have to devote to the PTA seem to prefer these forms participation, which one parent referred to as "non-public-facing volunteerism." One parent who works from home and participates in the PTA as her schedule permits explained, "I come and do one-day events where nobody might see me, or it might be a small group of people doing it." The shorter segments enable her to "drop in" and then "move on to your next activity" without a long-term commitment. Another mother echoed a preference for more behind-the-scenes forms of volunteering. However, her desire for a "low profile" stemmed from wanting to engage in activities that were "not invasive to children…they don't even realize you're doing it unless you're talking about it at the dinner table."

A longtime senior administrator acknowledged that many PTA events would "just go away" without the parents' involvement, as the PTA provides "the structure by which a lot of that stuff happens." Although many PTA activities are "not mission-critical," she believes it would detract from "what makes SPA a great place to be" if that were to occur. Another administrator agreed about the benefit SPA derives from the work done by parents within the PTA, stating, "there are a lot of clichés—like 'many hands, make light work' and 'it takes a village,' but SPA wouldn't be the community is without our very involved

[PTA] community." Researchers have highlighted the role of volunteering efforts in creating "a common form of involvement that promotes a sense of collective community and shared participation" in a school setting (Warren et al., 2009, p. 2232). However, Lareau and Muñoz (2012) argued that "collective PTA activities, such as gift-wrap fundraisers [and] extracurricular activities" (p. 202) have not been afforded sufficient prominence in the literature, either as activities central to the PTA's mission or sources of potential parent-school conflict.

PTA Meetings

Every month, the PTA meets to report on parent association events and hear updates from administrators on current and upcoming happenings at SPA. These meetings are open to all members/parents who wish to attend. Also, smaller groups of participant volunteers meet more informally throughout the month to plan for upcoming events. A high-level PTA leader indicated that the meetings serve as a means for informing parents about "things to look out for and the areas that [they] can contribute to if [they] want" and relaying the details of what is on the horizon in the coming months in terms of activities and volunteer opportunities.

PTA leaders use the first meeting to preview for parents (particularly new ones) what opportunities exist to get involved. This meeting serves as one way that a newcomer might learn

about how to participate in the SPA community. As for the remaining PTA meetings throughout the year, an administrator who frequently participates described their purpose as "hashing out specific upcoming events like the Auction…and talk[ing] about the meeting minutes every time, and it's very just events, events, events." Another administrator who attends every single PTA meeting offered three reasons beyond simple planning for parents to participate:

> **(1) To try to build that community to get people talking and get to know each other; (2) to help [parents] understand that we do want their help and we do want them to be involved; and (3) to get to know those parents [of students] that your kid is hanging out with [because] the best way to get to know their kids and kind of, I say, keep an eye on their kids, but really know what's happening, is to be involved in the PTA.**

This administrator explained that the purpose of all PTA meetings is "really to keep the [parents] involved, keep them informed, keep them getting to know each other, and then the Auction takes up a lot."

Parents and administrators familiar with PTA meetings identified various practices that shape the nature, content, and negotiated order of these parent gatherings:

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- The practice of exchanging niceties;

- The practice of reporting on past and upcoming events;

- The practice of disseminating information;

- The practice of soliciting volunteers;

- The practice of passively receiving information from administrators;

- The practice of nurturing friendships and supporting other parents in their work as organizers; and

- The practice of gossiping or complaining (at times).

</div>

Other than the practice of relationship-building, one might categorize the PTA meeting practices as more peripheral to the acquisition of knowledgeable skills that a parent would need in order to engage effectively and deeply with SPA (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The reported practices do not necessarily lend themselves to the cultivation of opportunities for parents to learn the full range of tasks associated with the job of engaging in the life of SPA, nor do they expose newcomers to "a trajectory of becoming competent and responsible" in parent engagement, as

legitimate peripheral participation requires (Greeno & Gresalfi, 2008, p. 173).

Based on what PTA members said, there appears to be a co-constructed hierarchy with administrators at the top with which parents willingly comply. Although parents are present and "participating" in PTA meetings, the administrators lead the conversations when they are in attendance, and the real power to shape and direct the discussion lies with school leadership.

Formal School-Sponsored Modes of Participation Outside of the PTA

SPA has formally established various other modes of parent participation outside the PTA. While these multiple opportunities for parents to participate are not official PTA activities, the PTA does support some of them by supplying volunteers to assist in their execution.

When asked what opportunities exist at SPA for parents to engage in the life of SPA, one parent who actively participates in the PTA outlined three different types of school-sponsored events and how the PTA and SPA work together as follows:

A lot. There's a lot of events that the parents' association just creates on their own to enhance the spirit of the school, especially at the Lower School. So there are things like they do Father-Daughter Dance….They do a Mother-Son basketball game, and they do a Fall Festival. So they come up with these kinds of ideas to kind of build community and to support the kids.

And then there are events that SPA hosts that we support. So there are maybe a Middle School musical or an Upper School play, and we might come in and support that through just receptions or other work. And then there are things that we do at the Upper School that we work in conjunction with a staff to come up things for the kids to do that are safe and free to kind of keep them busy and weekend….So with those, we kind of work together.

Back to School Night

At the beginning of the year, SPA hosts a Back to School Night for all parents. At that event, parents are the passive recipients of information disseminated by administrations and teachers. This event offers no opportunity for an in-depth, meaningful exchange among parents and SPA. As the Lower School

Head explained, administrators stand up in seriatim to address a large crowd of parents: "So they'll start everybody comes into the gym, they'll hear [the Head of School] speak, I'll speak, [the Director] from Development, and the [PTA] President will speak. Then they go to their classroom teacher's classroom, and they'll hear from the classroom teacher."

While SPA intends the Back to School Night to be an inclusive, fun, social event, one administrator acknowledged that some parents may "feel disenfranchised or like they don't fit in" because of the way the event is marketed:

Last week, we had a Welcome Back Bash, and we invited all the parents. It's just a social event. And we called it a "dressy casual" event. There could be people that really don't know what that means, and so they might not even come because they don't know what to wear.

It sounds dumb, but I'm very aware and sensitive to and wonder often, are decisions that we make putting people off just by something as simple as that? And are we doing enough to reach out to encourage people to come?

I think it's hard to do enough as far as those things go. I don't think you're ever gonna check the box and be like, okay, we're done now, moving on. I just don't think that's how it works.

Parent Coffees

The division-level Parent Coffees offer another opportunity for parents. As one parent who does not participate in the PTA explained, these Parent Coffees in the upper-grade levels have a "presentation format" where parents "sit and listen" with limited exchange between participants:

> They'll have the coffee with the Head of the Middle School, which is, I mean, that's just not that exciting to me. I don't really consider that to be an engagement opportunity. It's more like, sit and listen to the Head of the Middle School talk about the curriculum or whatever. There's not much interplay. There'll be with Q&A, but that would be about it.

The Lower School Parent Coffees follow a similar format. A Lower School administrator explained that at these grade-level events, the Lower School Head and Director of Instructional Programs "meet with all the parents of the grade level for about 45 minutes, give them some updates, and then it's intentional that next, they go to the classroom, and the teachers plan an activity to engage kids and parents and for them to get a glimpse inside of what happens."

That fact that some parents may perceive the lack of meaningful exchange between participants at

these Parent Coffees could explain why parent attendance was low until SPA coupled them with a chance to engage with students. A division head shared:

> With parent coffees, at least 90% of [parents] are coming to our Parent Coffees. It didn't use to be that way. But now that we've linked it with a follow-up classroom visit, that has helped us because it used to be just the coffee, and then they left, but we added the kid piece.

The opportunity for parents to "come back into the classroom and do an activity with the parents and kids together" happens only once a year, according to another Lower School administrator. However, that same administrator noted that parents do "come in for [classroom] parties occasionally" for other reasons. She distinguished Lower School and the Middle/Upper School in terms of what opportunities exist for parents to engage in the classroom, noting:

> It's very different in the Middle School. Like Lower School parents, you know, we're like a warm and welcoming place. Parents walk in and drop off stuff off [in the classroom] when the kids forget something, whereas in Middle School, you drop off [in carline], and then you go….You're not planning class parties and different activities.

Grade Level Representatives

In grades PK to 12, the parents can also connect with their appointed grade-level class representative. These group leaders fall under the umbrella of the PTA and offer parents "a way to just check in" by announcing what is going on within each grade. In Lower School, in addition to communicating news, the Class Parents coordinate opportunities for parents to help directly in their children's classroom. In Middle and Upper School, each grade level has a Class Representative who serves as the liaison between the parents in individual grades and the PTA, representing and expressing the views of parents in the class to the PTA. One parent explained that the Class Representatives are also "responsible for creating three or events, whether they're morning coffees or a reception at someone's home throughout the year for their grade." As this parent explained, these events offer an opportunity for parents to get to know one another, and there is an attempt to make some more accessible to working parents:

> It allows moms that have flexibility in the morning to meet and get to know, like, who's the parent of what other kids. And then for those parents who are working full-time, there's this reception usually in the spring at someone's home that allows the parents, both spouses, if there's a dual family, dual-

> parent household, to go and mingle with other parents.
>
> Making it grade-specific is really valuable because that's like a much smaller community that you're going to be part of for however long you're here.

The research supports the notion that group leaders like this "can help close the gap between parents and teachers as they play the role of relational bridges between schoolteachers and the larger population of parents" (Warren et al., 2009, p. 2221).

Parent Forum and Lecture Series

To promote parent education, SPA sponsors an annual three-speaker lecture series called "Parent Forums," facilitated by the Middle and Upper School counselors. They address "a need that parents might have" that the counselors identify based "on the repeating issues [counselors] see in [their] offices." Parents who participate in the PTA have some input into topic selection for these lectures, as the counselors ask them to "write down ideas for Parent Forums and then drop them in a box" at the PTA meeting. According to one administrator, school counselors take that information and then decide which topic is most important (considering, too, which speakers SPA can secure). By way of example, a local psychologist once presented to parents, "How to

Help Your Child Manage Anxiety." Other lectures have included topics such as boys and gaming, body image, sports psychology, chemical dependency, and "Is my Kid Normal?" A parent who frequently attends these events described them as "invaluable." While a Middle School administrator asserted that "some are aimed more towards younger kids," a Lower School administrator disagreed and advocated for more topics geared toward Lower School parents.

Depending on the subject, approximately 60 parents attend the Parent Forums, which a Lower School administrator categorized as "not well attended." These events, while typically styled as a "coffee and bagels in the morning" format, do not offer opportunities for audience participation or exchange, other than possibly a Q&A. Reflecting the ability of working parents to participate, an administrator stated that "the turnout is the same if not better if we do them in the morning, but then you're sort of omitting, if a parent is available in the morning and for drop off, you're probably not going to be available in the afternoon, right?" Generally speaking, men do not attend: "The guys will come to the sports psychology one. They're not coming to 'Is my Child Depressed?' They won't show up to that one. Body image, I wish they would, but they don't."

Another event SPA offers is an annual lecture series that SPA markets to the entire community. This event attracts a larger audience than the Parent Forums because the speakers are typically high-profile and the event is open to the public. While incredibly educational and informative, the

lecture series is not explicitly geared toward parents, nor does it provide them a space to exchange ideas.

Ambassador Program and New Parent Orientations

To help educate new parents in how SPA operates, the school provides a series of orientations. It also has an Ambassador Program through which it connects newcomers with old-timers. An existing parent reaches out to the new parent with whom they are paired "through an email or phone call over the summer, just welcoming them to the community and offering to answer questions." One administrator stated that recently she has been making an effort "not to ask my usual crew" from the PTA to serve as ambassadors. When she did, 52 new people volunteered. However, this administrator pointed out that engaging new people is "a challenge because teaching a new person is a lot of work," admitting that it is easier for her "to go to the old 'for sure' group or to do it myself." Another administrator involved in the Ambassador Program acknowledged that the success of the program rises and falls on its participants. She indicated there might be ways SPA could engage parents in more profound ways:

> **We don't do a great job with that. I mean, I think we can always do better because some parents…some are good, some are not good. You know, it's like a crapshoot in terms of how that actually works. These are always ways we could connect people more meaningfully. You know? And pay close attention to that.**

Advisory and Mentor Programs

The other modes of parent participation that interviewees identified were SPA's Advisory Program and the Mentoring Program, both Upper School programs. The primary focus of the Advisory Program is on students. Upper School students are assigned an advisor beginning in ninth grade to help guide them through their high school careers. SPA has trained parents to go to the advisor with any concerns about their child or a policy. This program offers parents the ability to stay abreast of their own child's life, as well as an avenue for conflict resolution. While valuable, the connection it forges is more of a one-on-one relationship with an individual faculty member. Parent interviewees emphasized their appreciation for the Advisory Program, but some expressed disappointment with the level and frequency of communication from certain advisors. Those parents noted that some advisors "are more open and welcoming than others," and they

identified this program as an area for possible improvement.

