

# Research Brief

Student Life in High Schools Project

School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago

## Changing Standards, Changing Relationships: Building Family-School Relationships to Promote Achievement in High Schools

August 1998



Photographs by Loren Santow

Rosa Tenemaza and her daughter Maria read together at Family Reading Night at Schurz High School.

*“ We cannot make the kinds of movement we need to make in terms of student progress—especially in a school like this one which is on probation—if there isn’t a sense that we all have to do this and have the support of parents. And that support comes from [parents] feeling like we respect them and their community and want to involve them in their kids’ learning. If not, it cancels out everything else we think we’re doing.”*

—Principal Janice Ollarvia,  
Fenger High School

Over the past two years, the Chicago Board of Education has embarked on an ambitious agenda to improve achievement in Chicago’s public high schools. The *Designs for High Schools* has raised the bar for students, teachers, and schools.<sup>1</sup> Now all students must take a more rigorous core curriculum in high school and must demonstrate mastery of material before advancing to the next grade. Critical to the success of this initiative is increasing the educational support that students receive both at school and at home. Most educators agree that the extent to which children receive day-to-day home support for their work in school is critical in determining how well they do in school.<sup>2</sup> This is as true during adolescence as it is during the elementary school years.<sup>3</sup> Too often, however,

**Principal  
Investigators:**  
**Melissa Roderick**  
**Susan Stone**  
with  
Michael Arney  
James Chiong  
Kneia DaCosta  
Elaine Waxman



with assistance from the Consortium on Chicago School Research

parents become less involved with their children's homework and participate less in school activities after the transition to high school. Parents of a high school student are also less likely to talk with their child about school work and educational plans. These changes in parents' roles and activities contribute to the decline in student performance we observe as students go from elementary to high school.<sup>4</sup> Until recently, few high school teachers or administrators saw it as their role to work with parents in reversing these declines in involvement. Now, more and more high schools are placing a high priority on finding new ways of working with parents and enabling teachers to reach out to parents of high school students.

But schools struggle with how to engage and support parents.

This research brief examines issues of family-school relationships during the early high school years. What are high school teachers doing and saying about their relationships with parents and how does this differ across CPS high schools? How have family-school relationships changed over time? And what are parents' own views, experiences, and concerns?

*There are two overarching messages:*

*High Schools will have a hard time pursuing higher standards and achievement if students are not more engaged in educational activities at home and at school, and if parents are not involved more in supporting their adolescents' education.*

*Parents are going to have a hard time meeting this challenge without more concrete assistance from high schools. Parents need information and resources to understand what they can do to promote their child's success.*

Data are drawn from teacher and student surveys conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research in 1994 and 1997. We look at what schools are currently doing based on phone surveys and visits to high schools. And we consider what parents of freshman say about their own experiences and interests (see "More about Data Sources" on page 25).

The main findings of this brief are the following:

- **Increasing parents' involvement in and support of their children's education must begin by changing teachers' and high schools' practices.** Ninth-grade teachers are less likely than eighth-grade teachers to communicate with parents about what they are trying to accomplish for students or to give parents direction in supporting that effort. This is not just a Chicago phenomenon. High schools have discouraged parent involvement by being less inviting to parents and by making it harder for parents to get information and resources.

- **Parents want more interaction around academic concerns, but high schools focus their communication on rules and problems.** Parents express the greatest interest in programs that help them build their own skills so that they can support their children's academic work in school, and in programs that help them plan for the future.

- **Hispanic parents feel the least able to support their children's schooling and express the greatest interest in programs that provide information and basic supports.** Hispanic parents appear to have greater difficulties helping their children with schoolwork and educa-

tional plans. Less than a quarter of the Hispanic parents we interviewed compared with almost all of the African-American parents feel able to help their ninth graders with daily school work. Hispanic parents express the greatest interest in programs that help them understand what their children are doing in high school and how to provide better support.

- **Teachers in majority Hispanic high schools also report the lowest levels of communication with parents.** This is not true for elementary schools. In majority Hispanic elementary schools, teachers actually report better than average home-school relationships. Thus, parents whose children attend majority Hispanic schools experience the most dramatic change in their relationships and support from school as these students move to high school.

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There is some good news in this research brief. Over the past several years, many high schools have begun new initiatives. Attention has been focused on the need to make high schools more personal and academically focused environments. When we compared teacher responses in 1997 with those of teachers in 1994, and when we looked at newer efforts begun over the past two years, we found:

- **Chicago high school teachers report better communication and more**

**positive relationships with parents than they did in 1994.** In 24 high schools, teachers reported more communication and better relationships with parents. Approximately 40 percent of the high schools have new initiatives to support

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## *There is some good news in this research brief.*

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parents as part of larger efforts to improve student performance. Most of these initiatives have started in the past two years.

- **Reforming high schools are paying attention to improving their support for parents along with improving instruction.** High schools that are improving instruction and pressing students to learn are those high schools where we see the largest improvements in teachers' efforts to communicate with parents and in the quality of teacher-parent relationships. High schools where teachers report that their practices have not changed have shown little improvement in their relationships with parents.

## Key to Data Sources

Because this brief draws on so many sources of data, the source of data for each table is designated using one of the following icons (for more information, see “More about Data Sources” on page 25):



Semi-structured interviews with 73 parents of freshman. This sample of parents was primarily Hispanic and African-American.



Teacher surveys conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research in 1994 and 1997. In 1997, surveys were completed by 10,000 elementary school teachers and 3,100 high school teachers. We focus on results for 1,000 eighth- and ninth-grade teachers.



Student surveys completed by 19,586 eighth graders and 14,257 tenth graders in winter 1997 as part of the Consortium on Chicago School Research's ongoing surveys.



Phone surveys of 45 Chicago high schools in fall 1997 on current practices of parental involvement in the early years of high school.



Site visits with principals and key staff of Chicago public high schools with innovative or best practices in the area of parental involvement.



Eighth- and tenth-grade student surveys from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS), a national sample that followed 24,000 students between eighth and twelfth grades.

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***This report reflects the interpretation of its authors. Although the Consortium on Chicago School Research assisted in the development of this research, no formal endorsement by its Steering Committee members, their organizations, or the Consortium should be assumed.***

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## What Do We Know about Parent Involvement in Adolescents' Education?

An adolescent does better and stays in school longer when four critical supports are present:

1. When parents talk with their child about education and provide day-to-day monitoring and support of schoolwork;
2. When parents set and hold high expectations and aspirations for their child's education;
3. When parents help their child develop problem solving and decision-making skills so that he or she can begin to handle new responsibilities and independence; and
4. When parents have knowledge of what their child is doing in school and what the teacher's expectations are so that teachers and parents share a common understanding about the school's goals for the child.<sup>5</sup>

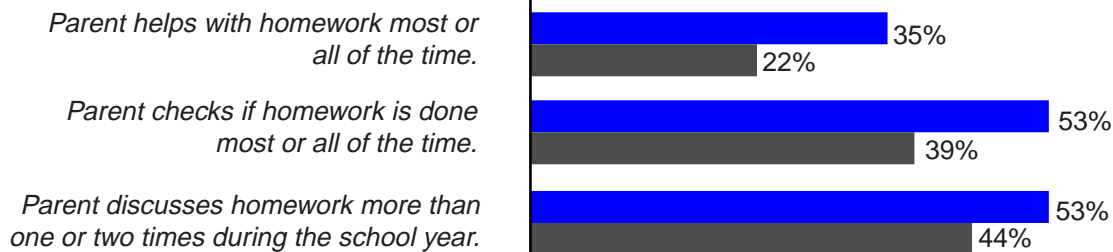
Thus, adolescents do best when parents play a variety of roles in their learning—"teachers, supporters, advocates, and decision makers."<sup>6</sup>

The extent to which parents play these roles often declines as students enter high school. For example, eighth graders in Chicago Public Schools are much more likely than tenth graders to say that their parents help with homework or were involved in their school that year. (See Figure 1.)

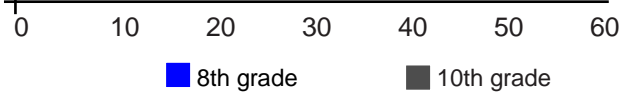
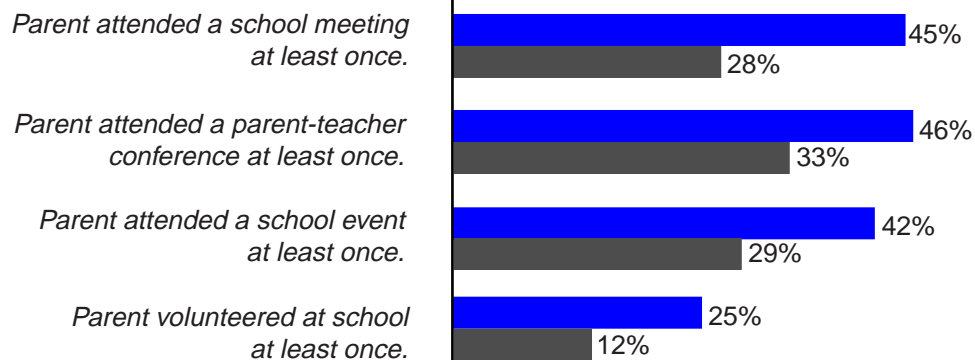
Figure 1

### Chicago Students Report That Their Parents Are Less Involved in Tenth Grade

#### Homework



#### School



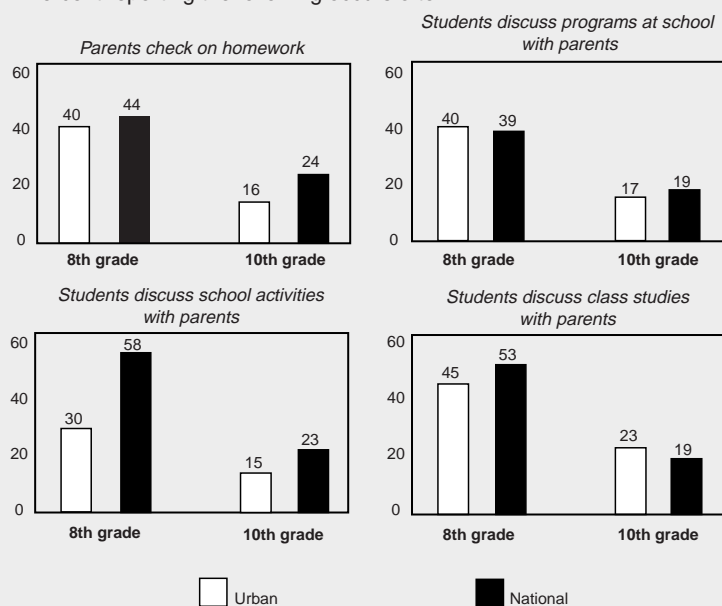
Note: The number of students is approximately 28,000 (n = 28,000). Valid responses on these and subsequent survey questions vary slightly from item to item due to invalid responses or skip patterns in the questionnaire.

## Changes in Parental Involvement between Eighth and Tenth Grades: A National Perspective

Chicago is not alone in facing declines in parental involvement in adolescents' education during the transition to high school. Students on national surveys report similar changes in the extent to which they talk to their parents about school and homework.

### National Survey Data

Percent reporting the following occurs often :



Note: 17,224 students surveyed in 1,000 schools. Of these, 967 students in 66 schools were in urban disadvantaged minority schools.

The National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 surveyed the same students at eighth (1988) and tenth (1990) grades about how often their parents check their homework or talk to them about school. Overall, students' reports of parental monitoring between high school and elementary school declined significantly between eighth and tenth grade. Thirty-nine percent of the eighth graders say that they often discuss programs at school with their parents. By tenth grade, that level of monitoring drops by more than half, to just 19 percent.

