

## TRANSFORMATIVE PARENT LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Parents who participate in family literacy and family learning programs gain new skills and knowledge through Family Service Learning projects. They increase their social capital and self-efficacy, especially developing leadership and advocacy skills, when they focus on issues of concern and relevance on behalf of themselves and their children. A group of parents participating in a family literacy program in one of four schools in Detroit, Michigan, led by a parent, initiated an anti-bullying campaign in their children's school. Through a series of family service action steps, the parents successfully engaged the school and community to address bullying and sustain anti-bullying practices with students, teachers, school administration, and family members.

### WE ARE SICK OF BULLIES!

After several upsetting bullying incidents at her children's school, Maria, a mother of two young children and an immigrant from Mexico, knew she had to do something. Maria also knew where to find the support she needed to put an end to the problem. As part of an innovative family literacy program in Detroit, Maria had become confident about her English language and literacy skills and had met her personal learning goals. She welcomed situations that led her to act as an advocate for all children by securing a safer school climate. Maria spearheaded a Family Service Learning project (Cramer & Toso, 2015) that focused on bullied students as well as those who saw the incidents and were impacted by an increasingly disruptive learning environment.

Fast forward a few weeks to when Maria excitedly phoned the manager of her family literacy program. She had just presented the class's Family Service Learning project proposal for an anti-bullying campaign to the school's Title I family engagement committee. Their plan included an explanation of why bullying hurts all students, not only those bullied, and how bad feelings hinder children's ability to concentrate and learn. She emphasized the point that prolonged, unmitigated bullying becomes toxic stress that harms children's development and threatens their future success.

Not content to simply complain about the problem, Maria offered a clear plan of action for students, teachers, and family members that included presentations by social service workers, a poster campaign, and a

school play. She also introduced a policy statement that outlined steps to stop all forms of student intimidation and inappropriate social behaviors.

“We did it!” Maria exclaimed to the program manager, “They loved our ideas and approved our anti-bullying plan! We are going to start right away!”

Maria immediately text messaged the good news to the 22 Hispanic families in her Family Learning community—they were ready to make changes in the school that would build healthy peer relationships.

### **FAMILY LITERACY—PATHWAYS TO A HEALTHY SCHOOL CLIMATE**

The goal of Maria’s family literacy program is to break the cycle of intergenerational educational failure and poverty by building family well-being through an educational intervention. Family literacy programs emphasize parents’ roles as learners as well as supporters of their children’s education (Jacobs, Cramer, Noles, & Lovett, 2019). Adults forge strong home-school partnerships by engaging in experiential learning, skill building, and the study of common problems in search of innovative solutions. Adult educators and key family service staff offer training that centers on parents’ needs, perceptions, and culture related to supporting and advocating for their children’s educational progress. School-based family literacy programs, like Maria’s, demonstrate positive outcomes that resonate with Henderson & Mapp’s (2002) assertion that children from diverse cultural backgrounds perform better when their parents and educators collaborate to bridge the gap between the culture at home and at the learning institution.

Parents like Maria across the nation are members of intensive family literacy programs built on four integrated components that stem from children’s education.<sup>1</sup> Parents engage in adult learning and skill building, parent education, and interactive learning activities within their children’s classrooms. Family literacy programs are for “families most in need, over a period of time, with consistency and intensity of services” (Jacobs, Cramer, Noles, & Lovett, 2019, p.1).

Successful family literacy programs are grounded by a mutual understanding and shared responsibility for ensuring high expectations for adults and their children—this structure provides a dual-generation intervention. On one hand, parents expect teachers to recognize their children as unique learners and attend to their social and emotional learning needs while also providing high-quality instruction. Teachers, in turn, expect families to promote their children’s character development during out-of-school time.

### **ENGAGE TO CREATE CHANGE**

Transformative leadership directs adults to focus on inequities that are generational and correlated with a group’s demographics (Lindsey, Kearney, Estrada, Terrell, & Lindsey, 2015). Parents in family literacy programs are profoundly engaged with their children, with their schools, and with their communities. They begin the program year by identifying their own personal (e.g., job readiness) and learning (e.g., high school equivalency) goals. Program staff and parents work together and determine systematic ways to approach these goals and monitor progress. Goal-centered engagement leads parents through future-focused systemic transformational change that impacts their entire family. Over the course of the school year, parents develop literacy skills and English proficiency as well as soft skills sought by employers. Stronger home-to-school relationships develop over time and enhance parents’ views about the critical role they play as their children’s first teachers. Maria’s program focuses on parents who want to learn English to gain employment and/or who believe that by

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1 The family literacy program described in this article was designed by the National Center for Families Learning.

being in a school-based program they will learn how to best support their children as learners. For example, the Hispanic adults in Maria's class concentrate on their own English learning to reinforce their children's education and to gain employment that will ensure their family's economic security.

