

Effective Family Engagement for Middle Grades Transition

by

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Transition to middle school is a time filled with changes for both students and families. At a time when academic expectations increasingly demand independence and deeper thought, and the team of educators expands (National Middle School Association, 1995), uncertainty for families entering the middle grades leads to the need for a different model of family engagement. By understanding the changing developmental needs of early adolescent learners (Casey, Galvan & Sommerville, 2016; Damour, 2016; Fagell, 2019) and determining parental desires for engagement, specific actions and strategies can be adopted to integrate and invest in systems that support transition to middle grades in order to create conditions for positive and impactful family engagement.

The main aim of this action research study is to determine what families desire to know about and how they can engage and support their adolescent learners, thereby identifying strengths. A survey of both parents and teachers provided insight into the perceptions of priorities and practices for successful engagement. This analysis culminates in recommendations for ongoing improvement within current family engagement practices. The need for this research is evident, as studies on early adolescent development and family engagement demonstrate gaps in programming and communication with families at the middle level. Family engagement relies on an understanding of the culture and needs of the community in which the school is situated; therefore, this study focused on the needs of an urban independent school.

However, much of the learning can be shared broadly with other educational leaders considering ongoing improvements in family engagement practices for middle grades. This study sought to provide insight for school leaders who desire to improve the transition to middle grades in a school system. This study adds to the scholarly conversation about effective engagement strategies and considerations for ongoing improvement in schools related to transition programming. The findings are consistent with the research which stresses that families of early adolescents desire developmental, social, organizational, and academic information and that this data should be personalized in order for families to feel engaged in the transition to middle grades.

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Preface

The basis for this study stems from my experience with and passion for early adolescent learning, as well as my newly acquired title of Middle School Parent. This developmental age group encompasses both the best of humanity, with their innate sense of justice and their persistent challenge of the status quo, and the most challenging, as they practice these skills unevenly and inconsistently due to the myriad and complex changes they are experiencing. It is my genuine affection for middle grades learners that inspired this work. Bridging my practitioner knowledge with my personal experience has culminated in this study.

None of this would be possible without my family and friends, including my “tween,” who have provided support and understanding throughout this journey. It is beyond words when your middle school daughter tells you she is proud of you, as any parent of an early adolescent can attest. I plan to hold on to that for as long as possible. To my husband, who, as always demonstrated what true partnership looks like, my three children, my parents who babysat, brought meals, and eagerly read my writing, and my sisters, who are also my best friends: thank you and I love you. Thank you to my committee and especially my advisor, Dr. Charlene Trovato who pushed me to create a project I can be proud of.

So many others have been beacons for me along the way. The educational leaders who have helped me discover my own leadership, especially Ms. Jackie Ellis, who taught me about equity and leadership through her actions, and Dr. Michelle Miller, who has mentored me and inspired me to lead bravely and honestly. My journey has been supported by the amazing, dedicated educators I have worked with along the way - teachers who were always teaching me

how to be a better educator and leader. The best part of this experience has been the friendships I have gained along the way, and I will be forever grateful for your friendship and support.

1.0 Introduction to the Problem of Practice

Each day, parents entrust educators with the academic and social-emotional development of their children. Anxious parents experiencing preschool or kindergarten drop-off on the first day of school is a familiar rite of passage. The transition to formal schooling requires serious communication and support from the school to ease the minds of families. Just as families adapt to the rhythm and communication approaches of elementary schools, another transition occurs as students move into middle school. Whether the transition occurs in fifth, sixth, or seventh grade, a shift occurs in the learning and parental involvement needs of these pre-adolescent learners while students experience simultaneous physiological and physical changes. As students start to exhibit more independence from their parents, as their communication patterns and behaviors change, parents may also experience changes in family engagement strategies with the school, leaving them feeling less connected to their child's school community.

Middle school marks the movement from early adolescence (typically defined as ages nine through 12), commonly known as the "tween" years, to the beginning of adolescence (Fagell, 2019; Garey, 2019). This developmental milestone is both exciting and tumultuous for these children, parents, and educators. Often, amid this metamorphosis from childhood to adolescence, students advance from a familiar and comfortable elementary school environment to a setting that more resembles a secondary school. Amidst the uncertainty of physical and social-emotional transformations, students are thrust into what for many students is a foreign school model where they are scheduled with multiple content-specific teachers, and likely intermixing with new students. Even in smaller K-8 buildings, while there may not be the introduction of new students,

the academic, emotional, and social changes still lead to a multifaceted, and at times unsettling, experience. (Damour, 2016; Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010; Flagell, 2019).

Parents, too, experience a shift in their own experiences as caregivers when their children move between elementary and middle school. As their children move towards independence, parents often feel less connected to their educational and social experiences (Eccles et al., 1993, Hill & Chao, 2009). Multiple teachers, shifting peer groups and increased academic demands can be confusing for parents, as well as their children. As illustrated in the literature review, there is a discrepancy between the communication and engagement offerings of the school and the needs and desires of parents. When combined with the developmental changes facing students during the middle grades, and the perception of parents that they are not valued partners in the school, the transition becomes tumultuous, impacting the trust between home and school. Research shows that strong parent engagement opportunities lead to strong academic outcomes for students (Astor, Benbenisty, & Estrada, 2009; Hill & Chao, 2009; OECD, 2009). Therefore, schools and districts can utilize communication frameworks for family engagement to focus on strengths and areas of need related to transition in order to enhance academic outcomes for early adolescent learners.

At a time when academic expectations increasingly demand independence and deeper thought, and the team of educators expands (National Middle School Association, 1995), uncertainty for families entering the middle grades leads to the need for a different model of family engagement. Two terms used in discussions regarding parent and school relationships are “parental engagement” and “family engagement.” These terms are often used interchangeably; however, given the diverse make-up of family units, this problem of practice will focus on the term “family engagement”.

Two definitions of family engagement may provide a holistic concept for how we define this term. The first comes from Karen Mapp and her work with the U.S. Department of Education which defines “family engagement” as a stakeholder, such as teacher or students, appeal to families to help both at school or at home to support the child (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). The Michigan Department of Education (2015) defines family engagement as ways schools facilitate and encourage parent and guardian involvement in the education of their child. Taken together, the message is clear: schools promote practices that encourage and support family engagement to benefit the education of the children they serve.

This problem of practice is situated in an Independent Private School, or IPS, located in the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. IPS serves students and families throughout the city and surrounding suburbs. Currently, 230 students are enrolled in the tuition-based school, from three-year-old Montessori and preschool students through eighth grade. The school is situated on a university campus that governs the school. Historically, parents have been involved in fundraising, hiring and curriculum decisions. The school has experienced significant changes over the past five years, cycling through multiple Heads of School and experiencing a decline in enrollment, leading to teacher lay-offs and mistrust between the university, administration, teachers and families. During a recent interview process for a Head of School position, parents expressed frustration with the lack of information provided about curriculum, assessments, and programming at the school level. Calls for transparency and partnership were echoed by many in attendance at the interviewing events.

Over the years, there has not been a clear determination about what grades form the Upper School, which is located on the third floor of the school building. At times, the Upper School has been described as grades six through eight. In other years, it has been defined as five through

eight. This decision appears to have been driven more by the number of teachers than by the needs of the students, and has contributed to the uncertainty felt by families when programmatic decisions have been made. This confusion and inconsistency are reflected in the lack of transition programming for students entering the middle grades. Knowing the social emotional and executive functioning needs of students in grades five and six (Casey, Galvan, & Summerville, 2016; Damour, 2016; Fagell, 2019), it is imperative that schools design supports and services in order to ensure students are ready for the increased rigor and expectations of the middle school curriculum and teachers. Ensuring that parents understand and are provided with opportunities to aid in this transition will provide students with the best possibility of a smooth transition into middle school.

For this independent, tuition-based school situated on an urban university campus, the vast majority of students come from homes where parents work in a professional capacity with occupations such as small business owners, university faculty and staff, medical doctors or lawyers. Parents are not often available during the school day and rely on electronic communication with teachers and administrators. Additionally, students who matriculate from this independent school must apply and be accepted to a number of elite, private high schools in the city, thereby making the transition to middle school a high impact transition. How well students transition into middle school will influence their high school choices.

As the current Head of School, I have found that it has been necessary to build relationships in an effort to heal the tensions built over the past few years, collecting information on how best to improve school programming in order to truly build systems for family partnerships and educational programming. Understanding what information parents desire to prepare for the transition to middle school and what information teachers are sharing with parents will provide an

opportunity to create a model of engagement to support a successful transition to adolescence. This also complements the IPS strategic goal of increasing retention through the middle grades to stabilize enrollment.

With regards to educational information and decision making - one of the areas identified in the research as important to parents - the school has provided inconsistent communication. Curricular information is provided to parents via the school website, where middle school course offerings, descriptions, and prerequisites are provided. However, this information is not regularly updated and, therefore, in some cases, is not accurate. Additionally, benchmarking data for reading and math has not been shared with parents unless requested, or if the school feels there is an issue that warrants it. Even though benchmark scores are typically used to determine placement in honors and remedial coursework, and provide teachers and families information on how students are progressing, this information is not readily shared during parent conferences or other settings. Parents have expressed uncertainty about student progress and how their children are developing in relation to their peers at other schools in the region. This concern has been exacerbated by the inconsistent implementation of yearly standardized tests and the inconsistent release of scores to families. Given the research on the unique needs of middle school students, coupled with the transition from grades four to five in a new educational model in the school, the communication may not be meeting the needs of the community.

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore current family engagement practices in fourth, fifth, and sixth grades and contrast those findings to family perceptions of engagement practices. A review of the literature introduces the reader to the developmental needs of students in middle school as well as the motivations for various types of family engagement in schools. The literature review demonstrates a gap in the research at the middle level, specifically related to transitioning

into adolescent programming. Many studies of parental involvement have been conducted at the elementary level, while far fewer have been conducted at the middle school level. Often elementary theories and practices are applied to middle grades (Hill & Chao, 2009). Further, each community has its own levels of strength and need, which will dictate the quality and specificity of engagement leading into the middle grades period. By understanding the changing developmental needs of early adolescent learners and determining parental desires for engagement, specific actions and strategies (if any) can be adopted to integrate and invest in systems that support transition to middle grades.

Given the unique needs of adolescent learners, it is essential that educators identify strengths and areas of need through the lens of family engagement frameworks in relation to adolescent development and middle school structures (Hill & Taylor, 2004). This is necessary to make recommendations for improvements specific to the transition to middle school to reflect the needs of the community and the students. This problem of practice focuses on evaluating current transition practices through the lens of three specific family engagement frameworks: Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Engagement (Epstein et al., 2002), Karen Mapp's Dual Capacity-Building Framework (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013), and Hong's Cord of Three Strands (Hong, 2011). While none are specific to middle grades engagement, each contains elements that will help the IPS determine family engagement needs focusing on the transition to middle school.

1.1 Definition of Key Terms

The following definitions are offered to assist the reader in becoming familiar with key terms cited in this problem of practice.

1. Early Adolescence: also referred to as the “tween” years, first identified by psychologist G. Stanley Hall in 1904 and typically encompassing the cohort of children 9-12 years old (Fagell, 2019; Garey, 2019)
2. Epstein’s Framework of Six Types of Engagement: Joyce Epstein categorized six major types of parent engagement: (a) parenting, (b) communicating, (c) volunteering, (d) learning at home, (e) decision making, and (f) collaborating with community (Epstein et al., 2002).
3. Family engagement: the teachers, school, or student request to parents to assist at school or at home to benefit the educational process of the child (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013)
4. Mapp’s Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships: This framework for parent engagement, adopted by the U.S. Department of Education from 2011-2013, focuses on the four “Cs” of capacity building: (a) capabilities, (b) connections, (c) confidence, and (d) cognition. (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013)
5. Middle School: Creation of the first middle school occurred in 1950 to address the educational and developmental needs of early adolescent learners. The concept gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s and continued to evolve through various grade configurations between grades 5 and 9. Early models include a junior high configuration, which modeled high school and typically contained a combination of grades 7-9, and K-8 elementary schools, which still exist (Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016).
6. School climate: the “quality and character of school life,” as defined by the National School Climate Center (2018).

2.0 Review of Literature

The transition to middle school is difficult both for students and their families. Academic, physical, and social-emotional transformations demand that educators focus on programming and supports to address the needs of these students. During adolescence, there are unique combinations of developmental fluctuations students entering grades five through seven are experiencing that may be both puzzling and frustrating for adults in their lives.

The following literature review focuses on the specific concerns families face as their children enter adolescence and transition from elementary to middle grades. The literature describes the physical, emotional, and academic impacts students experience during this developmental stage. Family motivation for engagement along with their aspirations are reviewed in the literature. The literature review seeks to uncover the distinctive needs that the transition to middle school involves for students and parents. Effective engagement between schools and families may mitigate the potential for negative outcomes during this transitional period. There are various models to engage families, however research demonstrates a persistent gap between current practices and family and student needs (Hill & Chao, 2009). The literature review will focus on best practices for family engagement highlighting three models.

2.1 Adolescent Development

Early adolescence, first defined in 1904 by the psychologist G. Stanley Hall (Flagell, 2019), is considered to be a period of incredible growth and change in brain development matched only

by the rapid growth seen between birth and age two (Fagell, 2019). Often defined as the developmental stage between the ages of nine and 12 years old (Fagell, 2019; Garey, 2019), researchers have found that multiple regions of the brain develop rapidly during this time, which may result in possible loss of impulse control, heightened sensitivity, and misinterpretation of social cues and dynamics (Casey, Galvan, & Somerville, 2016; Damour, 2016; Fagell, 2019). Additionally, the area of the brain that controls executive functioning and decision making is not fully developed in adolescents, resulting in inconsistent application of organizational skills and focus. Erik Erikson (1950) saw adolescence as a time of identity formation acquired by experimentation and the desire for strong peer-to-peer relationships, which assist in forming independent adult identities. In 1965, Anna Freud proposed a way to organize this time in childhood along several fronts, often occurring at different rates and sometimes simultaneously, emphasizing that these tumultuous changes are normal at this stage of life (Damour, 2016).

The hormonal and physical growth changes that occur as a result of puberty happen simultaneously with brain development and often at uneven rates. Girls ages 10 to 15, and boys 12 to 17, typically experience growth spurts (Bogin, 2015). With such a wide range of typical development, there is great diversity in the physical appearance of middle school students. Puberty signals changes in early adolescence that include emerging interests in intimate relationships, developing awareness of one's own sexuality, and sensitivity to how peers view one another. In other words, early adolescents begin to question their identity and how they "fit in" with others. During puberty, neuro-chemical changes take place in the brain, creating vulnerability to multiple risk factors, including depression, violence, alcohol/drug use and eating disorders. (Armstrong, 2018; Damour, 2016). These physical and emotional changes impact academic performance and social-emotional functioning at school and at home.

2.2 Transitions to Middle Grades

Adolescents need support to learn how to apply their emerging metacognitive skills to understand and regulate the changes taking place physically and emotionally. Thus, at a time when parental communication and engagement with teachers decreases from elementary to secondary school (Hill & Chao, 2009), students would benefit from increased home-school partnerships focused on their unique developmental needs.

In fact, student and parent concerns during the transition to middle school can fit into one of three categories: academic, procedural, and social. Academic concerns changes to expectations in the curriculum, homework, and schoolwork loads and how to obtain support if students experience difficulty. Procedural concerns revolve around more specific concerns about navigating the school such as lockers and locker combinations, new bus routes, and navigating the building in addition to school rules. Social concerns relate to both making new friends and navigating changes to existing friendships and interacting with new teachers. Possible interactions with older students, peer pressure, and knowing where to find help when there is a problem with a teacher or peer are all social concerns for transitioning students (Cauley & Janovich, 2006; Diemert, 1992).

Families and schools can work collaboratively to support students in learning to cope with neurological and hormonal changes and create productive channels and positive social relationships. These formidable transitions are more likely to succeed when families are engaged through middle school (Cauley & Janovich, 2006; Hong & Longo, 2012).

2.2.1 School Climate in Middle Grades

One method for assessing whether students and families are thriving in the programs and culture of a school is through evaluating school climate. School climate, which refers to the “quality and character of school life,” as defined by the National School Climate Center (2018), supports academic achievement and creates a positive culture where learning and positive risk taking can occur. School climate is often evaluated in both academic and behavioral domains of high expectations and academic rigor or challenge and student support, as well as social-emotional learning.

Research indicates that a positive school climate can be tied to positive academic progress among a diverse set of students (Astor, Benbenisty, & Estrada, 2009; Haahr, Nielsen, Hansen, & Jakobsen, 2005; OECD, 2009), enhanced motivation to learn (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Mac Iver, 1993), and better supports toward productive life outcomes for students. It is interesting to note that overall measures of school climate decline in middle schools, compared to K-8 schools (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Hopwood et al, 2017; West & Schwerdt, 2012). The decrease in school climate may be due to a disconnect between what supports middle schools are providing and what supports students need in relation to their development. It may also be connected to developmental and cognitive changes, as well as students’ lack of adaptive skills to cope with these changes (Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). Additionally, the social-emotional dynamics shift from elementary to middle school. Early adolescents experience increases in gossip, teasing, and bullying due to desires to gain and maintain social status among peers (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Damour, 2016).

Given this, schools must decide how to address these social-emotional concerns through programming and supports specific to the developmental needs of early adolescents, both for the

student body and for families. Schools must communicate both the need for school programming as well as how families can access community supports and services and support their children at home in an effort to capitalize on the positive outcomes related to partnering with families.

