In the following report, Hanover Research examines the literature on the subject of parent participation in schools, focusing on the unique factors that affect participation at Title I elementary schools. The report considers information from peer-reviewed journals, national advocacy organizations, and interviews with PTA representatives.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

This report seeks to identify the factors that affect school-based parent participation and to determine the most effective methods of increasing volunteer activity. For this report, Hanover reviewed the literature for academic studies of parent involvement, examined publications from major advocacy groups, and conducted interviews with PTA representatives. The report is divided into two sections. Section I: Factors Affecting Participation examines the literature to determine the major determinants of parents’ interest in participating in school-based activities. Section II: Increasing Participation presents specific strategies that have been implemented at schools and strategies recommended by major advocacy groups.

KEY FINDINGS

- Reaching parents depends on understanding their lifestyles, interests, and modes of communication. Teachers should be trained to interact and empathize with parents; schools should regularly solicit feedback from parents to gauge their interest in volunteer activities; and schools should communicate with parents using the medium with which they are most comfortable (e.g., e-mail, door-to-door visits).

- Schools need to create volunteer opportunities that accommodate a variety of parent schedules and interests. Schools can offer evening, weekend, or “work at home” volunteer opportunities for parents who are unable to visit the school during classroom hours. As all parents do not enjoy the same activities, schools should offer a variety of involvement opportunities for parents with different interests.

- Schools should foster welcoming school environments to attract parent volunteers. Many parents are discouraged from participating at their children’s schools because of language barriers, past negative educational experiences, or unfamiliarity with the educational system. Some strategies used include recruiting translators for school events, maintaining family resource centers, and placing greeters on the school campus and at school-wide events.

- One of the most effective methods of recruiting volunteers is asking them directly. Schools should have a specific task in mind when requesting help from parents. Parents often feel that they have nothing to contribute, and asking them in this way conveys that they are capable of making a valuable contribution and highlights one way that they can participate in the school’s success.

- In general, wealthier, more educated parents are more likely to attend school meetings, attend parent-teacher conferences, attend class events, or volunteer at school. Parents of Hispanic students, in particular, are much less likely to volunteer at school or attend class events. This presents a unique challenge for schools that primarily serve low-income, minority students.
SECTION I: FACTORS AFFECTING PARENT PARTICIPATION

This section examines the factors that affect parent participation in schools, incorporating information from academic studies, government statistics, and recommendations from major advocacy groups.

DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

The 2011 Digest of Education Statistics published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that race, level of education, and income all affect the likelihood that parents will participate in events at their children’s school. In general, wealthier, more educated parents are more likely to attend school meetings and parent-teacher conferences, participate in class events, or volunteer at school. For example, 57 percent of parents with a bachelor’s degree volunteered at their child’s school, while only 19.5 percent of parents with less than a high school education did so. Only 63.4 percent of parents whose household income was between $25,001 and $30,000 attended class events, while 79 percent of parents whose household income was between $50,001 and $75,000 did.\(^1\) Another study focusing on the parents of special education students also observed that parents of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to participate at their child’s school. Similarly, single parents and parents of students who receive free or reduced price lunch are less likely to be involved at their child’s school.\(^2\)

The Digest of Education Statistics found that parents of Hispanic and Black students were less likely to be involved with their students’ schools than parents of White students (see figures 1.1 and 1.2). The difference is most apparent in volunteer activity, where 54.2 percent of parents of White students reported volunteering at least once at their child’s school. In contrast, only 31.8 percent of Hispanic parents volunteered at their child’s school. Notably, parents of Hispanic students attended parent-teacher conferences at a higher rate than parents of White or Black students, suggesting a strong interest in involvement with their students’ education.\(^3\)

Figure 1.1: Percentage of Parents Who Participated in School Activities, by Student’s Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>WHITE</th>
<th>BLACK</th>
<th>HISPANIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attended a general school meeting</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended parent-teacher conference</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
<td>80.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended a class event</td>
<td>80.1%</td>
<td>64.7%</td>
<td>65.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteered at school</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Center for Education Statistics


These differences in participation rates illustrate the challenges faced by schools that primarily serve low income, minority students and may partially explain low parent participation rates at Title I schools.

