No Child Left Behind: School Processes Associated with Positive Changes, Collaborative Partnership, and Principal Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

On January 8, 2002, the President of the United States of America, George W. Bush, signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (EDEA) of 1965. NCLB is intended to impact student achievement through a wide range of mechanisms. Current educational discourse focuses on the pros and cons of testing standards and requirements, and policies around school choice. It also emphasizes the importance of family and community involvement in students’ education.

Title I, begun with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, provides federal funding for schools to help students who are behind academically or at risk of falling behind. Services can include: hiring teachers to reduce class size, tutoring, computer labs, parental involvement activities, professional development, purchase of materials and supplies, pre-kindergarten programs, and hiring teacher assistants or others. Title I is the largest federal education program, which is intended to help ensure that all children have the opportunity to obtain a high quality education and reach proficiency on challenging state academic standards and assessments.

Many of the major requirements in NCLB are outlined in Title I – Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), teacher and paraprofessional requirements, accountability, sanctions for schools designated for improvement, standards and assessments, annual state report cards, professional development, and parent involvement. According to section 1118 of Title I, schools receiving this type of funding are required to implement activities that help foster greater family and community involvement. Among these requirements, schools are required to provide information to parents helping them understand academic content and achievement standards, to educate educators in how to reach out to parents and implement programs connecting children’s home and school, and to communicate in languages and at reading levels accessible to all families. In addition, NCLB states that schools may also develop partnerships with community-based organizations and businesses.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Parent involvement is one of the key components of the NCLB Act. Under NCLB, every school district is mandated to develop processes to ensure meaningful ways to engage parents. The requirements for parental involvement rest on the premise that parents acting as informed advocates to hold schools...
and school district accountable.

The value placed on family involvement at the federal, district, and local school levels reflects decades of research showing the connection between family involvement and positive student outcomes. Studies on family involvement have concluded that students’ home environment and family involvement are important predictors of a variety of academic and non-academic outcomes (Henderson & Mapp, 2003; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2001; Reynolds & Walberg, 2002). Furthermore, research shows that educators’ efforts to improve school-home relationships and increase family and community involvement can have a positive effect on levels of parent involvement (Epstein & Salina, 2004; Sheldon & Voorhis, 2004; Van Voorhis, 2003) and student outcomes (Sanders, 2003; 2005). As a result, it is important for this researcher to identify those processes and characteristics that contribute to the development of strong school, family, and community partnership programs in schools.

Using cross-sectional data, Gerne (2004) showed that elementary schools reported greater enactment of the NCLB requirement for parent involvement than secondary schools. In addition, schools located in large urban and those that had more students tended to be in less compliance with NCLB. Gerne (2004) also found that school and systemic characteristics contributed to the enactment of NCLB requirements for parent involvement. Specifically, principal support and longevity at the school predicted greater NCLB compliance, as did support for partnerships from the school district. Although her study provided new information about the contribution of principals and district to the implementation of school, family, and community partnerships, without longitudinal data it is not clear whether or not these factors affect schools’ partnership implementation.

Districts and states have leadership roles to play in guiding schools to strengthen and sustain programs of family and community involvement (Sheldon, 2005). The NCLB requires schools, districts, and states to develop academic programs that will increase students’ proficiency in reading, math, and science. To learning at high levels, all students need the guidance and support of their teachers, families, and others in the community. NCLB also requires schools, districts, and states to develop programs to communicate with all families about their children’s education and to involve them in ways that help boost student achievement and success. The federal legislation, related state and district policies, school goals, family and student expectations, and useful research on partnerships are converging to encourage all schools to establish active and effective learning communities.

Schools have a vested interest in becoming true learning communities. A school learning community works with many partners to increase student’s learning opportunities and experiences. Activities to enrich students’ skills and talents may be conducted during lunch, after school, and at other times by school, family, and community partners (Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Most schools conduct at least a few activities to involve families in their children’s education, but most do not have well-organized, goal-linked, and sustainable partnership programs.

