

Evidence Cluster #3: An Assessment Project for School-Community Capacity-Building

by

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EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

Abstract

Although Leeds Middle School parents are highly involved in cultural, social, or athletic events that celebrate the achievements of their students, they are noticeably absent from instructionally orientated opportunities. Likewise, survey data from Leeds Middle School teachers show they feel unsupported by parents and their community but believe they are effective communicators on their end. Meanwhile, student achievement scores are declining after several years of growth. While intense school improvement efforts focused on improving the quality of instruction at LMS contributed to the rise in student achievement scores, a new emphasis on meaningful parent and community involvement may help LMS reclaim its successful growth record. My action plan proposes a three-year initiative to educate teachers on how to more effectively communicate with parents and the community, implements a parent and community feedback survey, and provides parents instructionally focused opportunities to be more engaged in the school like student-led conferencing.

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

An Assessment Project for School-Community Capacity-Building

Every morning and afternoon the car rider line snakes around the front parking lot of Leeds Middle School (LMS), filled with more parents waiting outside to pick up or drop off their child .than the school ever regularly sees inside. While LMS has some successful programs in place to welcome parents into the school and celebrate students for cultural, social, or athletic achievements, there is little cooperation or engagement between teachers and parents on instructional issues.

School & Community Context

LMS is located in rural Lincoln County and serves the students and families in the county seat, Leeds. However, Lincoln County's long rectangular shape contributes to vast community differences at both ends and the middle. The eastern end includes wealthier communities along Lake Norman and families moving in from the Charlotte area while families in the western end have owned the surrounding farmland for generations. Likewise, the city of Leeds is characterized by generations of families. In fact, while the county has experienced a 23% population change from 2006 to 2010, the rate of population change for the city is only 5.2% for the same time period according to the 2010 census data. Thus, family history and family connections are important to building relationships in both the community and the school.

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

Unlike the other ends of the county, the city of Leeds is richly diverse in its population. The 2010 census data shows that the City of Leeds has a significantly higher Black and Hispanic population base which is also reflected in LMS student demographics (see Figure 1). While almost 86% of the county is white, only 68% of

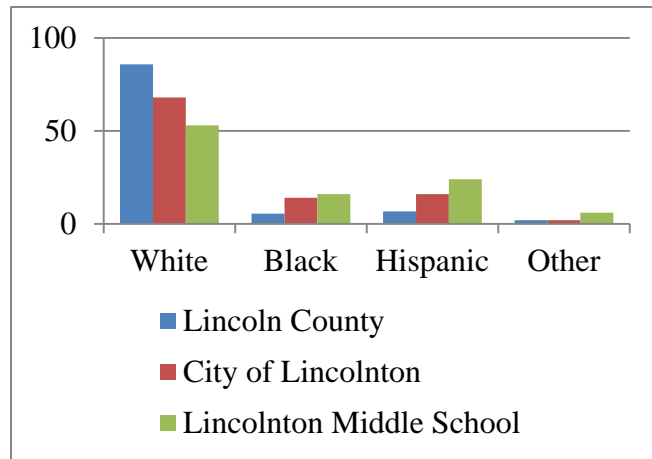


Figure 1. School and Community Demographics from 2010 U.S. Census data.

the city is, and 2012 LMS School Improvement Plan data only shows 53% of the student population identifying themselves as white. LMS's diversity is further represented economically as the average household income is approximately \$35,000 which is \$10,000 less than the state and \$13,000 less than the county according to the same census data. At nearly 24%, the poverty index for the city is over ten points higher than either the county or the state. This, of course, greatly impacts the schools and social service resources in the area. LMS technically qualifies as a Title I school due to 76% of the student population qualifying for free and reduced lunch, but the district chose not to accept federal Title I dollars for LMS in 2010 in order to avoid future No Child Left Behind sanctions for inconsistent progress toward Adequate Yearly Progress student achievement goals.

Despite the challenges presented by the school's diverse demographics and socio-economic status, student achievement data has improved. Although the school experienced a slight decline in overall reading, math, and science proficiency scores at the end of 2012, the previous five years represented a period of impressive growth. According to the 2012 school improvement plan data, LMS's overall proficiency composite was 61.2% in 2007-2008 but rose

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

to a high of 83.4% by the end of 2011. In 2011-2012, the composite score dropped to 78.8%.

While intense school improvement efforts focused on improving the quality of instruction at LMS contributed to the rise in student achievement scores, a new emphasis on meaningful parent and community involvement may help LMS reclaim its successful growth record.