Prior to joining the family literacy program, Maria, an English language learner, had never imagined herself speaking before a group of teachers and the principal. The program staff declared that Maria was a champion. They had seen Maria's increased sense of empowerment and her willingness to be a leader for parents of students who were the victims of bullying.

Most parents in the family literacy program had little previous academic success but were willing to push past their fear of failure. For many, feelings of confidence and competence relative to school were hard to realize as only two thirds of the group went past the sixth grade in their home countries. Through full program participation, they are increasingly involved with meaningful engagement in their children's education. They are present daily in their children's schools serving as positive role models, inviting other parents to become more engaged, and volunteering throughout the building. They understand the importance of a safe and respectful school climate and parental responsibilities for supporting learning at home.

Family literacy programs focus on families' strengths rather than perceived deficits. These intensive programs build parents' ability to adapt and be open to their own potential by equipping them with the tools they need to make good decisions. Maria attends adult learning instruction, parenting classes, and participates in her child's classroom four times a week. The content of the adult learning component often connects parents with the children's reading curriculum. The parents may study idioms and grammar one day and practice reading fluency the next. They learn that their own literacy development, progress toward family goals, and intense involvement in school-based programming are catalysts that accelerate their children's success.

Through Parent Time, parents identify topics of interest that align with their goals and help connect them with community resources during their classes. These interactions expand families' social capital and self-efficacy. Session topics may include work-life balance, housing, community safety, and the fraying fabric of the social safety net.<sup>2</sup>

Parents and Children Together (PACT) Time<sup>®</sup> may take place in classrooms, at home, or in the community when families work, play, and learn together in a supported way. This strengths-based approach enables families to become radically proactive—they seize new possibilities, foster resiliency among two generations, and make unique connections across schools, homes, and the community.

When parents are mindful of the power they wield by focusing on the time they share with their children, they realize how much their actions and words shape their children's development. Family literacy programs provide parents regular opportunities to co-learn with their children. They build rapport with teachers and better understand their children's interests and learning styles. Many mothers who are immigrants report PACT Time increases their understanding about the way American schools work.

During post-PACT Time debriefings, parents brainstorm how they can creatively apply strategies, new concepts, and vocabulary and practice activities at home. Parents' reflections about PACT Time affirm that

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<sup>2</sup> According to Wikipedia, "the social safety net is a collection of services provided by state or other institutions such as friendly societies, including welfare, unemployment benefit, universal healthcare... homeless shelters, and sometimes subsidized services such as public transport, which prevent individuals from falling into poverty beyond a certain level." (Retrieved August 18, 2019, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_safety\\_net](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_safety_net)). Programs within the safety net, in combinations, are intended to improve intergenerational economic mobility and to give children born into poverty a better shot at a better life.

“...sustained participation positively impacts parental involvement in schools, the extension of learning from school to the home, and children’s overall academic achievement” (Levesque, 2013).

### **LEARN—SERVE—LEARN MORE**

Family Service Learning weaves together the four family literacy program components, so adults and their children—together—practice new skills in the real world (Cramer & Toso, 2015). Service learning has its origins in transformative learning theories that explain adults’ world views and describe how they develop and use critical self-reflection to consider their beliefs and experiences—and over time, change (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Transformative learning happens when adults share opportunities for critical thinking while they learn and undertake work that stimulates novel ideas and actions.

Family Service Learning involves a six-step process created to promote adult skill building and parenting components. Participants start to see the world through a different lens when they look at the causes and impacts of problems and analyze the feasibility of solutions. Their worldviews change as they work together to identify and prioritize problems and then to explore the root causes of these issues. Transformational leadership skills, seeded through the intensive service learning process, build a base of informed and active parents. They perceive themselves as catalysts for change rather than passive bystanders.

The initial investigative step may involve research on the internet, conversations with other community members, and community mapping to discern the root causes of key issues. For example, one project stemmed from learning that one of the mothers at the program’s elementary school lacked warm clothing and was unbearably cold during her breast cancer treatment. The group set out to make blankets with their children. Parents gifted their creations to patients at a cancer clinic. Along the way the women learned about breast cancer risks, detection, and treatment options and reminded each other to do monthly self-exams.

Next, parents collectively decide upon a reasonable solution. The parents often discover intergenerational injustice and recognize oppressive systems that deny equity and opportunity. Parents act as leaders when exercising their voice and discovering there are people who will listen and support their solutions. They practice key employability skills such as project organization, time management, collaboration, and follow-through. Generally, these are not one-time events but engage families over weeks and months. The steps include time for a shared reflection about project highlights, barriers to success, and new insights. The process culminates with a family celebration, sharing of results, and consideration of “next steps” to ensure sustainable solutions and replication of social innovations. The overall impact is a stronger capacity for family-school partnerships that engage and promote the community.