In addition to developing capacity at the district and school levels, parent involvement initiatives must build the capacity of individual parents as well. Indeed, there is a movement of parents who are taking parent involvement into their own hands by learning how to become leaders and advocates for their children, as well agents for school change. Much of the philosophy behind this type of parent leadership stems from community organizing, where a central concern is building the social and political capital of parents and community members through empowerment and mobilization. A key part of this is leadership training and learning how to ask the right questions in order to make demands and hold
leadership training and learning how to ask the right questions in order to make demands and hold school officials accountable in a way that will yield positive results (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2005; Jehl, Blank, & McCloud, 2001; Mediratta, 2004; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2008; Zachary & Olatoye, 2001).

The challenges to parent involvement cannot be resolved at the school-level alone. Schools “need to be readied to relate to parents as resources and partners” (Lopez et al., 2005, p. 100). Support at the district level is key to translating parent involvement goals into effective practices (Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). Districts should also design evaluation processes in order to assess whether policies are translated into effective practices at the school level (Family and Community Engagement, 2006; Kessler-Sclar & Baker, 2000; Mattingly et al., 2002).

With NCLB and rising accountability expectations shaping current educational reforms, districts are required to ensure that parent involvement initiatives are in place. However, limited information is presently available on effective district parent involvement initiatives (Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000; Mattingly et al., 2002). Furthermore, although numerous parent involvement programs exist across the nation, attempts to assess the effectiveness of such programs have not been as common (Mattingly et al., 2002). These factors present serious implications for parent involvement efforts as districts attempt to translate national and state policies into “meaningful local policy and practice” (Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000, p. 102). A survey-based study by Kessler-Sklar and Baker (2000) on district parent involvement policies, and the programs in place to support these policies indicated a gap between the reported parent involvement policy goals for that district and the actual programs in place to address those goals. Also, few districts reported model, evaluated programs. More recently, a report about parent involvement initiatives in the Boston Public School system (Family and Community Engagement, 2006) revealed that the leadership has had difficulty supporting programs to engage parents in an effective way.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Schools, families, and communities are important contexts for children’s learning, and that greater coordination among these environments benefits children’s education and development. Actions by school personnel, parents, students, and community members can reduce or increase the distance and dissonance between and among these environments. In this paper, longitudinal 2-year data are examined to answer the question: What school processes are associated with changes in schools’ enactment of NCLB family involvement requirements from one year to the next?

The study spans over 2 years and draws upon selected schools in the United States. Schools are provided guideline handbooks for establishing, maintaining, and improving school-wide partnership programs that reach out to families of all students. The guidance handbooks provided for schools is based on a research-based framework of six types of involvement that help create effective partnerships (Epstein, 2002): (1) parenting — helping all families establish supportive home environments for children; (2) communicating — establishing two-way exchanges about school programs and children’s progress; (3) volunteering — recruiting and organizing parent help at school, home, or other locations; (4) learning at home — providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum-related materials; (5) decision making — having family members serve as representatives and leaders on school committees; and (6) collaborating with the community — identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen
school programs. This typology provides a structure around which a school can organize and evaluate its efforts and activities to involve parents in their children’s education (Simon, Salinas, & Jansom, 2002). Schools completed and returned an annual end-of-year survey.

In addition to encouraging schools to provide opportunities for involvement, the researcher asked schools to confront challenges associated with involving all families in their children’s education. Because research shows that there is variation in parent involvement according to the education levels of the child, educational attainment of the parents, and family structure (Eccles & Harold, 1996), schools were encouraged to examine their partnership practices and assess the degree to which they reach out to all of their students’ families. For example, schools that serve families who speak languages other than English were asked to provide information in words and forms that the families understand; they were encouraged to provide volunteer training and opportunities for parents to help at school and in other locations and to include parent representatives from all groups on school decision-making boards or committees (Hidalgo & Siu, 2003). By addressing these and other challenges, schools could inform and involve parents across racial, educational, and socioeconomic groups so that all families could actively support their children’s education.

As a first step in establishing this study, schools were required to form a Leadership & Partnership for Positive Change (LPPC) team. The LPPC members included teachers, school administrators, parents, community members, and, at the high school level, students. The LPPC was responsible for organizing and implementing each school’s involvement activities. Moreover, the school LPPC was encouraged to link family and community involvement activities to specific goals, consistent and supportive of those set by the school improvement team or school council. Establishing an LPPC with the same goals as the school improvement team allowed partnership activities to work with, rather than in opposition to, other programs at the school. Finally, the researcher recommended that the LPPC meet at least once a month.