2.2.2 Academic Impacts Experienced in Middle Grades

Students may often experience negative academic progress in moving from elementary to middle school, regardless of whether this transition occurs during grade 5, 6, or 7. As evidenced in several studies (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Hopwood et al., 2012; West & Schwerdt, 2012), students' academic growth declines during the transition to secondary school. This impact is greatest for schools in low socioeconomic areas. The highest declines in literacy achievement occur during this time, and often these academic gaps in achievement and growth are not fully closed once students exit the middle grades for high school. The achievement declines suggest that moving from one school to another negatively impacts student performance and that this transition is particularly detrimental for adolescent students (West & Schwerdt, 2012). In other words, students seem to achieve more in schools that include longer grade spans, such as K-8 or 6-12 models. Starting a new school in grade 6 or 7 appears to have a negative impact on student confidence and academic success (Fagell, 2019).

Academic declines are higher when students are transitioning to another school building, which may be related to confidence. Transitional programming can help mitigate these impacts. Even in schools where students remain in the same building with familiar teachers and procedures, they will be impacted by the developmental changes occurring in early adolescence. Teachers and parents who understand the academic demands and shifts required for middle grades learners can better prepare for these academic challenges.

2.3 Middle School Models

Through decades of research (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Manning, 2000, 2002; National Middle School Association, 1995), educators have concluded that middle school should be more than an extension of elementary school or a precursor of high school. An authentic middle school model prioritizes the developmental needs of adolescent learners under a unique mission. Middle school educational experiences should be “designed specifically for young adolescents in light of their unique physical, psychosocial, and cognitive developmental characteristics” (National Middle School Association, 1995). Historically, this has meant a shift in determining the physical configuration of classrooms or entire buildings, focusing on what combination best serves this age group, as well as specific middle grades programming.

In western Pennsylvania and across the country, schools serving early adolescents range from single grade configurations, (e.g., just sixth grade, or even 5 through 6 or 7 through 8). Over the past 50 years, the physical configuration of schools has evolved from the junior high school configuration of students in grades 7 through 9 to combinations ranging from 5 through 6, 5 through 7, 5 through 8, 6 through 7, and 7 through 8, in addition to the current predominant pattern of a middle school comprised of grades 6 through 8 (Middle Level Leadership Center, 2004). Regardless of these varied combinations, research has shown that one specific configuration of grades does not account for better results in academic achievement than another (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010). Programming and supports, or experiences, rather than whether students should be in a separate building, should be emphasized. Debby Kasak, who led the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform in 2005 stated:

As advocates for this age group, we should focus our attention on middle-grades students and their learning. Rather than simply reshuffling students and schools, we must support our educators and school leaders so they can implement proven practices to advance the learning of middle-grades students, regardless of a school's grade configuration. (Reeves, 2005, para..22)

2.4 Communication with Families

As students experience significant changes during these years, albeit at varied and disparate paces, families are impacted by similar shifts in their children's behaviors, attitudes, and needs. Just as middle schools cannot rely on elementary instructional delivery models, parenting models begin to shift as well. Understanding how to support their children in school becomes more complex and multi-dimensional when parents consider the cognitive and academic rigors of coursework, physical and physiological changes, and the uneven and often unpredictable social-emotional development, sometimes occurring all at once. These changes occur at the same time the average parent reports a decline in communication between school and home. This decline affects demographic groups differently, with parents of color or lower socioeconomic status reporting less preventive communication than white and more affluent parents in Grade 7 (Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014).

Parental reports of communication declines are mirrored by those of teachers and administrators. According to the 2012 "MetLife Survey of the American Teacher," while educators consistently express their understanding of the value in partnering with families of diverse backgrounds in order to build strong home-school partnerships, administrators and

teachers consistently cite family engagement as a difficult aspect of their work (Markow et al., 2012). As a result, schools are at a loss as to what information to provide, and instead often rely solely on parents and families to initiate engagement (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). It should not be surprising, then, that a monitoring report by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (2008) compliance in meeting family engagement standards was weak across many states (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

These trends are problematic. If middle level programs provide less information, families must rely on their own experiences regarding school functions and student needs and supports. Absent clear and effective communication rooted in an understanding of adolescent learners, both schools and families will revert to elementary models and strategies shown to be less impactful in adolescence (Hill & Chao, 2009).

2.4.1 Family Motivation for Involvement

Families often face multiple barriers and challenges that preclude constructive relationships with schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Durisic & Bunijevac, 2017; Hong & Longo, 2012; Mapp & Kutner, 2013). They may not have access to the resources necessary to navigate an educational system that can be complex, especially in large urban districts. Even in smaller schools, education may look completely different for the current generation, including a curriculum that is less didactic and has more student choice and technology (Langberg, et al., 2012; Patall, et al., 2008; Walkowiak, 2015). Parents may also have had negative experiences with schools in the past, either as students or parents, leading to distrust or to feeling unwelcome.

Parents' reasons for involvement include motivational factors, such as believing they should be part of their children's education and feeling a sense of efficacy in helping their children

learn (Hill & Chao, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Secondly, parental perceptions on whether they are invited to be involved by schools, teachers, and students influence their motivation (Hill & Chao, 2009). Therefore, at a time when adolescents are pushing their parents away in order to gain more independence, parents may feel less welcomed by both their children and the school and engage in the same ways they previously engaged. Parent motivation for school engagement may also be influenced by how teachers interact with parents and whether they communicate a message of equality or condescension. Genuine, respectful communication and opportunities for dialogue help mitigate parent feelings of inferiority and bolster self-efficacy for families (Hill & Chao, 2009; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Lastly, consideration must be given for parents' life experiences that allow or encourage involvement (Hill & Chao, 2009, Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995). Examples can include demands from employment or family dynamics that contribute to family ability to support school activities and student learning. In addition, families and schools face barriers to resources and training to support capacity building. Good intentions of educators cannot overcome these factors alone and require opportunities for comprehensive and on-going professional development on the creation of home-school partnerships (Epstein, 2014; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005; Mapp & Kutner, 2013; Sheldon, 2002).

2.4.2 School Communication Styles

Home-school communication styles are varied and influence the levels of engagement with families. Swap (1993) identified three communication models that influence what and how information is communicated and affect parents' levels of participation: protective, transmission, and curriculum-enrichment models. Educators who adopt the protective model communicate that teachers are experts and provide parents with limited opportunities to participate in educational

decision making. At the secondary level, where students are resistant to parental guidance, and where the academic demands are growing and more complex, a protective model reinforces the message for parents to keep their distance from the workings of the school. In the transmission model, teachers are still the experts, but parents are a resource to support the child's academic progress, including homework and out-of-school learning opportunities such as camps, athletics, and community programming. These models tend to promote the divide between home and school as separate but complementary entities. In contrast, the curriculum enrichment model embraces parental involvement in an effort to enhance school offerings. Parents are given opportunities to analyze specific student data and school-level achievement data, access course pathways and requirements, and support their children at home.

Hornby (2011) augments these models with descriptions of three more models: expert, consumer, and partnership models, which marry the unique roles both parents and educators play in children's lives. The expert model is described as teachers behaving in ways that discourage parental expertise and limit parents' participation in communication. The consumer model allows parents to influence decisions, with the teachers serving as facilitators of those decisions. The partnership model promotes teachers as curriculum experts working in partnership with parents - the experts on their children.

During the turmoil of adolescence, which involves changes in academic rigor; cognitive, physical, and physiological development; and inconsistency in social-emotional development, parent and family partnerships can mitigate some of the stress and uncertainty. Initiatives that adopt a partnership model create conditions for positive and impactful family engagement (Durisic & Binujevac, 2017; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

2.4.3 Family Aspirations for Engagement

Improvements in technology have increased the ability of schools to engage families through a variety of platforms. During the past year, 88 percent of school administrators reported using social media tools to communicate with parents (Herold, 2018). With easy access to communication tools, one might assume communication and engagement has improved. However, even with increased digital and proactive communication, parents still describe a disconnect with the information they require to support their children's learning (Weiss et al., 2005). This disconnect may result from a lack of analysis by schools regarding what messages are being disseminated, not necessarily the mode used to share them. Home-school communication is often dictated and initiated by the priorities of the school, thereby minimizing family concerns and expertise. When schools adopt a protective or transmission model of communication, they may focus on disseminating good news through public relations initiatives but may not balance these practices with deeper opportunities for connection. This deeper information is left to be gathered through informal sources. Parents then rely on seeking school information by “word of mouth,” with fewer than 25 percent of parents identifying school or district websites as their primary source of knowledge about school performance (Blackboard, 2018).

Parents want to know more about what they can do at home to support their children's learning. Primarily, they want to know how their children are doing with their coursework and whether they are meeting academic expectations. Information on student behavior and social skills, as well as any changes are also of interest to parents in addition to curriculum and educational changes as well as the rationale for changes. Perhaps most important, parents prefer communication that is direct and in electronic format. Not all electronic communication is equal, however: social media formats rank at the bottom tier of preferred communication modes for parents. (Blackboard, 2018; Weiss, et al., 2005).

2.5 Impacts of Ecological Systems Theory on Family Engagement

Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorized that multiple systems influence children's experiences, including historical, political, and cultural forces. Bronfenbrenner's work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Leonard, 2011) provides a comprehensive conceptual foundation to describe how each system interacts and effects the development of a child. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory describes how systems interact to influence an individual's participation in local communities and the larger society, both directly and indirectly. Ecological Systems Theory describes layers of systems that impact the experiences of children and their families to understand how they participate in communities, including in educational spaces. These five systems may assist educators in creating family engagement structures that acknowledge the needs and experiences of the families they aim to support.

2.5.1 Microsystems

Microsystems directly impact child development and are comprised of family, school, religious institutions, neighborhood, and peers. Each of these elements influences the development of the child through both direct and indirect experiences. School communities are comprised of a number of diverse microsystems that influence a child's development and the desire and ability of families to engage with schools. For example, members of the dominant ethnic or socioeconomic group will have more social status in a school community, allowing for easier access to the school system (Rodriquez, 2009). These combinations interplay so that a family may be of a dominant race, but a minority religion, such as practicing Judaism in a Catholic school

setting, influencing the desire or ability to engage with the school community. Further, family parenting practices affect adolescent development. Studies show that different parenting styles and the quality of family time impact adolescent development (Jones & Schneider, 2009).

Another example of a microsystem affecting family engagement involves employment demands. The 500 Family Study (2008) conducted via the University of Chicago and Alfred P. Sloan Center on Parents, Children and Work gathered data on middle class, dual-career families living in the United States in an effort to understand family dynamics and family work balance. It revealed that families in the middle and upper middle class, in dual-earning households, are often highly educated and goal-directed. While they value education, they have limited family time and are therefore interested in engagement that will influence the futures of their adolescent children (Jones & Schneider, 2009).

2.5.2 Mesosystems

Mesosystems are defined as the interactions between the members of different microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Leonard, 2011) (e.g., the relationships between parents and teachers or a program and school). Parents and families enter school buildings with their unique histories as students as well as their present experiences with supporting their children. Given the stressors of adolescence, it is possible that middle school was not a pleasant time for parents and thus may influence the mesosystems of child development. A poor relationship or unresolved tension from elementary school for either a child or a parent will impact the level of trust and initial relationships with educators during the transition to middle school. If middle schools provide less information to families about how they can be involved, it stands to reason that parents will rely on strategies they utilized in elementary school (Hill, Tyson, & Bromell, 2009) or rely on “word

of mouth” through informal parent networks (Blackboard, 2018). Schools with a proactive, accessible structure for communication and engagement may mitigate low levels of trust, thereby building stronger relationships to impact student learning.

2.5.3 Exosystems

This third level of system does not involve children directly, but rather constitutes how outside forces that impact families may also impact children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Leonard, 2011). Changes to parents’ work schedules that may cause a parent to be unable to support homework completion, or disruptions to established family dynamics which may result in behavior at school, are examples of the exosystem.

The structure of the school itself becomes an exosystem. The experiences and priorities of families in a school setting where the majority of students will matriculate to the local high school may look different than those of families in an independent elementary school who will need to apply for entry into a number of magnet or private high school programs. Suddenly, transitioning into middle school becomes a high-stakes transition where grades, activities, and behavior may determine one’s competitive advantage for high school admission. This may change the priorities of families for involvement in middle school and dictate the quality of information they need to support their adolescent learners.

2.5.4 Macrosystems

Macrosystems are defined as the culture that has evolved over time, influencing children and families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Leonard, 2011). Dependent upon both the microsystem

family culture - including language, traditions, and values - and the larger cultural shifts at play in society at large, the macrosystem is influenced by policy changes, economic opportunities, and political systems as well.

As Hong (2011) indicates in her work on family engagement, schools themselves have traditions, culture, and values developed by the community. When families join a school, there must be opportunities for them to integrate into the existing culture, helping them to make connections and further develop a sense of community. Additionally, shifts in the larger cultural context of the region, nation, and world must be understood for families to support their children through early adolescence. A prime example would be the shift in exposure to highly sexual content via social media such as TikTok, where students may be exposed to information they would not have accessed in previous generations. The BBC (2019) reported concerns with sexualized comments on posts uploaded by teenagers and children. If schools are unaware and unable to support families in grappling with these challenges, students are the ones potentially harmed.

2.5.5 Chronosystem

The chronosystem demonstrates how the environment and transitions between events, as well as changes to the broader cultural and historical context, also impact each system and, thereby, the development of a child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Leonard, 2011). Each system may be impacted differently depending on the period of time. For example, the impact of a divorce (exosystem) during adolescence may result in changes that are different than during another developmental time frame. By understanding how the developmental needs of adolescent learners influence the

types of supports needed to navigate transitions - both at school and at home - schools and families can develop tools to mitigate these challenges.

Figure 1 provides a visualization of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and demonstrates how each level influences the others over time.

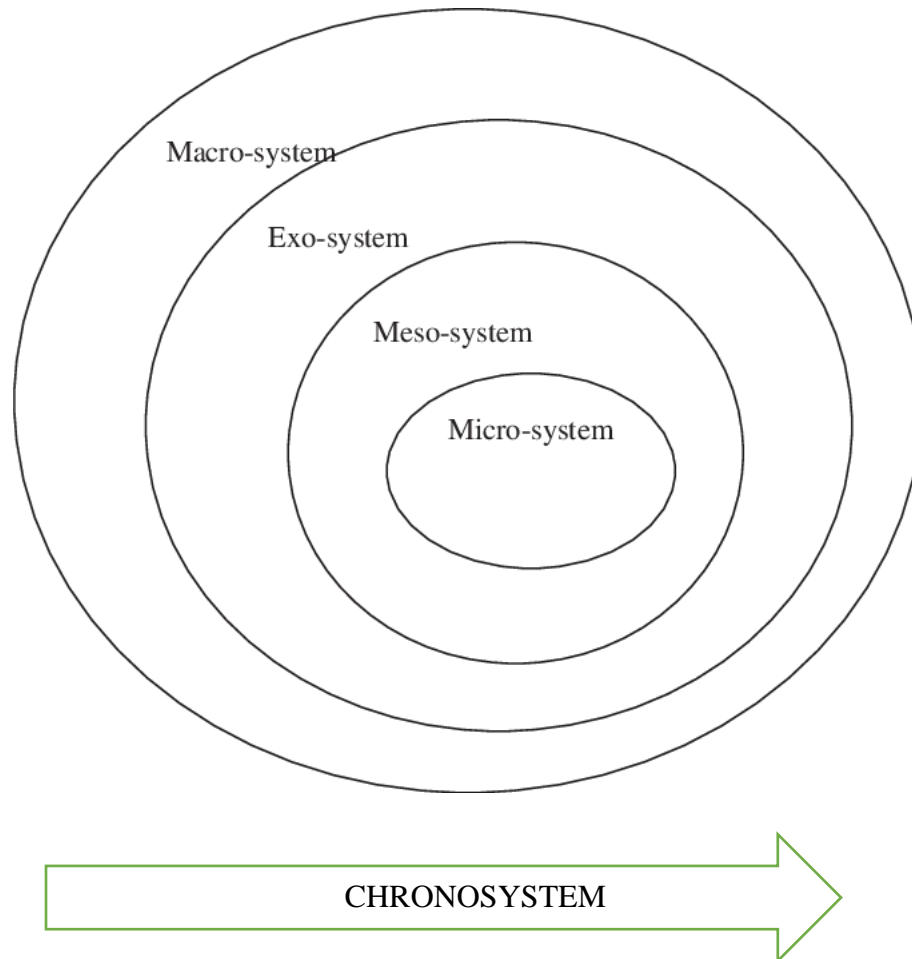


Figure 1. Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory is relevant for school personnel in understanding how personal experiences and larger systemic barriers impact how a family experiences school generally, and, more specifically, how the transition to middle school may be influenced by these systems. Challenges to family engagement may rest outside the school building and in the larger

community, creating a systems context for family engagement. Families may face myriad challenges to building positive relationships with schools, which may be seen as complex and confusing institutions to navigate. Families may face unique social and structural hurdles that prevent easy access or integration into a school community, leaving some families to build their own methods to support their child's learning and development (Higgins, 2005; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Understanding how families are impacted by each of these systems allows educators to devise effective supports and family engagement protocols to meet the needs of diverse family and developmental needs

2.6 Philosophical Shifts in Family Engagement

Educators and social scientists have long studied the role families play in students' education. A landmark study commissioned by the National Center for Educational Statistics and conducted by James Coleman (1966) is considered the first comprehensive study of student outcomes comparing students by race, socioeconomic status, and school funding. Coleman sought to determine how well students were learning and the factors influencing students' capacity to learn. He posited that student background, family education, and economic status are more important roles in determining student success than schools and teachers.

