



## THE PARENT ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM IN HIGH-PERFORMING CHARTER SCHOOLS

*A Guide for Schools*



**DONNELL-KAY**  
FOUNDATION

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# Table of Contents

Overview .....	3
The Parent Engagement Continuum in Action.....	5
Summary of Findings	
Scope.....	6
Conditions.....	7
Individual Level Parent Engagement.....	10
School Level Parent Engagement.....	14
System Level Parent Engagement.....	16
Closing.....	18
References .....	19

*All pictures in this report are from a spring 2013 meeting of Rocky Mountain Prep's Family Leadership Council. Special thanks to Elizabeth Cryan for capturing the event. [elizabethcryanphotography.com](http://elizabethcryanphotography.com)*

## Overview

Parent engagement has the potential to be a critical lever for success in the movement to provide high-quality education for all children. Because parent engagement manifests in many different ways with a range of distinct, meaningful purposes, the way a school designs their model for parent engagement should reflect the unique needs of their community and the families who live there. For both new and existing schools, it is essential to put time and thought into identifying the value of parent engagement, designing the best framework to achieve those outcomes, and successfully executing its implementation. Parent engagement has the potential to contribute to the academic success of all students and transform the educational experience of a community. It is time for school leaders, teachers and staff to be more intentional in the design and implementation of a parent engagement framework, culture and community.<sup>1</sup>

Parent engagement can be described on a continuum:

- **Individual Level:** Setting the standard for raised expectations, based on strong relationships and open communication,
- **School Level:** Creating a school framework for engagement and supporting parents as active participants in the school community, and
- **System Level:** Empowering parent leaders to support other parents in their engagement and mobilize as advocates for high-quality schools.

### Implementing the Parent Engagement Continuum<sup>1</sup>

#### SYSTEMIC:

Purposefully designed as a core component of educational goals

- ✓ Intentionally inform the way school staff perceive the value of parents
- ✓ Build parent relationships upfront and clearly communicate high expectations & rationale

#### INTEGRATED:

Embedded into the structures and processes designed to meet those goals

- ✓ Facilitate policies and culture in which parent engagement can occur
- ✓ Identify opportunities for meaningful parent participation and venues where voices can be heard

#### SUSTAINED:

Operate with adequate resources and partnerships

- ✓ Identify key staff to coordinate and execute strong, ongoing, culturally competent support for families
- ✓ Unify outreach and messaging to create consistent communications

#### INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:

Raising expectations and setting a new standard

#### SCHOOL LEVEL:

Building a culture and community of engagement

#### SYSTEM LEVEL:

Empowering parent leaders as advocates

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group: Recommendations for Federal Policy (2010).



## Overview

Historically, parent engagement has been defined in relation to an individual student's academic achievement. It is a logical notion that parent engagement would be positively correlated with a child's success, and decades of research support that children with parents engaged in their learning have better academic outcomes in school and in life.<sup>2</sup> If every parent was reading to their child at night, taking an active role in a partnership with teachers, and spending out-of-school time on enriching extracurricular activities, all children would likely have improved educational outcomes. Other research has connected family engagement to reduced drop-out rates, higher graduation rates, reduced absenteeism, better social skills, and fewer conduct problems.<sup>3</sup> But what are the possibilities for parent engagement to create change beyond any individual child? What if parent engagement contributed to a culture of high expectations for all children and ultimately, empowered parents to demand high-quality schools for all?



<sup>2</sup> Family Engagement Matters (2011). Flamboyant Foundation, Washington D.C.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

# The Parent Engagement Continuum in Action

## Individual Level: Raising Expectations & Setting a New Standard

*Democracy Prep: New York, NY*



**Democracy Prep** canvasses door-to-door to recruit students, which they start by talking about the achievement gap and the difference between failing and high-quality schools.

**Democracy Prep** gives each teacher a cell phone, so parents always have a direct way to reach them. Democracy Prep has found that positive phone calls from teachers to families are instrumental for relationship building.

