Article

From Family Engagement to Equitable Collaboration

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Abstract

Policy makers have long seen parents and families as key levers for improving U.S. student outcomes and success, and new cross-sector collaborative policy and initiatives provide a promising context for innovations in efforts to engage nondominant families in educational equity reform. Drawing on a lens of equitable collaboration, this study examined the strategies in three organizational efforts to improve family engagement in education within a common cross-sector collaboration initiative in a Western region of the United States. Although conventional approaches persisted amid regular exchanges across organizations, we identified more reciprocal, collective, and relational *strategies*: (a) parent capacity-building, (b) relationship-building, and (c) systemic capacity-building efforts. Despite promising strategies, the dynamics of implementation in the cross-sector collaborative constrained change and mirrored limitations in family engagement practice and policy. The article concludes with next steps for research, practice, and policy in the journey toward more equitable collaboration.

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Introduction

Policy makers have long seen parents and families as key levers for improving student outcomes and success (Marsh, Strunk, Bush, & Huguet, 2015; Nakagawa, 2000; Sanders, 2012), but a growing wave of cross-sector collaborative efforts has increasingly highlighted a broader policy context for work to engage parents and families in education, particularly in diverse, low-income communities. Federal policy—such as the Promise Neighborhood Initiative—has accompanied a proliferation of cross-sector collaborations for education—like the Harlem Children's Zone and the Strive Network—that aim to build strategic partnerships between schools, community-based organizations (CBOs), advocates, businesses, governmental agencies, and the public-at-large around a shared vision and indicators of improved educational outcomes for students "cradle-to-career," especially within a particular neighborhood, city, or region (Horsford & Heilig, 2014; Kania & Kramer, 2011; Lawson, 2013; Park, Hironaka, Carver, & Nordstrum, 2013). Such initiatives seek to remedy a lack of coordination, common goals, and shared metrics in previous, disparate efforts to improve educational outcomes (Henig, Riehl, Rebell, & Wolff, 2015). Amid persistent outcome disparities between White, middle-class students and those from low-income, immigrant, refugee, or other communities of color, such policies and reforms increasingly position parents, families, and communities as potential drivers of educational equity.

Although collaborative efforts among families, schools, and communities hold much promise for improving the success of young people (Ishimaru, 2014; Warren 2005), the enthusiasm for these "new" reforms calls for an examination of the extent to which parents and families interact with educators and policy makers in ways that depart from the traditional asymmetrical power dynamics, and cultural, class, and language divides that have historically limited authentic participation in school reform (Anderson, 1998; Auerbach, 2012; Olivos, 2006). Although an emerging literature has begun to examine the impact and complexities of cross-sector collaboratives, few empirical studies have examined the implications of this context for efforts to build more equitable partnerships between nondominant[1] families, schools, and communities. Moreover, in practice, many school-based efforts to engage parents default to an outmoded set of deficit-based strategies to "fix" parents (Olivos, 2006). We lack specific, concrete strategies that move beyond this conventional paradigm toward more equitable interactions between educators and nondominant families and more transformative educational change. This article seeks to connect and extend the literatures on family engagement and cross-sector collaborations, by using an equitable collaboration lens to examine strategies for engaging nondominant parents and families in education in three distinct organizational efforts within a shared cross-sector collaborative context. Specifically, I examined,

> In a cross-sector collaborative context, what collective, reciprocal, and relational strategies did district and community-based initiatives employ to engage parents/families in their children's education?

I begin by placing these collaboratives within a broader education reform context, then draw on the parent/family engagement literature to anchor key distinctions between traditional parent involvement (a deficit-based approach that privileges normative school-centric behaviors) and family engagement (efforts to reach out and better integrate nondominant parents and families into existing systems). I then propose a conceptual framework of equitable collaboration to analyze the *strategies* employed in three efforts to build family participation in schools within a cross-sector collaborative. My findings suggest that despite regular convenings and interactions between the sites, traditional parent involvement strategies predominated; yet, all three initiatives also enacted strategies to foster more reciprocal, collective, and relational dynamics between nondominant families and schools. The promising, but disparate, efforts were limited in shifting power asymmetries between families and schools, reflecting constraints in the implementation of cross-sector collaborative efforts seeking to build equitable relations with nondominant families and communities. The article concludes with implications for practice, theory, and policy.