While some reference the work of both Coleman and Bronfenbrenner as proof that socioeconomic and geography play an outsized role in creating an achievement gap, the Chicago Consortium on School Reform of the 1990s, in a study across a diverse network of schools, identified five essential supports for successful learning environments. According to the research, leadership drives change when educational leaders set a vision that all students can and will

succeed in a culture and climate that emphasizes respect and focuses on instructional time and instructional supports (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2012; Chenoweth, 2017). Strong professional support and professional development opportunities, coupled with a student-centered learning environment and effective instructional guidance, are necessary to cultivate student achievement. However, and most relevant to this problem of practice, without family and community support, schools would not improve, even with the other supports in place. When communities have strong positive networks and social norms, schools are positively impacted (Chenoweth, 2017; Kahne, et al., 2001; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). The findings of this study support the importance of understanding the unique and intricate systems impacting student experiences, as well as acknowledging the importance of family and community support.

Changing definitions of family engagement are seen in federal and state policy to focus on a more comprehensive and inclusive definition of engagement. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) requires that Title I schools develop “parental involvement policies” and “school–family compacts” focuses on student achievement and defining how parents and schools will work together. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act was signed into law, which changed "parental involvement" to "family engagement." This law and language became more inclusive in its definition of family and focuses on the strength of the home-school relationship, reinforcing the commitment to shared responsibility among the stakeholders in a child's life.

State governments have also implemented changes to the language and expectations of parent and family engagement. Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia had enacted laws calling for the implementation of family engagement policies by 2010, and several states integrated family engagement into their educator evaluation system as of 2012 (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

These broader definitions of effective parent and family engagement encompass all activities that support student success (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

2.7 Effective Models of Family Engagement

Three unique models for family engagement provide the basis for building successful supports and transitions for early adolescent learners. While each model categorizes family engagement differently, all rely on a similar philosophy focused on building partnerships that are student-centered and aimed at educational achievement. These models are general K-12 frameworks; however, each is meant to be adaptable to the community and school needs.

2.7.1 Six Types of Parental Engagement

The most frequently cited model for family engagement is Epstein's seminal framework, Six Types of Parental Engagement. Through her work, and the work of the Johns Hopkins National Network of Partnership Schools, Epstein posits that in order to promote effective engagement, it is essential for schools to focus on six types of involvement. Each type has unique elements that change depending on the needs of the students and community.

The Epstein framework classifies the first type of involvement as parenting. This involves schools helping parents develop skills for parenting and routines to support their children academically. The second type, communicating, is defined as developing relevant and sustainable systems of communications between home and school about school programs and student progress. Volunteering, the third type, requires schools to organize volunteer opportunities for

families that can be scheduled at various locations and times in order to encourage engagement. The fourth type, learning at home, involves supporting families to assist their children with homework and other curriculum-related activities. Learning at home encourages families to participate in extracurricular activities and programs to enhance learning and build prior knowledge for school; it also encourages discussions at home about the curriculum. The fifth type, decision-making, includes families as contributors in operational and curriculum decisions, and urges parents to serve as advocates for educational decisions at the local, state, and national levels. Epstein describes the sixth type as collaborating with the community (Epstein et al., 2002).

Epstein focuses on creating opportunities directly linked to district or school goals to create improved student outcomes (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Effective two-way communication promotes the sharing of information and ideas between and among stakeholders. Students whose families engage in their education tend to demonstrate higher academic performance, hold positive mindsets towards school and adopt positive, prosocial behaviors (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Goal-linked partnerships use parents' and teachers' time effectively. Rather than seeing family and community partnerships as a box to be checked, schools that focus on linking these connections with their school improvement or strategic plans, or the developmental needs of students, tend to see improvements in student outcomes. These patterns hold true regardless of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and marital status (Epstein et al., 2002).

2.7.2 Dual Capacity Framework

Mapp (2013) has focused her research on building strong partnerships between families, schools and communities to improve student achievement. In her role as a consultant, she created a framework for family engagement for the U.S. Department of Education. Mapp describes the

challenges schools must focus on in an effort to develop robust home-school partnerships, similar to the work of Bronfenbrenner. Engagement opportunities and communication with families must be aligned with the school's mission and vision and connected to teaching and learning targets. Effective partnerships share five common factors that Mapp categorizes as rational, developmental, collaborative, interactive and linked to learning. Mapp stresses that schools must focus on building trust, striving to include and support the intellectual, social, and human capital of all stakeholders. Collaborative group learning allows for building strong networks and learning communities that provide opportunities for participants to test, practice, and apply new skills (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Mapp developed the Dual Capacity-Building Framework to combine effective family engagement research with a focus on adult learning and motivation. The components include analyzing the challenges, conditions, and capacity goals and outcomes necessary to create effective partnerships. Mapp argues that schools must recognize the challenges families and communities face in order to support effective home-school partnerships. Additionally, there must be process and organizational conditions. In other words, true partnerships require schools to work with families in ways that expect participants (both families and school staff) to think differently about themselves and their roles as active participants in their schools and communities. The Dual Capacity Framework calls on schools to create engagement opportunities organized to be systematic, tied to school goals, and integrated into training and professional development, teaching and learning, curriculum and community collaboration that are sustained across time by adequate resources and infrastructure. The framework also recognizes that teachers and staff require sustained professional development in order to build capacity and create a welcoming

school climate for family engagement. The development and analysis of program and policy goals is key to this framework (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

2.7.3 A Cord with Three Strands

Ethnographer Hong's (2011) framework for parent engagement contains three strands: induction, integration, and investment. Induction involves the decisions schools make to introduce families to the school, creating connections with teachers, principals, and other parents. Integration requires schools to develop opportunities for families to help one another and to develop a community in which families know each other. Investment means that schools develop ways to sustain opportunities for community and culture building. Hong describes engagement as a "process that seeks to change the institution one relationship at a time" (p. 50). This process requires schools to build relationships over time because research demonstrates people attend most often when someone they know invites them to participate (Warren, et al., 2005). Relationships influence participation. As students and families enter a new building or level, this framework may be most relevant to creating and sustaining the culture of middle school while welcoming new families.

Regardless of which framework, model, or definition is chosen, the most significant elements of communication include knowledge and trust. Effective communication enables the exchange of knowledge and ideas between all parties. Students whose families engage in their education tend to demonstrate stronger outcomes, both academically and socially regardless of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and marital status (Epstein et al., 2002).

2.8 Effective Parent Engagement for Middle Grades Transition

Historically, parental engagement has been narrowly defined by traditional activities such as volunteering in classrooms and participating in parent-teacher organizations. Teachers reach out to parents through phone calls, emails, websites, and newsletters. Often, these engagement practices are one-to-one interactions, school-centered, and activity-based (Warren, Hong, Leung, & Uy, 2009). In other words, schools often attempt to involve parents in activities determined mainly by educators. While these school-based opportunities include elements of family engagement, they tend to focus on a narrower band of tangible actions that school staff can witness. However, involvement can occur behind the scenes or through off-campus avenues. Family engagement evolves from early childhood through adolescence, and there is significant value in engagement during periods of student transition between buildings and life stages (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017).

However, not all parents can participate fully in all activities. Additionally, schools may not be set up to support full participation in every activity or event. Research shows that while schools may have good intentions, conventional models of engagement tend to omit the participation of those parents who are unable to be involved or uncomfortable with this traditional model (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). This situation is magnified as students transition to adolescence when desires for independence and autonomy from families begin to arise. Parents may feel less welcomed in schools simply because their children are resistant to their presence. Additionally, parents may be employed or returning to the workforce as their children enter middle school and unable to take part during school hours or after-school activities. When educators measure engagement by physical attendance, we discount the myriad ways families support schooling in adolescence. While much research has been conducted on parent engagement at the

elementary level, a small but growing base of effective practices at the middle and secondary level exists, focusing on engagement that may look quite different from that at the elementary level. By categorizing behaviors into home-based and school-based activities, researchers have developed a comprehensive list of parental involvement activities in the middle grades, activities that are responsive to adolescent changes and family needs (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Sheldon, 2002; Sui-Chu & Wilms, 1996; Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014).

Home-based involvement activities often include strategies such as communication between parents and children about school, involvement with schoolwork (e.g., helping with homework), taking children to events and places that help their academic development (e.g., museums, libraries, college campuses, etc.), and establishing a learning environment in the home (e.g. having reading materials at home, playing games). Like home-based activities, academic socialization is a parent engagement strategy that includes parents communicating their academic expectations for their children, such as discussing the value of education, linking schoolwork to current events, developing educational and occupational aspirations, discussing learning strategies, and making plans with their children for their children's futures. Hill and Tyson (2009) determined that academic socialization as a form of parental involvement has the strongest positive relationship to student academic achievement in middle school and mirrors developmental needs of middle school students eager for more autonomy.

School-based involvement incorporates those activities in which parental engagement is visible, such as parents attending events (e.g., PTA meetings, open houses, etc.), participating in school governance committees, volunteering at school and school events, and creating communication lines between parents and school personnel (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Sheldon, 2002; Sui-Chu & Wilms, 1996; Wang, Hill, & Hofkens. 2014). One element of impactful family

engagement in adolescence involves helping parents scaffold children's increasing need for autonomy, as well as helping parents provide their children ways to try things out, make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes safely. Students do want parents to be involved in schools (Hill & Chao, 2009); they just want that involvement to be different from elementary school, taking into account their desire for autonomy (Damour, 2016).

The literature reviewed in this chapter describes the negative academic and emotional impacts students experience while transitioning from elementary to middle school, regardless of whether this transition occurs during grade 5, 6 or 7. Parent involvement is driven by parents' desire for proactive, positive communication to assist them in supporting the academic and emotional needs of their adolescent children. In order for schools to promote effective communication and engagement that will impact student achievement and create positive school culture, communication must be goal-linked and provide rational, developmental, collaborative, and interactive opportunities for families. Communication should also focus on welcoming diverse families into a new educational community that looks and feels different from an elementary community. While there are best practices, the overarching theme of personalized, community-based engagement practices emerges throughout the literature.

Epstein's framework is the most comprehensive for assessing parent involvement and is sufficiently flexible to be adapted for the unique developmental stages of each level of schooling as well as unique community characteristics and needs. Specific elements of Epstein's framework provide the greatest support for the transition to middle school: understanding the developmental and emotional needs of students and integrating that knowledge into parenting practices (parenting), the induction into a new building or educational level (communicating), and the

supports parents can provide at home (learning at home) to invest positively in their child's development.

2.8.1 Parenting

Adolescence is a time of great change and often can feel like a roller-coaster ride for parents. Suddenly, past disciplinary tactics and family boundaries seem to no longer be as effective. When parents and teachers understand the developmental map that Erikson (1950) and Freud (1965) describe, adults can guide and support students through these turbulent years. Effective parenting practices at the middle grades include modeling, monitoring social interactions, applying rules consistently, explaining rules and limits, and allowing students to use mistakes as opportunities for learning. Schools can apply a similar framework and, most importantly, share these models with parents so they are able to understand and reinforce them outside the school environment. This model can be used effectively across a variety of adolescent struggles (for example, with the increasing need for support around cell phones and social media). Schools can use and share resources with parents to encourage developmentally appropriate technology and media for children (Patrikakou, 2016).

As middle school students begin to resist interactions with parents in the school setting (Hill & Chao, 2009), there are still ways for middle schools to organize volunteers to support other parents new to a district or in need of assistance. Mario Luis Small (2009), a researcher of social networks, studied Head Start programs in New York City to see how they brought families together. His work illustrates how organizations play a key role in connecting parents to one another. Families met through volunteer opportunities and then supported each other in other ways that improved their health and well-being. Small found parental agency grew through participation

in volunteer activities. Volunteering in ways that indirectly support students may be a more effective manner to bring families in and to create support networks for parents who may otherwise feel isolated or alone. Therefore, the school plays a role in increasing parental social networks, which has been found to positively impact parent involvement (Sheldon, 2002) at the preschool and elementary levels. Parent networks may be an area to consider given the isolation parents of adolescents can experience. Helping to expand parent networks can also promote engagement around parenting and develop leadership and capacity in the ways Mapp's Dual Framework addresses (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

2.8.2 Communicating

By creating and sustaining effective communication from school-to-home and from home-to-school, schools can demystify the curriculum and educational pathways for enrichment and remediation, as well as benchmarking and standardized testing data. Parents should understand how their children are progressing both academically and socially as they transition from elementary to middle school. Because of the range of typical adolescent behaviors, it may be difficult to balance which behavior or academic struggles are typical and which are signs of broader issues. For example, when parents understand how their children's progress compares to their children's peers - both locally and nationally - they have a better sense of what strengths and weaknesses the child possesses.

Knowing, for example, whether children are rolling their eyes or questioning authority at a similar rate as their peers allows parents to make decisions about additional supports. By creating a true partnership, schools can create dynamic systems for a welcoming school climate for parents and students alike (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

2.8.3 Learning at Home

Homework is an opportunity for schools to communicate the curriculum and school practices, as well as to provide families with an opportunity to observe and understand the progress and possible needs of their children (Fox, 2016). Further, support for homework is correlated with students' academic success. Parents of struggling students spend more time with at-home learning than those of successful or average students (Shumow & Miller, 2001). Supporting families to assist their children with homework and other curriculum-related activities and decisions requires increased forethought during adolescence as the workload becomes more sophisticated and detailed. Over time, rapid changes have occurred in the delivery of instruction, from textbook and workbook-based activities to, often, more digital formats. With the adoption of Common Core standards in 2010, curriculum shifts now mean students may not be learning math or reading the same way their parents did (Langberg, et.al, 2012; Patall, et al., 2008; Walkowiak, 2015). Therefore, parents need access to common language and strategies in order to support their children. This can take the shape of digital or in-person tutorials for families, suggestions for curriculum-related games, and an understanding of the expectations and rigor of each course. For some families, this may mean assisting parents with the routines associated with learning at home: setting up a quiet study space, creating organizational supports, and checking online gradebooks for updates. Mapp reminds us that true engagement requires schools to acknowledge the need for sustained training and the allocation of resources to support parental engagement (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

2.9 Summary

It is axiomatic that adolescence is a time of great physical and emotional change for students. Research demonstrates the potential adverse challenges facing adolescents as they transition to a new school experience. Declines in academic outcomes, school climate, lack of impulse control, heightened sensitivity, and misinterpretation of social cues and dynamics (Casey, Galvan, & Somerville, 2016; Damour, 2016; Fagell, 2019) are all potential challenges facing early adolescent learners. Deficits in executive functioning and decision-making result in inconsistent application of organizational skills and focus and early adolescents are at increased risk for depression, violence, alcohol/drug use, and eating disorders. (Armstrong, 2018; Damour, 2016).

While adolescent learners value opportunities for independence and autonomy, parents value connection. When coupled with the transition to a new building, or new programming in middle grades, parents experience frustration and confusion, often feeling a sense of disconnect with the school. Parents want to know more about what they can do at home to support their children's learning, and how their children are developing academically and emotionally. Furthermore, they are also interested in understanding the curriculum and educational changes as well as understanding the reasons for changes (Blackboard, 2018; Weiss, et al., 2005). The desire for connection is strong enough that, in the absence of information from the school, parents will rely on their own social networks for answers (Blackboard, 2018).

Three frameworks for creating parent engagement are foregrounded in the literature. All three are generalized for use at any developmental level and school structure. Epstein's (1990) Six Types of Parental Involvement (Mapp, 2013) provides a framework for schools to analyze lines of communication and engagement practices in an effort to improve practices. The Dual Capacity Framework emphasizes professional development and sustainability of systems that

grow leadership capacity of families to engage with the schools. A Cord with Three Strands (Hong, 2011) focuses on engaging families through induction, integration and investment. Regardless of framework, programming and communication that allows parents to understand how their children are performing academically and socially is valued. Parents want to understand the curriculum and the rationale for changes.

Each community will have its own unique needs, based on the micro- and macro-systems influencing the community. Therefore, this problem of practice will focus on determining the specific needs of the IPS to determine what supports and communication parents desire as their children transition to the upper school beginning in grade six in an effort to support adolescent learners. Understanding what strategies and topics parents want the school to address, as well as how they perceive the school is communicating with them, will provide important information to drive future programming and supports.

3.0 Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodology utilized in this inquiry. The chapter begins with the statement of the inquiry problem followed by the three research questions. This section describes the design, conceptual framework and the research instruments utilized. A discussion of the methods of data analysis and the effect of the study on stakeholders is also provided. Lastly, limitations of this program evaluation are provided.

3.1 Statement of the Problem

Regardless of the setting and the grade levels comprising the middle or upper school experience, transition is stressful for most if not all students and families. Students experience both academic and emotional challenges when moving from elementary to middle school (Cauley & Jovanovich 2006, Hopwood et al., 2012; West & Schwerdt, 2012). As evidenced in the research, declines in academic performance and school climate measures are noted during the transition year.

These factors are compounded by the developmental changes of students which require families and schools to respond and support students differently as they transition through adolescence. Erikson (1993) defines adolescence as a stage of development in which students experiment and rely on strong peer relationships in order to form adult identities. During puberty, the chemical changes taking place in the brain generate vulnerabilities to maladaptive behaviors such as depression, violence, alcohol/drug use, and eating disorders. (Armstrong, 2018). Because

of these changes and risk factors, priority needs to be given at this age to social and emotional learning.

Families and schools have the ability to support students in navigating these challenges to form productive channels and positive social relationships and to understand what is happening developmentally. Therefore, at a time when parental communication and engagement decreases, students would benefit from increased home-school partnerships that are unique to their developmental needs.