**Democracy Prep** shares weekly academic progress reports with parents, to update them on the data so they can hold their students accountable at home. The reports, which parents must sign and return, can also be checked online - a skill that is taught in family council meetings.

**Advice from Democracy Prep:** As school staff, be relentless in defining the school's value on parents. Get to know as many parents as possible, as soon as possible. Build on the strong foundation of relationships.

## School Level: Building a School Community of Engagement

*Rocketship Education: San Jose, CA*



**Rocketship** holds a daily morning meeting which parents are welcome to attend, and many of them do. There are also computer labs in their schools with internet access open to all families. After attending morning meeting or using the computer lab, many families remain in the building to spend time in the classroom or have conversations with staff.

**Rocketship** has an open-door volunteering policy. Families elected volunteer expectations for themselves (30 hours/year for dual-headed household, 15 hours/year for single-headed household). School staff is diligent in tracking parent engagement hours, made much easier through the framework of a computer program called HelpCounter.

**Rocketship** includes parents in the celebration of their student's every academic milestone and acknowledges families for every demonstration of engagement. On the walls outside classrooms, parents are recognized for volunteerism, bringing in supplies for the classroom, or even calling to ask about homework.

**Advice from a Rocketship Education parent:** Parent engagement is progressive and it takes time. Teachers must open themselves to a child and their parents, show empathy, and truly listen to families. The best way to support parents is by teaching them how to support their children.

## System Level: Empowering Parent Leaders as Advocates

*Success Academy: New York, NY*



**Success Academy** asks parents to articulate their story and experience with education, which helps them realize their connection to the school's mission.

**Success Academy** raises the standard of what the school expects from parents by asking them to turn out in support of the school. The schools face constant political opposition and uses those looming threats as an organizing tool.

**Success Academy** mobilizes parents strategically by galvanizing around issues that will affect their own children and ensuring that first-time activists attend a "win." Parent leaders rally the newer, less engaged parents by sharing past success stories as a result of their activism.

**Advice from Success Academy:** Breadth is important because it shows mass demand, but depth has its place. Make the big issues feel very personal. Find a consistent way to turn parents into leaders who can inspire others.

## Summary of Findings



Although it is often framed solely as an input to student academic achievement, parent engagement can have many other positive, transformational outcomes including:

- **Raised Expectations**

Not only can parent engagement improve the academic performance of an individual child, but if carried out on a larger scale, it can help raise the academic expectations for an entire community.

- **School Culture of Engagement**

A school culture of engagement encourages frequent communication between parents and teachers, especially in regards to student achievement data. Engaged parents can contribute to a powerful school culture through volunteerism, community building, and collaborative action for decision-making.

- **Recruitment and Retention**

It is harder for schools to sustain their academic success with high attrition rates, and engaging parents helps keep 100% of students enrolled over time. As parents become vocal in their support for the school, they can also play a crucial role in the recruitment and retention of other families.

- **Protection and Replication**

When schools face threats to their funding, facilities, or autonomy, the support of engaged parents - often loud and visible - can go a long way in protecting a school and its assets. As schools seek to expand and replicate their success, parents can be the most important advocates in support of the school.

### Scope

This paper is a guide for school leaders, teachers and staff to think through parent engagement design and implementation. Although it is essential for all schools to think intentionally and strategically about parent engagement, this paper is limited in scope to one particular subset of schools: high performing charter schools or charter schools that strive to become high performing and hope to use parent engagement as a strategy to do so. Since the scope of this paper does not include a comparison of family engagement between various types of schools, not all of the strategies outlined in this continuum will be relevant or meaningful in traditional school settings.

## Summary of Findings

High-performing charter schools are a fitting case study for the parent engagement movement. Not only do they prove that low-income children are capable of achieving at the same level or higher than their affluent peers, but they also demonstrate that low-income parents want the best for their children and already hold great power as advocates for their children's education. In high-performing charter settings with increased expectations for student achievement, there are increased expectations for parents as well. With their ambitious academic goals and a vision of closing the achievement gap, charter schools must be tactical with their goals and anticipated outcomes for parent engagement.