**PARTICIPATION GUIDELINES**

While academic research on the most effective methods of increasing parent participation is limited, local, state, and national advocacy groups have published a variety of guides to improve parent involvement in schools. Many of those guides, such as the National PTA’s Standards Implementation Guide, utilize a six-part framework developed by Joyce Epstein, the Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships. Epstein’s model divides involvement into six classifications: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. This report concentrates primarily on the discussion related to parent volunteering and decision-making.

**ACCOMMODATING PARENTS**

Parents’ willingness to participate in school activities is often constrained by outside obligations such as work or child care. Schools that want to increase parent participation must find ways to accommodate parents’ unique schedules and obligations.

While many parents will be able to contribute during regular school hours, others may only be able to participate during the evening or on weekends. One case study of a public school

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in a low-income area of the Pacific Northwest observed that some parents “are so consumed by their daily life they don’t have time to get involved as maybe other demographic parents would.”

Scheduling events at different times allows all parents to be involved with their child’s school and build relationships with teachers, students, and other parents. However, it is not enough simply to schedule events at a variety of times: parents also must be made aware that there are opportunities to volunteer outside of traditional hours and at different times of the year. One study found that “parent involvement in school events was higher in schools that offered a greater number of parent outreach activities,” suggesting that schools can increase parent participation by increasing the number and variety of available volunteer opportunities.

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NREL) stated that plans to engage parents should recognize that many parents will not be able to participate in school activities without child care services. The Missouri state PTA also recognizes that lack of child care can be a barrier to parent participation and recommends offering child care at PTA meetings to attract more participants.

**CREATING A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT**

The National PTA states that “when families walk into the school building, they should feel that it is a place where they ‘belong.’” Language barriers, unfamiliarity, and poor past educational experiences all contribute to unease among parents who may be interested in volunteering. Public Schools of North Carolina (PSNC) emphasizes that there is a direct relationship between welcoming environments and greater participation levels.

The barriers associated with uncomfortable or unfamiliar environments are particularly apparent among schools with large immigrant populations who may not speak English fluently or have experience interacting with the educational system. The *Handbook on Family and Community Engagement*, developed by the Center on Innovation and Improvement with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, asserts that:

> Although there is absolute consensus that parental involvement is a key component of academic success for most U.S. students, many immigrant parents with low human and social capital are reluctant to approach the schools, some because they do not speak English, some because in their country of origin parents were not

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9 Ibid., p.10.

10 “201 Ways to Increase Your PTA Membership.” Missouri PTA. pp.1-14. [http://www.mopta.org/pdf/201_Ways_to_Increase_Your_PTA_Membership_1_%5b2%5d.pdf](http://www.mopta.org/pdf/201_Ways_to_Increase_Your_PTA_Membership_1_%5b2%5d.pdf)


expected to play a role in school decisions, and others because they have multiple home, child, and job responsibilities that must take priority.\textsuperscript{13}

Hispanic parents attend parent-teacher conferences at a higher rate than any other racial group, generally suggesting a genuine interest in their children’s education. However, the low rates of volunteerism and attendance at class events imply that there are barriers preventing them from becoming more involved. Schools must consider accommodating parents of diverse backgrounds when developing volunteer programs.

The most basic step toward encouraging non-native speakers to participate in school events is to provide translation. The former PTA president of a school in Northwestern Arkansas noted that having bilingual speakers at PTA meetings increased participation, and the Missouri state PTA recommends translating all PTA materials into multiple languages.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{CREATING MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES}

Parents are less likely to participate in school events if they do not feel that the event is meaningful. A study of one Title I school in South Carolina observed that parents “agreed that it is their responsibility to assume many roles in their children’s education, such as talking with their children about the school day, helping with homework, staying informed, and communicating regularly with their children’s teachers.” However, parents “were less likely to believe a role/activity is their responsibility if it is one that doesn’t relate directly to their child, such as making sure the school has what it needs, making the school better, and talking with other parents from the school.”\textsuperscript{15}