In large urban areas, in schools with a majority of their students receiving free or reduced lunch, such as in Chicago, we also see large declines. Fifty-eight percent of all eighth-grade respondents say they discuss school activities with their parents often, while only 30 percent feel the same way in disadvantaged, minority, urban school systems.

Source: National Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS). NELS surveyed 24,000 students between eighth and twelfth grades, their parents, teachers, and administrators. We present results from 17,224 eighth- and tenth-grade panel members in roughly 1,000 schools with a majority of students participating in free or reduced lunch programs. We also draw an urban subsample (967 students in 66 schools) weighted by race to facilitate comparability with the CPS systemwide racial composition.

This is not simply a Chicago or an urban phenomenon. As seen in the sidebar "Changes in Parent Involvement between Eighth and Tenth Grades: A National Perspective," students across the nation report significantly lower parental involvement in checking homework, discussing classroom and school activities, and working directly with schools as students move into high school.

### High School Teachers' Practices Contribute to Declines in Parental Involvement

There are several reasons why parental involvement declines as students enter high school. First, it becomes more difficult for parents to directly monitor their children's learning and provide help. Many parents run out of their own skills. Indeed, as standards and requirements for graduation have increased, the extent to which parents provide daily monitoring has become more important. But fewer parents have had the courses and developed the skills that we now expect all students to master. This means that parents must learn strategies and have more resources to help their children understand their school work. Just sitting down and helping out may not work.

Second, the ability to communicate with teachers and to understand what students are supposed to be doing becomes more difficult. High schools are larger, more bureaucratic environments that can often overwhelm even the most educated parents. Parents lose the central contact with an elementary school homeroom teacher who has much greater knowledge of a child's performance in school. It is unusual that any one teacher or counselor in the high school has that same knowledge of a

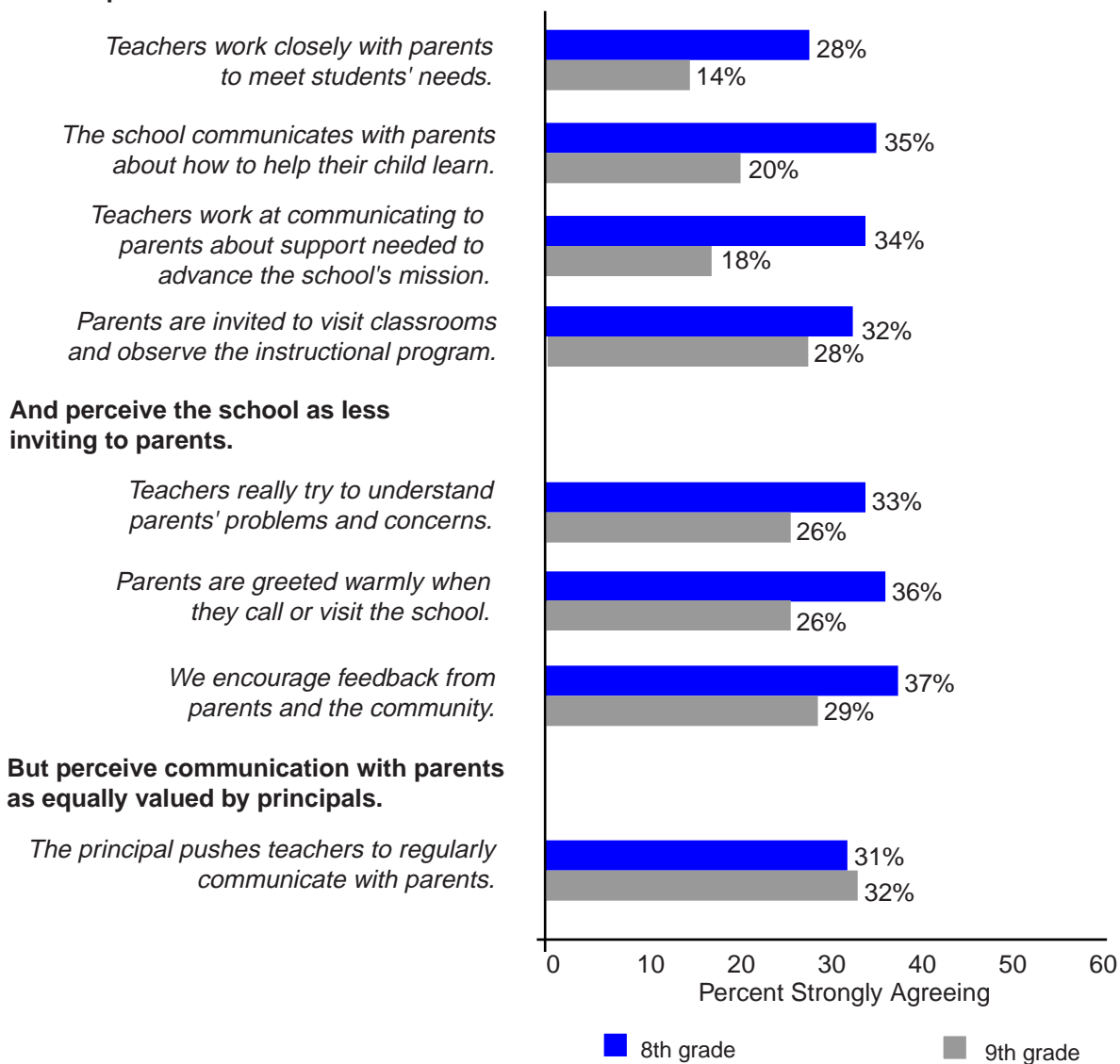


## Ninth-Grade Teachers Report Less Communication with and Academic Support to Parents

Figure 2

Compared with eighth-grade teachers, ninth-grade teachers . . .

**Involve parents less around students' academic lives.**



student. And parents have many fewer opportunities for informal contacts: teenagers take on more responsibility for getting themselves to school; there are fewer opportunities for parents to be involved in class activities like school projects and events; and teenagers themselves want more autonomy and independence.

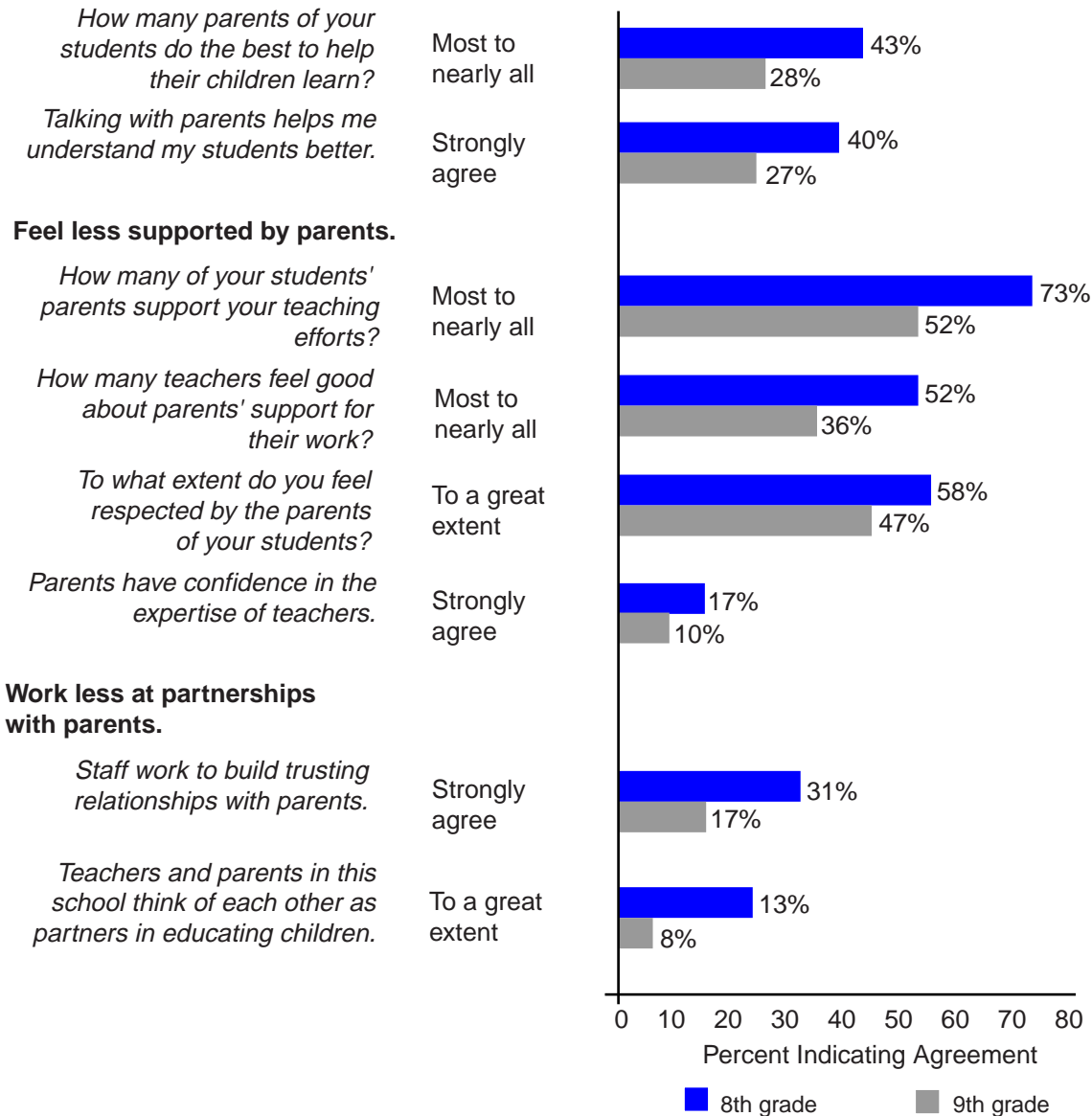
The fact that parents face greater barriers to supporting their ninth graders makes it even more important that high school teachers reach out to communicate and work with parents to develop new resources, skills, and

strategies about being involved and monitoring their children's school progress. Yet high schools are less likely than elementary schools to invite parents to become involved in decision making, monitoring, and problem solving around their teenagers' school work.

In recent surveys of teachers conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, ninth-grade teachers portrayed their schools as placing significantly less emphasis on communicating and working with parents than their eighth-grade counterparts. (See Figure 2.) For example, ninth-grade teachers were less

**Compared with eighth-grade teachers, ninth-grade teachers . . .**

**Are more negative about parents' educational influence.**



likely than eighth-grade teachers to strongly agree that they and their colleagues work closely with parents to meet student needs, really try to understand parents' problems, and communicate with parents about both their children's learning and broader school goals. Less than a quarter of the ninth-grade teachers portray their schools and practices as strongly parent focused. Thus, as children move to high school, teachers tell us that high schools send an implicit message to parents that their involvement is expected to decline.