3.2 Research Questions

This problem of practice centers on assessing current transition practices at the place of practice through the lens of Epstein's typology (Epstein et al., 2002) with an emphasis on creating opportunities that are rational, developmental, collaborative and interactive, as detailed in Mapp's Dual Capacity Framework (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). The inquiry questions are as follows:

1. What topics and activities do families believe the school should prioritize in order to aid families in transitioning to middle school?
2. To what extent do parents of students in grades 4-8 perceive that educators communicate the changing needs of students transitioning to middle grades?
3. What actions or strategies, if any, should the school and parent community adopt, either jointly or separately, to integrate and invest in systems that support student transition to middle grades?

3.3 Research Design

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Leonard, 2011) describes layers of systems that directly and indirectly impact child development, are interconnected and influence each other, and account for the ways in which multiple contexts influence the successes and challenges of children's development. It helps educators understand how families are impacted by each of these systems and allows educators to determine effective supports and family engagement protocols to meet the needs of diverse family and developmental needs.

In adapting Epstein's framework to focus on effective parental involvement strategies for the transition to middle school, current systems will be analyzed to determine both the strengths and opportunities for family engagement in the place of practice. Epstein's framework for parental involvement includes six pillars of effective engagement. By analyzing communication and programming through these pillars, educators can ensure they are offering broad opportunities for effective engagement, not merely using engagement as a vehicle for promotion. Epstein's framework calls on educators to engage parents in the areas of parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (1992). In order to promote effective communication, it is essential for schools to commit to focusing on improvement in communication framed around these factors.

Epstein's framework is the basis and most comprehensive framework for assessing parent involvement. It is flexible enough to be adapted for the unique developmental ages of each level of schooling and the unique characteristics and needs of a community. I posit that, when teachers and administrators in grades four and five focus on specific types of Epstein's framework that would provide the greatest support for the transition to middle school, the developmental, emotional needs of students (parenting), the induction into a new building (communicating), and

the supports parents can provide at home (learning at home), the transition process can become a more positive experience for students and families.

3.4 Inquiry Stance and Approach

The researcher is a member of the community and aims to determine an appropriate course of action for the development of a robust communication and engagement program in the school. Therefore, this research was situated within the pragmatic paradigm described by Mertens (2010) and is a parallel form mixed methods design. Surveys to parents and teachers contain both quantitative and qualitative questions that were coded for patterns of response.

3.5 Research Setting and Participants

3.5.1 Research Setting

The research site chosen for this inquiry is a small, independent PreK-8 school located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. IPS was founded in 1963 by the Sisters of Mercy and has a Roman Catholic affiliation. The total enrollment in the school is 234 students with 80 students in grades 5 through 8. The school offers an Early Learning Center, comprised of children from birth to three years, as well as two Montessori and two Pre-Kindergarten classes of mixed ages ranging from three to five years old. The elementary school offers grades through eight. Students and parents

must complete an enrollment process that involves a tour, interview, and academic record review, in addition to age-appropriate academic assessments.

3.5.2 Participants

Parents of students currently enrolled in grades 4 through 8 were asked to complete the survey. Seventy-eight families were invited to complete the survey. Teachers and administrators in grades 4 through 6 (12 teachers and two administrators) were asked to complete the teacher survey. The sample of parents represented 42 percent (n=32+) of all families with children in grades 4 through 8 and 100 percent of teachers and administrators in grades 4 through 8. (n=14).

3.5.3 Research Instruments

Data collection to address the above-mentioned inquiry questions was conducted utilizing a Qualtrics-based electronic survey within the inquiry setting. This section describes the inventory instrument, data collection processes, and protocols. Qualitative data was collected and analyzed utilizing a teacher survey with open-ended responses to determine the extent current to which grades four and five parent involvement practices align with Epstein's involvement categories of parenting, communicating, and learning at home (Epstein et al., 2002). Quantitative data associated with the inquiry was collected via parent and teacher surveys regarding the independent school practices that align with Epstein's parent involvement categories of parenting, communicating, and learning at home. Together, these measures provide data about potential changes in practice to support the parental engagement of adolescent learners during school transitions.

Participants were invited via email to participate in the survey and given a two-week window for completion. The email described how the data would be utilized to improve programming at the IPS, in the hope of creating a personal connection to the survey. During the second week, participants were emailed with pertinent information. A third email was sent to families prior to the close of the survey.

3.5.4 Parent Survey

The use of a survey in this study was important because it provided reliable perceptions of current family engagement practices as well as the needs of parents in supporting the development of their adolescent children in an effort to inform the direction for future family engagement opportunities. The survey was adapted with permission from the National Network of Partnership Schools, Johns Hopkins University, as it was developed through Dr. Joyce Epstein's research and is in alignment with her Framework for Family Engagement. Additional survey questions were modeled after the Panorama Family Engagement Survey created based on the work of Karen Mapp and the now defunct Harvard Family Engagement Center.

3.5.5 Teacher Survey

The second data collection came from a survey of teachers, adapted with permission from the National Network of Partnership Schools, Johns Hopkins University as it was developed through Dr. Joyce Epstein's research and is in alignment with her Framework for Family Engagement. The survey was designed to determine what engagement strategies or programming needs exist and which areas are lacking in an effort to promote positive transition to middle school,

thereby determining alignment and misalignment with Epstein's types of parental engagement. Each aspect of the survey informed analysis of next steps to enhance programming and communication in an effort to engage families of adolescent learners in ways that will support their social-emotional and academic growth.

Both parent and teacher surveys were anonymous. This is necessary to note as the study is asking for candid feedback on the current programming. Survey data was analyzed by categorizing responses to the three chosen areas of engagement (parenting, communication, and learning at home) to determine how teachers prepare families for the transition to middle school. These areas of engagement were selected from Epstein's Six Types of Parent Involvement (1990), and were chosen because they address specific student and parent needs around early adolescence and transition to middle school (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Manning, 2000; Manning, 2002; National Middle School Association, 1995).

3.6 Data Analysis

The study used a quantitative design. The data was statistically analyzed using Qualtrics. Open ended responses were analyzed to discover common themes.

The initial data analysis included a careful review of Qualtrics reports which allowed the researcher to begin to formulate analyses about the responses in relation to the three research questions. The second phase involved analyzing responses for patterns of response that correspond with the designated Framework for Family Engagement. Surveys were analyzed to determine which areas of family engagement the school relies on and where there are areas of misalignment with the Family Engagement Model.

The multiple-choice questions on both the family and teacher surveys were quantitatively analyzed, predominantly through the use of Likert scales. This data is ordinal because the responses follow a logical order; however, the difference between intervals is not the same (e.g. “Extremely important” and “Very important,” or “Slightly important” and “Not important at all”). Therefore, focus was placed on prioritizing which categories appeared to be characterized by families and teachers as most important.

The teacher survey contained open-ended questions that required participants to provide written responses. Responses were grouped based on categories reflected in Epstein’s Six Types of Parent Engagement (Epstein et al., 2002) in order to determine patterns of responses. These questions asked teachers to describe practices related to the middle school transition that they currently utilize, or are aware that other schools utilize, suggestions for creating strong partnerships with families and how the school can ensure students experience a successful transition to middle school.

3.7 Effects of the Study on Stakeholders

Stakeholders were either directly or indirectly impacted by the data generated as part of survey and teacher interview. The feedback provided to the Head of School has the potential to directly impact the quality of future communication and programming related to students. Students will be indirectly impacted by the quality and programming for family engagement

3.8 Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of this study would be sample size. There are 12 general education teachers for students in grades 4 through 8 and two administrators. The number of parents who completed the surveys would be another limitation and may not completely represent all the perceptions of the community.

Because teachers were asked to provide information on their perceptions and understanding of adolescent learning and parent engagement, there may be a limitation in relation to the accuracy of responses. Given that the researcher is their direct supervisor, and just recently commenced her tenure at the school, teachers may have been hesitant to provide honest feedback, regardless of reassurances of anonymity and desire for candor. The third limitation would be researcher bias . Given that the researcher is the Head of School, there may be some inherent bias in interpreting the current quality of family engagement practices through the interview and survey results. Personal bias can influence the direction of a study; therefore, it is important to be mindful of this possibility in an effort to remain as neutral as possible while conducting research.

4.0 Findings

Data from both the parent and teacher surveys were reviewed and described in detail specific to each research question. The data from the survey questions were extracted from the Qualtrics Online Survey Tool. The survey was adapted with permission from the National Network of Partnership Schools, Johns Hopkins University (Epstein & Salinas, 1993; Sheldon & Epstein, 2007) where it was developed by Dr. Joyce Epstein and is in alignment with her Framework for Family engagement. This study used both close-ended and open-ended questions to provide data for three types of Family Engagement Practices: Communication, Learning at Home, and Parenting, in order to support student transition to middle grades.

The Family Engagement Survey consists of 23 questions and is divided into four sections: 1) demographic information of participant, 2) family priorities for engagement (used to answer research question 1), 3) perceptions of how well the school is engaging families (used to answer research question 2), and 4) what information families would like to have in order to support their children through middle school (used to answer research question 3). Perceptions and priorities were assessed using a Likert scale to capture the strength of feeling about each topic.

The Teacher Family Engagement Survey, consisting of 20 questions, is divided into three sections: 1) demographic information about the faculty, 2) questions utilizing a Likert scale to capture teacher perceptions of parent involvement (used to answer question 3), and 3) open-ended responses to allow teachers to share their perceptions and recommendations to partner with parents towards a successful middle grades transition (used to answer research question 3). Table 1 below displays the alignment between the survey and inquiry questions.

Table 1. Correspondence of Survey and Inquiry Questions

Inquiry Question	Family Survey	Teacher Survey
1. What topics and activities do families believe the school should prioritize in order to aid families in transitioning to middle school?	Q11,12,17, 20-22	
2. To what extent do parents of students in grades 4-8 perceive that educators communicate the changing needs of students transitioning to middle grades?	Q12-13, 15, 18	
3. What actions or strategies, if any, should the school and parent community adopt, either jointly or separately, to integrate and invest in systems that support student transition to middle grades?	Q14, 20-22	Q15-17. 19-22

This section begins with a description of the demographic information. The findings from the remainder of the survey are organized by the research questions used to frame this study:

1. What topics and activities do families believe the school should prioritize in order to aid families in transitioning to middle school?
2. To what extent do parents of students in grades 4 through 8 perceive that educators communicate the changing needs of students transitioning to middle grades?
3. What actions or strategies, if any, should the school and parent community adopt, either jointly or separately, to integrate and invest in systems that support student transition to middle grades?

Data from the parent survey were analyzed for inquiry questions 1 and 2. Data from both the parent survey and teacher survey were analyzed to answer inquiry question 3. One hundred percent (n=14) of teachers and school administrators invited to complete the survey did so. Thirty-

two families out of the 78 invited to participate in the survey responded; all surveys were completed in full for a response rate of 41 percent. While researchers typically consider 50 to 70 percent to be an acceptable response rate (Mertens, 2015; Nulty, 2008), online surveys yield a lower rate than in-person surveys (Nulty, 2008). Additionally, surveys for parents were released during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have contributed to a lower than normal response rate as families navigated the stressors of working at home, supporting their children during remote learning, and social distancing. The survey asked one adult from each family to take part.

4.1 Demographic Results

The first 10 items on the parent and teacher surveys asked participants to provide information about their gender, background, and academic achievement. Parents were also asked to supply information on the grade and birth order for the eldest child enrolled in the school. The sample of parents represented 42 percent (n=32) of all families (n=78) with children in grades 4 through 8 and 100 percent (n=14) of teachers and administrators in grades 4 through 8.

4.1.1 Family Demographic Results

Of the 32 family respondents to the survey, 23 (72 percent) identified themselves as the mother while nine (28 percent) identified as fathers. Racial demographics for the survey showed that 66 percent (n=21) of respondents were white or Caucasian. Two families (6 percent) indicated they were Asian American, one (3 percent) respondent identified as Black or African-American, three (9 percent) identified as multi-racial, and four participants (12 percent) indicated they

preferred not to answer. English was the predominant language spoken in the homes (n=29, 81 percent). However, Spanish, French, Arabic, Russian, and Bengali were all noted as languages spoken in the home with 1 (3 percent) response each. Table 2 displays the demographic information of the survey respondents.

Table 2. Demographic Data from Family Survey

	Variables	%Age	N
	N		32
Gender	Male	28%	9
	Female	72%	23
Race	White/Caucasian	66%	21
	Black/African American	9%	3
	Multi-racial	9%	3
	Asian American	6%	2
	Prefer not to answer	12%	4
Primary Language	English	81%	29
	Spanish	3%	1
	Russian	3%	1
	Bengali	3%	1
	Arabic	3%	1
	French	3%	1

Parental education levels and employment status were also provided. Eighteen respondents (56 percent) hold a graduate degree in their field, while seven (23 percent) hold a terminal degree. Four (12 percent) parents obtained undergraduate degrees, and three (9 percent) had some college credits. Eighty-one percent (n=26) of responses came from married families. Twenty respondents (75 percent) indicated they are employed full time, seven (22 percent) are employed part-time, and 1 parent (3 percent) reported being unemployed. Spousal employment was also captured in the survey for the 81 percent of respondents who are married. Twenty participants (93 percent) indicated their spouse was employed full-time, and two (7 percent) participants indicated a spouse was employed part-time. Table 3 displays the education and employment of respondents.

Table 3. Education and Employment of Participants

	Variables	% Age	N
Education Level	N		32
	Some College Credits	9%	3
	Undergraduate Degree	12%	4
	Graduate Degree	56%	18
	Terminal Degree	23%	7
Employment	Full time	75%	24
	Part time	22%	7
	Unemployed	3%	1
Spousal Employment	Full time	93%	26
	Part time	7%	2

Twenty-five percent (n=8) have an eldest child in grade 8, and 25 percent (n=8) have an eldest child in grade seven. Seven respondents (22 percent) had an eldest child in grade four, while six respondents (19 percent) indicated their eldest child was in grade five. Grade six only had three respondents (3 percent) for this survey. Forty percent (13 respondents) indicated that this was the eldest child in the family, and 25 percent (n=8) indicated this was the only child in the family. Four respondents (12 percent) had middle children, and seven respondents (22 percent) had youngest children in the school. Seventy-two percent (n=23) stated they did not have older children who attended this school previously. Table 4 displays family information.

Table 4. Family Demographics

	Variables	%Age	N
Current grade of eldest child	N		32
	Grade 8	25%	8
	Grade 7	25%	8
	Grade 6	3%	3
	Grade 5	19%	6
	Grade 4	22%	7
Birth order of eldest child	Eldest	40%	13
	Only	25%	8
	Middle	12%	4
	Youngest	22%	7
Older children who attend school previously	Yes	28%	9
	No	72%	23

4.1.2 Teacher Demographic Data

The teacher survey asked all classroom and special subject teachers in grades 4 through 8 and administrators to participate in the study. Teachers were asked to identify their race and gender as well as their professional experience and highest levels of education. One-hundred percent of teachers (n=14) who responded to the survey were white and female. Six teachers (43 percent) hold graduate degrees with additional credits, five (36 percent) hold graduate degrees, and three (21 percent) hold undergraduate degrees with additional credits. The majority of teachers are veterans, with only two teachers (14 percent) indicating fewer than 10 years of teaching or administrative experience. Of note, two teachers (14 percent) have 38 years of teaching experience, and two have 35 years of teaching experience in total. Eight teachers (57 percent) have taught in the IPS between 7 and 18 years. Of note, two teachers (14 percent) have spent their teaching careers at IPS for 28 and 37 years, respectively. Table 5 displays the teacher demographic information.

Table 5. Teacher Demographic Data

	Variables	%Age	N
Gender	N		14
	Male	0%	0
	Female	72%	14
Race	White/Caucasian	100%	14
	Black/African American	0%	0
	Multi-racial	0%	0
	Asian American	0%	0
	Prefer not to answer	0%	0
Education Level	Variables		
	Bachelor Degree + Credits	21%	3
	Graduate Degree	36%	5
	Graduate Degree + Credits	43%	6
Years of Experience	Variables		
	0-9 Years	14%	2
	10-19 Years	28.5%	4
	20-29 Years	28.5%	4
	30-39 Years	28.5%	4

4.2 Research Question One: What topics and activities do families believe the school should prioritize in order to aid families in transitioning to middle school?

Question 12 of the parent survey asked parents to indicate what opportunities and communication they value from the school, with a focus on three Epstein (Epstein et al., 2002) categories of effective involvement (Communication, Learning at Home, and Parenting). Parents were asked to indicate what types of engagement families believe will assist them during the transition to middle school.

4.2.1 Parental Priorities in Communication

Respondents were asked to rank their priorities from “extremely important” to “not at all important.” Throughout the survey, “not at all important” and “slightly important” were rarely chosen. Therefore, priority was placed on the those who chose “extremely important” over “very important” or “somewhat important.”

Information on curriculum and skills children need to learn in Math (87 percent , n=27), Language Arts (84 percent , n=27), and Science (84 percent , n=26) were prioritized over skills needed in Social Studies (75 percent , n=24), and more significantly prioritized over skills needed in enrichment courses (53 percent , n=17). When combining the data from the extremely important and very important categories, we find that 100 percent (n=32) of respondents prioritized Math, Language Arts, and Science skills, indicating the importance of this communication and engagement. Twenty-two parents (71 percent) indicated that communication about their children’s social and emotional skills are extremely important in comparison to 17 (53 percent) who felt communication about enrichment course skills was extremely important. Table6 displays the results from families about priorities in communication.