Involvement vs. Engagement

Effective parent and community involvement has been defined in a myriad of ways, but Epstein and her colleagues' work with the six types of parent involvement is frequently referenced by researchers in this area (Goodall & Harris, 2008; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; North Carolina Department of Instruction, n.d.; Nzinga-Johnson, Aupperlee, & Baker, 2009; Price-Mitchell, 2009). According to the National Network of Partnership Schools, Epstein's work focuses on building relationships with parents in the following areas: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (n.d.). However, Marzano (2003) argues that since parents and the community have no real obligation to communicate with schools, it is the burden of the school to set a positive climate that fosters meaningful communication. Finally, parents and the community must be part of the governance of the school because people who are affected by school decisions should be meaningfully involved in the decision-making (Gordon & Louis, 2009; Marzano, 2003). Interestingly, Goodall and Harris (2008) found that parent involvement is defined differently depending on the stakeholder. In their research, teachers often defined it as showing support to the school while parents defined it as showing support for the learning of their student. Students were more closely aligned with their parents by defining parent involvement as taking an interest in what they are learning and valuing education in general.

Regardless of how it is defined, research shows that parent and community involvement can have a positive effect on student achievement, albeit the research is divided as to how large

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

that impact can be (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Price-Mitchell, 2009). In their summary of current research, Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that students from all backgrounds and income levels benefitted from parent involvement. They maintain that students with high levels of quality parent involvement have higher test scores, take more advanced classes, have better school attendance, and show improved social skills and ability to adapt to the school environment. However, not all types of parent and community involvement are considered equally as valuable. Harris and Goodall (2008) make a distinction between school-based parent involvement and what takes place at home. They argue that schools `use the words involvement and engagement interchangeably and typically think that any parent involvement is better than none. In support, Gordon and Louis (2009) caution schools against celebrating just involvement, defined simply as attendance at school functions. Likewise, Price-Mitchell (2009) says that participation cannot be celebrated for “people who only participate when invited” (p. 13). Like Harris and Goodall (2008), she downplays participation and volunteerism in favor of a more meaningful relationship based on engagement and partnership. In fact, Henderson and Mapp (2002) claim that when parents are meaningfully involved with their students’ education at home it has a greater impact, especially when linked directly to student achievement rather than just attending school-based activities.

While research shows that students from all socio-economic levels and backgrounds benefit from positive parent involvement, studies show that more affluent Caucasian families are more involved (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009). The reasons for this are various. Gordon and Louis (2009) cite a lack of opportunities and know-how. School communications are often one-way and don’t invite parent feedback (Marzano, 2003). Harris and Goodall (2008) describe for parents who do not have strong educational background themselves

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

do not know how to navigate the system. In addition, they explore other barriers such as lack of childcare, time, and perceptions of personal effectiveness. Thus, they maintain that parent involvement is easier and more welcomed at the elementary level in large part due to the complex structure of multiple teachers and the larger buildings at the upper grades. Other studies point to both conscious and unconscious forms of institutional prejudice such as written communications that intimidate parents with low literacy levels (Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009). Often these barriers can be wrongly interpreted as a parent choosing to be uninvolved. Rather than seeking out new and creative ways of involving parents, schools and teachers may simply play the martyr and complain that parents do not want to be involved. For this reason, schools should seek out partnerships with parents that value an equal relationship instead of a hierarchical one (Gordon & Louis, 2009; Price-Mitchell, 2009). While the school may offer parent involvement opportunities, Jeynes (2011) argues that “parents can easily discern whether their participation is welcome and whether their input is warmly received” (p. 12). In other words, parents might be less willing to participate when they don’t think they are truly wanted or that the event is for “show” only.

Data Sources

Parent attendance logs, stakeholder surveys, and parent organizational membership records all document lackluster LMS parent involvement that is limited largely to celebratory student events. According to the Parent-Teacher-Student-Association’s (PTSA) event logs for the last five years, curriculum programs average less than 20 participants compared with student centered attendance rates of 100 plus, which in reality only represents one-sixth of the student body. Typically, LMS annually offers at least two academically focused opportunities for parents that provide information about changes in curriculum, state assessments, or how to help struggling students. Meanwhile, the more frequent and popularly attended student centered

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

opportunities include band and chorus concerts, honor roll celebrations, the annual talent show, athletic games, and specially designated parent-student lunch date days.

PTSA membership data also shows disappointing involvement. In 2012-2013, only 294 families out of 675 or 44% joined PTSA by paying a small five-dollar membership fee.