Many urban districts with charter schools use a system of public school choice to determine enrollment.<sup>4</sup> Families living within the district have the option to “choice out” of their assigned neighborhood school in order to attend charter schools, which are often not associated with a geographic boundary. Although school choice remains an imperfect system<sup>5</sup>, it has begun to change the paradigm for low-income families to access high-quality education. However, the mere act of choosing a school does not automatically make parents more engaged in the daily activities that yield student success. One particular study sought to examine the correlation between school choice and parent engagement, and found that it is not the act of choice that shapes parent engagement, but rather the context of the school community that parents and students have chosen to be a part of.<sup>6</sup> In the case of high-performing charter schools, it is the increased expectations for student academic achievement that often necessitates a higher level of engagement from parents, and rising to those expectations can still be a challenge.

### Conditions

For truly valuable and effective parent engagement in the high-performing charter school setting, there are at least two essential conditions that must be in place. The first is that teachers and staff at the school must inherently value their students' families. Before schools can have an effective culture of parent engagement, teachers and staff must truly commit to the notion that all parents want their children to be successful, and parents at a high-performing charter have already taken a step in that direction by exercising their choice to access a high-quality school. Even if some parents appear hard-to-engage, the school must not waver from the belief that all parents want the best for their children. Furthermore, staff must never make assumptions about parents' capabilities or limitations, especially on the basis of their socioeconomic status. Helen Westmoreland of the Flamboyan Foundation states,

#### Conditions for Success

- ✓ School leaders, teachers and staff must inherently value their students' families, and commit to the notion that all parents want their children to be successful.
- ✓ School leaders, teachers and staff must be clear and precise about the value they place on their students' families, and align practices with those values.

<sup>4</sup> For a full list of public school choice policies by state, visit <http://www.heritage.org/applications/schoolchoice>.

<sup>5</sup> When Parents are Limited by Location, What Does 'Choice' Mean? (2013). Donnell-Kay Foundation, Denver CO.

<sup>6</sup> School Choice and the Creation of Social Capital Reexamined (2008). American Journal of Political Science.



## Summary of Findings

“It seems that the people once regarded as those kids who simply would not or could not learn are now, a decade or two later, regarded as those parents who will not or cannot help their own children succeed. If we believe that all kids can achieve at high levels, regardless of the color of

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*“If we believe that all kids can achieve at high levels, regardless of the color of their skin or the money in their pockets, then we must also believe that all parents can be great guides, partners and advocates in their child’s education.”*

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their skin or the money in their pockets, then we must also believe that all parents can be great guides, partners and advocates in their child’s education.” The school must emanate a culture of respect and shared mission in order to foster close relationships with parents, who must feel as though the school is there to serve them and their student’s needs.

The second condition is that teachers and staff at the school must be clear and precise about the value they place on their families, and align their practices with those values. For example, if schools say they value parent input but in reality do not want parents involved in any decision-making processes, or only want parents involved in very specific decisions, they must change their messaging to be more accurate. Likewise, if a school says they have an open-door volunteering policy but only want parents in the building at certain times of the day or with enough advance warning, the message does not reflect the value. School leaders, teachers and staff must continue to question themselves until they feel confident that their value on parent engagement is meaningful and transparent. Eric Dearing, an Associate Professor of Applied Development Psychology at Boston College, has found that research and practice around parent engagement rarely goes “beyond the idea that it is good for families to be involved, simply because family involvement is good.” As a result of the universal acceptance of this premise, “schools are all too often approaching parent engagement in a haphazard and extemporaneous manner.” The purpose of the parent engagement continuum is to distinguish between the many goals for parent engagement, and to describe various strategies for reaching those goals.