Parent recognition is a key component of increasing participation, emphasized by the NREL,\textsuperscript{16} PSNC,\textsuperscript{17} Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI),\textsuperscript{18} and Missouri state PTA,\textsuperscript{19} among others. According to the NREL family involvement guide, schools need to recognize volunteers’ contributions to maintain their interest. Recognizing volunteers and parents who accept decision-making roles provides two-fold benefits: contributors receive recognition for their work, and parents become familiar with other parents who represent them in the decision-making process.\textsuperscript{20}

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COMMUNICATION

The National PTA states that “for the standard of communicating effectively, there is one key goal: sharing information between school and families.” Further, the Colorado State Council for Educator Effectiveness (SCEE) asserts that “clear, regular, two-way communication is the number one determination of successful school-home partnerships.” The Handbook on Family and Community Engagement insists that schools must vary the modes of communication they use to reach parents. Reliance only on print sources may not attract parents who actively use social media, and communicating only through the school or PTA’s Facebook or Twitter account may not reach parents with limited computer access. The Handbook on Family and Community Engagement highlights three useful forms of communication: newsletters, websites, and telephone outreach. Newsletters can inform parents about opportunities while also allowing them to submit their own content; websites disseminate information to a wide audience instantaneously; and telephone outreach to parents communicates that their opinions are valuable. The president of the PTA at Rainbow Elementary School in Madison, Alabama – a winner of the National PTA’s Phoebe Apperson Hearst Innovation in Family Engagement Award – stressed the importance of identifying which methods of communication parents use and reaching them using those methods.

The two-way communication recommended by the parent involvement guides also requires schools to solicit feedback from parents. PSNC notes the importance of establishing “systems of gathering feedback from families and school staff for identifying numerous ways that family members may choose to volunteer.” It suggests conducting “annual surveys to identify interests, talents, availability of volunteers among families and community members.” The Missouri PTA recommends using regular surveys to gauge parent interest, and the NREL recommends sharing data with parents to develop new plans together. The Handbook on Family and Community Engagement proposes that schools use surveys, focus groups, and participant evaluations to evaluate the quality of the school and volunteer environments. The Wisconsin DPI family-community partnership checklist recommends directly asking family members how they would like to be involved and responding to their answers in a timely manner. The Wisconsin DPI also recommends encouraging parents to participate in school improvement team (SIT) meetings and assigning staff members specifically to address parents’ concerns and complaints.

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http://www.circon.nonprofitoffice.com/vertical/sites/%7B95025A21-DD4C-45C2-AE37-D35CA63B7AD9%7D/uploads/%7B05C62C94-5F0B-4164-86A2-485609F389D4%7D.PDF
evaluating programs in this way, schools can “identify strengths and weaknesses, demonstrate outcomes from the activities, and send a message that partnerships are valued at the school.”

**TRAINING**

Coordinating and participating in volunteer activities is not a natural skill, and schools need to train parents and teachers to work together at school activities. The NREL and Wisconsin DPI’s parent involvement guides both emphasize the importance of consistent volunteer training for staff members. Helping “school staff learn how to work with parent and community volunteers” is a key component of the Wisconsin DPI’s involvement checklist. PSNC highlights three key responsibilities that staff members need to be familiar with: **planning** for volunteers, **communicating** with volunteers, and **organizing activities** for effective volunteer participation.

The *Handbook on Family and Community Engagement* emphasizes that staff training should be differentiated: teachers should be trained to interact directly with parent volunteers, and other school staff members should learn how to foster a welcoming and supportive environment for parents. The SCEE recommends that local school systems “provide or ensure that schools provide job-embedded staff training that addresses issues related to individual student needs, family advocacy, cultural proficiency, and — to ensure a family-friendly atmosphere in the school — parent involvement and customer service skills.”