The Mentoring Program that currently exists is available for participation only by alumni. This program enables alumni participants to engage with 12th-grade students on a 2-week "micro-internship." Another aspect of the program pairs newly-minted alumni with more seasoned alumni professionals to participate in a one-on-one mentoring relationship. While several interviewees sang the praises of this program, they noted that it is only available to alumni, so parents would be able to participate only to the extent they were graduates of SPA.

In sum, there are several formal channels for parent participation outside of the PTA, which the parent interviewees are grateful for and appreciate. Many of the modes of engagement outside of the PTA skew toward large-group events in which participants come together physically but have limited opportunities for authentic exchanges between them (e.g., Back to School Night, Parent Coffees, Parent Forums, and the lecture series). In that respect, those events stand in contrast to the PTA meetings, which (at least after the administrators leave the room) do provide a forum for relationship building and exchange between parents.

Findings

Research Question 1

What Does the Term Parent Engagement Mean to Parents and School Administrators?

Finding 1

Parents Use Engagement as an Umbrella Term That Encompasses a Broad Range of Activities and Attitudes

Parents shared an enthusiastic interest in promoting a spirit of volunteerism and participation in school life. Many parents are actively engaged in everyday school activities, and their participation contributes to shaping SPA's culture.

The definitions of parent engagement that parents provided encompassed a wide variety of activities and attitudes. One parent (who does not engage in the PTA) captured in her definition almost all of the activities offered to parents both in and out of the PTA:

> So I think of people volunteering, I think of people giving money to the Annual Fund or other, you know, causes associated with SPA's fundraising. I think of people attending events like the auction and golf outing, so showing up for activities that are kind of sponsored by SPA. And then I also think of people showing up for activities that are student-centered, so athletics, theater, arts, you know, participating in those things. And then I also think of it as parents engaging when appropriate with their children's teachers, so like the parent-teacher conferences and the Back to School Night. Those are high engagement activities at SPA. And I think of those as like a really obvious platform for engagement. Those would be the bulk of it.

Similar to how other parents defined parent engagement, this mother explained that she views her parental role in the school context as:

> Stay[ing] informed about what's going on in SPA. Mak[ing] sure that I am supporting my children and...when there is something that I perceive to be a problem, whether that's like, my child is struggling with something, or there's something that's unclear to me coming from SPA-based upon what I'm hearing at home,

I think it's my role to clarify that by reaching out to the appropriate personnel to do that.

One new parent similarly defined engagement in terms of "being aware" and "being present with what's going on." Another parent (a PTA leader) described it as:

Contributing some in some way to your child's education, child's place of education, whether it be donating money, donating time, being aware of and participating and, you know, [PTA] meetings to me that's parent involvement because you're aware of what's going on with your child as well as contributing back to SPA.

Yet another PTA member framed engagement in terms of participation in the "educational process." However, the examples she provided skewed more toward PTA activities: "I just think, you know, your presence in their educational process, whatever that is, whether it's cooking hotdogs, making wreaths, showing up at a college night, you know, whatever, whatever." Parents who do not participate in the PTA also referenced "volunteering opportunities" as legitimate forms of engagement. However, as discussed in Finding 5 below, the examples they provided centered on experiences they could share with their children (e.g., chaperoning their child's field trip or assisting with a party in their child's classroom).

In defining parent engagement, parents differentiated between primary and secondary schooling. One parent of Lower and Middle School students

shared that for her, "successful parent engagement is that I know my child's teachers by name, and they know me, and they know my child. And that we have a rapport other than we just showed up a parent-teacher conference." Another parent in the group who has older children articulated how parent engagement in high school differs:

I think that's very valid in middle school. But I think that high school, they don't want you to get to know the teachers, and I don't mean this negatively. I mean, they're very good at saying your child needs to take ownership now to advocate for themselves. So I think the hand-holding comes off a little bit at ninth grade...I probably wouldn't know my children's teachers until parent conference, and I think that's a good thing because that means they're advocating to nurture that independence for themselves through high school.

Given this evolving role, this high school parent expressed appreciation for how SPA helps parents stay relevant in the later years of a student's career, stating: "I think with parents, they continue to do these opportunities that help us keep engaged, and that it's good that we're keeping engaged on the sidelines versus in the academic goals." Another high school parent agreed that finding "other ways to get involved and that [it] was very easy to do" helps parents when they discover their children "don't need" them.

In this context, parents specifically referenced the Head of School's message that "we're here to raise adults not raise children" and that

parents should endeavor to "put themselves out of business" throughout their children's educational careers. Parents acknowledged that although they enjoyed a more active presence in their child's primary school, they accepted a lesser role as their children grew older, even though it was hard for them to do. One parent connected her volunteerism to her willingness to "let go:"

> I think for me that really resonates because as hard as it is for mom—it goes against every fiber in your being to let your kid go—you feel much better about letting your kid go knowing that you had a hand in the environment that they're learning to be the adult in. Okay, they're okay. They're going to be okay.

Despite the diminished role that parents play over time, the experienced parents still believe that SPA administrators and faculty want to involve them at all stages. Remarking on SPA's attitude toward parent participation, one old-timer and PTA leader said: "I think they want it, [and] they definitely welcome and look for it. That's my feeling." Continuing on the subject, this parent shared, "I feel like it's my second home."

These beliefs suggest that SPA parents, similar to those interviewed by Barr and Saltmarsh (2014), have "a perception of themselves as stakeholders and valued clients" (p. 12). Moreover, studies confirm that when schools make parents feel welcome, they provide a stronger foundation for active parent participation (Warren et al., 2009). However, of the six types of parental

involvement identified by Epstein (1995, 2001) and Epstein et al. (2009)—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community—the parents at SPA explicitly included in their definition of parent engagement most forms of involvement except learning at home and decision-making. While these omissions may have been inadvertent, they may also provide insight into the situated order that parents and administrators have negotiated at SPA, including whether parents want to or believe they should engage in the omitted forms of involvement. Indeed, as discussed more fully in Finding 3, the parents' omission of decision-making from their definition of parent engagement would appear to relate to the shared perception and common understanding among stakeholders that SPA leadership makes the decisions—not the parents.

Finding 2

Administrators' Definitions of Parent Engagement Incorporate the Belief That Parents Should be Informed and Involved in School Life Within Expected Limits

SPA administrators described parent engagement in the context of a relational culture in which parents and administrators worked together to

ensure that students feel supported. They used words like "supportive," "tight-knit," "involved," "balanced," and "strong" to describe the community of parents at SPA. When asked to define parent engagement, administrators almost universally framed it in terms of parents being "informed" and "involved" in school life—taking, as one put it, an "active interest in the well-being of your child and your child's community."

Although some administrators suggested the existence of a "partnership" between SPA administrators and parents "to help raise their kids" and the importance of "working as a team," it was clear that even for those individuals, the partnership to which they referred was not meant to be equal. Instead, the definitions that administrators provided encompassed participation that seemed to extend beyond individual involvement but to fall short of true empowerment as to matters of consequence (e.g., curriculum, decision-making, etc.). There were separate, although sometimes overlapping, socially-constructed roles for the two groups to play.

For example, one senior administrator mentioned parents acting in partnership with SPA, but at the same time, indicated that parents should play "an appropriate supporting role." Expanding on SPA's expectations for the parent body in this respect, this school leader said:

> I think the main thing we're looking for is just the ability for families to partner with us to work with us, as people who we recognize are going to be advocates for their children, but

then also be willing to trust us with the education of their kids. Not always easy to figure out. But I think that is what we're looking for….Our parents are engaged in the life of SPA appropriately. And it could go the other way, you know, you could have a lot of parent engagement, but could it could be inappropriate.

In this leader's view, SPA parents do engage appropriately and manifest a suitable level of deference to administrators: "I think our community is actually very trusting of us. I think they are willing to trust us to be the experts on educating their kids." A division head agreed with this assessment, showcasing how parents may act as advocates for their children, but at that same time, they defer to administrators' expertise in determining the best course for students:

> I feel very fortunate with the parent body that we have here. I feel like they trust us, and they come to the table, wanting to work together and collaborate. You know, they feel confident that they can come and have open conversations, you know, most do, about concerns or questions that they have. I feel like they're always willing, you know, to look at this for what's best for the student. And they're always advocating for their kids, which they should be. But at the end of the day, I feel like they do respect that we're making decisions based on what's best for the child, the program that we have, and everybody that's

involved. But no, I mean, our parents are super involved.

A Middle School administrator noted that parent engagement is "not only being interested and having good intentions but [also] engaging yourself, which means interacting with the SPA community." This administrator does not see parent engagement "as good or bad" or as "having a value to it." Instead, she views it as a set of actions that "can be a productive or unproductive thing." In her view, "productive" engagement would be when a parent asks for direction with a child struggling with homework, whereas "unproductive" engagement would be attacking or alienating administrators or faculty in a "non-collaborative" way.

The same administrator explained that when unproductive interaction occurs at SPA, it "is extremely protective" of the faculty and "has little room for that type of behavior." She emphasized that "as soon as a parent sort of veers off the road of what's proper, polite and productive," the administration "just dives right in" and works "behind the scenes on what needs to change and what needs to be modified." For this reason, she believes that "when it comes to that type of interaction, it just doesn't happen. I mean, it just doesn't happen much at all." In these situations, the three defining conditions identified by Nadai and Maeder (2008) are present—the existence of tension, antagonistic interests, and opportunities for stakeholders to interact. However, what seems equally clear is that the relative power remains in the hands of SPA, in terms of the lack of visibility surrounding the negotiations ("behind

the scenes"), the clarity of boundaries of issues ("little room for that type of behavior"), and the existence of options to discontinue the negotiations ("it just doesn't happen"). These factors (Strauss, 1978) seem to influence the negotiations and position SPA to impose its will over the parents.

The idea that parents' engagement should support but not predominate over SPA was echoed by another administrator who works closely with the PTA. That administrator had the following to say about what an engaged parent should behave like "A parent who's involved, who volunteers and comes up with ideas or help or suggestions as needed, but is not overly, doesn't...I guess, knows their place."

Assuming that parents stay on the right side of the imaginary line separating their role from that of the administrators, administrators agreed that parent engagement benefits the SPA in many ways. They identified these benefits as including "benefits for children" associated with "know[ing] that your parents are working behind the scenes for you and are invested in your education and invested in your community," "peer relationships that [parents] build," and benefits that the entire school community derives from "people being supportive of other people and their efforts." One administrator summarized the benefits as follows:

> What are the benefits? Well, I do think in terms of involvement, there are certain things that need to be done. And we rely on volunteer support for those things. And then in terms of engagement, and I think that to

make a school community a fully-functioning, whole feeling community, I think that family needs to feel supported and students, you know, need to feel supported and administrators need to...know that their messages are getting across, being enforced. And I think that's where engagement is beneficial for the school.

There was no "one right way" of engaging in the life of the school in the eyes of any administrator. Instead, several agreed that "different parents will do that in different ways." For example, one administrator explained that engagement would include "showing up for their kids' specific activities," as well as "supporting the school financially." Another experienced administrator noted that "engagement" could be "intentional" (e.g., through participation in a planned event) or "spontaneous" (e.g., "when a kid needs to be walked in by a parent for whatever reason"). That said, one relatively new administrator distinguished parent engagement from parent involvement" intimating that the way stakeholders define the role of the parent may relate to, and be reflected in, the ways parents participate in the life of SPA:

> **So I definitely think that engagement and involvement are very different things. I think there's an element to engagement that relies on involvement and on being informed. But I think parent engagement is more like an investment—an emotional, psychological, financial,**

> **personal investment....I think of involvement having more of an active presence. There's more**
>
> **of a volunteer aspect, I often think, to involvement.**

In this administrator's opinion, both parent engagement and involvement have benefits for parents and children, although she believes the benefits are more significant when parents invest in and connect more deeply with the community, rather than merely volunteering:

> Well, I think that the benefits of involvement are the peer relationships that you build. I think they both have benefits for your children. But I actually think that often engagement has sort of a deeper, more meaningful benefit for a child....I don't necessarily think my own 11-year-old saw a benefit in me planning a kindergarten breakfast every year when I did it at his school. In fact, I know he didn't. But, you know, when his teacher says, "oh, and I talked your mom today, and she told me to tell you that you're going to eco adventures and so coming home on the bus." Or when I stop and talk to the counselor, and he knows that I've already built this relationship with her, and I'm building it on my own time. Or when I read the newsletter so I know what's coming up....I think that sort of thing for a kid is meaningful, when you know that

your parents are working behind the scenes for you and are invested in your education and invested in your community. I think it's meaningful for them to know their moms are coming and making wreaths and making the school beautiful, but I think that, um, that it's a little behind the scenes. I think show them, make them feel your presence.