**High School Teachers Are More Negative about Their Relationships with Parents**

Teachers also tell us that parents can expect a decline in the quality of their relationships with teachers when an adolescent moves to high school. Parents can expect that high school teachers will be much less positive about their contribution to their child's education. Ninth-grade teachers, for example, hold much more pessimistic views of whether they feel that the majority (most or nearly all) of the parents they serve do their best to

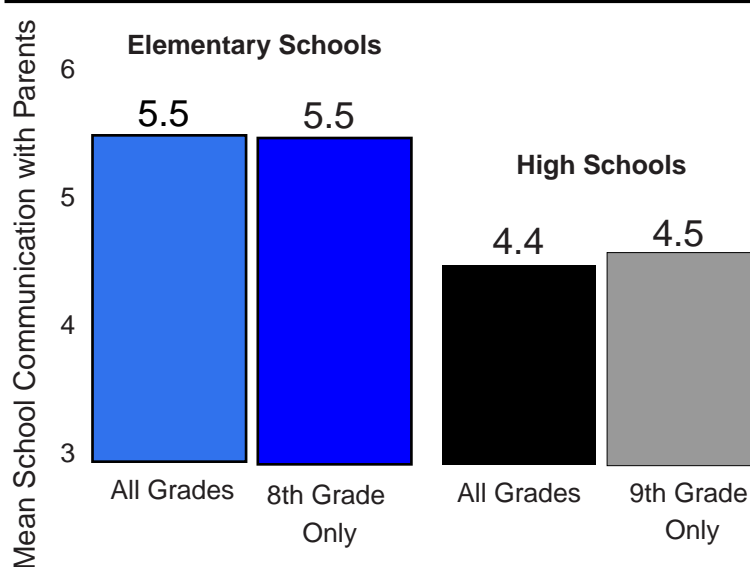


help their children learn. (See Figure 3.) Ninth-grade teachers are also less likely than eighth-grade teachers to feel that they have positive relationships and high levels of trust with parents. Only 36 percent of the ninth-grade teachers versus 52 percent of the eighth-grade teachers believe that most or nearly all of the teachers in their school feel good about parents' support for their work.

Declines in the amount of communication and quality of relationships between teachers and parents are not gradual, taking place over the course of the middle grades, but happen rather dramatically as children move to high school. We might expect that primary grade teachers, such as second- or third-grade teachers, would report higher levels of communication than middle grade teachers. But in fact, when we combine the questions on communication with parents into a scale, the mean level of communication reported by eighth-grade teachers is similar to that of all elementary school teachers. (See Figure 4.) Similarly, ninth-grade teachers' mean score is similar to that of all high school teachers. Thus, eighth- and ninth-grade teachers' responses to questions regarding their and their colleagues' efforts to communicate and work with parents reflect overall differences between elementary and high schools, not changes in teacher practice that occur as students get older. A central question is how much these disparities reflect fundamental differences in the culture of elementary and high schools and teacher approaches, and how much they reflect differences in workload and the structure of teachers' work. Specifically, high school teachers have larger workloads and have fewer opportunities to work and communicate with other teachers around individual children.



### Differences in Teachers' Levels of Communication with Parents Reflect Basic Differences between Elementary and High Schools



Note 1: Mean school communication is calculated by combining teachers' responses to questions in Figure 2 on a one to 10 scale and averaging those scores by school. Means are based on 280 elementary schools and 51 high schools.

Note 2: For elementary and high schools, these are the predicted school means controlling for difference in the demographic and achievement characteristics of the schools' student bodies and the characteristics of teachers answering the survey.

### Limited Parent-Teacher Interaction in High Schools Contributes to Negative Opinions and a Climate of Distrust

The more negative quality of parent-teacher relationships at the high school level may partly reflect when and how teachers and parents typically come together. When high school teachers interact with parents, it is often around discipline and academic problems. High school teachers have fewer opportunities to interact informally with parents and have fewer contacts with parents around what and how their children are doing in school. In our interviews with parents of ninth graders, parents reported that when contacted by a teacher or member of the school staff, it was usually because their child had discipline or academic problems. Nearly one-third of the parents of freshman had been contacted at sometime during the school year about a discipline problem that the student was having; an additional 13 percent were contacted for administrative reasons such as missing inocula-

tions or paper work; and 11 percent were contacted for academic reasons, usually poor performance.

Letting parents know when their child is having difficulty is important. However, without more positive contacts, high school teachers can easily develop negative opinions about parents' interest and responsive-

ness and vice versa. It is also easy to envision how gaps between schools and parents develop through lack of communication about a student's day-to-day work and, ultimately, how these gaps widen—resulting in teachers and parents perceiving each other as uncommitted and largely unsupportive of each other's efforts.

### Fenger High School: Making Parent Outreach a Central Component of Higher Achievement

Fenger High School, a 100 percent African-American high school on Chicago's south side, has made improved parent-school relationships an important part of its goals to raise test scores, reduce the student drop-out rate, and get off academic probation. Over half of Fenger's students scored in the bottom quartile nationally on standardized tests in reading and mathematics. Principal Janice Ollarvia found that many of Fenger's parents also struggled with low skills that limited their involvement in their children's education. As Ollarvia notes: "When you talk to parents individually and in conference, what you often find is that many of them don't feel adequate to help their kids with things like homework." Fenger has adopted a multimethod approach that seeks to open lines of communication and provide more assistance to parents.

**Skills and resource building for parents:** Last year Fenger began a family math night, developed by a teacher and the LSC president. Building on national models like Family Math and the Algebra Project, Fenger developed a series of bimonthly workshops focusing on basic mathematics, algebra, and geometry skills. Workshops help parents build their own skills and learn techniques to help with homework, even when parents may not know the answer. About 30-40 parents attended each workshop. Fenger hopes to expand Family Math into Family Reading and Social Studies nights.

Linking parent involvement to students' academic work is a theme of many parent events. Ollarvia hosts a breakfast for parents of incoming freshman. For new sophomores, juniors, and seniors, Fenger holds a parent orientation for each grade level, where teachers and counselors outline basic expectations and resources available at the school for students and parents. The school distributes written guidelines to parents and teachers about how to hold successful conferences and poses questions both should ask of each other. The school has a monthly Parent Advisory Council (attended regularly by about 20 parents and facilitated by two teachers) where parents can air comments and concerns, hear speakers, and discuss ways they can be involved at the school.

**Extra counseling and parent liaison in the junior academy:** Fenger has been working to create more personalized learning environments for freshman: moving all freshman and the freshman counselor's office to the second floor of the building, creating a semi-blocked schedule, and forming a team of freshman teachers. Even though freshman counselor Sandy Slone is responsible for a large caseload of freshman (250), these structural changes have enabled her to see and get to know her students and interact more with their teachers than under the old system. Fenger has also added a paid parent aide to the junior academy. Linda Berrien helps by informing parents about absences and is a valuable resource in working with individual parents. Slone tries to support teachers in communicating with parents, urging all teachers to send personal letters of introduction to all of their students' parents, and to have at least one contact with each of their students' parents by the end of the first marking period.

**Providing opportunities for parents and adolescents to be together:** Conveying the message that parents need not come to school only for problems or difficulties, Fenger has begun several efforts to bring together teachers, students, and families in a more informal way. Staff now encourage all parents to observe classes "just to see what the expectations are." The school has begun a family social night each semester. Conceived by teachers, a recent social night brought together teachers, students, and families to watch a Bulls game. The school distributed T-shirts and prizes. Fenger also hopes to do more to open the school to the community by keeping its computer lab open on nights and weekends and by beginning adult education classes.

## Why is Family-School Communication So Important? The Parents' Perspective

**I**n high poverty school systems like the Chicago Public Schools, there are students who come from homes where they receive very little support for their education. But most parents have high aspirations for their children and want them to succeed in school and later in the work force. These aspirations do not decline during adolescence. But clearly, parenting an adolescent is trickier, especially in high-risk communities where there are fewer opportunities for adolescents to find safe, productive activities when they are not in school and where high rates of crime, violence, and negative peer influences provide a significant pull on teenagers, undermining parents' efforts. Parents themselves often struggle with and get mixed messages about how much independence versus monitoring and structure they should be providing. For these parents who are eager to support their adolescent but are moving in uncharted and tricky waters, research finds that the degree and quality of home-school communication is critically important in shaping both how much and how they interact with their children around schoolwork and future educational plans. Whether a student gets homework, whether a parent knows what his or her teenager is doing in school, and what kind of guidance a parent receives from teachers about what a student ought to be doing and how to create a home environment that supports learning, all increase the capacity of parents to be involved in their child's education. A step as simple as telling parents what their child is doing in freshman English and providing materials that help parents understand what they can do at home to increase reading and English performance—such as having their adolescent read to young siblings, providing a list of vocabulary words that they could work on at home with their child, suggesting books that parents and



Schurz parents Manuel and Josefina Garcia solve a problem for the “Math: What’s Reading Got to Do With It?” workshop at Family Reading Night.

adolescents could read together, or suggesting that parents have their adolescent read to them and share with them their English assignments—provides critical direction and strategies for parents (see “Chicago Public Schools Initiatives” on page 12).

Family-school communication plays a key role in shaping the strategies parents use. If parents are given direction in what they can be doing to help their child improve and meet standards, they feel more effective. They are also more likely to monitor their child's progress and take steps to help rather than simply exhort him or her to do homework or try harder. And when parents receive messages that teachers and the school are a partner and a resource for them and their child, they are more likely to be proactive rather than

## Chicago Public Schools Initiatives

In September 1997, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) passed a resolution supporting “the development, implementation, and regular evaluation of a parent involvement policy and program in every school.” The CPS’s *Designs for High Schools* outlines initiatives to involve families and communities in building a “web of support” for high school improvement planning. These initiatives include:

**Citywide high school parent summits.** In summer 1996, Whitney Young High School created a series of workshops in response to its own survey of parents. This year, assisted by the CPS’s Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) Title I Parent Resource Service Center (see below), Whitney Young took these workshops citywide in the form of two summits. These Saturday summits, attended by over 500 parents, gave parents the opportunity to interact with education professionals around parenting adolescents, helping with homework, getting involved with education at home, and building self-esteem.

**Citywide parent forums.** This year, the Chicago Public Schools and City Colleges collaborated with the Chicago Panel on School Policy in conducting four citywide parent workshops (see “Other Local and National Resources” on page 28). Parents of eighth and ninth graders participated in special sessions on helping students make a good transition from elementary school to high school. In addition, the Chicago Public Schools’ Parent-Community Outreach Unit held a High School Symposium that introduced the *Designs for High Schools* to parents and other members of the school community.

**Parent Resource Service Center.** The Chicago Public Schools operates a Parent Resource Service Center through IASA Title I funds. This center, a systemwide training resource, helps parents develop the skills they need to participate effectively in their children’s education and to build their own skills.

Through its Parents are Teachers Too (PATT) program, the Parent Resource Service Center has expanded its effort to high school students to support the *Designs for High Schools*. PATT provides high schools on probation with outside consultants to work with them to promote home, school, and community partnerships and encourage parents to become more active in their children’s education through a variety of organized activities. Schools identify a staff facilitator who engages at least 15-20 parents in monthly activities. At Crane High School, for example, PATT helped a group of teachers and parents develop a series of Saturday workshops. Building on this success, the Resource Center has begun working with DuSable High School and its feeder elementary schools to develop a similar parent involvement initiative focused on the transition to high school.

reactive in dealing with problems. The degree to which parents get the message that the school holds high expectations and aspirations for their child and that they can turn to the school for help will shape the parents’ sense of effectiveness, level of involvement and, ultimately, aspirations.

But many school personnel and teachers struggle with how best to engage parents, and high school teachers themselves are unclear how to help parents fight the external forces that seem to be overwhelming. Unfortunately, high schools do not have a large body of successful practices to draw on. The research literature contains extensive programs and references for developing meaningful home-school relationships for elementary-aged students and their parents. Far fewer references and resources exist for parents of high schoolers. What do parents need and want from schools? And how does this compare with what they are getting?

### Parents Want More Interaction with Teachers about Academic Concerns

All parents of freshman receive a mailing as their first contact with the high school, informing them of basic rules and regulations. Additional mailings follow throughout the school year. This form of one-way and largely administrative communication is typical of any high school’s outreach. At the beginning of the school year, we attended several freshman high school orientations. As one observer reported, “After attending the orientation, I could tell you exactly how many braids freshman could wear and how many ways they can get suspended, but I couldn’t tell you why freshmen were taking the classes they



## Parents Hear about Rules and Regulations More Than Academics

Percent of parents saying they get ENOUGH information from high school about . . .