Schools must also train parents to be effective volunteers. It is especially important to develop strong parent leaders to direct, support, and recruit other parent volunteers. The SCEE recommends that local school systems “provide or ensure that schools provide training for parents and community members on leadership and effective involvement with schools.” Similarly, the *Handbook on Family and Community Engagement* recognizes that “for parent education, well-trained parents are often the best facilitators. Other parents feel comfortable with them, the experience builds their leadership skills, and bonds of community are formed.” PSNC notes that training parents as recruiters can lead to an influx of new volunteers. It also suggests creating “a mechanism for identifying and encouraging parents/caregivers to serve as mentors and coaches to other parents.”

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32 Ibid., p.10.
SECTION II: INCREASING PARTICIPATION

This section presents specific strategies that have been used or suggested to increase participation at school and PTA events. It incorporates information from primary interviews with representatives of successful programs, as well as secondary sources such as news reports and publications from advocacy groups.

ACCOMMODATING PARENTS

The president of the PTA at Jamerson Elementary, a 2013 winner of the Hearst Award for family-school partnerships, observed that “one size definitely does not fit all” when recruiting volunteers. Parents have different skills and different interests, and connecting parents with opportunities that will be rewarding to them is essential to developing a strong volunteer base.41 The National PTA insists that successful parent involvement efforts must provide “many ways to volunteer and help out, even for parents who may be working two jobs or don’t speak English, live near the school, or have a car.”42

Jamerson Elementary offers night and weekend activities to allow parents with daytime work schedules to interact with the school. The school also communicates to parents that all volunteer opportunities do not require them to be on the school campus.43 Parents can choose “work at home” opportunities such as assembling instructional materials.44 One such program is the “Three for Me” initiative at Fishkill Elementary School in Fishkill, New York. Parents agree to volunteer three hours over the course of the year, and the school allows parents to choose a variety of opportunities in different locations, including baking for school events, collating materials, chaperoning field trips, or attending school board meetings.45

Jamerson Elementary also recognizes that parents have different skill sets and interests, and some parents may be more interested in making copies than working directly with students. Jamerson Elementary communicates to parents that there are a variety of ways that they can contribute to the school.46 Parents can contribute by delivering career presentations, assisting with student events like art shows and science fairs, or assembling materials for classroom instruction.47 PTO Today, a PTO and PTA support website, suggests creating a list of “one-hour” volunteer opportunities to illustrate a range of opportunities for parents who cannot sacrifice large amounts of time.48 Parents who are worried that volunteering for one

41 Singh, Lizz. President, Jamerson Elementary School PTA. Phone interview and e-mail correspondence. July 31, 2013.
event will lead to a long-term volunteer commitment may be willing to join a “call me once” list, which assures parents that they will only be called once during the year to volunteer for an activity.\textsuperscript{49}

It is also important to ensure that there is enough work for volunteers to do. \textbf{Volunteers do not sacrifice their time to be unproductive; they generally want to see that their efforts are contributing to a worthwhile goal.}\textsuperscript{50} Schools can also engage volunteers by explaining how their role contributes to the school’s overall mission and connecting their efforts to a school-wide accomplishment.\textsuperscript{51}

\section*{Creating a Welcoming Environment}

Schools may increase participation by addressing some parents’ hesitation to participate in school activities. The PTA president at Douglas L. Jamerson Elementary School – another Hearst award winner – in St. Petersburg, Florida emphasized the importance of reaching out to parents from all groups and backgrounds and communicating that all parents can contribute to the school. She asserted that, “I think some people don’t volunteer at all because they think they don’t have the skill set or wouldn’t have anything to offer. This is not true – \textit{everyone} has something to offer.”\textsuperscript{52}

Schools should differentiate their approaches to encourage parents from all groups to contribute to the school. Meet-and-greet walks in neighborhoods where students live can introduce teachers and parent leaders to parents throughout the district, and parent help desks at school create an inviting environment for parents unfamiliar with the school.\textsuperscript{53} Bilingual services foster a more welcoming environment for non-native English speakers. The National PTA recommends recruiting bilingual parents as greeters and interpreters at school events.\textsuperscript{54} Similarly, the president of the PTA at Rainbow Elementary, another 2013 Hearst Award winner, stated that having Spanish speakers present at all PTA meetings and school enrollment events contributed to a more welcoming environment.\textsuperscript{55} Schools can also differentiate services to cater to specific parent groups such as single parents – all activities do not need to serve all groups.\textsuperscript{56} It is important to debunk the stereotype that volunteering and participating with the PTA is not “just for stay at home moms.”\textsuperscript{57}