As discussed, researchers have made a similar distinction in the literature between the terms engagement and involvement, with Warren et al. (2009) employing engagement to signal "a more active and powerful role for parents in schools" (p. 2211) and Goodall and Montgomery (2014) defining engagement to signal "a greater commitment, a greater ownership of action" than involvement (p. 400).

Stakeholders Have a Shared Understanding That Parents Have a Voice but no Direct Input Into School Decisions

While all stakeholders did not define parent engagement in the same way, there were several common themes and shared beliefs that emerged from the way they discussed the parents' role in the context of SPA. The stakeholders interviewed had a consistent view on whether parents have input into SPA decisions. Everyone agreed that they have a voice, but not direct input into the decision-making process. This message started at the top with the school's leadership team, the other members of the administrative team embraced it, and all of the parents interviewed accepted the message with understanding and without resistance.

A senior leader explained how SPA draws the line between the administrators' and parents' respective roles in terms of whether parents have any influence over school decisions:

> Influence, direct influence, no. But certainly, as we listen and hear and communicate with families, you have to take into account the parents' feelings and understandings...,Not, "Are we going to teach course X or course Y, or who teaches what," but schools need to

> listen to and respond in some way to external forces, whether they're economic forces, or whether they're your parent body. We serve their children, and they are a good voice for what people want. You know, we don't always give them what they want, we need to give them what they need. So there's that balance.

Several other administrators expressed different versions of the same sentiments. One senior administrator explained that she does not believe parents should be able to influence school decisions, but at the same time, believes that if parents have "problems or concerns," they should have "a voice in finding a way to talk about those problems." She provided an example of when parents' input would *not* affect the result:

> I use an example of parents saying, "We need to have a volleyball team." That's actually a real example that happened. But we're not going to have a volleyball team. There are a million reasons why. Would it be nice? Maybe. But there are reasons why we don't and didn't do it. So I guess my answer is really, "no." That's not up to parents.

A division head had a similar perception, explaining the negotiated balance in this way:

> They certainly don't have the final decision, but I think they feel that they can come with an

idea. They can come with thoughts about something and be heard. And then ultimately, they know we're going to make the best decision that's right for the group.

This administrator described a time when she had a disagreement with parents and explained how they found common ground to move forward:

> There was a pretty strong disagreement where the parents sat here in my office and said, "I disagree with you on this, but I want us to have a united front with my kid, and I don't want my kids to know we disagree on this. So how can we best handle this?" I have a lot of respect for the parents. You know, we had a really good conversation. And the kid ended the year great. And I ended the year great with the parents. I still see them, and we talk and enjoy one another. And I mean, that's what you want, you want that. We're not always going to agree. But at the end of the day, we have to come together and work together on things.

Three more administrators echoed the feeling that "parent voices should be heard," but that it was left to "our leadership to decide what actions come from those opinions." While each had a unique perspective, they all described the balance in terms of valuing the relationship and exhibiting mutual respect. One shared her view that in "a private school community…[the leaders] have to respect our parents and then, therefore, our parents respect our leadership and trust where we're headed." Another recognized the value of the parents' voice, emphasizing that to serve the needs of the students, "you have to have input from the people who are taking care of them." At the same time, this administrator distinguished "input" from "actual policymaking," with the latter reserved for the school leadership. A third administrator acknowledged parents as "huge constituents" and similar to the administrator just described, stressed the importance of "a parent lens on what's happening at home." She, too, agreed that this voice is "influential, but in terms of leveraging power, that's not how it goes at all."

Various parent comments demonstrated that they were not unaware of their positioning as "customers" of SPA and the corresponding power that position affords them to influence decision-making. One PTA board member said this on the topic of whether parents should have influence:

> I'm going to say yes, because we are customers, for lack of a better word. I think we should be heard. It doesn't necessarily have to be like, "You have to do it my way." But we should be able to express opinions and have some discussion about it. Just like any relationship, you want to have a part of the conversation because we are customers, and this is a business, and we're raising kids together.

Another experienced PTA leader agreed but acknowledged that there are limits to the influence parents have, stating, "I think that's one of those slippery slope kind of things" because "you can't please everybody…and the administration is obviously looking at

all 700 [students], not just my child." For this reason, this mother explained that she did not believe parents were involved when the administration was "making big decisions that affect policy at the school." Two other parents who participate less frequently in the PTA stated that "policy setting is with the Board," "parents should not be involved in decisions and policies because it gets mucky," and parents should instead "have faith and trust that they are making the best decisions given...all the expertise that they have."

PTA participation did not appear to sway the parents' perspective on this question. One longtime parent who does not participate in the PTA made this comment on parents' influence and the negotiated order:

> **I think that there's a time and a place for the parent, the voice of the parent body to be heard. But it's not the parents' job to design curriculum and build the program of the school. That's the school's job, and you're entrusting them with that responsibility. You know, if you want to be in charge of that, you just homeschool your kids. Do it yourself.**

The collective, constructed, and experienced viewpoints on parent influence at SPA are consistent with recommendations Lareau and Muñoz (2012) have made to schools about the need to recognize the importance of the parent perspective while acknowledging that the relationship

between parents and educators "is not a partnership between equals" (p. 214). Bushnell (1997) observed a similar balance where "teachers are recognized professionals, [but] the school does not deny that the families are the school's customers" (p. 13). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) described a continuum from involvement to engagement where: "the continuum does not represent a transfer of all agency from schools to parents but rather a more equitable distribution of agency with regard to children's learning, between parents and schools" (p. 402). They stressed that the distribution of power between parents and schools should be equitable but not equal, emphasizing that "the aim is a distribution of agency so that parents and schools can work together with young people to support the best possible outcomes" (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014, p. 402). A survey by NAIS likewise confirmed that "the most successful relationships between schools and their parent associations are governed by trust, respect, and appreciation;" participating schools stressed "how important it is to give parents encouragement and validation, while also helping them realize that a voice is not always a vote" (Lewis & Wilson, 2012, p. 9). By all accounts, SPA has established a successful balance in terms of this distribution.

The Order That Exists Around Parent Engagement has Been Negotiated Through Various Practices That Build a Strong Foundation of Trust Within a Culture of Knowing and Valuing Parents

The coherence of the stakeholders' stance on parent engagement is facilitated by a culture of welcoming parental engagement in school activities and various practices that build a strong foundation of trust. According to the Head of School, creating trust between the SPA's administration and parents is the "infinite goal." He explained:

> The parent has the trust, and they give us the greatest gifts at a time when they are arguably the most vulnerable; that's their children. And we are the custodians of that trust. And without that, without an understanding of that, then we're going to lose their faith in us helping their kids grow up."

School leadership builds culture of trust between stakeholders through intentional practices

Parents respond to feeling valued and cared for and increase their participation in school activities

Mapp (2003) found that when trusting and caring relationships between parents and administrators exist, parents are more apt to participate in their children's educational lives. Mapp's (2003) findings also underscored the importance of the school's leader in "creat[ing] and sustain[ing] a school culture that embraces full participation on the part of families" (p. 60). At SPA, trust is built within the parent community, paramount to its mission and culture, through several intentional and interlocking practices.

> **There is a culture of "knowing and valuing" parents**

At SPA, there is a culture of "knowing and valuing" members of the community, which is prominently featured in the school's mission statement. The mission statement informs the stakeholders' understanding of parent engagement and sets the tone and direction for the entire School to follow. The Head of School continuously conveys to parents his belief that "[t]he principles of the school's mission—character, conduct, scholarship, leadership, service, and achievement—[should be] alive and readily evident in the life of the school." A division head explained how this messaging occurs:

> It comes from the mission statement. And [the Head of School]. Every time that we have a parent gathering, like a Back

to School Night, [the Head] will share the mission statement and talk about it. And one of the pieces that's very different, and I spoke to this already, is the piece that talks about that the adults need to model these qualities. And so, again, coming together and setting that expectation up front that we, as an adult group, have to work together and model qualities and make things happen for kids….And I think people hear that and I think that's a great way to set that tone through your mission statement and then live it.

The spotlight that the mission statement casts on being "known and valued" sets the stage for how members of the community treat each other. It also delineates how SPA responds when parents deviate from set expectations:

> The school's mission is really centered around "known and valued." And I would say that the biggest expectation from our parents or community or faculty or anyone is that we all know and value each other. So, for instance, one expectation of our parents is that they model the behaviors that are listed in our mission. So you know, they're on the sidelines at a sports game, we need them to be showing the sportsman-like conduct, and they need to know and value all the athletes and not show any kind of favoritism or boo or anything like that. That's just not something that you see on this campus ever. And if you do,

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then it's addressed immediately. It's not something that we let grow. That's not our culture.

Parents have taken up the messages that SPA has delivered about the responsibility administrators and parents share to model appropriate behavior for the students. Parents' acceptance of this role seems to have impacted the ways they engage in the community. One parent of a ninth-grade student whose husband is an alum put it this way:

> So I just feel like [the Head of School] is always like, it's not just us, it's you. We need to work together. It's only going to be successful if we work together. And I think that hits people and they're like, "Oh gosh, like I want to get in and help too because of your message to us that it's not just us." And you know, you can't just expect the teacher to do it all.

With a culture of mutual respect firmly in place, parents tend to trust the administration and defer to them as professionals. One way parents demonstrate this trust is by using the normal channels of communication when a concern arises. An experienced parent directly related parents' willingness to follow this order to the culture at SPA:

> Yeah, I don't get a sense that people immediately go to the Head of School. We use the channels that are before us in baby steps. And, that's a respected process. That's part of the culture, and I'm very comfortable with that.

There is an intentional practice of engaging in open, direct, and transparent communication with parents

Administrators and parents viewed regular, direct, and transparent communications as being particularly important in establishing order at SPA. In the parents' view, SPA exhibits its commitment to facilitating a spirit of parent engagement by regularly sharing information with parents. The modalities of communication range from the weekly newsletter and PTA meetings to grade-level website pages on which teachers post and communications from grade-level representatives.

One parent active in the PTA explained that SPA's weekly newsletters update parents on opportunities to take part in school activities: "And so you see … here's a list of volunteer opportunities coming up, then you can click into that. And then you can see all the different things that are happening." Another mother (who does not participate in the PTA) similarly observed that "our weekly newsletter from the school…always has a section about ways to get involved." The school-sponsored PTA mirrors the welcoming tone of these communications at its meetings. As one PTA participant noted, all PTA activities are "wide open for everyone, and we welcome you to please sign up." This culture of embracing parent support is evident even to SPA's newest

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members. One newcomer whose family recently joined SPA expressed her appreciation for how "warm and welcoming" the administrators and other parents have been since her family arrived.

Parents regarded the frequency and transparency of the communications as a decisive factor contributing to the parents' sense of trust for administrators. One parent contrasted her experience at SPA with ones she had in other schools, and explaining why the direct communication at SPA keeps parents out of the weeds:

> I've never been in a school setting where you've gotten so much, "We're no longer doing this, and here's why." There's so much thought. And they communicate it so well with you, whereas sometimes people [in other schools] make changes, but you don't know that changes were made. Or they're just not willing to change this is how [they've] done it, [so] this is how we're going to do it. There is so much change here, and it is so clearly laid out [for parents], and you don't feel…like [you] need to get in there.