Table 6. Family Priorities of Skill Communication

Skill Area	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all important	Total
Math	87.10% 27	12.90% 4	0% 0	0% 0	0% 0	31
Language Arts	84.38% 27	15.63% 5	0% 0	0% 0	0% 0	32
Science	83.87% 26	16.13% 5	0% 0	0% 0	0% 0	31
Social Studies	75% 24	21.88% 7	3.13% 1	0% 0	0% 0	32
Enrichment	53.13% 17	25% 8	18.75% 6	3.13% 1	0% 0	32
Socially and Emotionally	70.97% 22	19.35% 6	9.68% 3	0% 0	0% 0	31

Type of communication is also weighed differently for families based on their responses to this question. Eighty-four percent (n=27) of the parent respondents indicated that information specific to the individual child was also viewed as extremely important or very important over generalized information, such as school news (47 percent , n=15). Fifteen (47 percent) respondents perceive attending PTA meetings as extremely or very important, while only six respondents (19 percent) indicated that fundraising help was considered very or extremely important. Seventeen respondents (53 percent) indicated fundraising was “moderately important.” Eighteen respondents (56 percent) value the opportunity to volunteer as very or extremely important. Table 7 below displays the results.

Table 7. Types of Communication Valued

		Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all important	Total					
Individual	Tells me how my child is doing in school	84.38%	27	15.63%	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	32
	Has a parent-teacher conference with me.	59.38%	19	31.25%	10	6.25%	2	3.13%	1	0	0	32
General	Sends home news about things happening at school	46.88%	15	43.75%	14	9.38%	3	0	0	0	0	32
Volunteering	Asks me to volunteer in the school	9.38%	3	46.88%	15	37.50%	12	6.25%	2	0	0	32
	Invites me to PTA meetings	9.38%	3	31.25%	12	31.25%	10	21.88%	7	0	0	32
	Asks me to help with fundraising	3.13%	1	15.63%	5	53.13%	17	15.63%	5	12.5%	4	32

4.2.2 Parental Priorities in Learning at Home

When asked to indicate the value families placed on the school providing engagement opportunities to support learning at home opportunities, families revealed a split response. Homework support and information about community events were not viewed as important for parents to feel engaged. When asked to describe the importance of providing communication to support families in checking homework, 10 respondents (32 percent) felt this was extremely important, and nine (29 percent) felt this was very important. Twelve respondents (37.5 percent) indicated that assigning homework that requires their child to discuss topics learned in school was considered extremely important or very important. Information on community events was viewed as very important by 12 respondents (27.5 percent) and moderately important by 11 respondents (24 percent). Of note are the four respondents (13 percent) who indicated checking homework or having homework that requires a student to share what they learned at school was only slightly important or not important at all, given how infrequently these categories were chosen throughout the survey. Table 7 displays the priorities for family communication to support learning at home.

Table 8. Learning at Home Priorities for Family Engagement

	Extremely Important		Very Important		Moderately Important		Slightly Important		Not at all important		Total
Explains how to check my child's homework	32.26%	10	29.03%	9	25.81%	8	9.68%	3	3.23%	1	31
Provides information on community events that I may want to attend with my child.	9.38%	3	37.50%	12	34.38%	11	18.75%	6	0	0	32

Table 8 (continued)

Assigns homework that requires my child to talk with me about things learned in school.	37.5%	12	37.50%	12	12.50%	4	9.38%	3	3.13%	1	32
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4.2.3 Family Priorities for Engagement with Parenting

Families in this survey were asked to rank the importance of the school providing support to assist with social-emotional and developmental milestones. Families did not rank the need for services and events to support their child’s development as highly as communication around academic and individualized performance in school. Information that is individualized was prioritized over generalized information as well. Only 15 respondents (47 percent) believe community services are very or extremely important compared to 29 respondents (91 percent) who ranked individualized information about a child’s stages of development as extremely or very important. This is in contrast to 24 respondents (75 percent) who indicated generalized resources on stages of development was extremely important or very important. Table 9 displays family priorities for engagement around parenting.

Table 9. Family Priority for Family Engagement Around Parenting

		Extremely Important		Very Important		Moderately Important		Slightly Important		Not at all important		Total
Individual	Helps me understand my child's stage of development	68.75%	22	21.88%	7	9.38%	3	0	0	0	0	32
General	Provides information on community services that I may want to use with my family.	9.38%	3	37.50%	12	31.25%	10	21.88%	7	0	0	32
General	Provides resources and information about developmental stages of my child.	43.75%	14	31.25%	10	21.88%	7	0	0	3.13 %	1	32

Data were further analyzed by birth order to determine whether parent engagement around these priorities is influenced by whether a family had previously experienced the transition to middle school. For instance, did parents whose eldest or only children are currently in early adolescence, or who had not reached this milestone yet, prioritize engagement around parenting and learning at home more than parents of middle or youngest children in this age band? As evidenced in Table 10, 100 percent of families with an eldest child in grades 4 through 8 (n=13) identified the school as helping families understand their children's stages of development as extremely or very important. Eighty-seven percent (n=8) of families of only children (n=8) and 86 percent of families with youngest children enrolled agreed that this is extremely or very important. The difference was found with the families who felt it was extremely important with

youngest (57 percent, n=4) and middle (50 percent, n=2) families identifying this information as extremely important compared to 77 percent (n=10) and 75 percent (n=6) respectively for families of the eldest and only children. While all families felt this information was important, emphasis on the degree to which it was important varied based on birth order. Table 10 displays the data indicating how families perceive information about stages of development based on the birth order of their child in this developmental strand.

Table 10. Family Importance for Schools to Help Understand My Child’s Stages of Development by Birth Order

	Extremely Important		Very Important		Moderately Important		Slightly Important		Not at all important		Total
Eldest	77%	10	23%	3	0	0	0%	0	0%	0	13
Only	75%	6	12.5%	1	12.5%	1	0%	0	0%	0	8
Youngest	57%	4	29%	2	14%	1	0%	0	0%	0	7
Middle	50%	2	25%	1	25%	1	0%	0	0%	0	4

While all families appeared to agree that resources and information about developmental stages was important, families of only children held a consensus (100 percent, n=8) that it is very or extremely important, while families with siblings were slightly more mixed in the level of importance, with 25 percent or more indicating moderate importance. Sixty-nine percent (n=9) of families with eldest children, 57 percent (n=4) with youngest children, and 75 percent (n=3) with middle children agreed that resources and information on developmental stages was extremely or very important for the school to provide. Table 11 outlines the importance of the school to provide resources and information on developmental stages.

Table 11. Provides Resources and Information About Developmental Stages of My Child by Birth Order

	Extremely Important		Very Important		Moderately Important		Slightly Important		Not at all important		Total
Eldest	31%	4	38%	5	31%	4	0%	0	0%	0	13
Only	62.5%	5	37.5%	3	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	8
Youngest	43%	3	14%	1	29%	2	0%	0	14%	1	7
Middle	50%	2	25%	1	25%	1	0%	0	0%	0	4

4.2.3.1 Research Question One Summary

Topics and activities related to curriculum, and communication specific to individual students, was highly prioritized by families transitioning to middle school. Most respondents felt curriculum and academic skills information was the priority for communication from the school. While close to half the respondents felt generalized school news was very important, information perceived as specific to individual students was widely seen as the most important in terms of school communication. Perceptions of the importance of learning at home did not appear to be as strong. Respondents prioritized these topics over all five categories of the Likert scale from “extremely important” to “not at all important,” demonstrating less of a priority overall for families. Families did, however, respond strongly to individualized engagement around parenting practices related to stages of development. This was especially true for families whose eldest or only child was between grades four and eight.

4.3 To what extent do parents of students in grades 4-8 perceive that educators communicate the changed needs of students transitioning to middle grades?

This research question was addressed by responses to the parent questionnaire, specifically question 18, which asked families to express how well they felt the school was preparing students for the upcoming school year. Twenty-three (71.88 percent) respondents indicated the school could do better at contacting families to help them understand their child's stage of development. This finding corresponds with question 13, which asked families to indicate how well the teacher or school had engaged them in the current year. When asked to rank how well the school engaged them on specific topics, both academic and developmental, most respondents indicated the school was doing a good to great job providing information about academics. Content area information ranked high with 25 (78 percent) respondents indicating they felt the school shared information well. Twenty-four respondents (75 percent) stated science and social studies information was shared well, and 23 respondents (73 percent) felt Language Arts information was shared well. Twenty-two respondents (68 percent) said the school did an average or slightly below average job communicating about enrichment courses. Community services were also seen as below average or slightly below average with 28 (90 percent) respondents indicating the school could improve communication in this area. Resources about developmental stages also fell into this category with 24 (77 percent) respondents ranking the school as average to below average. Table 12 illustrates how well families felt the school was currently performing in relation to communicating about the developmental and academic needs of students between grades 4 and 8.

Table 12. How Well Families Feel the School is Communicating About Developmental Needs

	Never 1		Below Avg. 2		Avg. 3		Well 4		Total
My child's stage of development	12.5%	4	12.5%	4	43.75%	14	31.25%	10	32
Math Skills	3.13%	1	18.75%	2	40.63%	13	37.50%	12	32
Language Arts Skills	3.13%	1	25%	8	46.88%	15	25%	8	32
Science Skills	3.13%	1	21.88%	7	40.63%	13	34.38%	11	32
Social Studies Skills	3.13%	1	21.88%	7	46.88%	15	28.13%	9	32
Enrichment Skills	18.75%	6	34.38%	11	34.38%	11	12.5%	4	32
Social Emotional Skills	6.45%	2	38.71%	12	32.26%	10	22.58%	7	31
Community Services	3.23%	1	29.03%	9	61.29%	19	6.45%	2	31
Community Events	3.23%	1	12.9%	4	45.16%	14	38.71%	12	31
Resources and information about developmental stages	3.23%	1	35.48%	11	41.94%	13	19.35%	6	31

Parents were also asked to express how important it is for the school to prepare them for the upcoming school year in contrast to how well they believe the school was preparing them in these same areas. Academic preparation, particularly in math and Language Arts, was prioritized by families. However, organizational and study skills ranked higher in importance than any one academic content area, with 31 respondents (97 percent) indicating it was an important skill for

students in order to be prepared for the upcoming year. While academic content areas received higher marks for how well the school was performing, parents indicated there was room for improvement in how well the school supported organizational skill development with only seven (23 percent) parents expressing confidence that the school was providing organization and study skills extremely well. Thirteen (42 percent) indicated the school prepared students moderately well with organization and study skills. This was also true of social-emotional development. While 27 (84 percent) families felt this was extremely important, only nine (29 percent) felt the school was preparing students extremely well for the upcoming school year. Twelve (39 percent) families indicated the school did moderately well in supporting students’ social and emotional development.

Table 13. Importance for Preparation Versus School Performance

Skill	How Important				How Well			
	Extremely	Moderately	Slightly	Not	Extremely	Very	Moderately	Slightly
Math	94% 30	6% 2	0% 0	0% 0	38.71% 12	38.71 12	16.15% 5	6.45% 2
Language Arts	97% 30	3% 1	0% 0	0% 0	41.94% 13	32.26% 10	22.58% 7	3.23% 1
Science	87.5% 28	12.5% 4	0% 0	0% 0	41.94% 13	38.71% 12	16.13% 5	3.23% 1
Social Studies	78% 25	21.88% 4	0% 0	0% 0	45.16% 14	38.71% 12	12.90% 4	3.23% 1
Social Emotional	84% 27	12.5% 4	0% 0	3% 1	29.03% 9	29.03% 9	38.71% 12	3.23% 1
Organizational	96.88% 31	3% 1	0% 0	0% 0	22.58% 7	25.81% 8	41.94% 13	9.68% 3

4.3.1.1 Research Question Two Summary

Parents of students in grades 4 through 8 perceived that educators communicated the changing needs of students transitioning to middle grades in several ways and with mixed effect.

Communication about academic expectations was perceived as good or above average. According to parents, communication on developmental stages, enrichment courses, and community services were at or below average for most respondents. Organizational and study skills and social-emotional development were both perceived as extremely important by families in this grade range; however, in both cases, families felt the school did not provide supports for these skills to prepare students for the upcoming school year.

4.4 What actions or strategies, if any, should the school and parent community adopt, either jointly or separately, to integrate and invest in systems that support student transition to middle grades?

Data from both the family and teacher surveys were used to determine what actions and strategies could be adopted to integrate and invest in systems that support student transition to middle school. Question 14 asked families to communicate their level of comfort in volunteering their skills to support other families. Questions 20, 21, and 22 on the family survey asked respondents to indicate topics they would like to know more about. Teacher survey questions 15, 16, 17, and 19 through 22 asked teachers to express their opinions about practices they felt would help support student success as they transition to middle school. The teacher questions were open-ended and coded to determine patterns in response.

4.4.1 Family Responses for Actions and Strategies to Adopt

The final three questions on the family survey asked respondents to indicate topics for which they would like more information in order to help their children be more successful in middle school. Respondents were able to check all that applied and given the opportunity to add additional topics. Academically, study skills ranked the highest with 28 respondents (87.5 percent) choosing this as a topic to address. Families indicated they would like information about math skills (n=23, 71 percent), reading (n=19, 59 percent), science (n=20, 63 percent), and speaking skills (n=19, 59 percent), as well as interpersonal (n=20, 63 percent) and social-emotional skills (n=20, 63 percent). High school transition was also an area of interest for 17 families (53 percent). Table 13 displays the data when broken down by grade level of the eldest child in the school. The responses show which areas were prioritized by families. For example, high school transition was of greatest concern for those families with students heading into eighth grade, also the year families apply to high schools in the region.

Table 14. Family Perceptions of Priority Skills to Address for Middle Grades Transition

	Grade 4		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 7		Grade 8		Total
Math Skills	21.74%	5	21.74%	5	0.00%	0	30.43%	7	26.09%	6	23
Reading Skills	15.79%	3	15.79%	3	5.26%	1	31.58%	6	31.58%	6	19
Writing Skills	12.50%	3	20.83%	5	8.33%	2	25.00%	6	33.33%	8	24
Spelling	18.18%	2	9.09%	1	9.09%	1	36.36%	4	27.27%	3	11
Social Studies	14.29%	2	21.43%	3	0.00%	0	28.57%	4	35.71%	5	14
Science	30.00%	6	10.00%	2	10.00%	2	25.00%	5	25.00%	5	20
Handwriting	33.33%	2	16.67%	1	0.00%	0	50.00%	3	0.00%	0	6
Speaking Skills	21.05%	4	15.79%	3	5.26%	1	21.05%	4	36.84%	7	19

Table 14 (continued)

Current Events	7.14%	1	21.43%	3	14.29%	2	28.57%	4	28.57%	4	14
Study Skills	21.43%	6	21.43%	6	10.71%	3	21.43%	6	25.00%	7	28
Interpersonal Skills	25.00%	5	15.00%	3	10.00%	2	25.00%	5	25.00%	5	20
Social Emotional Skills	30.00%	6	10.00%	2	10.00%	2	30.00%	6	20.00%	4	20
High School Transition	17.65%	3	0.00%	0	17.65%	3	35.29%	6	29.41%	5	17
None	0.00%	0	16.67%	1	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	1

Families were also asked to indicate interest in topics for workshops relevant to helping their children transition successfully to middle school. Twenty-five (78 percent) families indicated a desire for workshops about navigating social problems. Again, there was a variance in priority based on the grade of the eldest child enrolled in the school. Overall, dealing with stress and developing talents was chosen by 19 respondents (59 percent). However, when the data was categorized by the grade of the student, test taking became more of a priority for eighth grade families preparing for high school placement tests and standardized tests such as the ACT, PSAT, and SAT. While only 11 respondents (34 percent) chose test taking as important, 36 percent of those respondents (n=4) were grade eight families. Table 15 displays both the overall priority for workshop topics as well as those broken down by grade level.

Table 15. Workshop Topics to Support Middle Grades Transition

	Grade 4		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 7		Grade 8		Total	
Help with social problems	28%	7	20%	5	8%	2	16%	4	28%	7	78%	25
Prevent health problems	0%	0	33%	1	0%	0	33%	1	33%	1	9%	3
Deal with stress	26%	5	11%	2	0%	0	32%	6	32%	6	59%	19
Single parent	100%	1	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	3%	1
Developing talents	26%	5	16%	3	11%	2	16%	3	32%	6	59%	19
Test Taking	18%	2	27%	3	9%	1	9%	1	36%	4	34%	11
Middle School	33%	3	11%	1	11%	1	22%	2	22%	2	28%	9
None	0	0	50%	1	0%	0	50%	1	0%	0	6%	2

Families showed less interest in the school helping families connect with community services and activities. Information about community services, events, and after-school activities received the most interest overall. Nineteen (60 percent) respondents indicated information on community services is important for the school to share. Seventeen (53 percent) stated community events was important information for the school to share. Sixteen (50 percent) indicated information about after school sports and activities was important information for the school to share. Few responses were chosen from the list provided and, although respondents were permitted to suggest further topics, none were suggested. Table 16 illustrates parental interest in various topics for young adolescents and their families.