## Summary of Findings

Many successful strategies are outlined in this paper, but until the research can support best practices around the implementation of a strong parent engagement culture, schools should continue to experiment with their own creative design, execution and evaluation. Parent engagement is not a new concept, but some of the best knowledge in the field is anecdotal and based on experience. Once schools have elected strategies based on their goal and desired outcomes, they must continue to evaluate whether the strategy has been effective in achieving those outcomes; if not, the school must re-think and be prepared to move on from that strategy. This design process can be used as a form of research, to both inform and grow the depth of knowledge around parent engagement. Westmoreland says, “The question for the field over the next five years is not whether family engagement matters but what, exactly, it looks like when it is implemented in ways that move the needle.” In accordance with the National Family and Community Engagement Working Group’s standards, all efforts should be:

- **Systemic**, meaning they are designed as a core component of educational goals;
- **Integrated**, meaning they are embedded into the structures and processes designed to meet those goals;
- **Sustained**, meaning they are operated with adequate resources and partnerships.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Adapted from the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group: Recommendations for Federal Policy (2010).

## Individual Level: Raising Expectations & Setting a New Standard

### INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:

Raising expectations and setting a new standard

### SCHOOL LEVEL:

Building a culture and community of engagement

### SYSTEM LEVEL:

Empowering parent leaders as advocates

The start of the parent engagement continuum begins with an individual student. Before parents can advocate for high-quality schools, they must know and understand the performance of their own child's school or the school they are assigned to attend. It is important for educators and advocates to support parents in understanding the achievement gap and the difference between a mediocre and high-quality school. Jeremiah Kittredge of the non-profit organization Families for Excellent Schools refers to the need to help parents become "literate about school performance." This is especially important in districts where school performance data is not very accessible, or it is confusing and difficult to understand. *Fulfilling the Promise of Choice*, a qualitative report on how Latino families choose schools in Denver found, "When presented with clear information on school performance, parents were more willing to overcome many other considerations and obstacles in search of a better school."<sup>8</sup> When parents seek out a high-performing school for their children and can rise to the elevated expectations around attendance, tardiness, uniforms, homework and reading, they have already increased their child's opportunities to succeed. It is unrealistic to think a parent will become an active member of the school community or an advocate for the school reform movement before they are engaged in their own child's success.

In holding parents accountable to increased expectations around their engagement, some parents will still struggle to rise to the occasion. There are many different factors

### Individual Level:

#### Raising Expectations & Setting a New Standard

#### Outcomes:

Raised Expectations  
Strong Relationships

#### Strategies:

- ✓ Conduct outreach to improve parent literacy around school performance, the achievement gap and school choice.
- ✓ Build relationships between parents and teachers based on frequent and honest communication and in some cases, home visits.
- ✓ Invest families in student goals through increased communication around academic achievement data and ways to support learning at home.

<sup>8</sup> Fulfilling the Promise of Choice (2013). Stand for Children Colorado, Together Colorado, & The Piton Foundation, Denver CO.

## Individual Level: Raising Expectations & Setting a New Standard

at play that could cause a parent to fall into this category, including constraints imposed by poverty, distrust of authority, power dynamics, and a history of low academic expectations for low-income students and families. Westmoreland argues, “It is not enough to reach out only to those parents who proactively call the school or who are responsive if you market an event just right. ‘Hard-to-reach’ families should drive the design of our work, not be the afterthought to what already exists.” In building relationships, it is important that school leaders, teachers and staff understand the history of their community and the past experiences with education of the families who live there. In many cases, the strength of the school’s relationship with a parent will predict whether or not that parent will support the school staff in difficult or unpopular decisions such as disciplinary consequences for misbehavior, staying after school to finish incomplete homework, attending summer school, or repeating a grade level. Without parent support, many school efforts to uphold cultural and academic expectations could be derailed.

Although the school leader often spearheads parent engagement efforts, the teacher is the most important point of contact for his or her student’s families. To achieve the levels of communication necessary for successful engagement, every parent should have a way to easily and frequently reach their student’s teacher, whether through calling, texting, emailing, handwritten notes in the homework folder, or even chatting in person at drop-off or pick-up. In many cases, whether or not parents spend time in the school can be linked back to the nature of the relationship they’ve built with their child’s teacher and other school staff. In an effort to make communication between teachers and families less of a burden, Democracy Prep Public Schools network in New York City gives their teaching staff cell phones. Princess Lyles, the Director of Family and Community Engagement at Democracy Prep, often asks herself, “How do we make parents feel like a part of this thing that we’re doing?” Lyles truly believes that if teachers and parents unite as a support system with consistent expectations, pushing their children to be their best, students can achieve anything.