An experienced parent with two children at SPA concurred with this assessment, explaining how the trust she has in the school and the deference she shows to administrators emanates from the transparency around decision-making:

> These folks do a lot of independent research in their specific fields. It's not my field. I'm not an educator, so I have to have faith and trust that they

are making the best decisions given, you know, all the expertise that they have. But I do appreciate the fact that [the Head of School] and community when they make a decision about something will say, here's a long email or here's a parent conference opportunity. We're making changes, and this is why and I've repeatedly seen that and repeatedly walked away and said, "Wow, they really did such due diligence before they made a decision to make a change or whatever it is." Whether it was changing the academic scheduling last year, introducing this new app this week, I feel privileged that I can rely on these experts to do what they do best. So I don't feel it's like up to me to come in and say, "Hey, I'm second-guessing that."

The openness and transparency of the communications concern not only decisions and events, but also what SPA's expectations are for parents. One parent summarized the clarity with which SPA's administration delivers messages about its expectations and how parents readily receive those messages:

> It's just kind of made clear from the get-go that, for example, in the new parent orientations, the way they present stuff is kind of formal. And they don't follow up by surveying you and asking what you think all the time. While feedback is not rejected, and you can give it, they don't solicit it…so it's sort of like you have the opportunity to speak up if there's something that you don't

agree with, but it's not a culture where parents are actively being solicited for their opinions on things. And I think people, by and large, are okay with that. And if they decide they're not, they probably leave, but the attrition is super low. So I think people get it when they look at the school, somehow that message is conveyed clearly.

As a senior leader offered this explanation for why parents tend to accept direction from the administration:

> We're not loosey-goosey. We're not flip. We're very intentional about the decisions that we make. We're very clear about what the framework is and how we're doing that. So it's not a question. It's not ambiguous…with respect to anything that happens, there's transparency. And it's clear, and I think that helps set the stage for everything….You know, it's kind of like the framework is set, and everyone exists within that. And I think that's a very professional way to operate….It's a very specific set of guidelines and rules.

This administrator indicated that a transparent approach "leads to that trust," which is critical to SPA's ability to function as it does: "If there's a distrust of the administration, if people don't trust, then you're done. It's over. But if people generally trust what's happening, you know, I found that it's, it makes a big difference."

The intentional practice of hearing concerns is another factor that contributes to the negotiated order between parents and administrators. Parents across the board (experienced and new, those who participate in the PTA and those who do not) praised SPA for having an "open-door policy," establishing a "feedback loop," and "soliciting the information that they need to help get them to the right decision without it becoming a town hall." One PTA leader explained how SPA's willingness to listen impacts the way she and other parents respond to conflict:

> My whole thing is that when people feel like they're heard, they're gonna feel a lot better. Whether we do anything about it or not, they just need to be heard. And if you have that, then you have a lot more positive moving forward…to me, as long as there's an open dialogue, and no one's going to be perfectly happy with anything…at least you felt like [the Head of School] listened and addressed it in some way. It may or may not be to my liking, but he listened and heard it, and then I'm fine with what they're doing.

A parent who does not participate in the PTA explained that when this

process occurs, parents accept the message without pushback:

> It doesn't mean it's going to change what [administrators] do, because I think they're pretty good once they have made that decision. And again, it's such a thoughtful decision that they make, and there's a lot of research that backs it up, but I think as parents, we do feel like we're heard, even if the outcome isn't what we necessarily wanted, and they're able to talk through the concerns that we have.

The Head of School described this practice and highlighted how the exchange between administrators and parents occurs:

> There are things I say often, and one is, "I hear you, I don't agree, and this is why I don't agree." You can least acknowledge that they've been heard, and then we can come at it from [the standpoint of] we disagree about these points. It's not a personal thing. It's just the fact that here's what I don't agree with versus what you don't agree with….You will know where I stand. It may not be a position you agree with, and I'm okay with that. But let's de-personalize this and talk about the issues and where we stand on the issues…I'm completely open. It doesn't mean I will agree with you, but we can at least have the conversation.

The importance of hearing concerns is recognized throughout the administration, at all levels from the senior to junior ranks. A senior leader described the approach to disagreement with parents that she espouses, which resembles the Head of School's viewpoint:

> I think the school has to listen and has to pay attention and then respond appropriately, and so long as our family feels listened to. They may not agree, actually, I think this is true across the board, they may not agree with what's being said, or what the decision is, but at least they feel listened to and heard, and whatever the issue, we're giving a fair shot…so long as they feel like they've been heard, and they've had the ability to advocate for their child and all that stuff…they don't feel angry. That doesn't mean they're always happy with the decision. But they're not angry at the school as a result…this requires diplomacy.

A more junior administrator had a similar take on the issue, explaining that when a parent comes to her with a problem, she tries "to listen, first and foremost…[and then] validate as much as I can what they're saying without necessarily agreeing."

While parents appear to accept the current negotiated order, one parent observed that there would be disruption in the community if the administration were to abandon the practice of hearing concerns: "There's always the first opportunity for a parent that doesn't agree with whatever to go and the door's always open. And if that wasn't the case, I bet that would spread like wildfire throughout the parent community."

The Head of School's skill in leading with a strong, even, and decisive hand emerged as another form of trust-building with parents. One experienced parent described the leadership style at SPA and how this leader's resolve contributes to the order negotiated with parents, which parents, in turn, respect:

> You sense there's a leader….And this isn't one of those loosey-goosey communities where people kind of shape-shift between all these different roles. There's a hierarchy, and there are systems where things are communicated. And it's your responsibility to dial yourself in and know what's going on. And if you have a problem, you let somebody know, but, you know, I think the boundaries are they are pretty clear….[As a parent, you] don't go to the Head of School if you're annoyed about something. You start small and move forward from there.

Another parent echoed these sentiments regarding the firmness of the leader's approach:

> I think [the Head of School] has laid down the law on [parent influence]. I think he has an open-door policy in terms of expressing their concerns, but I don't ever get the sense that they will sway a policy or a decision. From my perspective as a parent, I don't think so.

A few parents pinpointed specific characteristics of this school leader that reinforced the line separating parents and school. One stated:

> Our school leader is not warm. And so people don't try to take advantage of his over-warmth and kindness. You know, he exudes a veneer of corporate professionalism. And so I think that keeps some of the folks who might otherwise try to poke or pry or work around. It just sets this really clear boundary, like, you can talk to me, but he just has no problem saying "no." So I think that the persona of the leader can force these boundaries that we're talking about. And I think his persona is one that keeps people here. And so it's not this warm, fuzzy, open door, huggy-kissy type of leader. It's not that kind of person. So, you know, he's very structured, and so people can see his structure, and they're not really going to mess with that.

Another parent described the Head of School as being comfortable saying, "This can't be our priority right now." Along these lines, the Head of School described himself as "bold in my expectations of people," explaining his approach to parent conflict in this manner:

> You don't just shift and shape and blow with every wind that comes in. And you need to be

clear about why we do these things. And this is the foundation that gets built. I think you have to be clear not just in today's world, but in any world. We have done some parent surveying. But you get the outliers. Those voices that say, "Oh, everything's wonderful" or "I'm thinking of pulling my kid." But you don't get anything in the middle.

One division head contrasted the leader's style with that of a former boss at another school who was not successful in establishing order in the community:

> Another leader that I worked with…tried to make everyone happy. So, someone came in with an idea—parent, teacher, didn't matter. Everything was "yes." And we're going to do that, or we're going to stop doing that.…To me…if you're not grounded in how you're making your decisions, you don't end up making anyone happy in the long run. You know, it's just yes, everybody gets their way, and in the end, it doesn't fit. I feel like it backfires. And then I mean, I saw that happen.

In addition to having a strong personal constitution, the Head of School has been aided in establishing boundaries with parents by stable and robust enrollment numbers, according to one senior administrator:

> It's just the foundation of everything. If you don't have that, then you're going to be making compromises everywhere else. And you're going to be

more willing to perhaps kowtow, for lack of a better word, to parents or parents' demands because you're so afraid of losing a family that you're going to be doing things that maybe you wouldn't under normal circumstances do.…There's just no question that solid enrollment has been the foundation on which pretty much everything else has happened.

The power that the current leader exercises over parents has evolved. Under a former administration, the parents—particularly those involved in the PTA—existed "outside of the school's formal supervisory and sanctioning capacity" (Lewis & Wilson, 2012, p. 4). Before the current Head of School took the helm approximately 15 years ago, the PTA was not under the umbrella or control of the school. Instead, it was fully-incorporated as its own 501(c)(3) corporation and had a voting seat on SPA's Board of Trustees. Additionally, the PTA engaged in private fundraising and directed the monies raised as it saw fit. One of the administrators whose tenure spans decades commented candidly on the difficulties the former structure posed for SPA: "They were all about raising money for SPA, which as we were putting together our development efforts…that was very tricky because we were basically fighting for the same dollars." Equally concerning was the fact that the PTA did not display an even hand in funding allocations. One senior administrator said, "They were doing things like they got a wonderful, comfortable coach bus for the boys' lacrosse team…and no other team was getting that." Not surprisingly, independent school experts have

recognized the separate legal status of PTA and fiscal control as "key sticking point[s] in the relationship" and "friction points between the school and the parents' association" (Lewis & Wilson, 2012, p. 12).

One of the first orders of business under the new leadership team was to strip the PTA of its power by forcing the PTA to relinquish its 501(c)(3) status and come under the purview and authority of SPA. At that time, the Head of School also created the PTA administrative liaison position, which further diminished the PTA's power because "then it all had to go through" the administration. While both of these moves are best practices in the independent school world (Lewis & Wilson, 2012), the community did not initially respond favorably and perceived the changes as radical. The Head of School admittedly "did not have a lot of political capital at that time."

One administrator remarked, "It was a [challenging] year-long process of working through how the PTA was going to became part of the school." Some parents withdrew their children and left as a result. Commenting on this struggle for control and how the balance was restored, an old-timer parent aptly noted:

> People cycle out, right? You know, you have people who felt very strongly that we should have more power as parents, but eventually, those kids graduate and those people are gone. And then when this [new] group [of parents] comes in, it's kind of a new way we're doing things.

Today, SPA directs the monies that the PTA underwrites. The PTA still "feels good about its fundraising efforts" associated with the Auction. The administration is transparent about how and where it spends the monies raised; it even permits the PTA leadership to have some input into how SPA spends a portion of the funds it helps to raise. More specifically, the administration asks, "Well, what do you think, and [the PTA] almost always say, "that's great" because it's an immediate impact on the kids that are here now." By all accounts, interactions between PTA members and school administrators nowadays center on coordination around the logistics of activities. In general, the relevant participants indicate that disputes between these two groups are rare if they occur at all.

The evolution of the parents' role vis-à-vis administrators both in and out of the PTA is readily traceable, at least in part, to the Head of School's strong leadership and intentional practice of not kowtowing to parents.

> *There is an intentional practice of "attending to the chorus, not simply the soloist"*

Inasmuch as the Head of School has established a practice of not kowtowing to parents, he is equally mindful of the reality that parents' views must sometimes be incorporated:

If you're not listening to them, if you're not shaping some of your programs and policies, based on the chorus, not the soloist out there, then then you're going to be counter to your population that you're trying to serve. And one that's just not good business sense.

When hiring, one of the things the Head of School looks for in a prospective administrator is their ability to "listen [to the views of parents], bring in different ideas and outside perspectives, and then shape and shift so it's right for SPA." The Head of School continued: "[Administrators] need to be comfortable with different opinions and not agree with all of them, but at least listen and bring them in to try to figure out what might make sense or what really doesn't make sense for us." Ultimately, as one division head noted, "Everybody's working together for the same ultimate goal, which is having [student] be educated and successful and happy."

> **There is an intentional practice of being approachable**

Another way administrators establish trust is through an intentional practice of being approachable. Faculty and staff are encouraged to attend student's athletic games, workshops, recitals, and events as a means of demonstrating their commitment to parents and students. An old-timer

parent described the administrative team in this way:

> Very professional. But people are approachable. You don't feel like, "Well, I'm not allowed to talk to that person." Leadership is approachable, available. Teachers same, you know, whenever I've reached out to a teacher, I could think of a couple of times when they missed the mark. But, you know, the vast majority of the time everybody has been communicative and helpful and responsive, but also professional and approachable.