Table 16. Family Interests in Information about Community Services to Support Middle Grades Transition

	Total	
Health care for adolescents	12.5%	4
Family counseling	12.5%	4
Parenting classes	12.5%	4
Child Care	0	0
After School Tutoring	25%	8
After School Sports/ Activities	50%	16
Community Service children	59%	19
Community Events	53%	17
None	9%	3
Other	0	0

To gauge interest in parental leadership and collaboration, families were asked to express their comfort levels in supporting other parents. Depending on the content, families expressed confidence in helping others in the community. Data were analyzed to determine whether there was a measurable difference in comfort level leading and supporting peers if the participants previously had children who had matriculated through the school. Data was categorized by topics that required parents to engage personally around learning at home or parenting supports versus those that were more universal and did not require personal knowledge about individual students and their families but instead promote school culture, community, and communication. For example, helping a family understand how their child is doing in school may require access to a report card or graded assignment and, therefore, would be more personal in nature. Encouraging families to attend a PTA meeting would be an example of a more generalized and less personal support families can provide for the school community. It appeared that there was not a substantial difference between parents who had been through the school with older children and those whose first child was in the school. If anything, families without older students seemed more comfortable

supporting other families than those with older students who had matriculated through the school. This finding was more evident in the more personal supports. Universal supports were evenly matched regardless of whether a family had an older child. Tables 17 and 18 illustrate family confidence in school leadership with their peers with both personal or individualized support and more generalized community support.

Table 17. Parental Comfort in Supporting Community Members With Learning at Home and Parenting

	Older Child	First Child	Total
Help other parents understand how their child is doing in school.			
Extremely comfortable	11%	18%	5
Somewhat comfortable	33%	27%	9
Somewhat uncomfortable	22%	27%	8
Not comfortable at all	33%	23%	8
Help other parents understand how to monitor and check their child's homework.			
Extremely comfortable	11%	27%	7
Somewhat comfortable	33%	32%	10
Somewhat uncomfortable	44%	32%	11
Not comfortable at all	11%	9%	3
Help other parents find ways to talk with their children about things learned in school.			
Extremely comfortable	0%	27%	6
Somewhat comfortable	33%	45%	13
Somewhat uncomfortable	33%	18%	7
Not comfortable at all	33%	9%	5
Help other parents understand what skills their child needs to learn Socially and Emotionally.			
Extremely comfortable	11%	18%	5
Somewhat comfortable	11%	32%	8
Somewhat uncomfortable	22%	45%	12
Not comfortable at all	23%	9%	7
Help other parents schedule and communicate during parent teacher conferences.			
Extremely comfortable	11%	23%	6
Somewhat comfortable	22%	32%	9
Somewhat uncomfortable	44%	32%	11
Not comfortable at all	22%	14%	5

Table 17 (continued)

Provides resources and information about developmental stages of child.					
Extremely comfortable	11%	1	23%	5	6
Somewhat comfortable	33%	3	23%	5	8
Somewhat uncomfortable	22%	2	50%	11	13
Not comfortable at all	33%	3	4%	1	4
Help other parents understand their child's stage of development.					
Extremely comfortable	0%	0	32%	7	7
Somewhat comfortable	55%	5	27%	6	11
Somewhat uncomfortable	11%	1	36%	8	9
Not comfortable at all	33%	3	9%	2	5

Table 18. Parental Comfort in Promoting General School Culture and Activities

		Older Child		First Child		Total
Help other parents find ways to volunteer at the school.						
Extremely comfortable	33%	3	26%	8	11	
Somewhat comfortable	11%	1	50%	11	12	
Somewhat uncomfortable	22%	2	14%	3	5	
Not comfortable at all	33%	3	4%	1	4	
Help communicate what it is happening at school.						
Extremely comfortable	44%	4	27%	6	10	
Somewhat comfortable	33%	3	55%	12	15	
Somewhat uncomfortable	11%	1	18%	4	5	
Not comfortable at all	11%	1	4%	1	2	
Provides information on community services that other families may want to use.						
Extremely comfortable	11%	1	18%	4	5	
Somewhat comfortable	66%	6	59%	13	19	
Somewhat uncomfortable	11%	1	18%	4	5	
Not comfortable at all	11%	1	0%	0	1	
Promote and welcome families to attend PTA meetings.						
Extremely comfortable	44%	4	36%	8	12	
Somewhat comfortable	22%	2	32%	7	9	
Somewhat uncomfortable	22%	2	27%	6	8	
Not comfortable at all	11%	1	0%	0	1	

Table 18 (continued)

Promote and welcome families to school programs.						
Extremely comfortable	56%	5	55%	12	17	
Somewhat comfortable	33%	3	32%	7	10	
Somewhat uncomfortable	0%	0	14%	3	3	
Not comfortable at all	11%	1	0%	0	1	
Encourage families to help with fund raising.						
Extremely comfortable	33%	3	23%	5	8	
Somewhat comfortable	33%	3	36%	8	11	
Somewhat uncomfortable	22%	2	36%	8	10	
Not comfortable at all	11%	1	4%	1	2	
Encourage other parents to join school committees, such as curriculum, budget or improvement committees.						
Extremely comfortable	33%	3	41%	9	12	
Somewhat comfortable	44%	4	23%	5	9	
Somewhat uncomfortable	11%	1	27%	6	7	
Not comfortable at all	11%	1	9%	2	3	
Provides information on community events that other parents may want to attend with their children.						
Extremely comfortable	44%	4	27%	6	10	
Somewhat comfortable	33%	3	55%	12	15	
Somewhat uncomfortable	22%	2	18%	4	6	
Not comfortable at all	0%	0	0%	0	0	

4.4.2 Teacher Responses for Actions to Implement

Question 15 asked teachers how important various types of involvement were in order to prepare students for transitioning to middle grades. Twelve (86 percent) teachers felt that communication should be accessible for all families to understand and use. Eleven (78 percent) felt communication about report cards to help parents understand student progress and needs was important. Workshops for parents to build skills in parenting and understand their children at each grade level also was important with 10 (71 percent) teachers indicating it was extremely important

for family involvement. In almost every category, teachers indicated each type of involvement to be at least moderately important, although teachers did not rank parent conferences (20 percent, n=7) as important as report card information (79 percent, n=11) as illustrated in Table 19 below.

Table 19. Teacher Perceptions of Importance of Types of Involvement to Transition to Middle Grades

	Extremely Important		Moderately Important		Not at all important		Total
	%	n	%	n	%	n	
Parenting Workshops	71%	10	29%	4	0	0	14
Learning at Home	57%	8	43%	6	0	0	14
Accessible Communication	86%	12	7%	1	7%	1	14
Report Card Information	79%	11	14%	2	7%	1	14
Conferences with all families	50%	7	50%	7	0%	0	14
Surveying families about school	50%	7	43%	6	7%	1	14
Monitoring Homework	43%	6	57%	8	0%	0	14
Parents Help with Specific Skills	64%	9	36%	5	0%	0	14
After school activities & homework help	50%	7	43%	6	7%	1	14
What to expect in upcoming grade	64%	9	36%	5	0%	0	14

Questions 19 through 22 on the teacher survey elicited open-ended responses to determine what practices teachers prioritize as successful for engaging parents to transition students to middle school. When asked what the most successful practice that they have either used or heard about, teachers provided responses focusing on organizational skills and time management, as well as consistent messaging beginning in the fourth grade. One teacher indicated:

There should be more formal, consistent messaging starting in fourth grade about the transition to middle school. Information evenings, articles shared with families and meet

the teachers. Something every month starting in January so that when the fifth grade year begins, it is not a completely new or unknown experience. We really need to do better at making an intentional, sound transition for those students and their families.

Three teachers mentioned creating programming to help parents understand projects, papers, tests, and teacher expectations. One teacher dubbed this a middle school “boot camp” while others referred to a “move up” or “step up” event held in the spring, and another mentioned a “buddy shadow day” for students themselves. Executive functioning skills were mentioned by two teachers as an important practice to address to aid students with the transition to middle school.

Question 17 asked teachers how better partnerships with families would help them support student transition to middle school. Teacher responses again reflected a desire for a unified approach and policies between parents and the school. One example cited was understanding the dangers of social media for individual students. Parental understanding of the curriculum and the “gradual release of responsibility,” along with programming to support organizational preparation at the beginning of the year, were examples provided by teachers. Welcoming parents into the school was mentioned by teachers indicating a desire for “more parent participation” and “greater attendance at open house and parent nights,” as well as “workshops and clinics.” Assisting parents in understanding expectations for both themselves and their children was consistent throughout the teacher responses. In this way, parents would feel supported because they would have information that they need “from the beginning” and resources to access what they need. Teachers would feel supported because the “entire burden would not fall on their shoulders.”

Parent involvement has changed recently according to three teachers (21 percent); however, others noted variation based on individual families. One teacher stated that while some

families were largely not involved in middle school, others were extremely involved to the level where “it feels like their agenda is to run their own school.” Another felt it varies with each class.

Question 19 asked teachers to identify current practices that have helped them the most and why. Communication was the most important practice for teachers, including examples of newsletters and increased social media messaging along with streamlining communication through the Student Information System platform. One teacher noted the High School Transition Fair held in the fall for seventh and eighth grade students as being successful because “it puts our work in perspective for parents who are new to [the] changing nature of middle school expectations and increased independence for students.” Events in general were mentioned by one teacher who felt full school and school spirit events were beneficial.

When asked what recommendations teachers would make to improve communication with families, “transparency” and “consistency” emerged as important along with enhancing the website and increasing “student-led video messages.” Welcoming families for volunteer opportunities and “engaging encounters” around learning were also mentioned. Three teachers mentioned encouraging parent leadership or involvement through the sharing of their skills and talents. As one teacher noted:

I think providing different avenues and types of communication (monthly messages and newsletters from the Head of School, short quick social media blurbs, updates from teachers) gives families options that work best for them.

Teachers were asked to indicate the most important thing for a school to do to ensure that all children are successful in transitioning to the middle school. The most popular suggestion came

from seven teachers (50 percent) who indicated the importance of vertical alignment of executive functioning skills and expectations between grades four through eight. The terms “organization” or “organize themselves and belongings” was mentioned twice. The word “expectations” was used seven times in this section to describe consistent and high expectations for students.

The final question (question 21) asked teachers how they would attempt to engage more parents if they oversaw the school. While planning family events and workshops and surveying families were mentioned, many responses indicated providing opportunities for families to volunteer their time and expertise. Co-teaching classes, career days, lunch and recess duty, and the development of a parent skill bank were all suggested.

4.4.2.1 Research Question Three Summary

Both parents and teachers felt strongly that organizational and study skills are priority topics to promote the successful transition to middle school. Specific topics, such as those dealing with the transition to high school, were cited by families and teachers as well. Teachers specifically referenced the High School Fair. Finding ways to partner with parents to share their expertise and volunteer were predominant teacher themes. Parent comfort with assuming leadership roles in supporting other families was mixed. However, those opportunities that were generalized demonstrated a higher level of comfort for families willing to support the school. Parents were more willing to promote school events, activities, and school culture rather than serve in an advocacy role to help specific families navigate parenting or learning at home. Teachers recognized the importance of consistent and transparent communication with families related to expectations, both academic and social-emotional at this age level, and cited the importance of working together as a team to prepare students and families for this transition.

4.4.3 Summary of Findings

Parents and teachers both recognize the importance of the transition from elementary to middle school. For families to feel prepared, great emphasis was placed on the understanding and specific needs of their own children and their individual academic skills. Understanding the curriculum and expectations for success, culminating in preparation for high school, was of the utmost value for families. Teachers perceived these needs, referencing vertical alignment and proactive communication around expectations and responsibilities, as well.

Executive functioning skills necessary for students to transition successfully to middle grades were also rated as important by both teachers and families. While teachers repeatedly referenced the importance of these skills, parents were not confident these skills were being provided, which may be indicative of a gap in communication. Teachers desired a vertical discussion between grades to ensure skills were being taught early in an effort to support early adolescent learners, and desired collaboration between departments to fulfill this need.

Overall, consistent communication was a hallmark theme for both parents and teachers. Understanding the curriculum, programming, and providing opportunities for volunteering in the school were all seen as important to the success of the school community at large and the success of students matriculating into middle school.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This study examined the desires and perceptions of families and teachers related to programming and supports for early adolescents transitioning to middle school. The study focused on three of the six types of parental engagement most closely linked to the developmental needs of early adolescents – communication, parenting, and learning at home – in order to identify what the IPS does and can consider doing to engage families as partners during this developmental milestone. The primary goal of this study was to better understand what types and topics of engagement families value and whether they perceive the school was meeting their needs for engagement during early adolescence. A secondary goal of the study was to gain an understanding of what teachers and families felt the school could do to increase engagement, both collectively and separately.

The belief that supports and communication are important given the unique needs of adolescent learners is directly related to research on early adolescence and middle grades (Hill & Taylor, 2004; National Middle School Association, 1995). Parent and teacher perceptions were collected and analyzed in order to make recommendations for improvements specific to the transition to middle school to reflect the needs of the community and the students.

A major assumption of the current study is that efforts to communicate and engage families may have little impact if schools do not understand the types and quality of communication families desire. Global attempts to communicate and engage families in the same ways as done in elementary school may provide a plethora of opportunities but may not provide the unique and

specific supports a family of an early adolescent learner may need. The goal of developing strong family engagement is to create strong academic outcomes (Astor, Benbenisty & Estrada, 2009; Hill & Chao, 2009; OECD, 2009).

5.2 Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. One limitation is the sample size of the participants on the family survey. Only 32 families (41 percent) out of 78 invited to participate in the survey responded. While researchers typically consider 50 to 70 percent to be an acceptable response rate (Mertens, 2015; Nulty, 2008), surveys for parents were released in April 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have contributed to a lower than normal response rate. On March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was officially declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization, followed by a national emergency declaration in the United States on March 13, 2020 (CDC, 2020). In the context of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), family, school and religious microsystems, as well as economic and political macrosystems, were all disrupted. These disruptions would potentially influence both the response rate and parental priorities as families navigated the stressors of working at home, supporting children during remote learning and social distancing, leading to potential alterations to the mesosystem of parent-school interactions during this time. For example, an abrupt change to remote learning left parents in the unique position to see first-hand the levels of independence, organizational and academic skill their child possessed as related to the new learning platform which may have influenced perceptions and responses.

While the response rate may be due to the pandemic, it may also be influenced by the medium employed to solicit feedback. Follow up work may include finding ways to encourage more robust participation, and deliberately recruiting families of color and diverse socio-economic status to encourage participation. A deeper exploration of the best ways to solicit information from families, encouraging those who may not feel welcomed by or personally invested in a survey, or who may not consider their voices heard in the community would benefit engagement practices in the school.

Another consideration related to sample size may be due to the historical context, specifically in changes in leadership that have resulted in an uncertainty of mission and vision for both teachers and families, leading to a sense that programs, curriculum and priorities are tied to the personal preferences of a leader and not the culture and beliefs of the community. Families who are feeling alienated or confused by the overall direction of the school may have been discouraged from taking part in the survey. Now under new leadership, the school has embarked on a Strategic Planning process that includes community stakeholders to begin laying the groundwork for stability and growth.

This sample size made it difficult to analyze data to determine the needs or perceptions of minoritized groups. Given that research indicates that parents of color or lower socioeconomic status report less preventive communication than higher socioeconomic status parents in grade 7 (Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014), it is important to guard against using data that does not allow for analysis of perceptions of all community members. Follow-up work may include finding ways to encourage more robust participation, and deliberately recruiting families of color and mixed socioeconomic status to increase participation.

Additionally, the family survey asked respondents to identify their eldest child in the school. However, data was not collected on how many students these families had in other grades still within the grades 4 through 8 range. For example, a family that indicated an eldest child in grade eight may also have a child or children in grade six. Thus, there was not true clarity on representation of grade level participation. Hence, it would be difficult to make determinations about grade level specific programming. Follow-up work may include clarifying specific priorities for each grade level to determine if there are specific topics or needs of families.

5.3 Important Considerations for IPS Middle School Transition Programming

The Independent Private School (IPS) parents and teachers both acknowledged the value of supporting students to make a successful transition to the middle school. The fact that this transition is happening in a small K-8 setting where cohorts of children remain relatively stable as they progress through the school did not seem to lessen parental desire for information. This may be due to the fact that only 28 percent (n=9) of respondents had students who had previously attended IPS. It may also reflect parental observations of the rapid changes, both physical and physiological, happening with their early adolescent learners (Casey, Galvan, & Somerville, 2016; Damour, 2016; Fagell, 2019). As 65 percent (n=21) of respondents indicated their early adolescent learner was the eldest or only child in the family, familiarity with middle grades may be limited. Real opportunities for programmatic change exist when framing transitional practices around Epstein's engagement categories (Epstein et al., 2002) engagement categories. Perhaps the adoption of a framework in combination with yearly survey tools would allow the school to create a consistent system of engagement that can be reviewed and analyzed using stakeholder data. This

would then allow for both foundational practices that stay consistent over time and flexible communication to meet the specific needs of the current families.

5.3.1 How Might We Design Effective Academically Focused Communication Pathways?

Although Cauley and Janovich (2006) categorized parental concerns into three kind: (academic, procedural, and social), the feedback from IPS parents focused on the academic and social. The lack of focus on procedural concerns may be due to the small size of the school, where students are not expected to memorize locker combinations and are already familiar with most school routines such as lunch, recess, and transitions between classrooms. Families clearly indicated a desire for communication to focus on the particular needs of their own children and their individual academic skills, which is reflected in the research (Blackboard, 2018; Weiss, et al., 2005).

Beginning with a clear articulation of the mission and vision of the middle school program provides families with the opportunity to understand priorities for programmatic decisions in the middle school and what to expect over the course of early adolescence, academics, and social-emotional skills. These foundational documents serve to anchor the curriculum and provide consistency in decision-making for growth. This practice would also reflect the three strands of Hong's (2011) framework for parent engagement: induction, integration, and investment. Strong foundational documents introduce families to the school, create connections with faculty and other parents, and develop ways to sustain opportunities for community and culture building as everyone is working towards the same goals.