New Context, Familiar Territory

Since the days of Jane Addams and the settlement houses in the late 1800s, education reformers have recognized poverty, violence, housing insecurity, lack of health care, and other economic and societal challenges as major barriers to education (Henig et al., 2015). Recent decades have seen a renewal of interest in addressing the linked fates of urban schools and communities (Anyon, 2009; Horsford & Heilig, 2014; Noguera, 2003). Prior to the most recent wave of cross-sector collaborative efforts, the comprehensive services movement of the 1990s targeted public schools as a hub for providing health, employment, recreation, and other services for students and families (Smrekar & Mawhinney, 1999). These efforts converged with two related dynamics. First, a growing body of research pointed to the critical role of families in improving educational achievement (Epstein 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Second, a number of "comprehensive community initiatives" in major urban centers sought to mobilize broad, multisector civic capacity in support of community-wide causes, such as community revitalization, economic development, and education (Henig et al., 2015; Stone, 2001).

The strategies employed by these collaborative initiatives largely reinforced conventional "parent involvement" dynamics at the time; parents were treated

as clients or beneficiaries whose best interests were known by professionals outside of those communities (Crowson & Boyd, 2001; Fine, 1993; Mawhinney & Smrekar, 1996). For instance, principals and agency directors generally decided which services to provide and how to link them to the school. Likewise, low-income families had little or no say in decision making, either in setting school priorities or shaping the broader initiatives. Rather, the well-intentioned models often reinforced power inequities between families and schools and consolidated dominant institutional authority.

From Parent Involvement to Family Engagement

Meanwhile, another body of research began to problematize the White, middle-class normative school-based behaviors and activities that "counted" as involvement, particularly given the growing number of immigrant and other families of color, whose cultural practices supported their children's learning in other ways (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005). For example, many Mexican American parents pass on culturally embedded *consejos* (advice) to their children and emphasize the value of hard work as forms of engagement, but these practices are often disregarded by schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001).

The move to expand the conception of involvement and highlight community empowerment built the foundation for a burgeoning community-focused education reform literature. From studies of community organizing in education reform (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Shirley, 1997; Warren et al., 2011) to bicultural family engagement (Hong, 2011; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Olivos, 2006) and principal leadership for authentic partnerships (Auerbach, 2012; Cooper, 2009; Ishimaru, 2013; Khalifa, 2012), this literature has provided studies of nondominant families and communities as central and powerful actors in equity-based school change. Dennis Shirley (1997) first articulated the distinction between traditional parent *involvement* and parent or family *engagement* in his landmark study of community organizing in education:

> Parental *involvement*—as practiced in most schools and reflected in the research literature—avoids issue of power and assigns parents a passive role in the maintenance of school culture. Parental *engagement* designates parents as citizens in the fullest sense—change agents who can transform urban schools and neighborhoods. (p. 73)

> This distinction launched a renewed conversation among scholars and practitioners about *engaging* families in their children's education and success.

More recently, educational policy about families has shifted from talk of "parent involvement" to a discourse of "family engagement" as it has emerged

as a popular lever for closing race- and class-based educational disparities in the United States.[2] The U.S. Department of Education's new family engagement framework (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013) broadened the focus from parents (exclusive to the parent–child dyad) to families (including siblings and multigenerational caregivers). The framework also prioritized building the "dual capacity" of *both* families and educators to collaborate in supporting student learning. The framework contrasts with conventional parent involvement approaches in important ways, such as focusing on learning as a central aim, acknowledging the key role of educators in shaping opportunities for engagement, and attending to relational dynamics between educators and families. However, the framework does not center family engagement in the pursuit of systemic and institutional change for educational equity, or explicitly address the power, race, class, language, citizenship status, and other dynamics that infuse educational institutions and shape opportunities for nondominant families to "partner" with schools in educational reform. The framework also continues to privilege school-based forms of engagement.