The focus of Maria’s Family Service Learning project is timely. Threats to safe learning environments that promote social-emotional learning include bullying, hazing, and student intimidation. These threats negatively impact more than one out of every five students in the nation (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). Numerous bullying incidents at school became a major concern as more and more parents realized their children’s mental and physical health were threatened. But, from their vantage point, they felt ill-equipped to solve the problem. Through the investigation step, they learned bullying not only harms the student who is the object of the abuse but also the bully and everyone who witnesses the incident. Parents shared painful experiences where their children complained of stomach pain and headaches and didn’t want to go to school anymore. The situation was growing more toxic and the district bullying policy seemed inadequate to resolve the problem.

Parents changed their focus for finding a solution from the district to the community, where they

discovered local programs for families and educators to address bullying. Community experts visited and shared information during Parent Time. Parents learned that bullying can happen anywhere: school hallways, lockers, bathrooms, and even in the classroom. Fortified with new awareness, the parents crafted an anti-bullying campaign. They reached out to other parents and shared newly found guidance for handling conflict and promoting social-emotional development for all students. Their campaign started with awareness of what bullying *is*. They encouraged everyone to talk with their children about bullying privately at home and confidentially through school connections. They offered parents candid advice about what to do at home if their child was a victim or perpetrator of bullying.

As Maria, her classmates, and their families implemented their anti-bullying campaign, they practiced communication, technology skills, resource management, and information use. They bounced ideas among the class members and acted on their new perspectives about what a healthy school climate should include. Through this experiential learning process, parents tackled issues outside of their comfort zone, such as how does one deal with a parent whose child—allegedly—physically hurt their own child? This and other dilemmas associated with confronting conflict spurred critical thinking and deep reflection. Their perceptions about self-confidence, efficacy, and competencies changed as they sensed that “being smart” is not static or carved in stone. They felt they were “growing smarter” by learning new things and practicing skills associated with learning (Dweck, 2006, 2015).

With a better understanding of bullying, its consequences, and strategies for dealing with harassment, parents put together a plan to raise awareness and to reduce bullying in their school. They introduced new strategies to other parents from information gathered during the community investigation. Social workers came to school to talk with children about bullying. Maria’s class wrote a play during adult skill building and then directed the performance—featuring students—for a schoolwide audience.

Parent organizers leading the bullying campaign created a student contest to design simple mottos, catchy slogans, and artwork. Posters and buttons displayed the contest’s top-rated entries. This visual media aspect of the project enhanced students’ awareness and ownership of problems and solutions associated with bullying. Bullying became a schoolwide topic of conversation. As the school community became more aware, greater numbers of students and families were willing to tackle behavioral issues, and incidences of bullying were less frequent.

As full partners with their children’s educators, Maria’s class helped more parents find their voices and assume their roles as supporters and advocates of a healthy social-emotional learning community. Because of the project’s effectiveness, the principal declared that every year an anti-bullying school event would take place. The principal also endorsed the committee’s anti-bullying policy recommendation, which she forwarded to the school board for consideration. It was clear the parent-driven actions were more effective than any printed directives.

## **TRANSFORMATIVE PARENT ENGAGEMENT MATTERS**

Issues such as bullying involve the entire school community. Deep issues that threaten or enhance students’ social-emotional learning require adults to get involved and take appropriate action (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2009). One way to initiate proactive solutions is to engage parents in Family Service Learning. It is a strategic process of inventing new solutions to old problems. Working together, parents sense that rather than learning through formal classes, they are creating their own new skills and knowledge from purposeful everyday living. Family Service Learning is a transformative strategy that builds self-efficacy and a willingness to explore new roles and relationships (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). From a

transformative view of adult learning, family learning is meaningful and transformative when it:

- is driven by what parents want to learn,
- provides opportunities for parents to practice skills they want to develop (rather than being limited to academic content alone),
- is pragmatic and progressive, and
- is grounded by the tenets of service learning.

Family Service Learning is a holistic strategy that expands the social networks connecting families more deeply and positively with their schools and communities.

Parents in Maria’s family literacy program transformed their capacity for strong and sustainable school engagement. They protect the core value of education—that all students deserve an excellent education in safe schools—by assuming the role of leaders. Their actions reflect a fresh perspective about transformative leadership and its impact on relationships between parents and teachers, teachers and students, and parents and their children. They believe positive relationships involve sharing feelings, expressing concerns, and acting on what parents *know* and can *do*. Through Family Service Learning, they transform their sense of belonging and pride in their school and their community. Parents, administrators, and teachers work side-by-side in parent-led projects. Parents exercise their deep sense of commitment and passion to correct a toxic situation rather than choosing to enroll their children in a different school. Their anti-bullying campaign was instrumental in moving a school from an ineffective district policy toward organic solutions that will safeguard a nurturing learning environment for all students. ☘

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