The Flamboyant Foundation, a private family foundation based in Washington, D.C. committed to improving public education, has produced a Classroom Family Engagement Rubric as a way to describe and measure three teacher competencies around engaging parents, which are:




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*“When it comes to how strongly engagement predicts student achievement, a parent occasionally volunteering or coming to school events is a blip on the radar screen compared to a parent who holds high expectations and sets goals for his or her individual child, monitors the child’s progress, holds the child accountable, and supports learning at home.”*

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## Individual Level: Raising Expectations & Setting a New Standard

- 1) The teacher possesses the beliefs and mindsets to effectively engage families.
- 2) Teachers and families have trusting relationships.
- 3) Teachers engage families in supporting learning by effectively communicating academic information and progress.<sup>9</sup>

Teacher beliefs and mindsets are a necessary condition for engagement, while relationships and communication are the most viable means of achieving it. The third competency, investing families in student goals, is one of the most important strategies in raising the standards for academic expectations.



Messaging the academic expectations and goals for students should be a major aspect of communication between the teacher and the family. Student achievement data must be easily digestible for parents to understand where their child academically “stands” in relation to other children in the classroom, school and district, and where their child needs to be by the end of the school year to be on the path to succeed. Many schools do this through data workshops led by the classroom teacher, displaying the entire range of student achievement and making each student anonymous with a number that is known only to the parents of that student. At the Flamboyan Foundation, parent-teacher conferences have been re-envisioned as Academic Parent Teacher Team (APTT) group meetings, which occur three times a year. APTT is a family engagement strategy that was developed in the Creighton school district in Phoenix, Arizona by Maria Paredes. The APTT meeting model is broken down to review Foundational Skills and Data, Home Learning Activities, and Goal Setting, to help parents understand data, how they can support student learning at home, and what goals to set for their student’s success. Westmoreland believes, “When it comes to how strongly engagement predicts student achievement, a parent occasionally volunteering or coming to school events is a blip on the radar screen compared to a parent who holds high expectations and sets goals for his or her individual child, monitors the child’s progress, holds the child accountable, and supports learning at home.” In taking the time to help parents understand the data, teachers can make student academic performance feel more real, personal and urgent.

Many schools have also experimented with conducting home visits as a way to improve the parent-teacher relationship or to draw out hard-to-engage parents. Home visits can help build trust and rapport between parents and teachers by altering the power equation. Instead of asking parents to come to the school, the school comes to the parent, and the conversations in the living room can be more intimate and meaningful than conversations in a school building. The Flamboyan Foundation has partnered with the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project that began in

<sup>9</sup> Classroom Family Engagement Rubric (2012). Flamboyan Foundation, Washington D.C.

## Individual Level: Raising Expectations & Setting a New Standard

Sacramento, California, which uses home visits to “end the cycle of blame between families and school staff by building trust and respect, instilling cultural competency and increasing personal and professional capacity for all involved.” Many schools choose to do home visits in their first year in the community as a strategy to build trust. Heidi Rosenberg of the Harvard Family Research Project argues, “The way that programs go about reaching out to and engaging families suffering from crises of poverty and other socio-environmental stressors is crucially important, for it is often those initial contacts with home visitors and other family-facing staff that make the difference between a family engaging or retreating.” One unanticipated outcome of home visits is that teachers gain a more compassionate understanding of their students’ backgrounds, the adversity they may have faced and the strength of their resilience.