### Rules and regulations.

*Fees, uniform requirements, rules, etc.*

77%

### Academics.

*How to get in touch with teachers.*

67%

*When your child is doing poorly in class.*

59%

*What your child's schedule is.*

58%

*What your child is doing in class and when he gets homework.*

38%

*When your child does something well.*

36%

### Problem solving.

*Whom to contact about problems.*

55%

*How to get a tutor or other help with school work.*

40%

*Whom to contact if you want to learn more about a subject.*

30%

### Community or school involvement.

*How to volunteer or be on the Local School Council.*

45%

*Programs available in the school and in the community.*

37%

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80

Source: Parent Interviews, 1996, Student Life in High Schools Project (n=73).

were, what the school was trying to accomplish for freshmen that year, or what the school expected parents' roles to be."

This emphasis on rules rather than on a holistic approach to academics is reflected in parents' evaluations of the information they get from schools. During the 1996 school year, we interviewed parents of ninth graders in three Chicago high schools (see "More about Data Sources" on page 25). Over three-quarters of the

parents we interviewed felt that they got enough information on rules and regulations. (See Figure 5.) Perhaps reflecting the use of five-week academic progress reports, the majority of parents also felt that they knew when their child was doing poorly in class.

Parents were less likely to report that they got enough information on their child's day-to-day activities or how to get help when they needed it. Only about a third of the ninth-grade parents reported



## Parents of Freshmen Are Eager for Information about College and Academic Support, Yet Differ in Interest by Ethnicity

Figure 6

### College Preparation

*Programs about how to help parents plan to pay for college.* 96% (African-American), 78% (Hispanic)

*Programs about how to get your child ready to go to college.* 89% (African-American), 75% (Hispanic)

### Academics

*Programs where teachers let parents know what students need to do well.* 89% (African-American), 86% (Hispanic)

*Programs that show parents how to help with homework.* 71% (African-American), 75% (Hispanic)

*Programs that help you understand your child's work.* 64% (African-American), 78% (Hispanic)

*Programs to introduce parents to the educational system.* 43% (African-American), 72% (Hispanic)

### Parenting

*Activities for parents and teenagers to spend time together.* 57% (African-American), 75% (Hispanic)

*Programs about how to raise teenagers.* 46% (African-American), 67% (Hispanic)

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100  
Percent Very Interested

■ African-American parents (n=28) ■ Hispanic parents (n=36)

Source: Parent Interviews, Student Life in High Schools Project, 1996.

getting enough information about what their child was doing in class (38 percent) and when their child was doing well (36 percent). Less than half of the parents reported getting enough information about how to obtain support for their adolescent, like finding a tutor (40 percent).

Parents' interest in improving their ability to support their adolescents' schoolwork was most clearly

reflected in their answers to the kinds of programs they might be interested in. (See Figure 6.) More than 85 percent of the parents we interviewed said that they were very interested in programs in which teachers let parents know what students need to do well. Nearly three-quarters also expressed interest in finding out how to do more to help with their child's work in school.

### Early On, Parents Want Guidance on Post-High School Plans

No high school in our phone surveys reported that it involves parents of freshman in planning for college. Yet parents of freshman told us that they are already thinking ahead. More than 95 percent of the African-American parents and more than 75 percent of the Hispanic parents we interviewed reported that they were very interested in programs that would help parents understand how to prepare for college. The cost of college has increased as the rewards of going to college have risen. As a result, parents, as early as freshman year, are eager to talk about their children's future and to find out about ways to help their children prepare for college and decide among options.

### Hispanic Parents Feel Most in Need of Support from High Schools

Helping with homework, talking with teenagers about school, and monitoring activities and learning require that parents understand what high school students need to be doing and accomplishing daily in order to be successful. Parents who have not attended high school in the United States have the hardest time understanding what high school is like and what strategies they may use to support their children. For these reasons, Hispanic parents expressed the greatest need for information and guidance from schools. Language barriers further limit many parents' capacity to communicate with teachers and maneuver the bureaucracy. Only 22 percent of the Hispanic parents of freshman we interviewed (versus 96 percent of the African-American parents) stated that

they feel able to help their child with school work. Among Mexican-origin parents, where levels of education are even lower, 92 percent stated that they feel unable to help their freshman with homework. In this largely working-parent sample, the average amount of education for Hispanic parents was only six years, compared with 13 for African-Americans. This finding is consistent with other research conducted in Chicago elementary schools in which the authors concluded that: "Hispanic mothers were eager to be helpful to their children but believed that they were less capable of helping their children and that their help was less likely to contribute to their child's achievement."<sup>7</sup>

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*. . . as early as freshman year [parents] are eager to talk about their children's future . . .*

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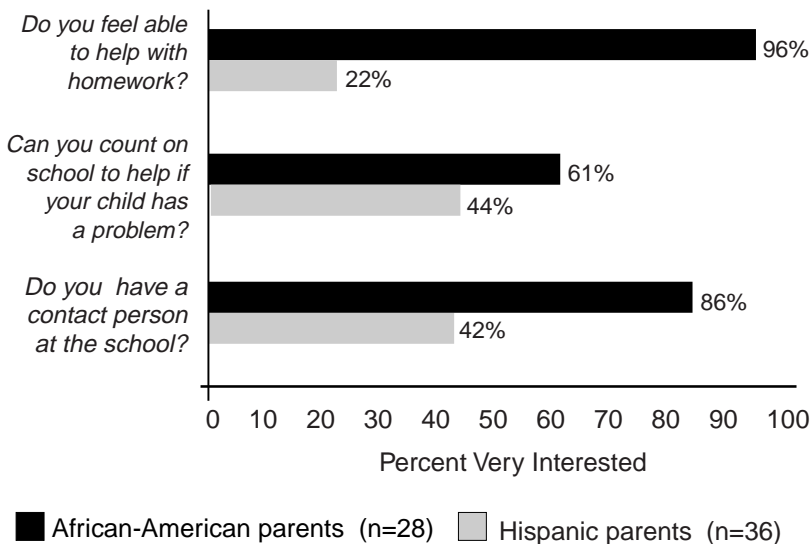
The particular barriers and difficulties that Hispanic parents face as their children move to high school was reflected in Hispanic parents' attitudes toward what they would like from schools. Hispanic parents of ninth graders were much more likely than African-American parents to say they would be very interested in programs about how to raise teenagers (67 versus 46 percent), programs that introduce parents to the education system (72 versus 43 percent), and programs that help parents understand the work that their children do in school (78 versus 64 percent.)



## Hispanic Parents Report the Least Confidence in Their Own Skills and the Least Support from Schools

Figure 7

Percent of ninth-grade parents interviewed answering YES to the question:



Source: Parent Interviews, Student Life in High Schools Project, 1996.

### But Hispanic High Schools Have the Lowest Levels of Communication and Academic Support for Parents

While Hispanic parents expressed the greatest need for guidance and communication from their adolescents' high schools, less than half of those we interviewed feel that they can count on the school to help if their child has a problem. (See Figure 7.) Hispanic parents are also half as likely (42 versus 86 percent) as African-American parents to report having a contact person at the school.

Teachers' reports of their own practices confirm these parents' experiences and suggest that the problem we observed in family-school communication for Hispanic parents is systemwide, not just limited to the three schools in which we interviewed parents. To examine this issue, we looked at how teachers' reports of their practices vary by the racial composition of high schools. (See Figure 8.) Twenty-six of the 51 CPS high schools analyzed from the Consortium on Chicago School Research's surveys serve a majority African-American student body, meaning that 70 percent or more of the student body is African-American.<sup>8</sup> Eight high schools serve a majority Hispanic-origin student body, using roughly the same criteria. Once we have taken into account differences in the eighth-grade achievement levels of each school's student body and the character-

istics of teachers taking the survey in each school, teachers in majority Hispanic high schools report the lowest levels of communication and academic support for parents.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, these poorer family-school relationships in majority Hispanic high schools stand in marked contrast to those in Hispanic elementary schools. Elementary school teachers in schools that serve majority Hispanic families report greater levels of communication with parents and greater levels of teacher-parent trust than teachers in either majority African-American, or mixed African-American and Hispanic high schools.<sup>10</sup> This means that Hispanic parents whose children attend majority Hispanic schools experience the largest changes in their relationships and support from schools as their children move to high school.

This finding that relationships between parents and teachers are weaker and more negative in Hispanic high schools is of concern and needs to be examined more systematically. There are several reasons why family-school communication may be lower at the high school level than among similar elementary schools. First, high schools that serve the Hispanic population in Chicago have experienced the most rapid growth in student enrollment and are struggling with overcrowding and resource constraints that may make it more difficult to mount systematic and positive outreach to parents. Second, language difficulties, combined with the lack of Spanish-speaking teachers in Hispanic high schools, may make it harder for schools to understand and address parents' needs and bridge cultural gaps. Twenty-eight percent of the teachers in

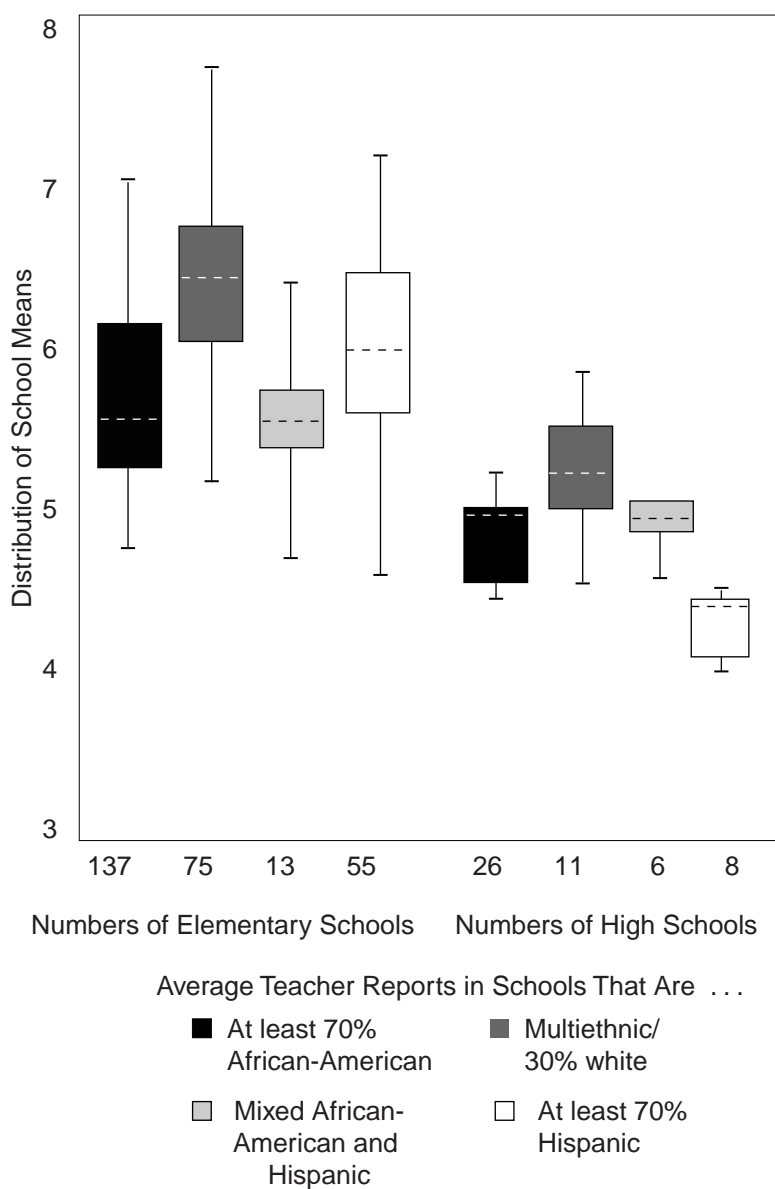


predominantly Hispanic elementary schools are Hispanic, compared with only 14 percent of the teachers in high schools that are majority Hispanic. Hispanic and African-American teachers tend to report more positive relationships with parents, regardless of parents' race or ethnicity.<sup>11</sup>

A lack of Hispanic teachers, language barriers, high rates of immigration, and overcrowding may be important factors in shaping poorer levels of family-school communication in Hispanic high schools. Another factor is the overall school environment. Even if we look at Hispanic teachers in majority Hispanic schools, we find that these teachers report lower than average levels of communication and academic support for parents than Hispanic teachers who teach in other high schools. Because of the small numbers of Hispanic high school teachers, this finding should be considered tentative.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, it suggests that teachers' reports of the extent to which they and their colleagues are focused on working with parents in majority Hispanic schools reflect larger differences in the climate of these schools.