However, parents cannot be singled out for lack of PTSA involvement as only 58% of the teachers joined. Low parent membership may be due to the timing of the fee when parents have other beginning of the year expenses, especially given the high prevalence of free and reduced lunch families, but it may also be due to a general lack of awareness of the PTSA. Other than monthly, unadvertised board meetings, the PTSA is not visible in the school. In fact, other than serving as state assessment proctors, there are no openly advertised volunteer opportunities.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine exactly how parents really feel about the school or the PTSA because there hasn't been an official parent or student perception data survey in the last 10 years. Any feedback from parents is anecdotal through administration, teachers, or the district office. In fact, the only parent on the School Improvement Team (SIT) is also the president of the PTSA for the past two years and has only actually attended two SIT meetings in the last two years according to meeting minutes.

While teacher survey data reflects positively on the school's own efforts for parent engagement, it also shows that they do not feel supported in return. According to the NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey (2012), almost 88% of the teachers feel that the school maintains clear, two-way communication with parents while 89% feel that the school does a good job of encouraging parent involvement. That data is relatively consistent with the 2010 results. In contrast, only 70% of the teachers feel supported by the parents and the community, which is at least five points below both district and state averages.

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

Action Plan Process

In order to improve parent involvement and teacher perceptions of parental support at LMS, there needs to be an emphasis on trust. Building that trust will require a climate that respects the differences in parental backgrounds and needs (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009). Building relationships between teachers and parents is important because “if a teacher and parent know, trust, and respect one another, there is a greater likelihood that one will initiate contact with the other when needed to help the child” (Price-Mitchell, 2009, p. 18). Thus, in order to execute any school improvement plan for parent and community involvement, those stakeholders must be meaningfully involved even in the planning stages. While my plan requires collaboration with both the school improvement team (SIT) and PTSA, I will also purposely engage other parents and community members in order to gather input and participation from a broad base of parents who more fully reflect the demographics of the school rather than just the seven member PTSA board comprised of six Caucasian females and one only African-American male.

Action Plan Narrative

To build a climate that engages parents in a positive and meaningful manner, I propose a two year action plan with the goal of focusing on involving parents in student learning and improving relationships between the school and families. My specific objectives are to increase parent involvement at academically-focused events from a 20 parent average to a 200 parent average, and improve teacher perception of the parent and school relationship from 70% to 90% on the NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey. These goals and objectives are significant because parent involvement is most effective when it is focused on student achievement through meaningful activities that treat parents as partners rather than visitors who are only welcome in the car line or as an audience.

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

Since the NC Teacher Working Conditions survey results show a disconnect between how teachers perceive how the school encourages parent involvement and the actual level of support they receive, LMS needs to engage in meaningful analysis of its parent involvement practices. For this reason, the first step I propose is for the SIT and administration to conduct a self-assessment using the NC School Self-Assessment of Parent and Family Involvement Practices as recommended by the North Carolina Department of Instruction's Parent and Family Involvement Toolkit. This self-assessment will allow SIT to validate the teachers' NCTWCS perceptions and assess how well the school supports parent involvement through evidence of research-based practices that have been proven to have a positive impact on parent involvement.

Another key strategy in the action plan is implementing reliable stakeholder surveys since LMS has no mechanisms in place to formally monitor student and parent needs and perceptions (See Appendix B). My survey asks parents to rate how well they agree with positively worded statements regarding school communication and opportunities for meaningful parent involvement. Due to the cost of printing paper surveys and a lack of at-home access to the internet, I recommend a blended approach where on-line responses are encouraged, but paper copies will be made available to those families who request them. These surveys will provide valuable insight into reasons why parents might not be supportive of the school. The surveys should be repeated annually in order to monitor the ongoing impact of school processes on stakeholder perceptions.

Although teachers think they have been successful at reaching out to parents, ongoing professional development is also needed to help teachers learn effective methods of parent communication. Most teachers rely on phone calls and notes home which may not be the best avenue for many of our second and third-shift families. Thus, teachers need support

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

implementing alternative means of parent communication that encourage meaningful, two-way conversations. Likewise, because many of the LMS teachers have less than five years of experience, general support on effective communication strategies, especially in being proactive in potentially difficult situations will be useful. Both aims can be achieved by making use of both North Carolina Department of Instruction resources and the collective wisdom of teachers within the building in faculty meetings and through existing professional learning community structures. In faculty meeting mini-lessons, teacher leaders can help train other staff on maximizing the potential of available district communication tools such as EChalk, a website and blogging site paid for by the district. Similarly, the large Hispanic population of the families will benefit from a partnership with local churches and organizations to provide volunteers to translate school communications and presentations.