Once again, the behaviors associated with this practice are modeled by the Head of School, who had this to say about his interactions with parents:

> How does the Head communicate? You have the face-to-face stuff that you saw yesterday. The hardest thing for Heads today is being visible, actually being. And I make sure that I'm visible, whether it's like this morning, I was at the Lower School doing car line. I'm either out front of the school on this campus or out front of the other campus. And so there's just something about seeing that individual, laying eyes on that individual every day. That's a way of communicating, whether it's actual communication or not. They know I'm invested. They know I'm here. They know I'm part of the community. And it really is attending to the breath of stuff that we have. It doesn't mean staying for the entire game or the entire this,

that, or the other thing. But it's just being at those things. And so you may not have a conversation with that parent, you may not communicate with a parent, but there's the nonverbal communication of "I'm in it. I'm in for everybody."

Parents notice and appreciate seeing the Head of School and other administrators at events, calling out this practice as something that builds trust in the community "They're at so many events. It's amazing. At the football games. At the lacrosse games. They're just walking to the car and stop for 20 minutes. [The Head of School] is at every game." For parents, the administrators' visibility was an indicator of SPA's attitude toward parent involvement. Their presence was seen as a pathway for parents and administrators to connect on a more personal level.

> *There is an intentional practice of "being honorable and following through"*

Finally, there is an intentional practice of "being honorable and following through," which contributes to the feeling of trust between administrators and parents. One parent referred to this practice as an "institutionalized value," stating that:

> Communication is just key to everything, like follow through and give parents a heads up

[when issues arise], you know, as much information as you can. It's always better to be honest and proactive rather than reactive. And I do feel [administrators] do a good job with that here.

As one administrator explained, this follow-through starts with "the little things:"

> We will always call back. You know, it's the little things. We will always call back, always email back, always address the little concerns that come up….If I hear from enough parents, like five parents saying, I can't find this, then I will address it in in our school communications, or if I hear from parents saying a communication isn't mobile-friendly, then I will fix it. And you know, if enough parents are saying something that [relates to] a decision that I can't make, I'm always bringing it up to my superiors and making sure they're aware of [the] problem. It's not something I know I can fix, but I want [them] to be aware.

The reason this administrator feels strongly about "the little things" is that they impact how parents feel about SPA, the impressions they have about how SPA values them, and the overall experience of the parents and administrators:

> It's really important to me that parents trust me, that they trust SPA because I am the voice of SPA. And we're getting everything they need to know to them accurately, quickly. That

they trust we're not holding anything behind the scenes that they need to see. That they trust that they are a valuable voice in the community and that they're valued. You know, if they want to come to speak to me or email me about anything, which happens all the time, I'm always going to get back to them, and that's what I value—that they know we're always there to help.

A senior leader underscored the importance of response time when parents raise concerns, even when there is not a definitive answer to the question, criticizing school staff that does adopt this practice:

One of the things that I think is incredibly important is response time. You know, parents have questions or concerns, you need to get back to them. You don't have to get back with an answer. But just, I hear you. I understand your question. I need to spend some time….But I would say that's something that's hard for teachers and people, in general. Particularly if somebody's asking a question they don't have the answer to, where they're not sure. And they will just err on the side of not responding at all, as opposed to saying, "Let me look into that and get back to you."

Another administrator summed up the practice in this way: "I am a big proponent of transparency whenever possible. That's probably the biggest thing that I do. I keep my word. I do my best to eliminate any surprises."

How do Parents Who Participate in the Parent Teacher Association Perceive Parent Engagement Compared With Parents Who do not Participate?

Finding 5

Parents Who Participate in the PTA View Engagement as a Means of Contributing to the SPA Community. Parents Who do not Participate Relate Engagement to Sharing in Their Children's Experiences.

A recurring theme in the interviews with PTA participants was the pride they derive from their close involvement with the day-to-day functioning of the school and the role they collectively play in contributing to the school community. While the PTA at SPA is not a vehicle for voice or power, PTA participants described deriving value and meaning from enhancing their children's place of education. One parent explained the impetus behind her PTA participation

and how it shapes her view of engagement:

> I think for me, it's all about like I said, the village mentality. We're all kind of doing it all together, and it's for the collective good of you know, moving forward.

She explained that her engagement at SPA is "my way to show appreciation for the part [the school's] doing…as my way of giving back." Because SPA is investing in the students, her expectation of parents, including herself, is for them to "have some sort of investment in the school and the community."

Another PTA leader agreed, explaining that she views engagement as a form of "hav[ing] my finger on the pulse of what's going on." This parent feels "like the school does their part so well on the education side that the parents should support on the policy side." In terms of what parents can and should do, her message was simple "Give something!"

> Volunteer at [concessions] one time during the year. If your thing is making a monetary donation to, you know, buy the gift for the whatever, fine. Show up at one a PTA meeting, or just you be interested in some way.

A working parent who participates in the PTA as her schedule permits supplied a long list of programs that SPA offers for parents to get involved. Notably, all of the activities she listed were ones by which parents could support SPA:

Oh my goodness, there are so many from decorating the campus to providing food or beverages for the various social events that happen. From award recognition programs or art programs or theater nights to [concessions], which is providing food service during the sporting events, to running the school store so that spirit wear can be sold on Back to School Nights. So many either behind the scenes, stuffing envelopes to be mailed out for the Auction. I come and do one-day events where nobody might see me, or it might be in a small group of people.

This parent said that SPA has "a large enough population of parents that want to engage" in these activities that they "fill all the needs that are there" on the school's end. Research shows that when parents "view themselves as a collective group and their families as a community bounded by similar interests and desires, a foundation to act collectively and to become more powerful agents in the school emerges" (Warren et al., 2009, p. 2232).

By contrast, parents who did not regularly attend PTA meetings related their engagement to opportunities to support and interact with their children. One parent whose husband is an alum of SPA stated, "When you bring your kids into it, it just takes it to a whole new level."

When asked about ways they like to engage in the life of SPA, the non-participating parents invariably named events that tied back to their children's school activities. These activities included chaperoning field trips, attending their children's athletic events, and assisting with parties in their children's classrooms.

One longtime parent and alum described the times when she feels most connected to SPA as follows:

You know, seeing my children on campus, happily engaged with peers and teachers, whether that be on a field or on stage or coming out of the school building. Those are things that make me feel connected….Coming to, if they do have a special assembly or something like that. For example, they just had the eighth-grade promotion that my daughter was a part of, that made me feel really connected. It's like, "Oh, we know all of these kids and look how well they're doing." And you know, I've known some of them since they were little and the teachers did recorded messages to all the students, and some of the teachers were teachers I had, so…those kinds of more personal interactions. Where your child is very much at the heart of the community, and at the heart of some more symbolic activity like a ceremony or a playoff game or a final play…that made me feel really connected. I was like, that's awesome. I'm so proud that my kids are there, so those are some examples.

In terms of the types of activities that she looks for and would like to see more of at SPA, this parent explained:

> I feel like tying back to the kids is important to me, if it's coming out of the school. I'm not interested in doing just like any old book club that's sponsored by the PTA. I would want that thread, that through-line, with my children's lives and all of that because I can find that other stuff somewhere else.

An administrator told a story of a parent who refuses to go to PTA events because they do not appeal to him socially. At the same time, this parent feels deeply connected to SPA because of the way the community responded when he tragically lost one of his children.

Thus, what emerged from the data is that parents who do not participate in the PTA have a desire for engagement that ties back more directly to the educational lives and experiences of their children and the parents' wish to interact with them in the school setting. The interviews suggested that many parents who participate in the PTA would likely appreciate these activities, as well.

Finding 6

Parents Who Participate in the PTA Value it as a Socially-Nourishing Conduit for Relationship Formation. Parents Who do Not Participate Rely on Self-Initiated Ways to Build Social Networks

Researchers have found that parents derive "mutual support and encouragement" from PTA participation (Warren et al., 2009, p. 2239), as well as empowerment from the relationships they form through such participation (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999a). Indeed, "parents who maintain ties with other parents use them as a source of information and advice and [those] network ties can affect parent involvement" (Sheldon, 2002, p. 304).

Data revealed that PTA involvement at SPA promotes shared participation, a strong feeling of camaraderie, and a sense of collective community. Relationships forged through PTA participation create both a kindship among parent participants and shared responsibility for children. Parents at SPA who participate in the PTA value the social networks that their membership in the organization affords them, as well as the information and support systems it provides. These participants' identities with respect to the site are situated in their social

practice and their relationships with other PTA members. In describing the PTA, one experienced PTA Board member illustrated how her school identity is situated in the parent association:

> It is genuinely like its own community. Everyone knows everybody pretty much. And it's a sense of they say, "it takes a village to raise a kid." And that's kind of how I feel about this community. Like, we all kind of look out for each other and are involved with our kids' activities in a non-helicopter way. I can't speak enough good things about it.

Phrases like "it takes a village" and "many hands make light work" were commonly used by PTA parents during interviews. Another PTA participant reaffirmed the significance of the relationships the PTA facilitates, stating:

> **And so it's really nice because we all get together for that time when we're all volunteering. And there's not a lot of "why are you not here more, why are you doing this or that or the other?" It's like, "hey, glad to see you." You make fast friends, and then you move on to your next activity. So there is a core group of women that I see.**

These data are consistent with prior findings that professional-class parents tend to network through school relations with other parents and educators within the school (Lareau, 1989; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999a).

Administrators extolled the value of the PTA as a sounding board for parents and celebrated the nurturing aspects they perceive parents to derive from their work as parent organizers. One seasoned administrator explained, "I think an engaged parent community is very helpful to help parents connect with other parents....I think that's super important." Another administrator who participates in the PTA meetings described how "they'll meet, and it may be for [planning] purpose[s], but they ultimately end up talking about [their experiences], which I think is great; I think it's how it should be." Yet another administrator explained how she attends the PTA meetings, but intentionally leaves them to give parents:

> their space to talk about whatever they want to talk about without somebody present. I think [the PTA meetings] are a really great connector for parent....I actually think that a lot of times when parents have frustration, they need a place to voice it. And either for it to be heard and then taken up the chain...it's just a place for people to get together with one another.

Parents who do not participate in the PTA do not have an institutionalized conduit for relationship formation. Arguably, this places them at a disadvantage in that they "do not have access to the social capital available through group membership" in the "dominant parent network" that the PTA provides (Posey-Maddox, 2012, p. 244). Instead, they must rely on self-

initiated means of forming relationships within the school community. Parents offered several reasons why they do not regularly attend PTA activities, pointing to the "structure, culture, and content of meetings as deterrents," as parents in other studies have done (Posey-Maddox, 2012, p. 251). One parent who opts not to participate explained her personal disincentives:

> **I'm just not that interested in that. I feel like the PTA does a lot of event planning and activities that are oriented towards organizing social events and decorating things, and I work full time. And so, you know, for me to take the morning off to go and tie ribbons on baskets, it just doesn't appeal.**
>
> **If I didn't work full time and my kids were younger, I might go to some of that stuff. Because when your kids are little, you're also trying to make friends and get to know other parents. But now my kids are older, and I already have friends, and so it's not focused on that.**

This parent also dismissed PTA meetings as consisting of "a lot of people sitting around gossiping, which doesn't really appeal to me." Without the PTA as a means of forging friendships, this parent explained how she has gone about building her social networks:

> So I already knew…a lot of people within the community

when I arrived. I would say I did meet new people through my kids. Sports would probably be a big way that [I met] new people, like on the sidelines chatting with other moms. And then also forming little trust circles with moms who are the moms of the kids whom my kids are friends with. So forming like a text group and then suddenly, it turns into a, you know, we go and get dinner, and we're actually friends.

In terms of what she and her other friends who do not participate in the PTA would like to see SPA implement by way of parent engagement, this parent stated:

> I would just say something…that's not focused on decorating or socializing. And I think that the gist of the [PTA's] programming is those types of things, like either helping with the Auction, which there's a lot of like legitimate work around soliciting gifts and things like that. But, you know, most of the stuff that I hear about is, you know, the sixth-grade happy hour with other parents, I don't know, I'm just sort of beyond that kind of stuff. If I were new to a community, I'd be really into going to those things because I'd be looking for my people, but I have many people, so, therefore, the only things that would really attract me as a really busy adult are opportunities to learn more or to have a different authentic interaction with somebody that's not about drinking wine and

talking about the Yacht Club. You know, have a book that we're all chewing on, and we want to kind of get together and talk about it as it pertains to raising kids today in the [SPA] culture, that's interesting to me. I would be open to that and wanting to learn more about how to be a better parent of a 14-year-old girl. And I think that there's a lot to be said for coming together with people who are in the exact same situation as you. And talking about those real types of things versus coming together and talking with people who are in the same situation and talking about sailing and my trip to Bermuda and whatever else that's no longer that interesting to me.