The past several years have seen rapid change for all high schools in Chicago, Hispanic high schools included. In the 1997-98 school year, three predominantly Hispanic high schools got new principal leadership; two of these schools participated in the Consortium survey and are included in our analysis. As we will see in the next section, many high schools have also begun initiatives to work with parents. All of the majority Hispanic high schools that responded to our telephone surveys had initiated efforts in the 1997-98 school year such

**Majority Hispanic Elementary Schools Do Not Show the Discrepancy in Communication and Support to Parents Observed in Majority Hispanic High Schools**



Note 1: Results are based on 280 elementary schools and 51 high schools. These school means have been statistically controlled for teacher characteristics (race, gender, ability level of students) and school characteristics (achievement level, racial composition, number of languages served).

as starting orientation programs for freshman parents and providing teachers flex time to contact parents. This suggests that many Hispanic high schools are realizing the need to improve school environments. However, as we discussed in this section, developing and supporting these efforts will require attention to

the special challenges that majority Hispanic high schools face, including a lack of Hispanic teachers, language barriers, the special problems of immigrant groups who are not familiar with the U.S. educational system, cultural differences within the Hispanic population, and the pressures of overcrowding.

### Roosevelt High School's Parent Center

Youth Guidance is a social service program based in several Chicago high schools. In 1996, Youth Guidance began working with Roosevelt High School to start a parent involvement program. Funded by a grant from the Kraft Family Foundation, the Parent Center seeks to provide extra problem solving and support services to the school's multiracial and multiethnic student body. The Youth Guidance program at Roosevelt has three components: parent education and outreach activities; volunteering opportunities for parents; and support, case management, and counseling to families facing special problems.



Mariana Osoria, Director of Youth Guidance's parent program at Roosevelt High School, introduces the topic at one of the monthly parent workshops.

The **parent education** component includes monthly evening workshops for parents, a bimonthly parent newsletter distributed every other month, and a Parent Center located in the school where parents can get information and resources. Monthly workshops are posted in the school calendar and are announced through flyers, mailings, and phone calls to parents. Workshops were developed with the input of parents. They focus on adolescent development, the transition to high school, helping with homework, conflict resolution, holiday stress, student safety, and gangs. Workshops conducted in both Spanish and English have served between 25 and 80 parents per month.

The **volunteer program**, coordinated by a paid parent liaison, organizes parent volunteers who work in the office, the library, and in classrooms. Mariana Osoria, the coordinator of the Parent Center, notes that such efforts are critical to make parents feel that they are welcome in the school and to increase parent-teacher interaction. Osoria is coordinating her efforts with the school's Bilingual Parent Advisory Council and teachers to build an active parent coalition that meets every two months with the principal to discuss activities related to the Parent Center and school governance.

Finally, the Parent Center provides **individualized services to parents and adolescents who are facing special problems**. Parents are informed about these services through the Center's bimonthly newsletter. Services include individual and family counseling by Youth Guidance and referrals to other social service agencies in the community. The Parent Center is producing a reference book that compiles a list of social services available to families in the surrounding community. This component—which is still in the early phases of implementation—has been in place since Spring 1997. Individualized services are provided for four to five families per semester. By combining general outreach and education activities with more intensive assistance, the Parent Center is able to offer a range of services to help families solve problems they are having in supporting their adolescents' education.

## Changing Standards, New Demands on Parents, and New High School Efforts

**P**olicy changes in Chicago and changes in the economic benefits of getting an education have made it even more important for high schools to work with parents. The high school restructuring initiative has raised standards for students. A changing economic climate means that more parents are realizing that their children need to graduate from high school and go on to post-secondary training in order to be successful. Chicago high schools will have a difficult time meeting these new expectations if students are not doing more homework, if parents are not involved in monitoring their teenagers' school work and talking about it, and if parents are not brought on board in supporting high standards and working with their schools to implement higher expectations for their children. New core requirements and tougher promotional standards mean that all students must now get the kind of parental monitoring and support necessary to ensure progress in school. Research shows that parents who are involved in daily discussions about their children's school work and education make a critical difference for adolescents who are struggling in school. These parents can help their children persevere and not drop out.<sup>13</sup> But, as we saw in the previous section, parents need more concrete guidance from high school teachers about how best to support their children's high school work, and parents are eager for such relationships. Urban high schools and teachers have an important and special role to play in bridging knowledge and resource gaps for parents, and in helping parents understand how they can help their children meet these new expectations. Not surprisingly, we find that many high schools are beginning to respond to these new needs.



Elaine Jones and her sister Christian discuss excerpts from Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* at the "Family Stories: Writing and Reading" workshop at Schurz High School.

### Chicago High School Teachers Report Better Communication and More Positive Relationships with Parents than They Did Just Three Years Ago

Parent involvement has been a mantra of education reform over the past decade. In Chicago, parent involvement has taken on special significance through the establishment of Local School Councils that brought greater parental influence on school governance. Recent reforms have also emphasized initiatives to promote parental involvement and family education (see "Other Local and National Resources" on page 28).

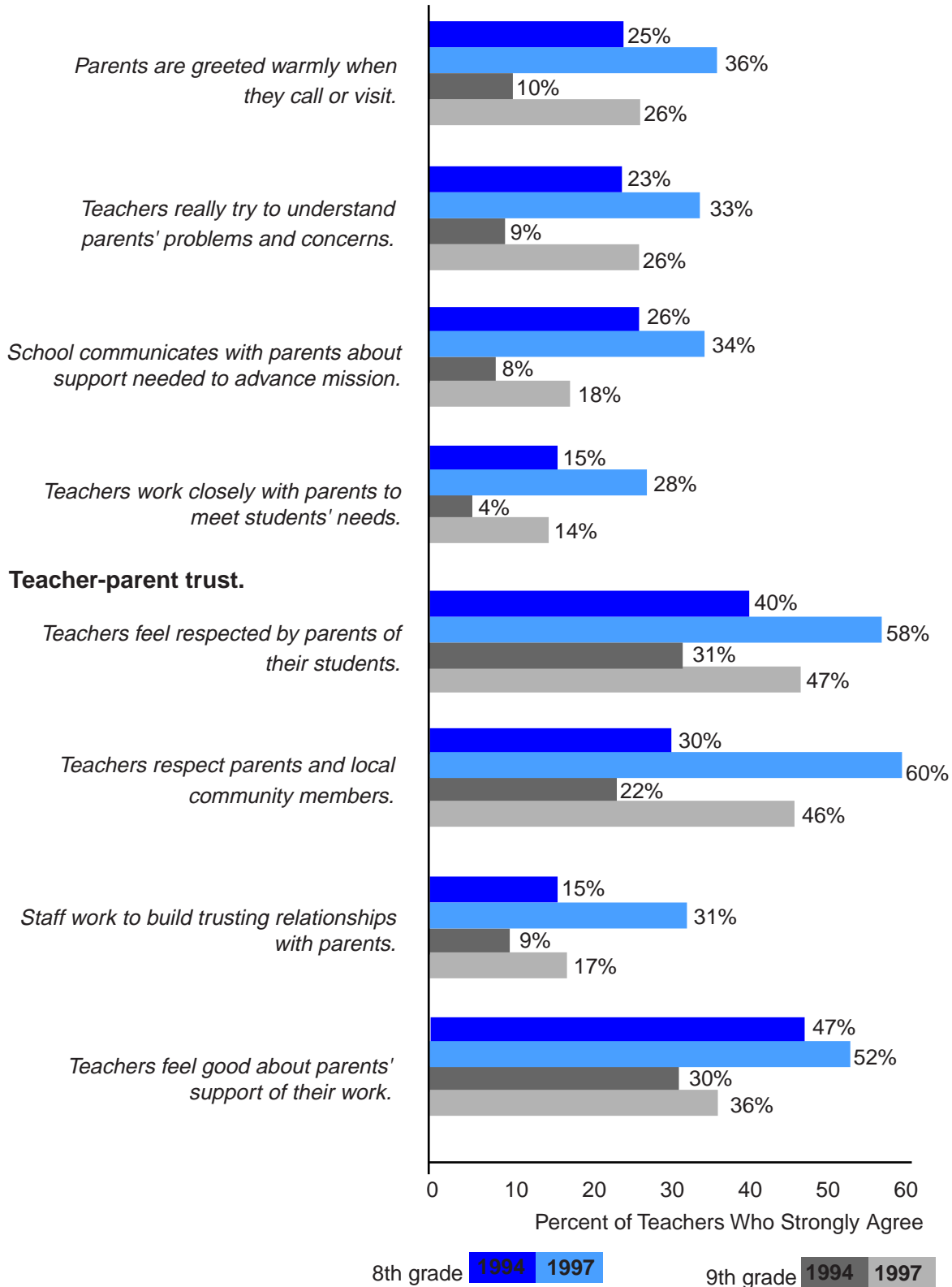
We compared teachers' responses to the questions asked in 1997 with teachers' answers to comparable questions asked on surveys in 1994. (See Figure 9.) Both elementary and high school teachers are much more positive about their relationships with parents and about their efforts to communicate with parents than they were just three



## Between 1994 and 1997, Eighth- and Ninth-Grade Teachers Report Greater Levels of Parent Communication and Teacher-Parent Trust

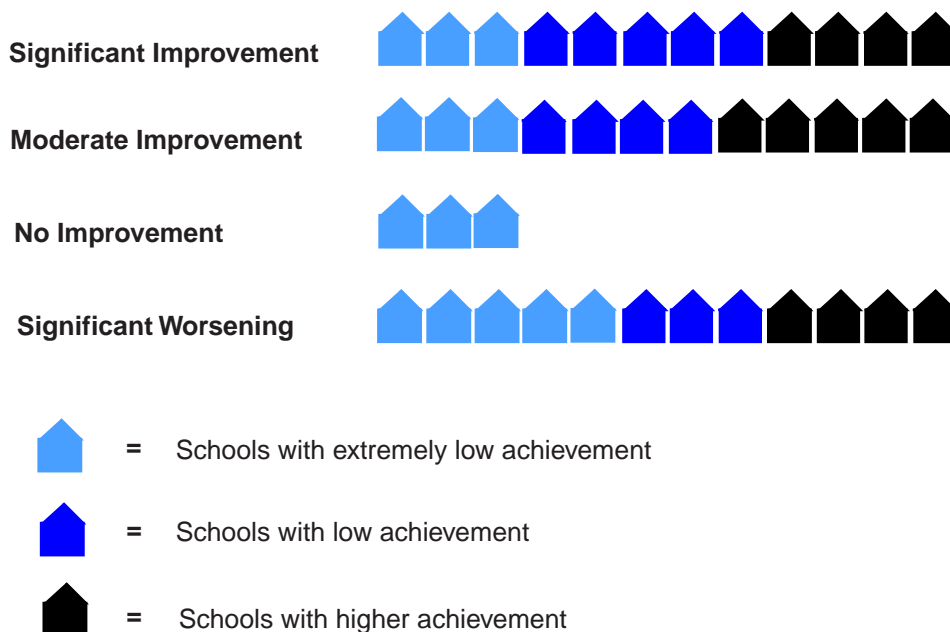
Figure 9

### Communication and academic support to parents.



## Improvements in Communication and Support to Parents Are Occurring Across a Range of Schools in the City

Schools where change in teacher reports of communication and support to parents between 1994 and 1997 showed . . .