The National PTA suggests investing in family resource centers (FRCs),\textsuperscript{58} and the previously-mentioned Pacific Northwest elementary school relied heavily on its Family Resource Center to attract parents from diverse backgrounds. The facility, which offered a variety of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{49} “201 Ways,” Op. cit.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Singh, Op. cit.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Bystrynski, Op. cit.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Singh, Op. cit.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Griffith, Op. cit.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Singh, Op. cit.
\end{itemize}
resources such as computer use and training, food services, clothing donations, and other services, drew many low-income parents to the school. The Family Services Coordinator noted that the FRC “affords [parents] an opportunity to feel a part of this community, and that’s only going to benefit their child. If you have a positive feeling about this school, it will rub off on the way that they story this place for their child.” Parent involvement at the FRC led to an increase in interaction among parents and the exchange of relevant information between the school and parents. Ultimately, the Family Liaison stated that the FRC led to “more parents trying to be more involved or at least come into the building more, whether it’s to have that lunch with their student or walk them to breakfast or touch base with the teacher.”

However, one of the most effective ways to increase parent involvement is also one of the most direct: asking parents to help with specific tasks. PTO Today asserts that “the number one reason parents don’t volunteer is because ‘no one asked.’” The PTA president at Jamerson Elementary noted that “if you ask directly, parents will probably be willing to help.” Even participants from underserved groups are often willing to participate if asked directly. Rather than issuing general invitations or requests for parents to participate, organizers should reach out to individual parents with specific requests, such as working the grill at a cookout. This gives parents a concrete idea of how they can help and communicates their value to the school. The PTA at Cane Run Elementary School in Louisville, Kentucky, which was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education for its parent involvement efforts, increased participation by engaging parents with volunteer requests during pick-up and drop-off times on the school campus.

**COMMUNICATION**

The PTA president at Rainbow Elementary stated that to ensure effective communication, schools must understand the modes of communication that parents use and the things they are interested in. Brief weekly e-mail “blasts” and the PTA’s Facebook page have been effective at increasing interest at Rainbow, although the PTA president acknowledged also using telephone calls and home visits to reach parents who were less reliant on computers for communication. Rainbow’s e-mail messages and other forms of communication are supported by resources provided by PTO Today.

Advertising is an important element of PTA recruiting, and the Missouri state PTA suggests advertising in as many places and as many formats as possible. This may include hanging weatherproof banners outside the school, requesting airtime from local TV channels (particularly channels that broadcast to underserved groups), or publicizing events in local

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newspapers. The PTA at Rainbow Elementary successfully leverages its relationship with the local newspaper to advertise events.

Reaching parents is not the only component of effective communication, however. PTO Today emphasizes the importance of using messages that will motivate, encourage, and excite potential volunteers, especially in low-income areas. The Pacific Northwest case study concluded that “in low-income schools, there is a need to acknowledge and encourage even the smallest efforts made by parents to support their children’s education.” PTO Today recommends regularly complimenting parents’ ideas and talents. Communicating that the parents and school form a team with shared goals and accomplishments with comments such as “we’re all in this together” or “we did it!” can make parents feel valuable and included in the school’s objectives. The National PTA and others recommend using “Happy-Grams,” or positive notes exchanged between parents and teachers.

The president of the PTA at Jamerson Elementary noted that “parents like to be thanked.” Other groups such as PTO Today, the Missouri State PTA, and Rainbow Elementary PTA echo this observation. Showing gratitude to parents is easily done and can have a lasting effect. Jamerson places greeters at the entrance to its school events to welcome parents and thank them for attending. This simple act cultivates positive relationships between parents and the school and lays the foundation for future involvement. Schools can further express gratitude by sending out follow-up “thank you for attending” e-mails to parents, establishing a volunteer “wall of fame,” dedicating sections in newsletters to volunteers, and hosting volunteer appreciation events.