Finding 7

The PTA Does not Currently Attract a Diverse Body of Parent Participants

Stakeholders are making efforts—but more could be done—to attract a diverse body of parent participants in the PTA, including based on gender, race, working status, and socioeconomic status. Similar to what has been observed in ethnographic studies of other schools (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999b; Posey-Maddox, 2012), parent participation in the PTA overwhelmingly consists of a limited number of middle- to upper-middle-class White women. This makeup is not uncommon, nor is it particularly unexpected, given the demographics of SPA (predominately White, middle- to upper-middle class), which one administrator described as "slightly homogenous and traditional."

The notion that work schedules drive participation is echoed in the research. McGrath and Kuriloff (1999b) observed the same phenomenon of substantial involvement in a PTA by non-working mothers or mothers with flexible working schedules:

> A major influence on differing levels of parent involvement was the mothers' availability for school activities. Much of the school volunteer work, including most parent-educator meetings, occurred during the school day. Involved mothers needed flexible schedules in order to attend

these meetings. The highly-involved mothers tended either not to work for pay, to work part-time, or to hold jobs that allowed them to be involved at school. (p. 609)

One former parent and teacher underscored that the PTA has homogeneous origins, as it began as a group of non-working women "try[ing] to beautify the campus" and "wanting to be part of a community and support the school" rather than merely "standing on the sidelines." According to this parent, PTA participation by fathers increased only during the period when the PTA controlled fundraising at SPA. This increase in male involvement at that time potentially speaks to activities that build identification with the PTA among males: "[I]t was fascinating to me that then the men became much more involved. So that was like a male participation group" controlling the funds and how they were directed.

Many stakeholders today (administrators and parents) describe seeing the "same faces" at PTA activities. One parent went further to say that it "tends to be the same parents involved year after year." An administrator attributed this regularity, at least in part, to SPA's tendency to lean on "your crew that you count on," which consists of "those tried and true people [who] are more of the leaders."

SPA administrators and parents acknowledge they have work to do in terms of soliciting and engaging more parents in the PTA, particularly fathers, working parents, and individuals with more diverse backgrounds. The current PTA activities that draw more fathers a chili cook-off,

a fall festival, and a father-daughter dance. While not a PTA-sponsored event, fathers also tend to participate in Back to School Night and athletics. Administrators shared the following thoughts on male participation in the PTA, acknowledging that the engagement norms at SPA have implications for gendered forms of parent participation in the PTA. One administrator actively involved in PTA shared:

> I would agree that we certainly have more moms coming to events as far as the PTA meetings themselves. I will say, though, like the fall festival, we tend to see both parents attend. Whether that's mom and dad or whether that's dad and dad, you know, we'll see both parents attend (Lower School administrator).

> There are not a lot of fathers that volunteer. If they do, they tend to be more athletic events. We have one father at the [PTA] meetings. He is a new dad who signed up for everything, which is great….There were a couple of dads that were in charge of athletic events last year or the year before, and they just, they just didn't, it didn't work out. We had to ultimately find somebody else. So while that would be nice, I don't know that they have, I hate to say that, but I don't know that the interest is there….So I don't, I don't know, I'm not sure what to do.

A school counselor offered: "Men don't come to the lecture series." Finally, a senior administrator expressed:" I don't have any good thought on [how to get men more involved in the PTA]. I wonder how that differs in urban schools versus more suburban schools, or I wonder if it's different."

Stakeholders expressed many of the same sentiments around a desire to do more to involve working parents in the PTA. One administrator commented on the lack of evening programs for parents to attend:

> The one thing I don't think a lot of independent schools do well is catering to working parents. You know, so a lot of the coffees are happening in the morning, and there are very few activities that happen in the evening. I always say Back to School Nights really are the only nighttime activity. Most conferences are all during the day. There are no conferences in the evening.

Increasing diversity in terms of race, socioeconomic, and familial status were other areas of concern that emerged from the interviews. A Middle School administrator expressed the following worries about the barriers that may operate to diminish or preclude parent participation by certain members of the community:

So I do wonder what it's like to be a family of color here and what it's like to be a single parent her….So how these single parents do it, the ones who work two or three jobs. Their child doesn't have someone to review flashcards with at night. They don't have someone to make sure that their uniform is clean in the morning necessarily. And it's

not from a lack of, I mean, these parents are so invested. But they're strapped or if you have a parent, if you have a child with special needs, like how do you, how do you do that? What if you live 45 minutes away?....So I think that's a...relevant conversation to some degree, but I don't know what's formally in place just to get that voice heard. We do not have a diversity coordinator. And that's been a major source of conversation....That would probably be the area that I think could use the most support.

are you doing as a school that might be precluding people from being involved." The need to be self-reflective was echoed by another administrator who urged school and parent leaders to ask themselves questions such as: "Who are we not reaching that we don't know as far as the parent out there?" and "Are there things that we could be doing more of?" and "How do we get everybody connected?"

These questions are critical not only from the standpoint of the parent experience but also in terms of how they affect the broader community. Indeed, Posey-Maddox (2012) found that having a disproportionate number of parents who are "professionally oriented, high- status, [and with] social, cultural, and economic capital" runs the risk of "exacerbat[ing] race and class tensions and status positions at the school" (p. 254-255).

Moving forward, one senior administrator emphasized the need to examine disparities in parent participation and attempt to offer "opportunities of different varieties for different types of parents." While acknowledging that she "d[id] not know what the school could necessarily do better," this administrator stressed the importance of "pay[ing] attention to what you know and look[ing] at what

Although SPA currently delivers a rather robust parent education program (through the Parent Forums discussed above), interviews revealed a desire among parents for additional learning opportunities geared toward the developmental stages of their children's lives and focused on areas of concern that parents identified.

When asked about existing educational opportunities for parents at SPA, experienced parents praised the Parent Forums as "invaluable" and "always wonderful." At the same time, parents expressed a desire for more opportunities like them to learn and communicate with one another. One longtime parent and active volunteer

stated, "I think what they're doing is, is a good start. I love the seminars that they do." However, she indicated that she would like for SPA to go further in this regard and would appreciate "having a little bit more communication, especially as the [students] get older:"

> When your kids are small, like, you know their entire day, every day, what's going. And it's tricky because when they asked the vaping question downstairs, I don't have a sense of what's going on in that world. I do, in a global sense, know it's happening, but I don't know, is it a problem here? Is it not? What are we seeing? But I also don't want to know, if that makes sense….But I would like to have a little bit more knowledge of what's happening in this world right now…like the anxiety thing; for example, I wasn't aware that this generation of kids has a lot more anxiety. I didn't know that. I mean, it's something that I would like to know, I would like a little bit more of that, is my point. And not necessarily because I want to poke my kid about it, but I just want awareness, I guess….So I think what they're doing is good…I think they're doing as best as they can right now. But I guess more that would be good for me. Like, I'm constantly surprised by what's going on. So I think that's also the thing with the community. You know, I hear stuff…that I might not have heard about because it's an Upper School issue, something that's happening in the upper

grades and I think, oh, gosh, I have to look out for that. You know, that type of environment.

Another seasoned parent articulated a similar desire to know what to "look out for," particularly when "your first kid is going through" because parents do not know from experience what to expect. In this regard, this parent wished SPA would be more communicative about social-emotional topics they cover with their children at school:

> And I think a lot of this information they are sharing with the kids it just doesn't come to us. So if your child doesn't tell you anything, you're not hearing anything, but they're hearing it. They're just choosing to tune it out and not share it. So it would maybe be nice if the Upper School principal said: "Hey, these were the topics we talked about in the morning meeting today so you could ask your kid at the dinner table."

Although parents described having a desire, or even an expectation, for SPA to assume this educational function, no one went so far as to say it was the school's responsibility to educate parents. One old-timer put the role in terms of a partnership:

> Responsibility, no....I guess I have a somewhat of an expectation, but I don't if they don't do it, would I hold them accountable? No. That's my job. But that's how they're thinking of it. It's a partnership.

A newcomer agreed, explaining why she values opportunities to hear from the school about current challenges her children may be facing. When asked if she relies on SPA to educate her on these matters, she responded:

> Not completely, but it's good to see them educating because I feel like there are some parents, just in my past experience, that think, "My child's not doing X, so I'm not going to worry about it." Okay, well, you might think your child's not, but at least you're aware of it. Maybe they are. I think they're gonna know somebody [who does]. I think that the school community, especially at the high school level, has to be aware of [these issues], [and] has to be educating the kids and the parents.

Yet another newcomer was focused less on the need for SPA to educate parents and more on the need for the school to facilitate dialogue with parents, asserting that "open conversations are just so important." One of the experienced parents (who does not participate in the PTA) suggested a format for educational opportunities that could serve to create a more open dialogue, strengthen relationships among parents, and enable old-timers to impart know-how to newcomers in the manner contemplated by Lave and Wenger (1991). She indicated that small discussion groups with an "affinity orientation" would appeal to her more as a learning experience than the Lecture Series and Parent Forums that SPA currently sponsors, where "hundreds of people" come to hear "a really high profile speaker." She explained:

> We all go through privately in our parenting journeys where if we can learn or come together with other people, and just talk about, I don't know, research, or other people's experiences, and what they've learned or conventional wisdom, that would be interesting.
>
> These lectures that I was telling you about are hundreds of people, and I would prefer a smaller group setting. You know, I get it if it's like a really high profile person, which that's who they usually bring.
>
> But for the type of thing I was just talking about, I think it would be more interesting if it had an affinity orientation, like high school boys. You know, I don't know anything about high school boys. I'm just learning as I go. And if I could learn more from people who've already raised high school boys or somebody who's written something, or read a book together and talk about it, that would be interesting to me.

One of SPA's counselors offered insight into why she believes parents want additional educational opportunities like the ones this parent described:

> And I've had almost 99% of the time, just very good experiences with the parents. They're well-intended. They just want to do the right thing. And they don't know if this is their only Middle School child, they don't have

thousands of other kids to compare their child to figure out sort of where on the bell curve, these particular sets of behaviors are falling. They just want to know is this normal or is it not normal? Should I be worried? Should I not be worried?

The Head of School explained that increasingly during his career, schools have "needed to become educators of parents." He elaborated on how the role of schools vis-à-vis parents has shifted and increased in importance over time:

> I don't mean [educating parents in] English, Math, or things of those nature, but the programming that we put together—so that they can be confident in their decision-making—is really, really important….Every year, we do at least three speakers for parents….So yes, we need to [educate parents], and schools that don't understand that it is now a new role of a school really are not looking at the breadth….It used to be, you know, a three-legged stool and one was school, one was the family nuclear unit, and one was some sort of religious organization. But so much of the family sit down at the dinner table is just not happening anymore. And parents are sometimes abdicating their responsibilities to schools, and then fewer and fewer people are part of a religious group….So schools in many ways are kind of left there holding up the whole stool. And that whole stool does

include helping parents be better at what they need to do. And we need to take on those roles.

Other administrators shared the Head of School's vision in terms of the responsibility SPA has to deliver parent education. For example, one Lower School administrator explained how educating parents is vital to SPA's mission:

I do feel like the school's job is to educate parents as much as it is to educate students. Because as parents, you just don't know if you don't know what's normal….So I do feel that it's important for schools to be the ones who are doing the research and sharing out.

She suggested the possibility of surveying parents "to keep a good idea of how the parents are feeling and what the parents want to know." While SPA has not done formal surveys to date, it does solicit parent feedback on ideas for topics and uses their questions as the basis for themes to cover in the future.

Finding 9

Parents Value Opportunities To Connect With the Student Body.

Parents interviewed experienced a particularly secure connection to SPA when they served the students themselves in some direct fashion. Under the current program, these opportunities include passing out food and drinks at athletic events, volunteering in the classroom, and assisting teachers on field trips.