In some cultures it is not traditional for families to take an active role or voice their opinion in the school setting, and this can be a hard attitude to shift. In *Fulfilling the Promise of Choice*, researchers found that “unacculturated parents felt especially uneasy about their ability to be as involved with their children’s education as they would like to be. In most circumstances, this arose from language barriers: there was often discomfort, and sometimes embarrassment, when faced with the prospect of having to interact with teachers or administrators who did not speak Spanish. More concerning, fears about immigration status often impeded the ability of parents to feel that they were allowed to be involved.”<sup>10</sup> It is crucial for teachers to pave the way for engagement by ensuring that language or citizen documentation is not an obstacle to spending time in the classroom or accessing resources. For schools that require background checks for volunteers, immigration status should not be a factor in determining the outcome. Schools must utilize multilingual staff and interpretation for communication with non-English speaking parents, as well as messaging explicitly to Latino and other minority families about the value and importance of their engagement.

The common theme in each strategy for raising the expectations around parent engagement is relationship building between the school and the family. Preston Smith, the CEO of the Rocketship Education charter network in San Jose, CA, insists, “It’s all about one-to-one relationship building. We in the education reform space want change to be fast and replicate quickly, but this is hand-to-hand combat. There are no shortcuts.” In her book *A Cord of Three Strands: A New Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools*, author Soo Hong argues that there is also an element of reparation required in order to build trust with marginalized populations: “This approach requires time, patience and planning. It is rooted in the slow and patient work of relationship-building and the belief that hope and healing must replace the separation created by distrust and misunderstanding.” This stage of raising expectations, setting a new standard, and building relationships with families is a necessary stepping stone to the rest of the parent engagement continuum.

<sup>10</sup> Fulfilling the Promise of Choice (2013). Stand for Children Colorado, Together Colorado & The Piton Foundation, Denver CO.

## School Level: Building a Culture & Community of Engagement

### INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:

Raising expectations and setting a new standard

### SCHOOL LEVEL:

Building a culture and community of engagement

### SYSTEM LEVEL:

Empowering parent leaders as advocates

Beyond any individual child, parent engagement has the potential to create a community of engaged families who support and spread the school's mission. Social events, family council meetings and an open-door culture of volunteering can bring together a diverse group of parents to network, build relationships, and ultimately increase their social capital to advocate for their children. M. Elena Lopez of the Harvard Family Research Project explains, "Social capital refers to the relationships of trust and reciprocity within and across communities that form the basis of collective action." Patrick McGuinn, an Associate Professor of Political Science at Drew University, agrees that "social capital is the central foundation for collaborative action." For Rocketship, the outcomes of a school community of engagement are that "parents have the opportunity to develop firsthand experience of educational excellence, a sense of personal ownership over educational choices for all students available in their community, and an understanding of what it takes to effect real change for kids." Building a culture of engagement brings the unit of change from the individual level to the school level.

To facilitate that shift, school staff should encourage families to take ownership over pieces of school culture, especially in areas that make the high-performing charter school experience different from a traditional neighborhood school. One vehicle to encourage school community is a family council. Many charter schools elect a parent to serve on the board of directors and take part in holding the

### School Level:

#### Building a School Community of Engagement

#### Outcomes:

Culture of Engagement  
Retention

#### Strategies:

- ✓ Implement a volunteer policy that gives parents meaningful opportunities in the classroom, witnessing high quality instruction.
- ✓ Support parents in taking ownership over pieces of school culture through a family council, while building a network with other parents in the school community.
- ✓ Provide outlets for parents to articulate their experiences with education and their connection to the school mission.



## School Level: Building a Culture & Community of Engagement

school and its leader accountable. For some schools, the family council may be more social and viewed as a way to involve parents in planning culture-building events for the school community. For other schools, the purpose of the family council is to incorporate family input into school decision making. At Democracy Prep, Lyles says learning how to message is a big part of building school community. “As a school, you must know exactly what you want your agenda for parents to be, and communicate that agenda effectively to parents so they also know exactly what it is.” It is important for the school leader to be honest with staff and families about the scope of decisions parents can be involved in.