The Pacific Northwest elementary school incorporated feedback into their parent involvement program from its earliest stages, forming an involvement advisory committee that collected responses from the local parent teacher organization, neighborhood association, and local community agencies that serve the area’s low-income residents. By inviting these constituencies to comment, the school was able to pursue an involvement strategy that “understood the needs and strengths of the neighborhood residents.” The case study concluded that “educators interested in developing strategies for enhanced parental involvement in low-income schools would be wise to seek the input of neighbors and interested agency representatives in order to gain an understanding of the lives of those that the school serves.” For example, one urban charter school collected feedback

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on an annual basis, using parent surveys and focus groups to understand parents’ opinions about school policies and new programs.\(^74\)

**TRAINING**

**TRAINING TEACHERS**

Administrators at the Pacific Northwest school emphasized the importance of staff training to the success of their parent involvement efforts. The school focused on educating teachers about the life circumstances and environmental factors affecting families at the school. According to the case study, “once teachers were made aware of the differences in perception and behavior based on socioeconomic status, they approached parents with greater appreciation.” One teacher commented that she “was very shocked to find out that a lot of children didn’t have very many books at home, not even Dr. Seuss.” Teachers’ newfound understanding enabled them to recognize the level of involvement many parents could offer, and this led educators to appreciate and encourage all forms of parent involvement.\(^75\)

**TRAINING PARENTS**

Creating “parent universities” is one method of informing and empowering parents, and thereby encouraging them to participate in school activities. At these parent universities, schools provide parents the opportunity to develop ways to become involved with the school. Boston Public Schools’ Parent University teaches parents to become multifaceted participants in the educational system, training them to fulfill roles as educators, advocates, leaders, and learners.\(^76\) The Parent University at Duval County Public Schools in Florida is a one-day event that combines educational programming and entertainment. Parents can attend workshops about parent advocacy, pre-K family literacy, financial management, and college preparedness, or they can participate in alternative activities like Zumba fitness.\(^77\)

Washoe County School District (WCSD) in Nevada hosts a Parent University open to any adults involved with an area child whether or not they are parents of the student. Parent University classes are completely free, and the Parent University provides childcare for children of all ages. In addition, Parent University provides Spanish interpretation for all its classes.\(^78\) WCSD offers myriad Parent University courses in the following categories:

- Navigating the Education System/Student Learning
- Leadership/Advocacy
- Parenting


\(^{76}\) “Parent University.” Boston Public Schools. http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/parentuniversity

\(^{77}\) “Upcoming Events.” Duval County Public Schools. http://www.duvalschoolsonline.org/static/aboutdcps/departments/special/titleone/Parent_Centers/Events.asp

- Family Health and Wellness
- Parent’s Personal Growth and Development

The Missouri PTA recommends offering CPR, First Aid, and self-defense classes to attract new PTA members and volunteers. One parent interviewed for an *Education Week* article about parental engagement asserted that the “most valuable class focused on building her understanding of her son's math curriculum, which initially confused her because it was starkly different from the model she learned in school.”

Research and observations suggest that these programs are effective at increasing parent participation in schools. For example, participation in the Boston Public Schools Parent University increased rapidly after its introduction, growing from 500 attendees to 2,400 during its first three years of operation.

One study measured the impact of a parent leadership program, the Vision and Voice Family Leadership Institute (VVFLI), on parents’ leadership capacity and actions. The study found that participants – the majority of whom possessed at least a high school education, self-identified as Latino/a, primarily spoke Spanish in the home, and had immigrated to the United States – were much more likely to be involved in advocacy and school-based activities during or after their time at the VVFLI.