METHOD

Procedure

In the spring of 2008 and 2009, schools were sent the annual end-of-year survey to complete and return to the researcher. The survey asks schools to report on school characteristics and reflect upon the implementation of their partnership program. Schools report on the extent and quality of their program implementation; the extent to which they are working on challenges to family and community involvement; the extent to which they receive support from the school community and district for partnerships; and the extent to which teachers support parent involvement and parents are actively involved in their children’s education.

Sample

Six hundred and two schools returned the survey in 2009 (69.4% return rate). Of these schools, 462 had returned the survey in 2008. The longitudinal sample consisted of schools located in a variety of locales, including: large urban (42.4%), small urban (23.2%), suburban (22.5%), and rural (11.9%) areas. Over three-quarters of the schools reported that they received Title I funds. Finally, the sample of schools is mostly elementary and K-8 schools (77.7%). The remaining schools are middle schools (12.9%), middle and high schools (.9%), and high schools (6.5%). Nine schools (2.0%) were removed
from the sample because they were responsible for teaching students in grades K-12 and it was unclear whether to code them as an elementary or secondary school.

Variables

Dependent Variable

NCLB enactment—Thirteen items were taken from the 2008 and 2009 surveys to measure schools’ enactment of the NCLB policy requirements for parent involvement (2008

α = .79, 2009 α = .79). These items are: (1) How many parents or community liaisons were member of the LPPC?; (2) “We wrote a one-year action plan for partnerships for the 2007-2008 school year;” and “We wrote a one-year action plan for partnerships for the 2008-2009 school year.”; (3) How well did your school’s LPPC implement partnership activities that support school improvement goals?; (4) How well did your school’s LPPC share information about the partnership program with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA)/Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) and all families?; (5) What percentage of teachers conducted at least one parent-teacher conference with each student’s family?; (6) What percentage of teachers utilized parents as volunteers in class, at school, or at home?; (7) To what extent did the school send home positive communications periodically to all parents about their children’s work and accomplishments?; (8) To what extent did the school recruit and train parent/family volunteers to conduct activities that support school improvement goals?; (9) To what extent did the school prepare teachers to guide families on how to talk with, monitor, and interact with their children about homework?; (10) To what extent did the school communicate with all families, including those who do not read or speak English well?; (11) To what extent did the school identify and use community resources and services to help meet school improvement goals?; and (12) To what extent did the school develop ways for students to contribute to the community? (see Table 1 – NCLB Act and Corresponding Survey Measures). Because the items did not use the same response scale, each item was converted into standardized scores so that the scale mean would be 0 and the standard deviation would be 1.
Independent Variables

School Background

School Level. Schools were categorized as elementary schools and secondary schools. Those serving grades PK-6 and PK-8 were coded “1” to represent elementary schools. Middle schools (grades 4-8), middle/high schools (grades 4-12) and high schools (grades 9-12) were grouped together and coded “0” to represent secondary schools. Schools located in large urban, central city areas were coded 1. All other schools were coded 0. (see Table 2 – Mean, Standard Deviations, and Correlations)
Leadership & Partnership for Positive Change (LPPC) Team Organization

Team Structure. Schools that organized their LPPC with committees focused on either school goals or the six types of involvement were coded 1, while schools whose LPPC functioned as a single whole group were coded 0. A single item measured the extent to which schools’ LPPC met with greater or less frequency. Schools reported whether their LPPC met: “Never,” “1-2 times,” “A few times,” “Monthly,” or “More than monthly.” Each response was coded 1 to 5, respectively.

Principal Effects

Principal Stability. Schools reported the number of principals they have had over the past three years. Higher numbers reflect less stability, and greater mobility, in the administration of a school. Schools also reported whether or not the principal at their school took up to eight actions that support partnerships at the school. This measure of principal support for partnerships was the sum of the following eight items (α = .83): (1) Is an active member of the LPPC, (2) Supports LPPC-sponsored activities, (3) Provides time for LPPC members to meet and work, (4) Allocates funds for LPPC activities, (5) Brings community partners and resources to the school, (6) Encourages teachers, students, and parents to support LPPC-sponsored parent involvement activities, (7) Shares a clear vision for strong school, family, and community partnerships, and (8) Welcomes all families to the school.