Note: Schools with extremely low achievement are those where 90 percent of the ninth graders **do not** meet national norms in reading and math. Schools with low achievement are those where 75 to 89 percent of the ninth graders **do not** meet national norms in reading and math. Schools with higher achievement are those where at least 25 percent of the ninth graders meet national norms in reading and math.

years earlier. The percentages of ninth-grade teachers who strongly agree that teachers greet parents warmly, try to understand parents' problems, and work to communicate to parents the mission of the school more than doubled between 1994 and 1997. While eighth-grade teachers' reports are also more positive in 1997, improvements have been most marked at the high school level, thus decreasing the gap between eighth- and ninth-grade teachers' responses.

### Improving High Schools' Focus on Strengthening Instruction and Engaging Parents

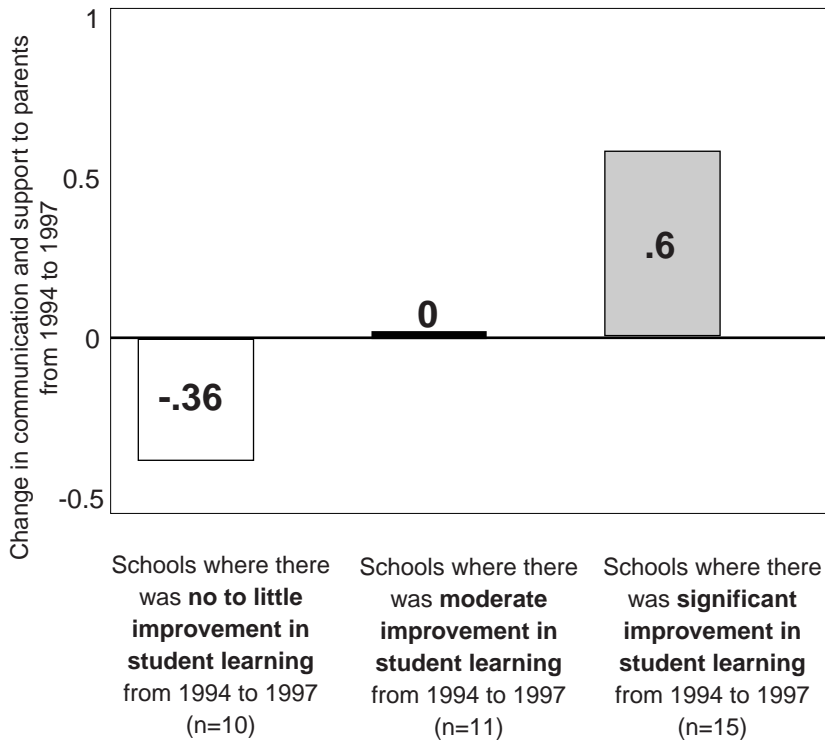
Improvements in teachers' reports regarding communication and relationships with parents are not uniform across high schools. (See Figure 10.) Thirty-nine high schools took the survey in 1994 and 1997. When all questions regarding teachers' reports of their level

of communication with parents are placed on a 1 to 10 scale, the average score of teacher reports increased in 24 high schools between 1994 and 1997, with three showing no change and twelve declining.<sup>14</sup> Almost half of the high schools in which teachers' reports of their efforts to communicate with parents got worse between 1994 and 1997 have since been reconstituted.

What kinds of high schools are making the most progress in improving parent-school relationships? Prior research has shown that many schools successful in reform efforts combine a focus on improving the technical core (the quality of instruction and curricula in classrooms) with efforts to improve the quality of relationships within the building—how much time teachers have to work together, to get to know and work with students, and to work with parents. Such a dual approach supports school improvement because

Figure 11

**As Schools Focus More on Student Learning, They Communicate with and Support Parents More**



"Focus on student learning" is based on teachers' answers in 1994 and 1997 to the questions of how much they agree that their school (1) is organized to maximize instructional time, (2) sets high academic standards, (3) has well-defined learning expectations for all students, (4) always focuses on what is best for student learning, and (5) develops students' social skills.

by working together, parents, students, and teachers develop a "vision of the possible" and develop the supports that allow higher standards to be achieved.<sup>15</sup> This research is reflected in the *Designs for High Schools'* emphasis on both academic press and personalism and in the CPS's school improvement framework (see "Essential Supports and the Consortium on Chicago School Research" on page 27).

Our own data support these findings. Those schools in which teachers' reports of their communication with parents increased markedly between 1994 and 1997 also tend to be those schools where teachers report a greater focus on student learning and more efforts to work together to improve instruction. We examined how changes in high school teachers' reports about communication and the quality of their relationships with parents vary by three critical indicators of school improvement:

1. the degree to which teachers report a strong emphasis on student learning in the school (*focus on student learning*);
2. the degree to which teachers report that they are working together to improve instruction (*peer collaboration*); and
3. the degree to which teachers report that their work and that of their colleagues is focused on school improvement and innovation (*innovation*).

Between 1994 and 1997, 15 CPS high schools showed significant increases in the degree to which teachers reported that the instructional environment was focused more on student learning, such as setting high academic standards and providing the support for students to meet those standards. (See Figure 11.) In these high schools, the average teacher reports of communication with parents about their children's academic work and the school's mission also increased significantly (.6). In contrast, in the 10 high schools where teachers' reports of the quality of the instructional environment made no to little improvement between 1994 and 1997, the mean level of their reports of communication with parents declined.

We see similar associations between changes in teachers' reports of their efforts to work together to improve instruction and the schools' parent practices. (See Figures 12 and 13.) Those schools where teachers report that they are working together more, such as becoming more collegial (16 schools), and those schools that experiment more with innovative

**When Teachers Work Together on Instruction, the Schools Work More with Parents**

"Collegiality" is based on teachers' answers in 1994 and 1997 to the questions of how often they (1) designed instructional programs together, (2) coordinated instruction across grade levels, (3) collaborated to make the school run effectively, and (4) worked together cordially.

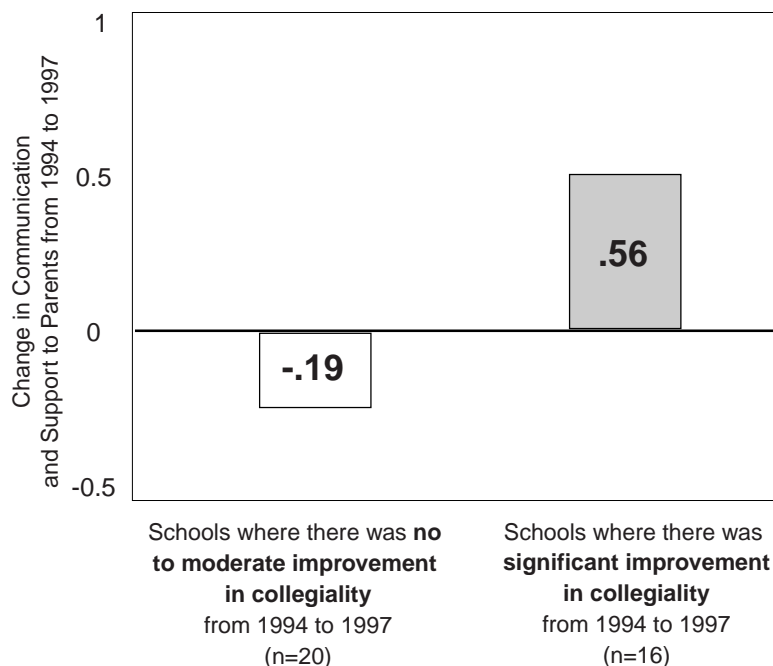


Figure 13

**Schools with Innovative Practices Indicate More Outreach to Parents**

"Innovation" is based on teachers' answers in 1994 and 1997 to the questions of how much they agree that they (1) were really trying to improve their teaching, (2) were willing to take risks to make the school better, (3) were trying new ideas, (4) felt that they were encouraged to "stretch and grow," and (5) were continually learning and seeking new ideas.

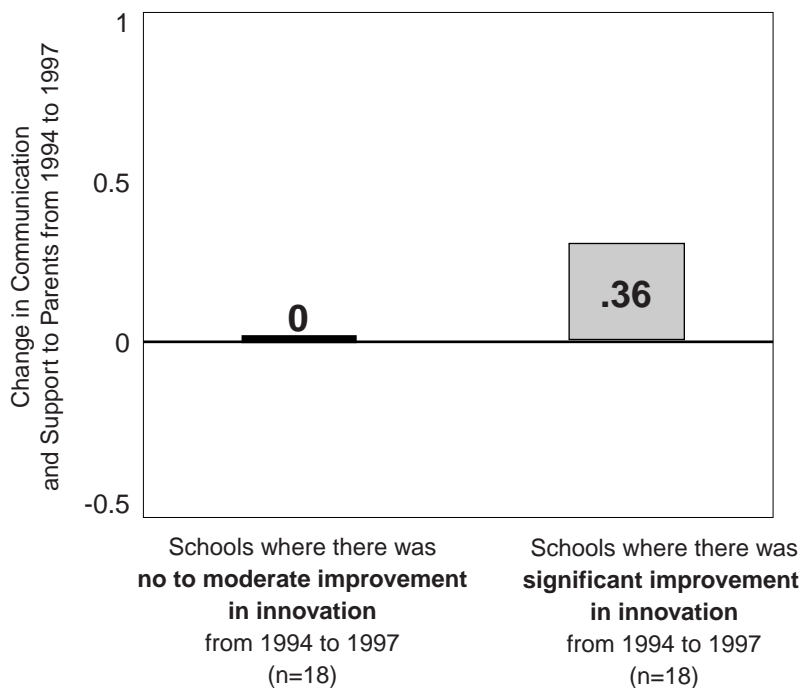


Figure 14

## 📞 Current Efforts in High Schools: Results from a Phone Survey

### on Orientation Activities

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100%	Send letters to parents of freshmen informing them of orientation schedules.
100%	Invite parents to accompany their child to the freshman orientation.
75%	Provide a contact at school for parents, usually through sending a letter home.
50%	Have special orientation events for parents (invitations to walk through students' schedules and meet teachers, tours, or workshops for parents).
40%	Have a special parent event at which parents can meet teachers.
40%	Meet with parents of eighth graders before summer.
20%	Produce a parent handbook for freshmen.

### Ongoing Contact with Parents

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100%	Mail home five-week progress reports.
93%	Mail home information regarding rules, regulations, fees, and requirements.
47%	Produce a parent newsletter for all parents.
11%	Use progress reports to report on students doing well and poorly.

### Special Parent Activities for All Parents

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60%	Use newsletters and mailings to solicit parent volunteers.
44%	Have special social activities and open houses for parents (parent back-to-school nights, school mission meetings, school festivals, parent breakfasts).
42%	Have skills-based workshops and academic support services for parents (parent skills training, workshops tailored to parent interests, family math nights).
42%	Use their freshman academy or advisory groups to do outreach to parents such as having flex time for contacting parents, a special division for parents, and parent advisory meetings.
7%	Have school-based parent centers.

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practices (18 schools), also had, on average, increases in teachers' reports of their level of communication with parents. This finding suggests that the improvements we observe in teachers' reports of their efforts to work with parents between 1994 and 1997 reflect broader changes in teacher attitudes and activity around school improvement. It also suggests that changing teachers' practice is a schoolwide issue, not an issue that results from the attitudes or practices of any individual teacher.