In practice, efforts to enact more reciprocal engagement within highly politicized school contexts continue to place the onus of change on parents themselves without a primary focus on educational systems and *their* engagement. That is, rather than seeking to involve "hard-to-reach" parents, the converging literatures on critical family engagement and community-based education reform suggest the need for "hard-to-access" systems to fundamentally redesign their goals, values, routine practices, and interactions with parents and communities. However, we have few theoretical or analytic tools to distinguish between the wide range of efforts to engage multiple stakeholders in improving student success. I next describe a framework from which I propose a more robust lens to analyze the strategies in such efforts.

Conceptual Framework: Equitable Community–School Collaborations

This study draws on a conceptual framework from previous empirical work (Ishimaru, 2014) merged with theory from community organizing as a lens to analyze the parent engagement efforts in this study. In contrast to traditional involvement approaches underwritten by deficit assumptions, equitable community–school collaborations entail (a) systemic change *goals*, (b) *strategies* that build capacity and relationships, (c) the *role* of low-income parents and families of color as experts and fellow educational leaders, and (d) educational change as a *context-specific* political process. Collectively, these dimensions comprise a conceptual model of school–community collaboration that challenges the "rules of engagement" in conventional parent, family, and cross-sector partnerships with schools (see Table 1 for overview of contrast).

Table 1. Contrasting Rules of Engagement Between Partnerships and Equitable Collaborations.

	Traditional partnerships	Equitable collaborations
Goals	Material resources and discrete aims within a culture of denial or implicit blame	Systemic change within a culture of shared responsibility
Strategies	Inside, technical change.	Adaptive change to build capacity and relationships of a broad range of stakeholders
Parent role	Nondominant parents as clients and beneficiaries (educators/professionals set the agenda).	Nondominant parents as educational leaders who contribute and help shape the agenda
Context	Apolitical approach focused on schools in isolation	Reform as a political process that addresses broader issues in community

This study foregrounds the *strategies* of three parent engagement initiatives within a common regional cross-sector collaborative context, though the findings also address the initiative goals, stakeholder roles, and broader context.

Strategies to Build Capacity and Relationships

Equitable collaboration strategies contrast with traditional involvement approaches along three dimensions: intervention level (individuals vs. collective), directionality (unidirectional vs. reciprocal), and power (unilateral vs. relational). Recognizing that, in practice, these dimensions constitute continua rather than simplistic dichotomies, this study uses *collective*, *reciprocal*, and *relational* dynamics as a lens for illuminating strategies that align with equitable collaboration. Past efforts suggest how easily strategies and practices default to the dominant paradigm of asymmetric power relationships and efforts to "fix" families, so these concepts help to specify the dimensions of more equitable strategies to building capacity and relationships (see Table 2 for overview of these dimensions).

First, conventional parent involvement efforts often intervene at the level of individual parents to build capacity. Many programs build parents' capacity to advocate on behalf of their own child to ensure he or she receives the services or supports needed for his or her success, an approach that assumes parents' only impact is on their own children (see, for instance, Chrispeels &

Table 2. Dimensions of Equitable Collaboration Strategies That Build Capacity and Relationships.

Dimension	Traditional partnerships	Equitable collaborations
Intervention level	Individual parent/student	Collective families/ communities
Directionality	Unidirectional	Reciprocal
Power	Unilateral	Relational

Gonzalez, 2006). In contrast, Warren, Mapp, and Community Organizing for Education Reform Project's (2011) study of community organizing suggests the foundational importance of building the capacity of both nondominant families and educators to address systemic change (beyond support for an individual child). The predominantly individualistic focus of traditional involvement approaches can preclude more *collective* efforts to engage families together, which may be more culturally responsive for nondominant cultural groups, can leverage valuable forms of information and support (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009), and can facilitate advocacy and leadership to benefit *all* the children in a school or community.

Second, conventional approaches to parents are often *unidirectional*, not only in terms of communication (e.g., the flyer in the backpack or the "robo-call") but also in terms of presumed expertise and capacity in relationships. Nondominant parents and families, in particular, are rarely presumed to possess capacity or knowledge that can improve teaching and learning or educational systems. Yet, an extensive and growing literature suggests that parents and families possess "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) as well as cultural and intellectual resources that can contribute to transforming instructional and institutional practices in schools (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2010; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010; Ishimaru, Barajas-López & Bang, 2015; Mediratta et al., 2009). Thus, more *reciprocal* strategies that identify and help leverage the existing resources, capacity, and culturally embedded knowledge of families can, theoretically, build family support and engagement as well as improve schools.