District Effects

District Support for Partnerships. School reported the extent to which their district offices provided six types of support for partnerships. Schools reported whether their district offices: conducted workshops on partnerships, provided technical assistance on partnerships, provided funds for partnership programs, disseminated information on successful partnership practices, recognized schools’ good work on partnerships, or evaluated or helped the school evaluate the quality of their partnership.
program. Schools rated whether each type of support was: “Not Provided,” “A Little Helpful,” “Helpful,” or “Very Helpful.” This scale is the mean of the six items (α = .88).

**RESULTS**

To examine the influence of action team organization and systemic support on NCLB enactment, multiple regression analysis were conducted (see Table 3 – Multiple Regression Predicting NCLB Enactment in 2009). Prior to entering NCLB enactment in 2006, analysis indicated that elementary schools were in greater compliance with regulations to create partnerships than secondary schools (β = .238, p < .000). Schools located in large urban areas tended to be enacting fewer of the NCLB requirements (β = -.123, p < .003). Action team structure did not predict schools’ partnership implementation; however, those schools in which the action team met more frequently also reported greater NCLB compliance (β = .231, p <.000). Regression analysis show that the principal and district play important roles in helping schools meet NCLB regulations for parent involvement. Schools with greater mobility tended to implement fewer NCLB requirements (β = -.084, p < .044). Schools in which the principal support the work of partnerships and the action team, however, reported greater enactment of parent involvement activities (β = 298, p < .000), as did schools that reported greater support for partnerships from their district offices (β = .180, p < .000).

**Table 3. Multiple Regression Predicting NCLB Enactment in 2009**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
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<td>.170***</td>
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<td>-.094*</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>.396***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 462 schools

* p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01, *** p ≤ .001
School Level: Elementary schools = 1, Secondary schools = 0
Large Urban: Yes = 1, No = 0
Team Structure: Single team/no committees = 1, committee structure = 0

After entering prior levels of NCLB enactment action teams, principal support, and district support remain significant predictors of partnership implementation. Not surprisingly, schools that were in greater compliance of the NCLB requirement for parent involvement in 2008 tended to be in greater compliance in 2008 (β = .407, p < .000). After controlling for prior levels of enactment, elementary schools continued to do more work on partnerships than secondary schools (β = .161, p < .000). In addition, schools with action teams that met more regularly, that had greater principal support for
partnerships, and that reported greater support from their district offices tended to report higher levels of compliance from one year to the next ($\beta = .186, p < .000, \beta = .249, p < .000, \beta = .139, p < .000$, respectively).

DISCUSSION

The present study proves factors associated with stronger enactment of the parent, family, and community involvement requirements in NCLB. In particular, this study confirms the importance of principal leadership for partnerships, as well as district support. The study also provides critical information on the role of leadership teams for partnership enactment, and shows that principal and district support for parent involvement are needed in order for schools to increase the degree to which they meet the requirements for NCLB. The following are brief summaries of important issues raised through this study:

- Schools can implement partnership activities and programs better when they have a team that meets regularly. Schools are encouraged to set up a LPPC to plan partnership activities that will help them meet school improvement goals. When these teams met on a more regular basis, they were more likely to be in compliance of NCLB requirements and were able to improve the level of compliance to federal law over time. Partnership efforts within schools, therefore, benefit from a school-wide organizational approach.

- Principals are critical to a school’s ability to more effectively implement parent involvement activities and programs. Analyses here suggest that schools without stability in school leadership are less likely to implement the parent involvement components of NCLB. Also, principal support is needed in order for a school to maintain strong school, family, and community partnerships or to improve these efforts. This finding is consistent with prior research on the development and effectiveness of family and community involvement efforts in schools (Griffith, 2008).

- Analyses also suggest the district support for partnerships is crucial for meeting the demands for parent involvement in the NCLB law. This form of support indicates a systemic approach to partnerships that helps improve student learning and school compliance to the law from one year to the next.

In conclusion, further studies are needed of the multilevel and longitudinal effects of state, district, and school actions to increase equity in family involvement, including the effects of contrasting approaches on (1) outreach to families with diverse educational, racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds; (2) involvement by families; and (3) results for students on academic and behavioral outcomes of interest to educators. Such policy-related studies of school, family, community leadership and partnerships should influence future reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Title I.

REFERENCES


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