A transparent and easily accessed vertically aligned curriculum assists families in much the same way as the articulation of the mission and vision. In order for families to feel comfortable with the academic skills being taught, they must understand what the goals and expectations are

for each grade level and each course. This allows for communication and engagement around expectations to support learning at home and what parenting practices would best support school curriculum and programming.

Considerations on the design and scheduling of parent conferences may be one way to provide the individualized information families desire. Currently, students in preschool through fifth grade are placed in cohorts assigned to one or two teachers. Therefore, during the bi-annual parent conference days, each family meets with the grade level teacher or teachers to obtain specific progress about their classes. At the middle school level, where a student has content area teachers, it becomes difficult to schedule individual meetings for each parent with each teacher. The challenge for school leaders will be to design the middle school conference experience to meet the needs of families and teachers.

Given that 29 parent respondents (91 percent) indicated that parent-teacher conferences are important, a further analysis of the structure of conferences should occur with teachers, only seven of whom (50 percent) felt conferences were very important. Designing an effective structure for conferences that includes academic data and learner dispositions may go a long way to bridging the gap, providing a personalized conference experience that meets the priorities of families and supports teachers in understanding the value of the conference. Considerations should be given to including students in these conferences, to practice self-advocacy and understand their own development as a learner, which teachers expressed the desire to cultivate. This practice would also promote the personalization of communication and community, promoting stronger engagement.

Another consideration is whether parent conferences are the only or best way to engage families in student progress. Digital student portfolios that demonstrate growth over time are a personalized approach to the demonstration of learning that allow parents frequent and tangible performance-based information. This would also promote a medium for deeper engagement with enrichment teachers, such as art and music, who could contribute artifacts to the portfolio. Reflecting

upon our mission to promote a holistic educational experience, communication on enrichment skills, and performance is an opportunity for growth.

Both parent and teacher surveys captured the importance of addressing executive functioning skills. Teachers repeatedly referenced the importance of these skills. Although parents indicated that organizational and study skills were the most important skills to ensure a successful middle school transition, they were not assured that these skills were being taught, which may be indicative of a gap in programming or communication. Given the research on inconsistent organizational skills and focus during early adolescence (Casey, Galvan, & Somerville, 2016; Damour, 2016; Fagell, 2019), a well-developed and articulated curriculum model should be designed to address these needs.

Finally, parents expressed a desire to understand the transition to high school. Seventeen (53 percent) parents indicated information on high school transition as a priority. Students who matriculate from this independent school typically enroll in a small number of elite private high schools in the city. The planning process begins during the seventh grade year with a high school career fair. Understanding both the public and private school choices available for students and helping families navigate these decisions based on the needs of their children are important roles for IPS faculty and staff. Additionally, parent concerns about academic rigor and curriculum offerings in IPS also reflect a need for them to understand how well their children are being prepared for this transition. As the Head of School, it will be necessary to design a system to receive feedback from high schools and to track how well our alumni are doing academically and socially in these spaces. That data can then help inform curriculum and program enhancements for the middle school. Teachers cite vertical alignment as important within the IPS, but there is also a need to understand the high school programs our students are most likely to attend.

5.3.2 How Might We Enhance Parenting and Learning at Home Resources and Opportunities?

Social concerns were also important to families. Twenty-seven respondents (84 percent) indicated that they felt social-emotional learning was important for a successful transition to middle school, but again, they did not feel confident that the school was communicating or addressing these skills well. Workshops to help parents navigate the social conflicts of adolescents was the most popular topic for families and teachers alike. This appears to be a tangible area for action. A significant consideration that emerges from this study is time. Given that 75 percent (n=24) of respondents indicated they were employed full-time, providing information and opportunities for workshops in a variety of formats and times would ensure the broadest reach. Programming opportunities related to executive functioning and organizational and study skills, coupled with opportunities for parents to learn how to support their children at home with these skills, were a high priority for parents. In addition, families desired support in understanding how to navigate social problems. Developing workshops that focus on early adolescent development and providing families with tangible tools to navigate tumult and scaffold developmentally-appropriate supports, would engage families while also encouraging networking among parents. These can take the form of in-person or virtual workshops, reference articles, or social media communication. Ensuring that teachers are well versed in these skills allows for additional information to be shared via teacher conferences or communication with families to further articulate these skills. Weekly or biweekly newsletters can intentionally provide a focus on developmental stages and resources in the local community as well as within the school.

The school should also consider developing opportunities for learning and support that are of interest in subgroups within the community, in addition to the globally important opportunities.

For example, while only one respondent on this survey desired information and supports regarding parenting as a single parent, this survey by no means represented all parents. Additionally, family dynamics can shift at any time and provide a need for supports on this topic or many others. In focusing on equity, it is important to provide information, workshops, and resources on topics that may be of interest for only a few, or only during a specific time frame. This requires the school to maintain open lines of communication built on trust, so that families are able to communicate their specific needs.

5.3.3 How Might We Design Impactful and Sustainable Opportunities for Families to Volunteer?

Although this problem of practice focused on three types of involvement (communication, learning at home, and parenting), Epstein does include volunteering as an important type of engagement for schools to adopt (Epstein et al., 2002). Surprisingly, although teachers suggested providing opportunities for volunteering, they also perceived changes in how visibly engaged parents have been over the last few years. Parents' responses aligned with the teachers in this area. Parents did not prioritize volunteering as extremely important, in contrast to engagement on academics and social-emotional development. Fundraising was also not prioritized by the families who responded to this survey. As Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory reminds us, macrosystems are influenced by both the microsystem of family culture and policy changes, economic opportunities, and political systems as well. This lukewarm response by parents to volunteering may be related to job-related demands, parents as students themselves, and increased caretaking demands for older parents. It may also be a reflection of the current global pandemic that has shifted work-life balance for families, as well as potentially their economic stability.

Parents' life experiences will dictate their ability to support school activities and student learning (Hill & Chao, 2009, Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995).

Understanding how families would like to volunteer is an area for further exploration. For example, the data from the family survey clearly illustrated that families were more comfortable volunteering in ways that promote the school, or in ways directly related to their own children. Additionally, our parent community reflects a highly educated resource. With 78 percent (n=25) of respondents holding advanced degrees in their fields, the opportunities for extended learning and real-world application of skills through partnerships with experts in these various fields is profound - an opportunity for family engagement that provides an opportunity for further growth. Teachers indicated their desire to partner with parents in this way through their responses on the teacher survey. These types of partnerships put parents and teachers on equal footing and serve to develop an engagement model described by Swap (1993), a curriculum enrichment model in which parental involvement is a tool to enhance the school offerings.

Although most parents indicated they were more confident in their abilities to provide more global support, there were parents who felt confident in their ability to help other families with parenting or learning at home. By creating a group of interested volunteers to serve as family liaisons, the school could provide an opportunity for Hong's Three Strands (2011): induction, introducing families to the school; integration, encouraging families to help each other; and investment, sustaining opportunities for community building. This could take the form of a New Parent "buddy system" with current families to help them navigate and learn the culture. These relationships could progress into the middle school transition to provide mentorship to families with an eldest or only child entering adolescence. It appears that families whose eldest or only children are entering or immersed in early adolescence may find information on stages of

development to be more important than those of middle or younger children and may, therefore, benefit from a program that provides this level of mentorship.

Given that some families indicated hesitancy in their confidence to engage with other families in this capacity, the school could provide training opportunities for families to serve as mentors. This process builds relationships over time and encourages participation in events. Relationships impact participation, as people are more likely to attend events and activities when someone they know invites them (Warren, et al., 2005). This also builds capacity and true partnership.

It would be interesting to see if these responses change over the next few years as parents of younger students, who are currently serving in leadership roles on PTA and Boosters, matriculate into the middle school. The challenge moving forward will be to determine how to keep parents active in volunteering throughout their tenure at IPS and in creative ways that allow those with limited time to participate.

5.3.4 How Might We Design Professional Development Opportunities to Increase Family Engagement?

Teachers in grades four through eight identified areas of need for further professional development. The majority of teachers are veteran educators. On average, teachers in grades four through eight have 23 years of teaching experience, fourteen years of which have been at IPS. This makes for compelling data that this staff have rich experiences with early and pre-adolescent learners, as well as deep institutional knowledge about the community in which they serve. This expertise should be reflected in programmatic decisions about professional development opportunities to maximize their leadership and knowledge.

Throughout the teacher survey, concerns for organizational and time management skills were cited by multiple respondents. Seven (50 percent) of teachers cited executive functioning skills as important for students to learn in order to be successful in middle school. It was also referenced by parents as a priority. Teachers desire a vertical discussion between grades to ensure skills are being taught early in an effort to support early adolescent learners, and they desire collaboration between departments to fulfill this need.

While teachers repeatedly referenced the importance of these skills, parents were not confident these skills were being integrated into the curriculum at school. Given the lack of a systematic program to teach executive functioning and study skills throughout the school, the school may want to consider implementing and articulating what skills should look like at each development level and how they address them in the grade level curriculum and structure. Focusing time during an advisory period to provide direction instruction in these skills in fourth and fifth grade (prior to the transition to middle school) would benefit students and teachers.

Vertical alignment of skills should begin with a well-developed Profile of a Graduate. A graduate profile is typically developed collaboratively with stakeholders to illustrate the cognitive and social competencies that students should master upon graduation. It also serves to communicate priority goals for teaching and learning to align their collective efforts (Kay, 2017). This tool enables the community to work backwards to plan programming and skill development at each grade level to ensure everyone is working towards the same goal for the students. It also provides a transparent vision for the future of the school community.

Ensuring that all teachers understand the brain development and social-emotional needs of early adolescents would enhance the ability to design appropriate dispositions and competencies and articulate the rationale for programming and curriculum decisions made to prepare students

for the middle grades transition. Upper elementary and middle school teachers should be well versed in the growing research on early adolescent learners to understand and articulate the diverse spectrum of behaviors and cognitive skills that represent a middle school learner. Parent responses indicated a strong desire to understand both the general characteristics of this developmental stage as well as information specific to their own children's development and social-emotional skills. Therefore, teachers must have the skills to speak confidently on both current research and in broad terms of what to expect during early adolescence to help families navigate this developmental period and to recognize if and when they should seek additional support. One way to do this would be through a professional book study specific to middle schools, such as *Middle Schools Matter* by Phyllis Flagell (2019). This information can then serve as the basis for a structured parent conference experience that focuses on both academic progress based on data, and developmentally-appropriate learner dispositions.

5.4 Implications for Further Research

This problem of practice provided a glimpse into the perceptions and priorities of families and teachers related to the transition to middle school in an independent tuition-based school in an urban setting. The data provides the initial step in understanding ways in which, through the eyes of parents and teachers, the school can proactively engage families to encourage a successful transition to middle school. Understanding how the priorities of these specific families and teachers compare to a larger sample size of families, in public, private, suburban, and rural settings, would further the scope of the research and provide an opportunity to determine trends and potential universal programming needs.

This study investigated family and teacher perceptions at one point in time. As we know from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, multiple systems influence children's experiences, including historical, political, and cultural forces that change over time. In other words, this is not a static experience for families and teachers, and priorities may continue to shift as new families join the community or outside forces exert influence on the priorities of families and students.

Further research might include measuring school climate. Through the use of a school climate measure that captures perceptions of students, teachers, families, and other stakeholders, the school can measure whether students and families are thriving in the programs and culture of a school. This would provide baseline data allowing the school to determine the impacts on all stakeholders of any changes to academic programming and communication and engagement with families. School climate surveys are readily available through the Pennsylvania Department of Education and administered annually to collect and assess perceptions of the school. Such information would provide longitudinal data for the school to measure progress and provide a method to monitor shifts in priorities over time.

In addition, more qualitative studies of family engagement practices would be beneficial to the school. Semi-structured interviews or focus groups of parents, teachers, and students would allow for a better understanding of perceptions and priorities for family engagement practices surrounding middle school transition. Understanding how students perceive the transition and what they perceive would assist them in entering middle school would further enhance future programmatic decisions.

This study focused on engaging families to support student transition to middle school. As students matriculate to various high schools upon graduation from the middle school, further

research might include determining the perceptions of alumni and alumni families once students have entered high school or later to determine if they felt middle school programming prepares students to be successful in high school. This data would inform middle school practices and ensure the school was indeed meeting its stated goals and priorities. Additionally, as a community that spans multiple transitions, IPS is in a unique position to create a comprehensive transitional program at all levels. While each developmental transition (preschool to kindergarten, elementary to middle and middle to high school) is unique, there will be elements of each that should be further analyzed to determine what should and can be replicated at each level to promote a systematic and sustainable engagement experience across all school transitions.

5.5 IPS Call to Action

This year, the IPS is designing and launching a five-year Strategic Plan meant to guide our priorities for growth. The results of both the teacher and family feedback regarding parent engagement to support the transition to middle school provides IPS with a strong basis from which to design a plan to be tested during implementation and to make changes accordingly. The development of a strong communication plan, focusing on parental supports for parenting and learning at home, as well as designing professional development opportunities for teachers, must be informed by the ongoing collection and analysis of stakeholder data and grounded in the Mission and Vision Statements for the IPS. A method for tracking alumni data and the adoption of the PA School Climate Survey, along with an annual Family Engagement Survey, would benefit programmatic decisions to build strong family engagement practices. Figure 2 captures the continuous process for improvement.

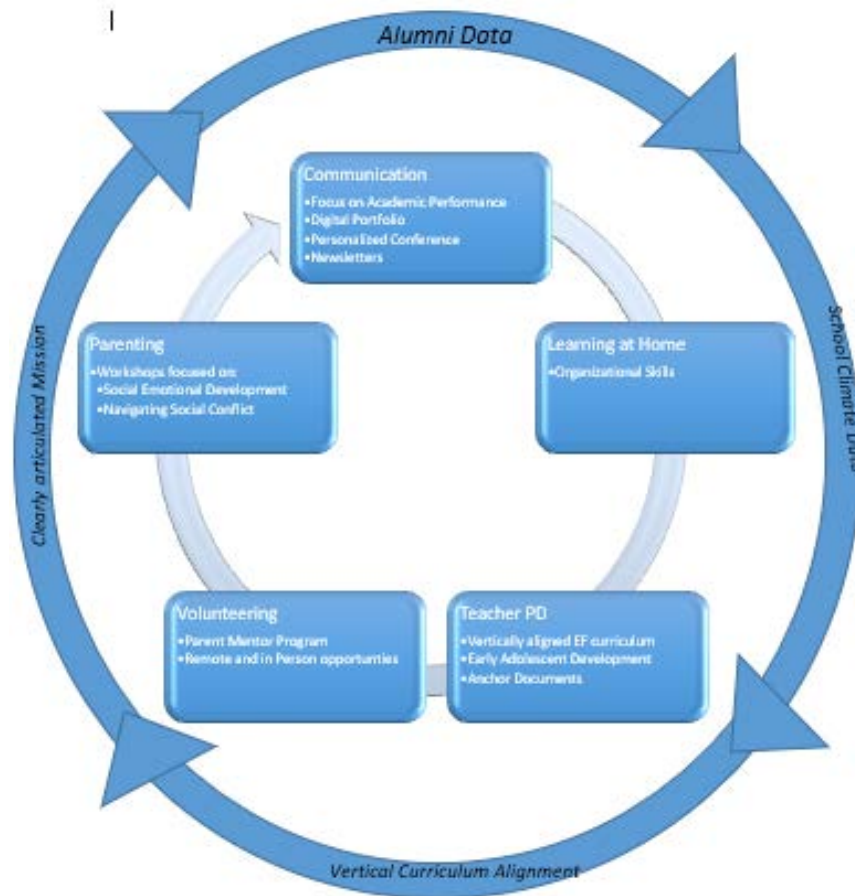


Figure 2. Continuous Process for Family Engagement

The current work of the Strategic Plan dictates the development and updates to the school mission and vision statements, including a Middle School Specific Mission and the Profile of a Graduate. These anchor documents should be disseminated widely and published on the school website. All decisions should be grounded in these documents. Further, the annual School Climate Survey should be implemented in the spring to gather baseline data on the climate of the IPS to inform future planning. This work is complemented by the vertical alignment of curriculum that should be published for stakeholders on the website.

5.5.1 Year One Activities

In year one, given the expressed importance of both families and teachers, the adoption of a research-based Executive Functioning curriculum, along with professional development opportunities, should be prioritized. As teachers begin to practice implementation, parent informational sessions can be provided to share with parents how they can support these same practices for organization, study skills, and problem solving at home. Further, the middle school team should design specific, purposeful activities to begin in the second trimester, for both families and students who will become rising sixth graders. These activities can include informational sessions, buddy days, and newsletter information.

5.5.2 Year Two Activities

In year two, while maintaining and building on the programming and structures from year one, IPS can collaborate with the PTA to formulate a parent volunteer and mentorship program. Additionally, the creation and distribution of an alumni survey to gather information on how well students are prepared for high school and the distribution of a general family engagement survey would provide consistent data to determine programmatic needs and areas of growth. These data, along with the school climate data, could be the basis for a stakeholder taskforce on family engagement practices to meet twice a year.

5.5.3 Year Three Activities

Year three provides an opportunity for the school to analyze survey data to determine the effectiveness of implemented programming and make changes accordingly. The programs established in year one and two should be analyzed to determine further improvements. The Communication and Engagement Task Force should, based on the data, make recommendations for further improvement. Figure 3 provides a graphic representation of the Call to Action.