Finally, asymmetric power relations infuse conventional strategies to engage parents in schools (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Loomer's (1976) distinction between *unilateral* power "over" and *relational* power "with" illuminates strategies that can begin to address issues of power amidst disparities between families and educators. Unilateral power refers to traditional hierarchical authority to

make something happen, typically associated with top-down dominant institutions and leadership, and an assumption of a zero-sum game wherein an increase in one individual or group's power entails the loss of control and power on the part of another's. In contrast, Loomer's conception of *relational* power does not assume a limited amount or capacity of people to make things happen. Relational power can be cultivated between parents, families, community members, and educators engaged together to influence institutions—not only to provide conditional access to resources, knowledge, and opportunities but also to *transform* them systemically. Scholars suggest that sustainable reform requires not only building new relationships but also *changing* relationships and interactions to build power and create the political context needed to institute and sustain new practices (Stone, 2001).

Thus, this lens can help distinguish different kinds of capacity-building and relationship-focused strategies, and this study sought to highlight the specific practices that hold promise for building toward more equitable forms of collaboration between families, schools, and communities.

Methods

This study highlights the strategies undertaken within a nested, comparative qualitative case study of three initiatives, all of which were seeking to build more meaningful and impactful engagement with parents and families in their children's education, originally at the elementary level. All three sites were nested within a common cross-sector collaborative context, described in the next section.

The Pathways Project

The Pathways Project[3] was a cross-sector collaborative initiative comprised of education, community, health, and other organizational partners located in a region of concentrated suburban poverty in a Western region of the United States. Through aligning efforts and coordinated action from multiple institutions from "cradle-to-career" around common indicators, the initiative sought to double the number of students in the region ready to graduate from college or begin a career by 2020 and to eliminate the opportunity gap between students of different racial backgrounds (Pathways Project website, 2013). In 2012-2013, the Pathways region served approximately 120,000 students, of whom 59% were low income, 67% were students of color, and 16% were English language learners. The achievement rates in the region were among the lowest in the state. Galvanized by this problem, seven school districts in the region joined together with other partners and policy makers in 2010 to

launch a collective effort to improve educational outcomes, and they identified parent and community engagement as a key mechanism through which to attain their common goal.

Parent and community engagement was one of six key components of the Pathways Project, operationalized through work groups.[4] The Pathways Project work group on parent and community engagement consisted of 18 core district and community-based organizational leaders who met monthly—and sometimes more frequently—and were joined by up to 10 additional partner organizational staff and leaders, who varied across meetings. Unlike the other five work groups that were facilitated and staffed by other organizations, staff from the facilitating "backbone" organization itself convened and supported the parent engagement work group, in collaboration with two work group cochairs: the director of a community development association and a staff lead from the regional educational service district.

Parent Engagement Initiatives

The three initiatives selected for this study were identified by the Pathways Project for their leadership in parent engagement. Each of the three was selected—by Pathways Project staff and the lead initiative funder—to receive targeted funding and support to improve school-based parent engagement as part of the collective initiative. Across the three sites, efforts targeted high-poverty schools with the largest number of immigrant, refugee, and families of color. These sites were not systematically selected as models of success, but rather as sites within which a concerted effort was being directed to improve and strengthen initial or ongoing family engagement programs. Located within a 20-mile radius, the communities of Fairview, Kellogg, and Westfield had dramatically transformed in the last few decades through rapid population growth, increasing racial and cultural diversity and concentrated poverty. The districts ranged from just below 20,000 to nearly 30,000 students, with similar demographic and income ranges (see Table 3 for an overview of the initiatives, demographics, and research participants).