For a truly valuable open-door policy, schools must create an infrastructure for parents to spend meaningful time in the classroom. CEO of Rocketship Education Preston Smith has found it is natural for teachers and school leaders to define parent engagement in terms of how it serves them, but wanting involvement for a selfish reason does not motivate other people to participate. Parents spending time in the classroom can lead to a much more valuable outcome beyond routine volunteerism: it can allow them to witness and learn to recognize high-quality instruction. The story of Karen Martinez, a Rocketship parent turned district school board member, is just one example. Although Martinez reflects that it took her some time to become engaged (she remembers thinking throughout that first year, “Is this even real? Is this even possible?”),



*“This is time consuming and the commitment is huge. But the payout is tremendous.”*

she credits the extent of her engagement to the Rocketship principal, teachers and staff. “Rocketship meets students and parents where they are and where the need is. When you start meeting students at a level that has never been met before, parents will see that and they will move.” After Martinez began to witness her daughter’s remarkable academic growth and the inspiring interactions with her teacher, she believed that Rocketship teachers were doing everything possible to support her child. Exposing parents to the tenets of a high-quality school equips them with the knowledge to advocate for their children throughout every stage of their education.

Steve Corbett, founding principal of the East Harlem Scholars Academy II set to open in the fall of 2013, has found that the best strategy is to “maximize the touch points.” For example, the first East Harlem Scholars Academy planned 50 family engagement events in a 190-day school year to occur at all times of day, including literacy and math workshops, barbeques, academic showcases, kickball games, health fairs, informal coffee hours with the principal, and many more. Corbett acknowledges, “This is time consuming and the commitment is huge. But the payout is tremendous.”

## School Level: Building a Culture & Community of Engagement

This strategy can be especially beneficial in creating a school that acts as the hub of the neighborhood. According to Corbett, even in the charter world, “schools should be communities and reflective of what the community needs.” Rocketship is one example of a school acting as a community focal point, where some schools have designed open computer labs with internet access as a method to get families in the door. The labs are open during school hours for parents to use the computer for their own personal use – playing games, using social media, or typing a resume – and Rocketship staff are finding that parents who come to the lab often stay to spend time in their children’s classrooms. Because of this success, Rocketship intends to make the computer labs a network-wide practice. Whatever the structure, it is essential that parents feel welcome within the doors of the school and that their presence is appreciated.



## System Level: Empowering Parent Leaders as Advocates

### INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:

Raising expectations and setting a new standard

### SCHOOL LEVEL:

Building a culture and community of engagement

### SYSTEM LEVEL:

Empowering parent leaders as advocates

Parent leaders can play a crucial role in the greater school reform movement, when the focus of the continuum shifts from school-level engagement to system-level engagement. As part of a local and national movement for school reform, high-performing charters often have opportunities to interact with other members of the movement. Inviting parents to such events can be a valuable strategy. Parents have a chance to share their experience with education and their decision to seek higher-quality schools for their children. Local and national leaders can bear witness to families who have been affected by the lack of universally high-quality options and education policies around public school choice and charter school laws. Attending just one high-leverage event could determine whether a parent remains engaged on the school level or breaks through to the system level. Martinez, a Rocketship Education parent who was recently elected to the school board for the east San Jose school district in California, is a model for breakthrough engagement. Her journey on the continuum began with the academic success of her own child and the relationship she built with her child's teacher, and continues today with her leadership as a school board member and her advocacy for system-level change.

For some high-performing charters, the value on parent engagement may be on the political organizing and activism necessary for the school to be sustainable in delivering high-quality education. Recently referred to as “parent power” in the report of the same title by the American

### System Level:

#### Empowering Parent Leaders as Advocates

#### Outcomes:

Recruitment  
Protection & Replication

#### Strategies:

- ✓ Harness parent power to advocate for the school and its assets, especially when a lack of facilities, funding or autonomy threatens sustainability.
- ✓ Identify parents who can act as leaders in supporting other parents to begin their engagement.
- ✓ Employ the strengths of parent leaders in their own communities to spread the word and connect every family with a high-quality school.

<sup>11</sup> Parent Power (2012). American Enterprise Institute, Washington D.C.



