

What Can Community Organizing Teach Us about Parent Engagement? Five Simple Ways to Rethink the Bake Sale

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Over the past several years, more and more evidence has emerged that effective parent engagement can positively affect school culture, working conditions, and student achievement (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). A school that actively welcomes and sees parents as important stakeholders with valuable knowledge and expertise can build trust and support throughout the community that is necessary to build and sustain reform. But when we think about what parent engagement usually means, the first things to come to mind are bake sales, PTA meetings, and parent-teacher conferences. Although individual teachers can and do find ways to reach parents across a school community, these efforts are often isolated and fall short of creating a school-wide vision for parent engagement. With little training or expertise in community affairs, school staff often need support to make dynamic shifts in how they work with families.

There are many ways that strong community organizing groups can facilitate more meaningful relationships between families and schools. These groups often have staff who speak the languages of a community and are tuned in to the experiences, dilemmas, and assets of neighborhood. Dr. Soo Hong of Wellesley College has spent the last four years exploring the work of one successful community organizing group in Chicago, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA). LSNA has partnered with eight neighborhood schools to build a model of parent engagement that is unlike any other.

At a [webinar hosted by the Annenberg Institute](#) for planning grantees of the Nellie Mae Education Foundations District-Level Systems Change initiative (DLSC), Dr. Hong presented findings from her book, *A Cord of Three Strands*, on five LSNA strategies that are relevant to DLSC sites and anyone seeking to increase parent engagement in schools.

1. Focus on the needs and experiences of families first: Bake sales, open houses, and parent-teacher conferences are often shaped by the preferences and views of schools rather than families. LSNA is focused on the experience of families first. When working with Mexican immigrant mothers who are not accustomed to parent presence in schools, LSNA introduces them to the ways parents *can* be involved. By highlighting the assets and building the

participation of bilingual parent leaders, schools can also develop a rich resource of individuals who bridge across school staff and families.

2. Promote authentic relationships and engagement, not just a revised calendar of activities: As they try to become more effective with “hard to reach” parents, schools translate newsletters into different languages and plan events at more family-friendly times. These revised plans and activities are a step in the right direction, but schools need to design strategies that bring school staff and families into conversation and dialogue. In LSNA schools, a parent mentor works with a teacher daily in a classroom (other than their child’s) to support student learning. These collaborative working relationships and opportunities for dialogue and relationship-building become the core to newfound mutual understandings of family life and school culture.

3. View parents as assets, not deficits: When schools struggle with low levels of parent involvement, they often wonder why parents don’t care or aren’t interested in their child’s education. Based on this belief, many parent involvement programs are designed to educate parents or equip them with skills they may be lacking. LSNA sees each parent as a child’s first teacher who has keen insight into their own children and the broader community. Parents are successful in connecting to children across a school community and are often the most effective in drawing in new parents to participate in the school. In this and many other ways, parents are seen as allies and leaders in the larger effort to improve schools.

4. Broaden, don’t limit participation: After LSNA organizers build a program that brings parents into schools, they immediately shift their attention to the parents they didn’t reach. Rather than relying on a few successful events or programs that attract the same group of interested parents, LSNA organizers make every effort to broaden participation. This requires building a portfolio of programs and opportunities that meet different needs and expectations within the community.

5. Transform families, schools, and communities: When schools focus on parent programs that single mindedly seek to alter parenting practices at home, the responsibility for change rests solely on families. Addressing the dilemma of parent engagement should be a shared effort that asks not only how parents can understand schools and more effectively support their children at home, but also how schools can alter their beliefs about parents and their strategies for parent engagement to transform a school culture.

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. Through the work of community organizing groups like LSNA—that are founded in building community voice, promoting justice, and shifting power imbalances—we can build a new and transformative model for parent engagement in schools.

RESOURCES

Henderson, Anne, and Mapp, Karen. (2002). *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools.

> [Download PDF](#)

Hong, Soo. (2011). *A Cord of Three Strands: A New Approach to Parent Engagement in*

Schools. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
> [Order online](#)

[Logan Square Neighborhood Association](#)

[Chicago Public Schools](#)

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[Joanne Thompson](#), Research Associate, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, with perspective from Dr. Soo Hong, Wellesley College. The strategies included here are based on a description of an *ecological model of parent engagement* that comes from *A Cord of Three Strands*.

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