In summary, schools that have gained most in teachers' reports of parent focus are those in which instructional change has been made a priority. High schools like Schurz, Fenger, and Roosevelt (see sidebars on pages 26, 10, and 18, respectively) recognize the importance of parent involvement and realize that changing school environments to be more responsive to and supportive of parents is integral to raising achievement. Principals and staff members in these schools spoke of higher levels of communication and better relationships between school staff and parents as a central piece of their efforts to develop a more student-centered learning environment and raise performance.

Schurz, Fenger, and Roosevelt are not alone in implementing new initiatives to engage parents. In a telephone survey of 45 high schools, we found that many high schools across the city are trying new programs and policies to engage and support parents. (See Figure 14.) Half of the 45 high schools had some kind of event for parents of incoming ninth graders in the 1997-98 school year. More than 40 percent continued activities throughout



the school year with parent newsletters, workshops, and using the structure of advisory groups and/or freshman academies to step up efforts to work with parents. Many of these efforts began as part of the new high school reform initiative. For example, 57 percent of the high schools that held parent orien-

tations for freshman started this practice within the last two years. Similarly, almost all of the high schools that reported ongoing workshops and academic support services had started these initiatives within the last two years.

### **More about Data Sources**

In this research brief, we use three primary sources of data. First, we draw on surveys completed by CPS eighth and tenth graders (approximately 25,000 students) and by elementary and high school teachers (approximately 13,000) in spring 1997, and similar surveys conducted by the Consortium in 1994. Overall, 55 high schools participated in the 1997 surveys, and 39 high schools participated in both the 1994 and 1997 surveys. We exclude schools that serve special needs populations, alternative schools, and elementary and high schools with fewer than 10 teacher respondents. The 1997 surveys were conducted by the Consortium on Chicago Research in conjunction with the Chicago Annenberg Research Project.

Second, this brief uses information from telephone surveys of 45 high schools in fall 1997 and follow-up visits to 11 high schools. Telephone surveys and site visits collected information on current school policies, practices, and approaches to parent involvement. A few of these high school initiatives are highlighted in specific case studies presented in this brief.

Third, this brief draws on interviews with 73 parents of freshman during 1996 as part of the Student Life in High Schools Project (SLP). The SLP is a longitudinal study of the transition to high school that followed more than 90 students from the end of eighth grade to the end of tenth grade. Most students attended three Chicago high schools. Parents were interviewed during the winter and spring of students' ninth grade. The SLP sample was primarily minority students with working parents employed as clerical, service, or factory workers. Twenty-eight parents were African-American, 30 parents were of Mexican descent, six parents were of Puerto Rican or Central American descent, four parents were Polish immigrants, and five parents were white, non-Hispanic. Among African-Americans, 47 percent of the households were headed by a single parent. Among Hispanic parents, 53 percent of the households were headed by a single parent. The average amount of education was 13 years for African-American parents, and 75 percent graduated from high school. Among Hispanic parents, the average amount of education was six years, and 20 percent graduated from high school.

## Schurz High School: Multilayered Efforts to Involve Parents

Schurz high school serves a student body that is predominately Latino and African-American on Chicago's northwest side. After the school was placed on probation, school personnel met with their external partners from Northeastern Illinois University and decided to make parent involvement a part of their efforts to raise achievement. Schurz spent last year developing multiple approaches aimed at improving communication with parents, increasing parents' opportunities to work with their child on reading and homework, and bringing parents into the building on a regular basis.

**Family reading:** Staff at Schurz realized that improving reading skills meant that students needed to do more reading in school and at home. They found that students often did not have enough reading materials at home and that parents often lacked skills in reading. The school, with help from its external partner, identified a curriculum using materials from *Reader's Digest*, designed to increase reading materials in the home and provide a means for families to interact with children around reading. This strategy was addressed at the fall open house, and families were presented *Reader's Digest* books. Rather than just adopt the curriculum, Schurz decided to build on initial interest and develop its own. Teachers and parents have spent the year planning a series of family reading nights which will be held monthly next year. Schurz's assistant principal, Carline Williams-Strong, feels that the year of planning was critical and mobilized parents and teachers, especially in the English department. Schurz's curriculum draws on established curricula such as *Reader's Digest's* Reading Renaissance and Sustained Silent Reading practices. It will bring parents together to work on reading and homework strategies. Each monthly meeting will be led by a teacher volunteer. Schurz is kicking off the program with a family reading night in May. The event was planned by a team of teachers, parents, and students. Both Schurz families and families of future freshmen will be invited.

**Homework hotline:** Three years ago, Schurz purchased a voice-mail-based phone system to provide homework information to parents. The system allows teachers to leave outgoing messages about assigned work and allows parents to leave messages for specific teachers. The phone system permits the school to track the number of parent calls and how often teachers update their information. Parents, however, found the system difficult to navigate. This year, the school's open house included a training session for parents in three different languages about how to use the homework hotline.

**Freshman orientations, parent open houses, and report card pick-up day:** Schurz has made a concerted effort to use orientations and open houses to introduce family reading and homework hotline initiatives to parents. During freshman orientation, staff from Northeastern Illinois held special assemblies with parents. At the school's open house, Schurz sent letters home and held a raffle. The school boasted a 75 percent attendance rate. Five divisions had 100 percent attendance. At the open house, the school focused on informing parents of the school's new initiatives to raise reading levels and held a training session for parents on the homework hotline.

These new parent initiatives are part of a larger effort to get parents into Schurz on a more regular basis. The school is now open until 6:00 p.m. two afternoons a week and on weekends. This After School Academy and Social Center provides space for continuing education classes including adult English as a Second Language, computer training, woodworking, auto mechanics, and activities such as swimming and weight lifting. The adult learners share space with Schurz students who attend the After School Academy's homework center and tutoring activities. The After School Academy and Social Center serves about 200-300 persons, including adults, per week.

**Parent academy:** The school's newest effort is the parent academy, which had a shaky but promising start during its first year. The parent academy seeks to provide a parent liaison for each division (homeroom) and develop ongoing workshops for parents. Personnel from Northeastern Illinois University presented the goals of the parent academy to parents at the school's orientation. Initial interest was high. Approximately 70 parents expressed interest in participating in workshops. Three parents were hired as paid volunteers to coordinate the program and were trained at the Family Center of Northeastern University. Thirty parents attended the first workshop and were organized in three groups of 10, by ethnicity. One group was very successful and maintained high participation for ten consecutive sessions. These parents hope to continue next year and recruit others. Next year, Schurz plans to continue the program, trying to improve and learn from this year's efforts.

## Interpretive Summary: Improving Parent Involvement in Adolescents' Education—Lessons from New Initiatives

**A**t the beginning of this research brief, we outlined four critical home supports that are linked to success in school, particularly for average and lower performing students. High schools can do much to encourage and develop home environments for these adolescents. But high school teachers traditionally have not been asked to work with parents in developing critical home supports, nor have they seen these activities as central to their work. There is a reason for this. As recently as two decades ago, students who were not going to college could drop out and get a job. And up until relatively recently, most students in high school did not take academically challenging courses in which they needed to do homework, learn study skills, and develop strategies for help. Most students were not pursuing curricula for which parents needed to provide high levels of support, and most parents did not need help keeping their children in school and preparing for post-secondary schools. But a changing economy and changing standards have altered the rules for students, parents, and teachers. If there is one clear trend in the American economy, it is that of rising payoffs for high level skills and decreasing economic prospects for students who do not graduate from high school and go on to post-secondary training. Families and schools are recognizing that if they are to succeed in the new economy, all students must begin to receive the training and develop the skills that were previously reserved for only a few.

But this is a tall order to ask of schools, particularly at a time when the Chicago Public Schools are becoming more diverse. First, teachers are often no more expert in the question of how to support

### Essential Supports and the Consortium on Chicago School Research

In 1994, Consortium researchers, Chicago Public Schools staff, and researchers from several universities and reform organizations developed a framework to guide schools' self-analysis and development (see the Chicago Public Schools' *Children First: A Self-Analysis Guide*). This framework outlines five essential supports for student learning drawn from research on effective urban schools: school leadership, a student-centered learning environment, a quality instructional program, professional development and collaboration among teachers, and parent and community partnerships. In this research brief, we take an in-depth look at one of five essential supports—parent partnerships at the high school level.

The Consortium on Chicago School Research uses this framework to look at school improvement in Chicago. This brief builds on prior research findings presented in the Consortium on Chicago School Research's *Charting Reform: Chicago Teachers Take Stock*, and *Charting Reform: The Students Speak*.<sup>16</sup> These reports highlight that in schools where parents and teachers are working together to advance school improvement and where there are high levels of trust and communication among parents, teachers, and principals, we often see higher levels of student engagement, decreased absenteeism, higher achievement, and more time spent on homework.

The Consortium is an independent federation of Chicago area organizations that conducts research on ways to improve Chicago's public schools and assess the progress of school improvement and reform. Formed in 1990, it is a bipartisan organization that includes faculty from area universities, leadership from the Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Teachers Union, education advocacy groups, the Illinois State Board of Education, and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, as well as other key civic and professional leaders. The Consortium does not argue a particular policy position. Rather, it believes that good policy is most likely to result from a genuine competition of ideas informed by the best evidence that can be obtained.

urban adolescents and make sure that they stay on task than parents, even though parents are looking to them for such guidance. High school teachers face their own barriers in talking with parents, have received little training in either adolescent development or strategies to work with parents, and often feel frustrated in their ability to help parents with a misbehaving student. Second, every school staff member we interviewed referred to the fact that getting parents involved in high schools was a continuous and challenging process. Parents have difficulty getting to school and face obstacles to their own involvement including work, child care, and language barriers. And third, high school teachers often don't have the resources to follow up beyond a particular class problem and may

not know students well enough to effectively mount an effort to assist parents. High schools have not traditionally organized work and instruction so that teachers have the time and flexibility to work together and with parents to develop new approaches to meet the challenge of higher standards for all students.

With all of these difficulties, it is impressive that teachers report so much progress in their relationships and efforts to communicate with parents. In this final section, we report three common themes gleaned from observations in our visits to both struggling and effective high schools, in our discussions with teachers and school administrators about their experiences, and in looking nationally at other models and approaches.

### Other Local and National Resources

There are several noteworthy efforts occurring in Chicago and nationally that provide resources to schools.

The **Chicago Panel on School Policy** in conjunction with the Chicago Public Schools and the City Colleges of Chicago has developed a Chicago Parent Connection and a Parent Involvement Resource Bank. The Chicago Parent Connection has hosted a series of workshops and adult education activities, some of which focus on high schools. The Parent Involvement Resource Bank provides a data base of local and national resources for parent involvement. About 300-500 parents have attended each of these events. *For more information, contact Gaylee Morgan or Erin Krasik, Chicago Panel on School Policy, 75 E. Wacker Drive, Suite 300, Chicago, IL 60601; or at 312-346-2202.*

The **Chicago Teachers' Center at Northeastern Illinois University** is an external partner for several Chicago schools. Their Building Parent Communities program, currently based in elementary schools, provides support and training to parents to promote student academic success. This program also has resources to help high schools develop better family-school relationships. *For more information, contact Wendy Stack at 312-733-7330.*

**Family Math** was developed by the Equals program at the Lawrence Hall of Science at the University of California at Berkeley. Family Math is designed to help families become more involved in their children's education and break down traditional barriers between home and school. Family Math offers training for families, educators, and community members who want to establish family math courses. These courses, typically six to eight weekly sessions, bring together 25 parents and children for focused activities. The program publishes a newsletter and has family math curricula available. *For more information, contact Steven Jordan at the Office of Mathematics and Computer Education, University of Illinois at Chicago, 851 S. Morgan, mail code 249, Chicago, IL 60607; or at 312-996-3041, or at their World Wide web site: <http://equals.LHS.berkeley.edu/>.*

High schools can become members of the **National Network of Partnership Schools** and receive support for developing action plans to increase parental involvement. The network's framework was developed by Joyce Epstein and Lori Connors. *For more information, contact Dr. Joyce Epstein, Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, 3003 North Charles Street, Suite 200, Baltimore, MD 21218, or Karen Salinas at 410-516-8818. Visit their website at <http://scov.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/p2000.html>.*

Parents Donna Lashus and Michelle Brooks have developed the **Boston High School Parent Centers**. *For more information, contact Donna Lashus, Boston Public Schools, at 617-635-9660 or Michelle Brooks, Burke High School Parent Center, at 617-635-6863.*

For more ideas and a citywide look at parent involvement, see the March 1998 issue of *CATALYST: Voices of Chicago School Reform*.