The strongest effects of the VVFLI were in parent advocacy: 68 percent of all respondents reported building alliances with parents of different backgrounds during or after the program, and 57 percent of all respondents reported recruiting other parents to effect change in educational or community settings during or after the program. Additionally, 49 percent of respondents became school volunteers and 46 percent began regularly participating in an advisory group such as the PTA during or after the program.

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82 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
Parent training programs can also be targeted at specific parent groups. For example, the California-based Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) program “[trains] immigrant parents (in their own language) about their rights and responsibilities with respect to their children’s education, how to promote higher academic achievement, how to advocate for their children, and how to prepare them for college.” Further, “a critical component of the program is that it trains parents to train parents, thereby building social capital in communities and creating strong bonds and trust among parents.”

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HOSTING SCHOOL EVENTS

Parent involvement efforts may seek primarily to encourage greater attendance at school-wide events, but increasing event attendance can also lead to increased parent participation as volunteers in other capacities. Successful school-wide events can lead to stronger parent-school relationships and greater awareness among parents. School-wide events also provide easy opportunities for organizers to reach a large pool of potential volunteers simultaneously. For example, the back-to-school picnic at Jamerson Elementary school is a key source of PTA volunteers; more parents join the PTA through the picnic than through any other event.86

EVENT TYPES

School-wide events can take a number of forms. Jamerson Elementary has been successful with school-wide picnics and barbecues, a small “Hallow-fun” carnival, a back-to-school picnic, and an “All-Pro Families” picnic.87 Rainbow Elementary School hosts “brown bag” lunches to inform parents about developments in their children’s education.88 Ceres Elementary School in Princeton, West Virginia, recently hosted a mystery-themed parent involvement night. The mystery night included activities such as identifying teachers based on childhood photographs and reassembling sentences to solve puzzles.89

ATTRACTING PARENTS TO SCHOOL EVENTS

OFFERING FREE ITEMS

The Jamerson Elementary PTA president noted that one of the most effective ways to attract parents to school events was to offer free items – food, in particular. Each of the most successful events at Jamerson offered free or discounted food to attendees. Offering free food can also draw parents to the “educational” components of school-wide events that often discourage parents’ participation. For example, at Jamerson, parents who went to the cafeteria during an event to eat were asked to watch a short video about supporting summer learning. According to the Jamerson PTA president, this technique has not resulted in any complaints from parents.90

ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TO ENCOURAGE THEIR PARENTS

Outside of traditional advertising methods, schools can increase parent participation at events by encouraging parents and students to attend. Invitations to attend school-wide events or join the PTA can be sent home with students to reach parents who would not

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87 Ibid.
otherwise encounter outreach efforts.\textsuperscript{91} Enthusiastic students may even be able to convince disinterested parents to attend school events. For example, Jamerson Elementary has distributed “free popcorn” coupons to students at school on the day of an evening event to increase student interest in the event – interest which may translate into parent attendance.\textsuperscript{92}

\textit{CHOOSING THE RIGHT TARGET AUDIENCE}

Rainbow Elementary participates in the Watch D.O.G.S. program, which encourages men to be involved with the school. This event challenges ideas that volunteering at school is a strictly female role and promotes broader involvement from \textit{all} parents.\textsuperscript{93} Jamerson Elementary, however, has made its father participation event more inclusive to increase participation. Jamerson increased attendance at its “All-Pro Dads” breakfast from approximately 25 people to 200 people by renaming the event to “All-Pro Families.” While expanding the audience may dilute the event’s emphasis on involving male role models, it also allows interested students without an available male figure in their lives to participate. The All-Pro Families event occurs four times per year and generally incorporates interactive activities such as engineering challenges or Home Depot-sponsored kit projects.\textsuperscript{94}

\textit{PAIRING EVENTS}

Schools may be able to increase attendance at events – particularly at events that are primarily educational (e.g., health fairs) – by pairing them with other, more popular events. For example, the Jamerson Elementary School PTA increased attendance at its health fair by hosting the event in conjunction with a movie night, scheduled to coincide with Dr. Seuss’ birthday.\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{93} Griffith, Op. cit.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
PROJECT EVALUATION FORM

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