Since both the LMS student population and surrounding community has a predominantly lower socio-economic demographic, teacher attitudes about diverse family backgrounds need to be examined. I propose a study of Ruby Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005) as an initial step towards creating a more family friendly environment where parents of all backgrounds feel welcome. This is important because building positive relationships is key to improving parent involvement. Reading Ruby Payne's work may help teachers better meet the needs of low socio-economic families instead of being judgmental of those families.

Additionally, LMS must improve its current methods of at-school activities for parents in order to create a more family friendly environment, so I will use stakeholder survey data to plan more relevant activities that address instructional needs in an engaging format. For example, attendance at LMS parent curriculum nights has been traditionally low. In contrast, attendance at events like the quarterly "Lunch Bunch" parent dates, annual talent show, and arts concerts have

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

always been high. I will capitalize on existing successful parent involvement activities by combining curriculum topics with these popular events. For example, instead of using the hallway as a staging area while parents wait for the cafeteria to be ready for the “lunch dates”, parents could be in the library where that wait time can be used to engage parents in dialogue or activities aimed at improving student learning.

Similarly, evening time curriculum nights need to be more interactive. Attendance at celebratory and athletic events shows that parents will come to school when their students are doing something rather than just coming to school to hear about something. Therefore, I propose instituting school-wide student led conferences where students present their work to their parents, and teachers are there to answer questions and support students. In contrast to traditional parent-teacher conferences that marginalize the student, Kinney, Munroe, and Sessions (2000) laud student-led conferences because they allow for meaningful conversations centered directly on student achievement and require that students take ownership of their efforts. They claim these conferences give even low performing students “a voice to discuss their own learning” (p.55) and can motivate them to complete assignments with more effort.

However, student-led conferencing is not as simple as putting graded student work samples in a folder for a student to explain why they received the grade they did. Effective student-led conferencing will require that both teachers and student be trained in how to meaningfully organize and present their work samples in order show a picture of student growth or engage parents and students in reflective conversation when progress is lacking. All students need and deserve a potential audience. Since there will realistically be parents who cannot or will not attend, faculty members or other special adults in a student’s life will serve as volunteer listeners. Yet, to encourage attendance, I will work the PTSA to offer a gift card drawing for

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

each grade level as well as child-care to be manned by Student Council or high school student service organizations like Key Club. In addition, I will work with local churches to provide bus transportation for families where transportation is a challenge.

Reflection

As State Superintendent June Atkinson notes in her opening letter in the NC Parent and Family Involvement Toolkit, “failure to establish a home-school-community collaboration aimed at increasing student success puts our children’s future at stake” (p. 3). Although teachers think they positively encourage parent and community involvement, they contradict themselves by reporting that they feel unsupported. The blame cannot be laid solely on the doorsteps of the parents and the local community. We need to take responsibility for our own role in a lack of parent and community involvement by self-assessing our actual practices, valuing stakeholder perception data, and reflecting on institutional prejudices that may be conscious and unconscious barriers to a positive school, home, and community relationship. Effective parent involvement cannot be solely defined by attendance at lunch dates and cultural events. Effective parent involvement must also involve engaging parents meaningfully in their child’s education. These strategies lay the foundation for improving school processes and policies that may inhibit a school culture based on shared responsibility for student learning between the school, home, and community. We will know we have been successful when student learning events are as highly attended by parents and the community as athletics and cultural events. However, in order to make that happen, we need to recognize the school’s role in making parents feel welcome and dismantling barriers to their involvement.

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

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EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

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Appendix A:

Leeds Middle School Action Plan

<p>School Improvement Goal: To improve school and parent/community relationships</p> <p>Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By 2014, increase average parent attendance at curriculum centered events from 20 parents to 200 parents (1/3 of the student population). • By 2014, improve teacher perception of the parent and school relationship from 70% to 90% on the NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey.

Action Steps	Persons Responsible	Resources/ Budget Required	Potential Barriers	Due Date
Year One: 2012-2013				
Engage SIT in self-assessment of parent involvement practices using NC School Self-Assessment of Parent and Family Involvement Practices	SIT Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy of the NC School Self-Assessment of Parent and Family Involvement Practices (free) • Laptop & data projector • Chart paper/ markers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willingness to have open and honest discussion as part of the self-assessment 	September 2012
Engage staff in ongoing professional development regarding quality parent communications using: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty meeting professional development • Team PLC structures 	Administration All instructional staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCDPI Parent Involvement Toolkit website resources (free) • Teacher leaders to share effective strategies (free) • Training on available district communication tools such as EChalk and Connect Ed (free) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting needs of 3rd shift parents • Balancing digital communications with availability of resources in families 	Monthly August 2012 to May 2013
Connect with local Spanish language churches to engage volunteers to translate curriculum documents & translate at parent events	Administration Selected staff members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritized documents to be translated • Gifts of appreciation for volunteers (gift cards, certificates of recognition) • Use general funds 		September 2012 for establishing partnership (use as needed)