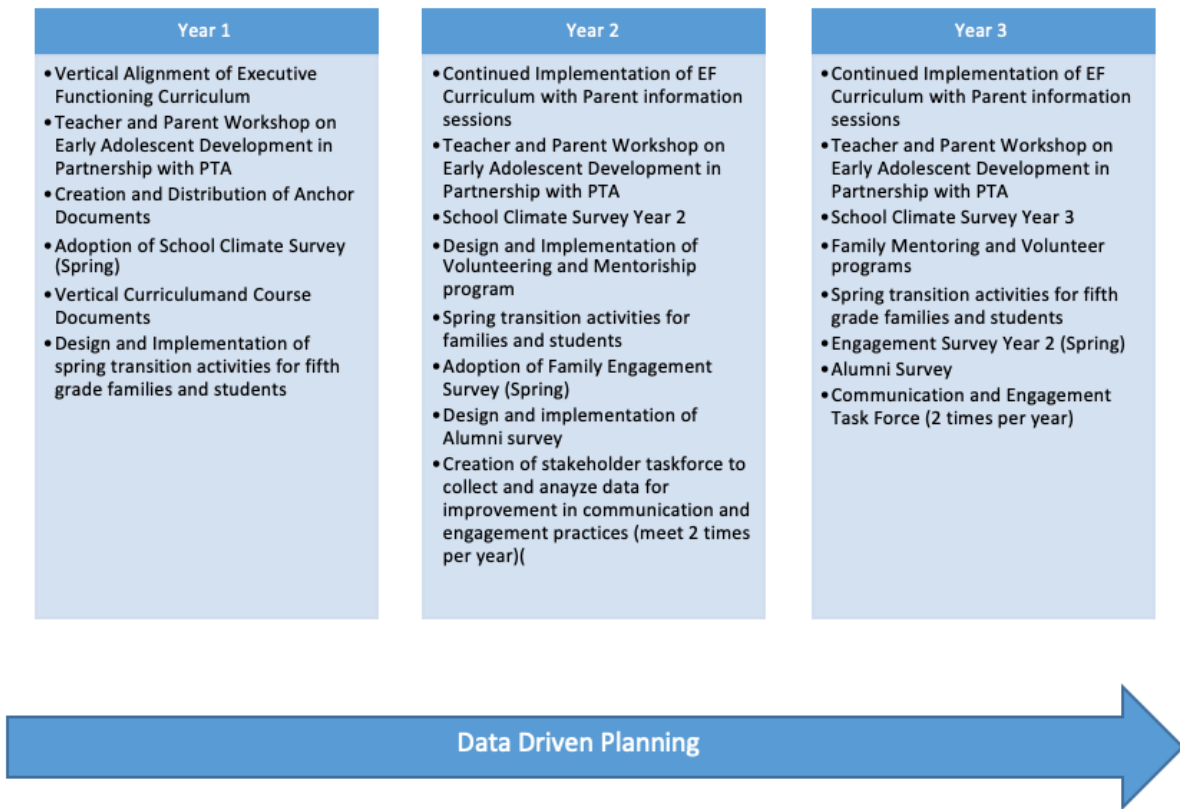


Figure 3. IPS Call to Action

5.6 Conclusion

This study raises the possibility that strategic and intentional efforts may yield stronger engagement than during the middle grades and, therefore, may positively affect student transition to middle school. The data tells the story that parents want developmental, social, organizational and academic information in a personalized format to feel fully engaged in supporting the transition to middle grades. Another way to interpret the results of this study is that both teachers and parents value the partnership, desire the same outcomes, and are calling for the same types of communication and engagement. This suggests there are real possibilities and opportunities for creating a dynamic model of engagement for families moving forward.

Appendix A Survey Introduction Script for Family Engagement Survey

Dear Campus Laboratory School Families,

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled Engaging Families to Support Middle Grades Transition. This study is being done by Jessica Webster, Head of School, as part of my Problem of Practice for the University of Pittsburgh School of Education Doctoral Program. You were selected to participate in this study because you currently have a child(ren) in grades 4-8.

The purpose of this research study is determining the needs of families and educators as students prepare to transition from elementary to middle level education. By understanding what families value, our school can assess our current programming and proactive communication to engage families during the middle school years. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete an online survey. This survey/questionnaire will ask about your experiences and priorities as they relate to your child's education and will take you approximately 15 minutes to complete.

https://pitt.col.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1RDCh8fJ2A86XFH

We believe there are minimal risks associated with this research study; however, a risk of breach of confidentiality always exists and we have taken the steps to minimize this risk by not collecting personally identifying information. To the best of our ability your answers in this study will remain confidential. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. If you have questions about this project, you may contact Jessica Webster, Head of School, via email: jewebster@carlow.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

Appendix B Survey Introduction Script for Family Engagement Survey for Teachers

Dear Campus Laboratory School Teachers,

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled Engaging Families to Support Middle Grades Transition. This study is being done by Jessica Webster, Head of School, as part of my Problem of Practice for the University of Pittsburgh School of Education Doctoral Program. You were selected to participate in this study because you currently teach grades 4-8.

The purpose of this research study is determining the needs of families and educators as students prepare to transition from elementary to middle level education. By understanding what teachers value, our school can assess our current programming and proactive communication to engage families during the middle school years.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete an online survey. This survey/questionnaire will ask about your experiences and priorities as they relate to your teaching experience and will take you approximately 15 minutes to complete.

We believe there are minimal risks associated with this research study; however, a risk of breach of confidentiality always exists and we have taken the steps to minimize this risk by not collecting personally identifying information. To the best of our ability your answers in this study will remain confidential. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. If you have questions about this project, you may contact Jessica Webster, Head of School, via email: jewebster@carlow.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

Appendix C Parent Engagement Survey

Survey questions for parents

Adapted with permission from Epstein, J. L. & Salinas, K. C. (1993) *Surveys and Summaries: Questionnaires for Teachers and Parents in the Elementary and Middle Grades*. Baltimore: Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, Johns Hopkins University.

Directions: Questions should be answered by the parent or guardian who has the most contact with the school about your child. This survey is to be completed by parents and guardians of students currently in grades 4-8. Please answer the questions about your OLDEST CHILD in those grades.

Demographic Questions

D1. Who is filling out this questionnaire?

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <input type="radio"/> Mother | <input type="radio"/> Grandmother |
| <input type="radio"/> Father | <input type="radio"/> Grandfather |
| <input type="radio"/> Stepmother | <input type="radio"/> Guardian |
| <input type="radio"/> Stepfather | <input type="radio"/> Other relative |
| <input type="radio"/> Aunt | <input type="radio"/> Other (describe) |
| <input type="radio"/> Uncle | |

D2. What grade is your oldest child in at this school?

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 7 |
| <input type="radio"/> 5 | <input type="radio"/> 8 |
| <input type="radio"/> 6 | |

D3. What is the gender of your eldest child in this school?

- Boy
- Girl

D4. What is the birth order of the eldest child in this school?

- Eldest Child in family
- Only Child in family
- Older siblings in family

D5. What is your highest education level?

- Did not complete high school
- Completed high school
- Some college
- College degree
- Master's degree
- Terminal degree

D6. Marital Status:

- Married
- Divorced or separated
- Never married

D7. Are you currently employed?

- Employed full time
- Employed part time
- Not currently employed

D8. If applicable, is your spouse or partner employed?

- Employed full time
- Employed part time
- Not currently employed
- Not applicable

D9. How do you describe yourself?

- Asian-American
- Black or African American
- White or Caucasian
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Multiracial

D10. What languages do you speak at home?

- English
- Spanish
- Mandarin
- Arabic
- Russian
- Other

Q1. In your opinion, how important is it for the school to help create opportunities for adult community and networking?

- Extremely Important
- Very Important
- Moderately Important
- Minimally Important
- Not Important

Q2. How important is it for your child’s teacher or someone at the school to provide the following opportunities or communications to you?

How important is it to me that my child’s teacher or someone at the school....

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Minimally Important	Not at all Important
a. Helps me understand my child’s stage of development.					
b. Tells me how my child is doing in school.					
c. Asks me to volunteer at the school.					
d. Explains how to check my child’s homework.					
e. Sends home news about things happening at school.					
f. Tells me what skills my child needs to learn in:					
Math.					
Language Arts/Reading					
Science					
Socially and Emotionally					
g. Provides information on community services that I may want to use with my family.					
h. Invites me to PTA meetings.					
i. Assigns homework that requires my child to talk with me about things learned in school.					
j. Invites me to a program at school.					
k. Asks me to help with fund raising.					
l. Has a parent-teacher conference with me					

m. Includes parents on school committees, such as curriculum, budget or improvement committees.					
n. Provides information on community events that I may want to attend with my child.					
p. Provide resources and information about developmental stages of my child.					

Q3. How well has your child's teacher or someone at the school done the following this school year?

My child's teacher or someone at the school....

	Well	OK	Poorly	Never
a. Helps me understand my child's stage of development.				
b. Tells me how my child is doing in school.				
c. Asks me to volunteer at the school.				
d. Explains how to check my child's homework.				
e. Sends home news about things happening at school.				
f. Tells me what skills my child needs to learn in:				
Math.				
Language Arts/Reading				
Science				
Socially and Emotionally				
g. Provides information on community services that I may want to use with my family.				
h. Invites me to PTA meetings.				
i. Assigns homework that requires my child to talk with me about things learned in school.				
j. Invites me to a program at school.				
k. Asks me to help with fund raising.				

l. Has a parent-teacher conference with me				
m. Includes parents on school committees, such as curriculum, budget or improvement committees.				
n. Provides information on community events that I may want to attend with my child.				
p. Provide resources and information about developmental stages of my child.				

Q4. Many parents have expertise or experiences that they can contribute to the school community to support other families. How comfortable would you be in contributing to help other parents understand and access the following information and programs?

	Very comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Not comfortable
a. Help other parents understand their child's stage of development.			
b. Help other parents understand how their child is doing in school			
c. Help other parents find ways to volunteer at the school.			
d. Help other parents understand how to monitor and check their child's homework.			
e. Help communicate what it is happening at school.			
f. Help other parents understand what skills their child needs to learn in:			
Math.			
Language Arts/Reading			
Science			
Socially and Emotionally			
g. Provides information on community services that other families may want to use.			
h. Promote and welcome families to attend PTA meetings.			
i. Help other parents find ways to talk with their children about things learned in school.			
h. Promote and welcome families to school programs			
k. Encourage families to help with fund raising.			

l. Help other parents schedule and communicate during a parent-teacher conference.			
m. Encourage other parents to join school committees, such as curriculum, budget or improvement committees.			
n. Provides information on community events that other parents may want to attend with their children.			
p. Provide resources and information about developmental stages of child.			

Q5. Schools contact families in different ways. Please indicate if the school has done these things...

	Does Not Do	Could Do Better	Does Well	I Do Not Know
a. Help me understand my child's stage of development.				
b. Tell me how my child is doing in school.				
c. Tell me what skills my child needs to learn each year.				
d. Holds a parent-teacher conference with me.				
e. Explains how to check my child's homework.				
f. Sends home news about things happening at school.				
g. Give me information about how report card grades are earned.				
h. Contacts me if my child is having problems.				
Contacts me if my child does something well or improves.				

Q6. Over the past two years how much has the school involved you at school and at home?

- School involved me less this year than last.
- School involved me about the same in both years.
- School involved me more this year than last.
- My child did not attend this school last year.

Q7. In your opinion, how important is it for the school to prepare your child for her next academic year in the following areas:

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Minimally Important	Not at all important
Math					
Language Arts/Reading					
Science					
Social Studies					
Social Emotional Development					
Organizational and Study Skills					

Q8. How well do you feel your child's school is preparing him/her for his/her next academic year?

	Well	OK	Poorly
Math			
Language Arts/Reading			
Science			
Social Studies			
Social Emotional Development			
Organizational and Study Skills			

Q9. We would like to know how you feel about this school right now. This will help us plan for the future. Please state how you feel about the following:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
This school has an active parent organization (PTA).				
Many parents I know help out at the school.				
I could help my child more if the teachers gave me more ideas.				
Parents at this school get involved more in the younger grades.				
This school is known for trying new programs.				
The school views parents as important partners.				
The community supports this school.				
This school is one of the best schools for students and for parents.				

Q10. Some families want more information about what their children are learning in each subject. Check which subjects you want to know more about to help your child be successful in middle school.

- Math Skills
- Reading Skills
- Writing Skills
- Spelling
- Social Studies
- Science
- Handwriting
- Speaking Skills
- Current Events
- Study Skills
- Interpersonal Skills
- Social and Emotional Skills
- High School Transition
- None
- Other: _____

Q11. Some families want to attend workshops on topics they want to hear more about.

Check the topics that interest you or suggest a few

- How children grow and develop in adolescence
- How to discipline children
- Helping children solve school problems
- Helping children solve social problems
- Preventing health problems
- How to deal with stress
- Raising children as a single parent
- How to help my child develop his/her talents
- Helping children take tests
- Understanding middle schools
- None
- Other topics:

Q12. All communities have information that would help families. Which services in your community would you like to know more about?

- Health care for adolescents and families
- Family counseling
- Parenting classes
- Child care
- After School Tutoring
- After School Sports and Activities
- Community Service for children
- Summer programs
- Information on museums, shows and events in the community
- None
- Other services:

Appendix D Teacher Survey Questions for Family Engagement

Demographic Questions

D1. What grades do you teach this year?

- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8

D2. How many different students do you teach each day, on average? _____

D3. What best describes your teaching responsibility?

- I teach several subjects to one self-contained class.
- I teach one subject to several different classes/grades of students in a departmentalized program.
- I teach more than one subject to more than one class in a semi-departmental or other arrangement.
- Other (please describe):

D4. Check the subjects you teach in an average week (check all that apply):

- Reading
- Language Arts/English
- Math
- Science
- Social Studies
- Health
- Art
- Music
- Advisory/Responsive Classroom
- Physical Education
- Other:

D5. What is your experience?

_____ **Years in teaching or administration**

_____ **Years in this school**

D7. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

D8. What is your highest education?

- Bachelor's
- Bachelor's + credits
- Master's
- Master's + credits
- Doctorate

D9. How to you describe yourself?

- Asian-American
- Black or African American
- White or Caucasian
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Multiracial

D10. About how many hours each week do you spend contacting parents?

- None
- Less than one hour
- Two hours
- Three or more hours

Q1. What percentage of families have you contacted in the following ways:

	None	25%	50%	75%	All
Email					
Telephone					
Meeting at School					
Scheduled parent conference					
Home visit					
Meeting in the community					
Report Card commentas					
Performances, sports or other events					

Q2. Please estimate the percentage of your students' families who did the following this year:

	None	25%	50%	75%	All
Attend workshops regularly at school					
Check daily that child's homework is done					
Practice schoolwork in the summer					
Attend PTA meetings regularly					
Attend parent teacher conferences with you					
Understand enough to help their child at home with					
Reading Skills at your grade level					
Math Skills at your grade level					
Writing Skills at your grade level					
Organizational Skills at your grade level					

Q3. How important are types of involvement listed :

a. Workshops for parents to build skills in parenting and understand their children at each grade level.			
b. Workshops for parents on creating home conditions for learning.			
c. Communications from the school to the home that all families can understand and use.			
d. Communications about report cards so that parents understand student progress and needs.			
e. Parent teacher conferences with all families.			
f. Surveying parents each year for their ideas about the school.			
g. Information on how to monitor homework.			
h. information for parents to help their children with specific skills and subjects.			
i. Programs for after school activities, recreation and homework help.			
j. Information on what to expect in the upcoming grade.			

Q4. What is the most successful practice to involve parents to prepare for middle school transition that you have used or have heard about?

Q5. In what ways could better partnerships with families help you as a teacher support the transition to middle school?

Q6. In what ways has parent involvement changed over the past year or two at this school?

Q7. What school practices to involve parents have helped you the most and why?

Q8. What recommendations would you make for how to improve communications with parents?

Q9. What is the most important thing for a school to do to ensure that all children are successful in transitioning to the upper grades/middle school?

Q10. If you were in charge of the school, how would you try to engage more parents from your community?

Appendix E Permission to Adapt and Use Survey



Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships

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August 23, 2019

To: Jessica Webster

From: Joyce L. Epstein & Steven B. Sheldon

Re: Permission to use:

- Sheldon, S. B. & Epstein, J. L. (2007). Parent and Student Surveys of Family and Community Involvement in the Elementary and Middle Grades. Baltimore, MD: Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University.
- Epstein, J. L. & Salinas, K. C. (1993). Surveys and Summaries: Questionnaires for Teachers and Parents in Elementary and Middle Grades. Baltimore, MD: Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University.

This letter grants you permission to use, adapt, translate, or reprint the survey(s) noted above in your dissertation study. We ask only that you include appropriate references to the survey(s) and authors in the text and bibliography of your reports and publications.

Best of luck with your project.

Appendix F Permission to Conduct Research

To: University of Pittsburgh

From: Sibdas Gosh, PhD

Carlow University Provost

Re: Effective Family Engagement for Middle Grades Transition

Jessica Webster has expressed her desire to conduct a research student with the Campus Laboratory School of Carlow University teachers and parents. It is our understanding that Jessica would like to conduct a survey of parents and teachers, and possibly administer teacher interviews in our school. Participants will answer questions regarding their experiences and needs related to supporting families in transitioning students to middle grades.

Carlow University believes this information will help inform our instructional practices. We are committed to work that will have a positive impact on our understanding of how best to engage families.

Jessica has requested to use space within our Campus Laboratory School to conduct this research. In addition, teacher participants will be permitted to use their Carlow issued computer and internet to complete the survey.

Carlow University provides permission for Jessica to conduct her research within Campus Laboratory School of Carlow University.

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