A PTA leader and old-timer said the following about why she participates in the PTA:

> **For the kids. For me personally, like, I am a huge, I mean, this is the same for everybody, but…I think education is such the lifeline for our kids that I want to give as much as I can to them so that—I'm like getting teary. I want to give as much as I can to this generation of kids who are amazing, smart, brilliant kids and help them succeed as much as they can without, you know, telling them what to do. Like, giving them the atmosphere, and you know, tools, to succeed in life.**

When asked about the types of events she enjoys, she indicated: "I like the [concession]. I do love going to all the events, the auctions, you know, participating. But my favorite is probably going to sports because I love watching the kids play."

The current opportunities for parents to connect with students vary by division. In Lower School, parents "want to be around their kids and the joyful things that are happening," according to one Lower School administrator. Another administrator commented:

The Lower School [parents], they want to be completely involved in the classroom. Like they want to go in there and make those Valentine's Day cards. They want to bring the teacher coffee to, like, really be with their kid.

She said SPA permits them to participate in this way "in a controlled atmosphere." As noted above, administrators speculated that the parents' desire to interact with students explained why attendance at Parent Coffees increased after SPA paired these events with a classroom visit. If true, this would underscore the importance that SPA parents place on opportunities to connect with children.

In Middle School and Upper School, the opportunities to interact with students are more contained. An experienced administrator explained:

> Engagement changes over time based on the age of your kid. Parents that have little kids, you know, there's a pretty robust group of parents, class moms and dads. They plan things in the classroom for the younger kids. That's not what that looks like [in the upper grades]. And that's a transition….Parents here aren't in the classroom, actually volunteering and helping in the class, where they are at the Lower School. But that's an appropriate change, given the age of the kids. So, again, that engagement looks different depending on the age of the children.

The administrator overseeing the PTA described a PTA event at this level:

We have a middle school event called [Invention] Day, and the PTA's sole purpose is just to provide lunch for the kids. So, the Middle School sets up the whole day prior to the lunch. And then we come in and do lunch, serve it, clean up, and then we're done. So you basically are serving lunch, but you get to have a glimpse of your child. So I think when I ask for a volunteer, I have to be very specific, like, don't come early, you're not going to get involved in the day.

The Middle and Upper School parents interviewed indicated their willingness to comply with these norms and accept less interaction with students as a natural progression of their children's growth. A parent with a child in both divisions focused on the value her volunteerism creates for the students, as well as the insight into what is going on that parents may gain by volunteering:

> I think that the kids really value you going in and taking your time to give back to their school. I think it makes them feel like you really care about what they're doing, that it's important to you. And I think, you know, that collaboration between school and family, really kind of setting the tone that, you know, we want you to be successful here. We're supporting you in that effort. And you know, then you have your finger on the pulse. So, there are so many benefits, I think, to really getting involved in the school and giving back and what your kids see.

One of the Upper School parents noted the importance of serving as role models for all students, not just her own: "I think they do a good job here where like they get people involved who it's not necessarily for their kid's grade, but then they're also there as role models [for other students]." A Middle School parent (who is also the mother of a SPA graduate) shared how she enjoys volunteering at games in sports that her son does not participate in so that she can be around students without missing her son play: "You know, I don't want to do it in lacrosse season because I have a Middle School [student] and I had an Upper Schooler. But that's why I did basketball because there's nothing more fun than coming to a basketball game." A parent with children in Lower and Middle School agreed, saying, "Your kid can watch the sport that's not the sport they're playing, and you don't miss them. And it's only a couple hours, and that message may resonate really well."

By contrast, the Middle School parents interviewed who had recently joined the SPA community expressed some nostalgia for the leeway to interact more frequently and directly with students that they had at their prior schools. When asked whether there was anything that they would like to see at SPA that they have not seen so far in terms of parent engagement, one parent who had been at SPA for a year responded:

> I feel like there's definitely a lot of volunteer opportunities. There's not as many with students. I just like to put names and faces and where you get to interact with the kids through volunteering. The parents' role

when the teachers, take all the kids on field trips, that was always, I felt, a great chance for me to see my kids. Especially even after that, I'd love to be a fly on the wall in the classroom too. But you know, I think that would be one thing, maybe just like you were saying with the games, kind of volunteering there would be a good chance to see the kids. Maybe some things within the classroom, setting some more volunteer opportunities with kids.

While this parent lamented that when she had volunteered at SPA, she "never saw students," one of the other new parents stated that in her previous school, "there was a room parent for every class and there was a grade party or an ice cream social or whatever." This parent said she "finds it weird" that there are no chaperoning opportunities in Middle School at SPA because "it's nice to put the child with the parents, [and without those opportunities,] I don't know how you do that." The parent with a year's experience responded, "I'm still working on it," sharing that she seizes whatever occasions there are to meet people, "so when those opportunities come around, I think it's good to try to do them as much as possible."

Parents and Administrators Perceive a Need for Engagement Modalities That Capitalize on Parents' Professional Skill Sets and Enable Parents to Share Their Knowledge and Expertise

The data revealed a perceived need among stakeholders for a range of activities broader than what SPA currently offers parents. In particular, several stakeholders highlighted a desire for modalities that would engage parents on a more professional level and draw on their diverse range of strengths and abilities.

Administrators had innovative ideas about forms of participation that do not exist at SPA that they would like to see introduced. One administrator said she would like for SPA to incorporate current parents by using them in the lecture series to "help lead [presentations to parents] if they're an expert in the area." Another parent opined: "There are lots of things you could [potentially] do other than be on a breakfast committee that's planning the gala, the auction." By way of example, this parent floated the prospect of offering parents formalized opportunities to address groups of students about their careers: "We could have parents come to speak to kids if they're, you know, in a career." Expanding on this idea, she suggested

current parents could form professional mentoring relationships with SPA's students, which dovetails with the value that parents place on opportunities to interact with students discussed in Finding 9:

> This generation of parents, you know, would love the idea [that a student] always…wanted to be a vet. Well's here's a parent that's a vet, and that student could come, you know, shadow me on Friday afternoons. You know that they can work that way.

This same parent pointed out that SPA currently has a "really amazing" mentoring program that connects "the seniors…[with] the alums," which she rightly noted would enable parents to do "something more than fundraising" if they were permitted to participate. One administrator interviewee touted SPA's mentoring program as a real opportunity for parents to interact with students and form "a big web of connections." However, as discussed above, this program is currently available only to alumni parents.

Another administrator sang the virtues of the alumni mentoring program. However, she correctly identified this as a form of engagement not offered to current parents at SPA that she would like to see promoted beyond the alumni base:

I continue to think that [SPA] is doing a good job of, you know, building this road for the alumni. [SPA] is doing a really good job because it didn't really exist before, mentorship, and some kind of professional development. Things I think are real.

You know, I worked with college kids for a really long time, and I thought that the kids that I worked with were really smart. And they were really sharp, but they lacked some life skills. And it was because they always had people doing everything for them. And I think that they lacked adult relationships with people who weren't their teachers or their parents. And so I would love to see us continue to, you know, [provide mentoring opportunities to students]….

We have lots of parents who offer different skill sets and have different experiences that are valuable to our kids in different ways. And I would love to see us continue to do that. Continue to sort of give our parents opportunities to be engaged and involved, but not having to do that on campus necessarily. And to do it in a way where it sort of lends to their strength not to their crafting ability.

Recommendations

Three key recommendations are offered designed to extend the traditional forms of parent engagement available at SPA and deepen the connection that all parents feel to the institution. The goal of the recommendations is to enhance SPA's already-robust parent engagement program by creating a mix of new opportunities that can promote learning in the parent community and broaden participation both in and out of the PTA.

The overarching principle connecting these recommendations is the importance of building and promoting relationships. As one SPA administrator keenly remarked: "Relationships matter. And I think it's at the forefront here with everybody with parents, with kids, with teachers." The role of relationships in creating an engaged parent community features prominently in the literature (Povey et al., 2016; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). "Relationships create a sense of community and shared responsibility for children" (Warren et al., 2009, p. 2240), and "enhance [parents'] desire to be involved and influence how they participate in their children's educational development" (Mapp, 2003, p. 36).

In terms of conflict management within the organization, social network researchers and social psychologists studying conflict have found that "positive, strong relationships across groups increase intergroup cooperation and mitigate intergroup conflict"

(Labianca et al., 1998, p. 57). Thus, to the extent that SPA can facilitate the development of new relationships and strengthen those that already exist, it may also expect to benefit in terms of the negotiated order.

Opportunities to Connect

Recommendation 1

Enhance Existing Support Systems Within the PTA by Adding Affinity Groups to Diversify and Expand Parent Engagement and Aid in Relationship Building

In its current form, the PTA has strong socializing and networking elements for parents who choose to participate. However, parents who are unable to attend PTA activities because of conflicting commitments, as well as parents with whom the PTA format just does not resonate, lack the ability or incentive to participate in existing PTA offerings.

Given this, the first recommendation is to augment existing support systems within the PTA by adding affinity groups. The literature identifies several benefits associated with the use of affinity groups as a form of parent engagement.

First, having affinity groups of parent stakeholders with shared interests or identity markers would help to provide a richer menu of engagement modalities within the PTA for all parents, even those who already participate. Affinity-based engagement creates spaces for a kind of authenticity of coming together that one might not find in the setting of a "traditional" PTA meeting. According to Warren et al. (2009), bringing parents with similar backgrounds and circumstances together enables parents to offer support and encouragement to one another. Additionally, "these efforts build bonding forms of social ties as a basis to enter broader 'bridging' efforts at collaboration with educators" (Warren et al., 2009, p. 2239).

Second, affinity groups within a parent organization would offer opportunities for old-timers to mentor newcomers and enable experienced parent leaders to "play a powerful role in inspiring [newcomers] to develop as leaders" (Warren et al., 2009, p. 2239). Creating a "ladder of opportunities for participation" has been found to play a successful role in parent engagement work (Warren et al., 2009, p. 2228).

Third, enhancing existing support systems within the PTA would serve to diversify PTA participation by attracting traditionally underrepresented parents who currently are not attending PTA events, either because the activities are inaccessible or do not speak to them (e.g., dads, working parents, parents of color, etc.). Establishing homogeneous groups for parents who are new to SPA involvement or represent underrepresented racial, ethnic, social class, or gender groups has been identified as an effective means of "reduc[ing] the isolation of new and different parents…[and] help[ing] minority voices be heard" (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999b, p. 625).

Finally, based on the research, it can be expected that affinity groups may help attract parents who simply do not feel comfortable coming to a meeting with many people they do not know. These parents might participate if groups are smaller and consisted of people with similar traits or interests. Posey-Maddox (2012) found that parents were more likely to engage in PTA events "when they received a personal invitation or had a relationship with the person asking" (p. 256).

Reaching underrepresented parents is critical not only to foster a sense of belonging in those parents without a voice in the PTA but also to creating a culture of inclusion and promoting the health of the school community (Brown, 2015). Forming new ties and strengthening old ones through authentic participation and meaningful shared practices builds parents' social networks and positively influences the manner and style of parents' engagement (Sheldon, 2002; see also Posey-Maddox, 2012).

Opportunities to Learn

Recommendation 2

Offer Informal, School-Facilitated Discussion Sessions in Intimate Settings on Topics of Importance to Parents

The second recommendation grows out of the emphasis parent interviewees place on their desire to learn more about parenting and what their children are dealing with at different stages of their lives. This study demonstrated that parents at SPA look mainly to the school to educate them on what they needed to know about issues children are facing today.

SPA does have current programs in place for this—parent forums consisting of three guest lecturers each year on topics selected by SPA counselors and a lecture series once a year during which honored guest speakers address the entire community. Both of these existing opportunities are designed to educate, motivate, and build cultural awareness on current topics of interest. Both are also time-honored and treasured events that community members look forward to and value. However, these events are open to all parents and are done on a large-scale basis. Thus, while they provide valuable learning experiences for parents, they do not necessarily offer legitimate opportunities for interplay

or exchange among the parent participants.

Parents shared that it was nourishing to them to talk to other parents in the community who were "in the same boat" and to discuss shared experiences about parenting challenges they face. Moreover, interviewees indicated that the current topics tend to relate to issues that students face as young adults, rather than problems parents encounter throughout their children's educational careers. Even parents with older children (to whom the topics are generally geared) expressed a desire for more educational opportunities.