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

<p>Administer parent and student school perception surveys and analyze to identify relevant topics for parent and community involvement activities that support student learning.</p>	<p>Administration SIT Parents Students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copies of survey request letter with website address (700 copies @ 2 cents per copy = \$14) • SurveyMonkey account for online surveys (free) • Paper copies of survey upon request (start with 300 copies @ 2 cents per copy = \$6) • General Funds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of participation by parents and students • Lack of technological access for web-based survey 	<p>Administer survey: May 2013</p> <p>Analyze: Summer 2013</p>
<p>Year 2: 2013-2014</p>				
<p>Pilot Lunch Bunch and Curriculum combination and survey participates for feedback on future feasibility</p>	<p>Administration Instructional Coach Translation volunteers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic appropriate handouts • Sample EOG reading and math questions for each grade level • Parent Plus/Delta 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time to complete activities • Parents who show up late 	<p>October 2013</p> <p>January 2014</p> <p>April 2014</p>
<p>Create website section dedicated to helping families support their student's social and academic growth</p>	<p>Administration Instructional Coach Building Webmaster</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spanish language & English resources • Curriculum links and topics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep it constantly updated 	<p>August 2013 (with monthly updates)</p>
<p>Engage staff in ongoing professional development regarding understanding our community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole staff professional development • Team PLC structures 	<p>Administration All instructional staff</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copies of Ruby Payne's <i>A Framework for Understanding Poverty</i> 		<p>District early release PD days</p> <p>October 2013</p> <p>November 2013</p>

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 3

<p>Repeat parent and student perception surveys and analyze results, focusing on areas of change from previous year's survey</p>	<p>Administration SIT Parents Students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copies of survey request letter with website address (700 copies @ 2 cents per copy = \$14) • SurveyMonkey account for online surveys (free) • Paper copies of survey upon request (start with 300 copies @ 2 cents per copy = \$6) • General Funds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of participation by parents and students • Lack of technological access for web-based survey 	<p>Administer survey: May 2014</p> <p>Analyze: Summer 2014</p>
<p>Engage instructional staff in training for student led conferencing protocols</p>	<p>Administration SIT Instructional Coach All staff</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protocols for effective student conferencing prepared from <i>A School Wide Approach to Student-Led Conferences</i> from the National Middle School Association 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher buy-in 	<p>½ day session on August Workday before students return</p>
<p>Provide at least 3 student led conferencing curriculum nights to engage parents in instructional topics.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide child-care • Have gift-card drawings 	<p>Administration All staff members</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transportation provided by partnership with local churches like Kingdom's Cross • Planned games & activities for child-care (use gym for older children) • 3 - \$25 gift cards for attendee drawing (one per grade level) (PTSA & General funds) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting the word out to parents about both the student led conferencing and the available transportation • Preparing staff and students for effective student led conferences 	<p>September 2014</p> <p>December 2014</p> <p>March 2015</p>
<p>Evidence of Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student-Led Conference Portfolios • Parent Website Resources • Parent Lunch Bunch events <p>Evaluation Process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent Survey Results • Professional Development • Student-Led Conference attendance rates 				

Appendix B:

 2012-2013 Leeds Middle School Parent Survey 

Parents,

We thank you for your support this year and all that you do to help make your child successful. You are a very important part of our school community and would like your input on how we can improve our parent and community involvement. Please take a moment to complete the survey below and return it to the school. With your help, we can make Leeds Middle School the “Best Middle School in Lincoln County”!

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. My school keeps me well-informed about school activities.					
2. My school keeps me well-informed about my child's progress and classroom expectations.					
3. The school, its teachers and administrators are open to parents' concerns and suggestions.					
4. My school encourages parents to participate in school activities.					
5. I am aware of support resources available to my family through the school.					
6. My school offers multiple volunteer opportunities for me to get involved in the school or my child's classroom?					
7. How often do you currently participate in parent involvement opportunities at our school?					
8. My school responds to my emails, phone calls, or other communications in a timely manner.					
9. My school provides resources for me to support my child academically.					
10. What additional suggestions do you have for parent and community involvement opportunities at our school?					