## System Level: Empowering Parent Leaders as Advocates

Enterprise Institute, the mobilization of charter parents on a variety of political issues has gained national attention in recent years.<sup>11</sup> At the Success Academy Charter Schools in New York City, the reason parents are so active is because their schools face “an ever-present existential threat,” according to Director of External Affairs Jenny Sedlis. Parents are aware of constant battles to protect funding and facilities, and Sedlis says these threats are helpful from an organizing perspective. Charismatic network leader Eva Moskowitz tells newly enrolled families that she will call on them to turn out in times of critical importance, because the fight for school choice and high-quality education is not over. As a result, parents know they are being counted on and their time will not be wasted, and they turn out in mass. Andrew P. Kelly of the American Enterprise Institute says there is a degree of “social pressure” in the Success Academy strategy, as they rely on their parent leaders to rally the newer, less engaged parents by sharing the past successes as a result of their activism.

Parents are much more likely to be invested if the issue will affect their own child, if they see an immediate payoff for their involvement or an immediate threat to their school. For the vast majority of parents, it is too idealistic to appeal to their sense of fairness or benevolence. Sedlis advises against pushing for 100% attendance at events that aren’t relevant and critical, “just for the sake of high turn-out. If you make parents attend something that doesn’t matter to them, you risk losing their engagement forever.” Instead, Sedlis ensures that first-time parent activists at Success Academy attend an event she knows will result in a “win.” Beyond building morale, it sends the message to parents that their participation is meaningful and has an impact. Sedlis admits, “There is nothing worse than asking parents to come out to an advocacy event for the first time when they’re not handed a victory.” Organizing parents as system-level advocates is its own complex phenomenon, but it begins with the other stages of engagement relating to a parent’s own child and school community.

### Closing

In a way, the parent engagement continuum is cyclical. Through their charisma and presence in the school community, parent leaders become catalysts for drawing engagement from other parents. They act as ambassadors in spreading the message of the achievement gap, the difference between failing and high-quality schools, and the prospect of exercising choice in a child’s education. Research shows that many low-income, minority families make school choices based in large part on the input from their family, friends and neighbors.<sup>12</sup> The report *Fulfilling the Promise of Choice* refers to parent leaders as those “who had had more experience with the system and were considered valuable resources for more recent immigrants or those with less experience” navigating the system.<sup>13</sup> These parents are often natural leaders who are recognized

<sup>11</sup> How Parents Chose Schools in 2012: Executive Summary (2012). Donnell-Kay Foundation, Denver CO.

<sup>13</sup> Fulfilling the Promise of Choice (2013). Stand for Children Colorado, Together Colorado & The Piton Foundation, Denver CO.

## System Level: Empowering Parent Leaders as Advocates



as the backbone of their own families and neighborhoods. In regards to her own activism, Martinez says,

*“Rocketship allowed me to have a voice and to be a part of the movement, [but] this is not about doing something for Rocketship. This is about doing something for your community.”*

Parent leaders who have progressed through all stages of engagement set off a ripple effect, paving the way for others to begin their path on the engagement continuum.

Research and the anecdotal experience of many of the nation’s highest-performing charters support that parent engagement can be a vital lever in the educational success of children. Parent engagement also has many positive, transformational outcomes beyond student achievement, including raised expectations, creating a school culture of engagement, recruitment and retention of students, and protection and replication of a school and its assets. For parents, the understanding of high-quality education, the trusting and honest relationships with teachers, and the increased social capital for collaborative action can all lead to transformational change in a community. Even the most successful culture of parent engagement is still a mean to the most important end: student academic success and the demand for high-quality schools for all children. For parents who have “choiced in” to the high-performing charter setting, it is the context of that school’s culture, interpersonal networks, and interactions with the greater reform community, that influences parent engagement the most. The parent engagement continuum can act as a guide for both new and existing schools to think strategically about that context, and be intentional in the design and implementation of their parent engagement framework. As long as the appropriate conditions are in place and parent engagement strategies are planned as a core component of educational goals, embedded into the structures of the school intended to meet those goals, and operated with adequate resources and partnerships, high-performing charter schools are in a position to leverage a fundamental piece of the school reform movement.

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