This recommendation based on the data is to offer additional school-facilitated discussion sessions in a more informal and intimate setting. The desired educational opportunities should be provided to small groups of individuals with shared interests to enable participants to exchange stories and get to know one another on a more personal level. The topics should be parent-driven to promote robust dialogue and heighten interest. This format would enable participants to draw upon their individual histories, backgrounds, and stories as resources for the community. Warren et al. (2009) emphasized the value of "structured training around issues in education and community life so that parents develop the skills and knowledge necessary to be participants and leaders with a greater voice." (p. 3).

A more informal, intimate setting would also provide an alternative script to the prevailing large-auditorium lecture model, which offers no opportunity for parents to connect with

other parents or administrators. Meeting the basic needs of parents in this way should also appeal to those stakeholders who long for opportunities to authentically connect with other community members, thereby attracting a broader range of participants and providing a foundation for everyone's involvement and participation. Giles (2005) advocated this approach, suggesting that a relational narrative can be established through "small groups of parents…facilitated by the counselor and others identified as educational leaders in the school" (p. 234). Povey et al. (2016) suggested "offering workshops/programs to support parent learning" (p. 13).

A school counselor would be skilled in creating opportunities for active and open dialogue between participants on substantive issues facing parents and students within the SPA community. "In facilitating such conversations, it is important for the counselor to shed the role of expert, and simply be a good listener, as well as to share his or her own hopes and concerns for the school" (Giles, 2005, p. 234).

These small-scale events would serve the dual purpose of providing parental education and relationship-building opportunities. Based on the research, it can be expected that these efforts would position stakeholders to express their identities, talk more fluidly about their shared experiences, and build funds of knowledge within the SPA community. This exchange of funds of knowledge between parents and school staff would move parents away from being "passive recipients of information" and more toward participants "in the construction of a

fuller understanding of the student and acknowledged contributors to the student's academic future" (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014, p. 404). Giles (2005) observed that "one of the most basic and important steps to take toward creating a relational narrative is to develop space where parents and educators can share their hopes and concerns about the school and identify issues that they would like to take action on together" (p. 234). As participants discover more about what other participants want, need, and think, they will be equipped with a common framework to strengthen their relationships and draw on them to make sense of parent engagement within the community.

Opportunities to Connect

Recommendation 3

Offer Opportunities for Parents to "Pay it Forward" by Serving as Mentors to Students in the SPA Community

The qualitative interviews demonstrated a perceived need for parent engagement modalities that would incorporate parents on a more professional level and draw on their diverse range of strengths and abilities. The data also revealed that parents

experienced a particularly strong connection to SPA when they interacted directly with the students. SPA is poised to address both of these needs by building on existing programs and offering parents new opportunities to foster relationships with students in ways that would "lend to their strength and not to their crafting abilities."

Outside of the PTA, SPA offers a mentoring program that pairs alumni of the school with recent graduates during their transition to college and the working world. In the model of a big-brother-big-sister program, this opportunity provides recent graduates with a professionally-supported, one-to-one mentoring relationship with another more seasoned alum. SPA also offers a 2-week micro-internship program that facilitates short-term mentoring between SPA alumni and 12th grade students. The third recommendation is to expand these programs to involve current parents in these programs, extending the same opportunities to them for connecting with existing students and recent graduates on a professional level in a one-on-one setting. An expansion of these programs to include current parents would solidify parents' identification with the institution in various ways.

First, it would provide current parents with a "feel good" opportunity to help current students, which SPA parents indicated increases their social capital and sense of connection to the school. Studies of other schools have found that parents working with students other than their own "create[s] a community in which involved parents look out for the interests of each other's children—indeed, of all children

at the school" (Warren et al., 2009, p. 2231). This mode of engagement has also caused parents' understanding of engagement to shift from an individualistic definition to one that is more expansive and cooperative. Parents began defining their engagement in terms of helping other children, not just their own, which, in turn, created a "collective community" that resembled more of a family and strengthened their agency within the school (Warren et al., 2009, p. 2231).

Second, these opportunities would play to parents' professional strengths, which would increase their self-efficacy and provide them with social currency within the community as servant-leaders who are imparting something of great value to SPA's students (Grolnick et al., 1997). As Hoover-Dempsey et al. (1992) observed in their study on parent-school relations, parents who believe they can "make a difference" are more likely to be involved in school activities (p. 288). These researchers found that parent volunteerism was positively associated with higher levels of parent efficacy and posited that the link between volunteering and efficacy may exist "because the decision to volunteer requires some sense that one has educationally relevant skills that can and will be used effectively" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992, p. 291). This study further found that "the correlational nature of [their] results suggests that just as efficacy may influence involvement choices, varied forms of involvement may influence parent's sense of efficacy" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992, p. 291). In 1997, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler made similar findings regarding the association between efficacy and involvement: "Parents who believe

they should be involved in their children's education and schooling and who have a positive sense of efficacy about the usefulness of their involvement are likely to be involved" (p. 36).

Based on these findings, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) concluded that "the most effective efforts to improve involvement must incorporate invitations that support and build these two socially constructed qualities (i.e., parent efficacy and parents' belief that their involvement is desired)" (p. 36). For all of these reasons, SPA's interest would be served by offering parents the opportunity to engage in activities, such as mentoring, that increase their self-efficacy because higher parent efficacy is likely to increase parent engagement.

Third, these opportunities would be expected to attract working professional parents. While working parents typically do not have the time to attend PTA events during the workday, it is anticipated (based on the described success of the existing mentoring program) that these parents would welcome the opportunity to participate in an apprenticeship with current students at their workplace.

Finally, enabling parents to form a mentorship relationship with current students would connect parents more authentically and deeply to student learning and the student experience, both of which lie at the heart of why parents are at SPA in the first instance. Through this new opportunity, parents could demonstrate the profound significance they attach to supporting children and their school community.

Conclusion

SPA, is a PK-12 independent, college preparatory day school located on the East Coast. Like many independent schools, SPA has been challenged by demanding parent expectations, and thus, seeks to identify the most effective means of engaging parents and building their identification with the school. The parent-school relationship can serve as a complex source of conflict and endless negotiations between parents and independent school leaders; however, if managed wisely, conflict between these stakeholders can present opportunities for improvement, growth, and positive change within the community.

At SPA, school leaders are keenly aware—and this study supports their belief—that promoting strong parent relationships will benefit the school by:

- Reinforcing parents' connections to the school;

- Enhancing the overall sense of community;

- Increasing parent cooperation;

- Decreasing destructive conflict between stakeholders; and

- Increasing constructive conflict between stakeholders.

While the full potential of the parent community at SPA has yet to be realized, the foundations for strong parent engagement are present. This study revealed some differences in the ways parents and administrators define engagement; however, commonalities predominate, particularly on important issues, such as the role of parents in school decision-making. Stakeholders have a mutual understanding of parents' role in this regard, which bodes well because disagreement on this issue presents the possibility of destructive conflict that does not exist at SPA. Administrators have successfully negotiated order by promoting a positive culture and engaging in a series of interlocking practices that build a strong foundation of trust with the parent community. These findings underscore the importance of independent school administrators actively working to promote respectful and trusting relationships with parents.

SPA currently has numerous programs in place to engage parents that it can use as a launch pad to foster more impactful forms of parent engagement. By implementing the recommendations designed to strengthen existing support systems for parents and offer more meaningful ways to engage, SPA can strengthen and deepen relationships among all stakeholders. These efforts can also assist SPA in attracting a more diverse body of parent participants, helping the school to take a needed step toward establishing enduring connections across a broader, more inclusive group of parents. This study can yield numerous benefits for SPA and provide insight to other independent schools seeking to broaden and deepen parent engagement.

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Appendix A. Parent Interview/Focus Group Protocol

Focus

This study focuses on expectations for parent engagement in the independent school setting, what constituents effective vehicles for parent engagement, whether the PTA is an effective vehicle for parent engagement (as a standalone method or in concert with other forms of involvement), and what forms of engagement help to build parents' identification with the institution at large.

Research Questions

1. What does the term parent engagement mean to parents and school administrators?

2. How do parents who participate in the parent teacher association perceive parent engagement compared with parents who do not participate?

3. What forms of engagement help to build parents' identification with the institution at large?

Conceptual Framework

- Parent involvement literature
- Negotiated order theory

Ice Breaker

How many children do you have at the school? What names? Grades?

Do you have any other involvement/history with the school (e.g., alumni)?

How would you describe the parent community at SPA?

How do parents become part of the SPA community?

What is expected of parents at the school? How do new parents learn what is expected?

Parent Involvement

What is your role as a parent in the context of school?

How do you hear about things that are going on at school?

If you are concerned about something at school, what do you do?

What opportunities exist for parents to engage in the educational life of a student?

What do you like most about those opportunities? What do you like least?

Do you attend meetings of the PTA?

Why do/don't you participate in the PTA?

What do you think about PTA meetings? What purpose do they serve?

What, if anything, do you learn at the meetings?

What (other) programs does the school offer for parents?

What do you like most about those programs? Least?

How are these programs determined?

How often do you visit the school? What influences how often you visit the school?

How would you define parent engagement?

What are the benefits of parent engagement? Are there any downsides?

Is there any form of engagement not offered at SPA that you would like to see implemented?

Are there any forms of engagement currently offered that you would like to eliminate?

What has been your experience interacting with other parents at the school?

What motivates you to engage in activities with other SPA parents?

What relationships at school do you value most?

Can you give me an example of a parent activity you participated in that made you feel part of the SPA community?

How about a time when you felt most connected to other parents at the school? Or a time when you felt excluded?

Negotiated Order

How would you describe the relationship between school administrators and parents?

How would you describe the relationship between faculty and parents?

What do you like best about those relationships?

Is there anything about them that you would like to change or improve on?

What responsibilities do faculty and administrators hold in the school setting?

What are the responsibilities of parents in this setting?

How do you know/learn what the responsibilities of parents are?

Who decides what the responsibilities of parents are in the school setting?

Do you believe parents should be able to influence school policy or decision-making? Why or why not?

Do you have any influence over any school policies or decisions at SPA?

If yes, In what ways do you exercise your influence?

How does this make you feel?

How do you handle conflicts with school faculty or administration?

Can you provide an example of a time when a conflict was resolved by the school to your satisfaction? Can you describe a time when it was not resolved to your satisfaction?

What is most important to you about your relationships with school staff?

Wrap Up

Is there anything else you would like to add to our discussion?

May I contact you again if I have any additional questions?

Appendix B. Administrator Interview Protocol

Focus

This study focuses on expectations for parent engagement in the independent school setting, what constituents effective vehicles for parent engagement, whether the PTA is an effective vehicle for parent engagement (as a standalone method or in concert with other forms of involvement), and what forms of engagement help to build parents' identification with the institution at large.

Research Questions

1. What does the term parent engagement mean to parents and school administrators?

2. How do parents who participate in the parent teacher association perceive parent engagement compared with parents who do not participate?

3. What forms of engagement help to build parents' identification with the institution at large?

Conceptual Framework

- Parent involvement literature
- Negotiated order theory

Ice Breaker

How long have you been working at the school? In what capacities?

How would you describe the parent community at SPA?

What is expected of parents at the school?

Parent Involvement

What opportunities exist for parents to engage in the educational life of a student?

What (other) programs does the school offer for parents?

How do you determine what types of programs to offer parents?

Do you attend or participate in meetings of the PTA?

Why do/don't you participate in the PTA?

What do you think about PTA meetings? What purpose do they serve?

How would you define parent engagement?

Generally speaking, about how many SPA parents are engaged in the way you just described?

What are the benefits of parent engagement?

Are there any downsides?

Is there any form of engagement not offered at SPA that you would like to see implemented?

Are there any forms of engagement currently offered that you would like to eliminate?

Negotiated Order

How do you interact with parents in the context of your current position?

Could you describe any differences in your interactions across different types of parents (i.e., with PTA parents and non-PTA parents)?

How would you describe the relationship between school administrators and parents?

What do you like best about those relationships?

Is there anything about them that you would like to change or improve on?

What responsibilities do administrators hold in the school setting?

What are the responsibilities of parents in this setting?

Who decides what role parents play in the school setting?

Do parents have any influence over any school policies or decisions at SPA?

If yes, In what ways do they exercise influence?

How does this make you feel?

Do you believe parents should be able to influence school policy or decision-making? Why or why not?

How does the school administration communicate with parents?

How do you manage times when parents have conflicts with school administration?

What is most important to you about your relationships with parents?

Wrap Up

Is there anything else you would like to add to our discussion?

May I contact you again if I have any additional questions?