## Theme 1: Effective School Initiatives Combine Multiple Approaches

The results of our parent interviews suggest four areas of development for high schools regarding parent support:

1. Improving parents' access to information about how and what their child is doing in school;
2. Building parents' skills and developing new strategies in assisting with their child's schoolwork;
3. Providing services so that parents can get help if their child is having difficulty, can get their child involved in work and extracurricular activities, and can get assistance in planning for their child's future and make the link between high school work and future plans; and
4. Bringing teachers and parents together so that they can share common struggles and concerns and develop new strategies.

Schools like Schurz, Fenger, and Roosevelt that are developing effective strategies are addressing these needs by using multiple approaches such as the homework help line, orientation programs, and Family Math and Reading that invite parents into the school to empower them in gaining access to the school and in building skills. Not surprisingly, many of these initiatives were developed by teachers and parents working together to identify needs. This approach allows for programs to develop slowly. It also creates an overall school environment that is open and supportive of parents rather than delegating parent support to one particular initiative unrelated to the broader activities of the school. In summary, while many good ideas exist, it is clear that effective programming rests on multiple approaches that meet parents' diverse needs, that involve teachers, and that are linked to the instructional goals of the school.

## Theme 2: Effective School Initiatives Focus on Academics

High schools that are developing effective approaches draw a clear link between parent outreach efforts and the academic mission of the school. When teachers and school staff are clear about their goals, such as Schurz's focus on improving reading scores, parents and teachers can more readily see the payoffs. Parents appreciate concrete programs that address problems they struggle with—how to help their child with homework, how to get help when their child needs it, and where to get help to understand the work their child is doing. In addition, parents of high school students want to be engaged in discussion about the mission and goals for the school, what teachers are trying to accomplish, and how parents can help.

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*Parents appreciate concrete programs that address problems they struggle with—how to help their child with homework, how to get help when their child needs it, and where to get help to understand the work their child is doing.*

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Just as parental outreach and involvement efforts will be most effective when they are tailored to specific problems high schools face, we also find that such programs need to be tailored to the individual needs of parents. For example, as we found in this study, schools that serve a high proportion of students who are immigrants, particularly Hispanic students, may need to do more to educate parents about the nature of high school level work.

### Theme 3: Schools Need to Build Institutional Capacity to Support Parent Outreach Efforts

Generally the structure of high school teachers' work does not allow teachers the resources, time, or opportunities they need to communicate with parents. Critical to the process of parent involvement and to the sustainability of efforts,

is using the reform initiatives such as junior academies and advisories to build the capacity of the school to work with parents. Many high schools' parent initiatives have begun as part of the new junior academy and advisory programs. Senn High School, for example, has begun using its junior academy to promote parent outreach. Freshman and sophomore students are organized into "PODS" with four core teachers sharing a group of 100-120 students. Each Wednesday, Senn's teachers meet to discuss their shared students and identify specific needs regarding academic or behavioral problems. Since the school year began, each POD teacher team has been meeting with a parent a week. POD math teacher Holly Esaki said she feels this focus is especially conducive to joint problem solving with parents and allows parents to get to know POD teachers. Such efforts not only further the goals of the junior academies—to bring more personalism and academic focus to high schools—but also add an important preventive layer and a method of bringing together parents and teachers to work as a team with a counselor. Most important, such efforts provide an infrastructure of support for effective schools. Previous studies by the Consortium have shown that schools that have a strong sense of teamwork among the principal, teachers, and parents, are schools that provide students more support to handle challenging work.<sup>17</sup>

The good news in this research brief is that many high schools and high school teachers are becoming aware that changing practices toward parents is central to raising achievement and educational attainment. Many of these initiatives, however, are being mounted and supported as extra programs in schools, often with short-term funding such as probationary monies or foundation grants. These initiatives are being assisted by outside experts who are involved only on a short-term basis. If parental involvement is to be a central piece of high school restructuring, these financial and professional resources must be available to all schools and must receive sustained and institutionalized support.

#### Acknowledgments

We would like to thank wholeheartedly the following persons for their help during school site visits:

Leota Jones, Von Steuben High School  
John Barnes, Amundsen High School  
Sharon Rae Bender, Schurz High School  
Linda Berrien, Fenger High School  
Holly Esaki, Senn High School  
Judith Hernandez, Senn High School  
Phyllis Hodges, Von Steuben High School  
Edward Klunk, Amundsen High School  
Mary Pat McKenna, Senn High School  
Gaylee Morgan, Chicago Panel on School Policy  
Janice Ollarvia, Fenger High School  
Mariana Osoria, Youth Guidance, Roosevelt High School  
Melverlene Parker, Whitney Young High School  
Soledad Rodriguez, Schurz High School  
Sandy Slone, Fenger High School  
Carline Williams-Strong, Schurz High School  
Pauline Tavardian, Amundsen High School  
Paul Zeitler, Von Steuben High School

At the Consortium on Chicago School Research, we would like to thank John Q. Easton, Diane King Bilcer, Kay Kersch Kirkpatrick, Sandra Jennings, Stuart Luppescu, and Yeow Meng Thum. We appreciate the time spent by the Consortium's directors and Steering Committee members who reviewed drafts of this brief and offered their comments.

At the Chicago Public Schools, we wish to thank Ellie Kierson, Nellie Balach, Martha Alexakos, and Powhatan Collins for their essential input and guidance.

Finally, we want to thank all students and parents who participated in the Student Life in High Schools Project.

Funding for this project was provided by the Steans Family Foundation, The McDougal Family Foundation, the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (OERI-GR117D40005), The Spencer Foundation, and the Chicago Public Schools.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Chicago Board of Education, *Designs for High Schools* (Chicago: Chicago Public Schools, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> For literature reviews on the link between parental educational support and school performance, see the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's concluding report, *Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for A New Century* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1995); and Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla, *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement* (Washington, DC: National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Over the last two decades, researchers studying resilience and adolescence have challenged the notion that children need greater autonomy from adults as they move into adolescence. A discussion of the importance of parental involvement during adolescence can be found in Jacquelyne Eccles and Harold Rena, "Family Involvement in Children's and Adolescents' Schooling" in *Family-School Links: How Do They Affect Educational Outcomes?* ed. Alan Booth, Judith F. Dunn, and Judy Dunn (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Seyong Lee, *Family-School Connections and Students' Education: Continuity and Change of Family Involvement from the Middle Grades to High School* (Ph.D. dissertation, The Johns Hopkins University, 1994); and Susan Stone, *The Determinants of Parental Involvement over the High School Transition: An Intensive Study of Families and Adolescents in Urban School Settings* (Ph.D. dissertation, School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, Forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> These four critical supports are derived from research on critical supports that students receive at home, particularly during elementary school. Several critical studies can be found in:

Russell Rumberger, Rita Ghatak, Gary Poulus, Phillip Ritter, and Sanford Dornbusch, "Family Influences on Dropout Behavior in One California High School," *Sociology of Education* 63 (1990): 283-299;

Phillip Bowman and Cleopatra Howard, "Race-related Socialization, Motivation, and Academic Achievement: A Study of Black Youth in Three-Generation Families," *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry* 24 (1985): 134-141;

Laurence Steinberg, Susie Lamborn, Sanford Dornbusch, and Nancy Darling, "Impact of Parenting Practices on Adolescent Achievement: Authoritative Parenting, School Involvement, and Encouragement to Succeed," *Child Development* 63 (1992): 1266-1281; and

Henderson and Berla.

<sup>6</sup> Henderson and Berla.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Stevenson, Chuansheng Chen, and David Uttal, "Beliefs and Achievement: A Study of Black, White, and Hispanic Children," *Child Development* 61 (1990): 519.

<sup>8</sup> In this report, we depart from the Consortium on Chicago School Research's

standard classification of student school racial composition, which defines elementary and high schools as predominantly African-American if the student body is greater than 85 percent African-American, and predominantly Hispanic if the student body is greater than 85 percent Hispanic. Because high schools are larger and more diverse, we chose to broaden our classification of Hispanic schools by choosing schools that were approximately 70 percent Hispanic or greater. For consistency, we also define African-American schools by the same criteria. To distinguish definitions, we refer to these schools as "majority" Hispanic or African-American.

<sup>9</sup> This analysis was based on a Hierarchical Linear Model (HLM), which allows us to examine the effects of school characteristics. In this case we looked at the racial composition of the student body, the average achievement level of incoming freshman, and the number of home languages served in the school. We also statistically controlled for teacher responses based on the race of the teachers, gender, years of teaching experience, whether the individual teacher is teaching a predominantly high ability class, and the degree to which a teacher holds negative beliefs about the students' learning capacities.

<sup>10</sup> We repeated the analyses described in Endnote 9 with 3,985 teachers in 280 elementary schools using the same teacher characteristics and the same school classifications on two indicators of parental involvement—outreach and teacher-parent trust. In both cases, the coefficient was positive for Hispanic schools and statistically significant on the teacher-parent trust indicator.

<sup>11</sup> This finding is based on analyses described in Endnote 9. In these analyses, teachers who designated themselves as African-American or Hispanic report higher levels of communication and support to parents even after we have statistically controlled for other individual characteristics and the characteristics of the schools in which they serve.

<sup>12</sup> The percentages of Hispanic teachers are based on those who responded to the Consortium surveys. These numbers are comparable to those calculated by the Latino Institute in 1995 that found that systemwide between 5 and 7 percent of the CPS teachers designated themselves as Hispanic.

<sup>13</sup> Rumberger et al.

<sup>14</sup> We define a school as showing marked improvement in communication and support to parents if the school's change on this measure between 1994 and 1997 was greater than two standard errors above the average level of improvement for high schools used in the analysis (or a change above .60) See Figure 10.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Carter and Michael Chatfield, "Effective Bilingual Schools: Implications for Policy and Practice." *American Journal of Education* 95 (1986): 200-231.

<sup>16</sup> Penny Bender Sebring, Anthony S. Bryk, and John Q. Easton, *Charting Reform: Chicago Teachers Take Stock*. (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1995); and Penny Sebring, Anthony S. Bryk, Melissa Roderick, and Eric Camburn, *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak* (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Sebring, Bryk, Roderick, and Camburn.

### What Is This Research Brief?

This is the second in a series of research briefs produced by the Student Life in High Schools Project with assistance from the Consortium on Chicago School Research and the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). The first brief focused on truancy and course skipping in the freshman year of high school. The purpose of these briefs is to produce analysis that will assist high school reform. These research briefs are not intended to evaluate specific aspects of current reform efforts, assess the progress of individual schools, or endorse particular reform strategies. Rather, the goal is to provide information that will help schools grapple with some of the more difficult issues facing CPS high schools, their students, and families. We attempt to place our analysis within the larger framework that guides Chicago school reform (see “The Essential Supports and the Consortium on Chicago School Research” on page 27) and the initiatives proposed as part of the Chicago Public Schools’ *Designs for High Schools*.

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Roosevelt High School parents participate in planning activities at the Youth Guidance Parent Program.



Consortium on Chicago School Research  
1313 East 60th Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60637