Fairview School District's Family and Community Partnerships Office (F&CPO) sought to prepare parents to become more "informed, prepared and involved" as effective partners in helping their children successfully engage in learning and graduate prepared for college. The F&CPO sponsored a district parent advisory team, quarterly stakeholder meetings, an annual family conference, school-based workshops, and elementary school-based family liaisons. Although the district's initiative aimed at engaging parents of children at all levels (K-12), the mostly Spanish-speaking family liaisons were based at elementary schools with the highest poverty rates

Table 3. Summary of Parent/Family Engagement Initiatives, District Demographics, and Research Participants.

Fairview Family and Community Partnerships	Kellogg District Parent–Student Success Program	Westfield Promise Family Allies
District-led initiative	District-led initiative	Community-led initiative
Program activities	Program activities	Program activities
Parent advisory team	9-week parent education workshops	Family allies
Quarterly stakeholder meetings	Train-the-trainer model of language-specific, parent	Community summits
School-based workshops	facilitators	Community resource referrals
School-based family liaisons		
Student demographics	Student demographics	Student demographics
22,113 students	27,500 students	18,280 students
0.8% AI/AN	0.7% AI/AN	1.1% AI/AN
12.5% Asian	17.1% Asian	14.7% Asian
4.1% Pacific Islander	2.3% Pacific Islander	4% Pacific Islander
11.4% Black/African American	11.9% Black/African American	11% Black/African American
24.4% Hispanic/Latino	19.8% Hispanic/Latino	36.5% Hispanic/Latino
35.3% White	39.5% White	25.0% White
11.5% multiracial	8.7% multiracial	7.8% multiracial
14% English language learners	17% English language learners	22% English language learners
57% free/reduced meals	52% free/reduced meals	70% free/reduced meals
57% high school graduates meet minimum requirements	68% high school graduates meet minimum	55% high school graduates meet minimum
for state 4-year college	requirements for state 4-year college	requirements for state 4-year college
Research participants[a]	Research participants	Research participants
Four district leaders (including board members)	Four district leaders	Five CBO staff/family allies
Six family liaisons/staff	Three principals/vice principals	Three community partners
Five parents	Four PSS staff	Two district leaders
One parent focus group (nine)	Five PSS facilitators	Two district family liaisons
One principal	Four teachers	Two principals
three teachers	One counselor	One teacher
21 observations	Two focus groups (six parents)	Two focus groups (seven parents, three family allies)
	18 observations	15 observations

Note. AI/AN = American Indian/Alaska Native; PSS = Parents–Student Success; CBO = community-based organization.
[a]We also conducted interviews of cross-sector collaborative staff and stakeholders who were not directly involved in any of the three family engagement initiatives.

(and more immigrant and other families of color) in the district, and the school-based workshops and parent meetings were offered primarily (though not exclusively) at these schools. Families were, thus, invited to participate in school and district activities via educators and family liaisons at their schools. Rather than a discrete time-limited intervention, the district's initiative constituted an ongoing "menu" of options at both the school and district levels, and a number of the parent leaders at the district level who had been involved for many years had children in high school (and sometimes college as well).

Kellogg School District's Parents–Student Success (PSS) Program was a 9-week evening parent education program aimed at enabling parents to partner with students and educators to support students in achieving high standards within a college-going culture. Piloted in two high-poverty elementary schools, the train-the-trainer model entailed hiring and training 16 parents and community members to facilitate nine 90-min modules in their native language (English, Spanish, Somali, Russian) or with simultaneous translation to Vietnamese, Burmese, Arabic, Punjabi, and Kurdish. Parents were recruited through principal invitations, teacher announcements, and community-specific recruiters (parents and some district staff) who called every parent in the school—and sometimes did home visits—in their native languages to encourage participation.

Westfield Center (WC), the neighborhood-based initiative in this study, was a well-established community development association aimed at eradicating poverty in Westfield and ensuring that children in the community graduate from high school and earn a postsecondary credential that leads to a living wage career. The lead partner in a place-based Promise Neighborhood effort (within the broader collective impact initiative), WC placed Family Allies into several nearby elementary schools and one middle school to connect parents to schools and community-based resources, and to provide services based on needs identified by parents. WC partnered with its nearby district, so much of its work emphasized school-based engagement, but the organization's purview included addressing issues of affordable housing, immigration, drug abuse, transportation, and city annexation. Thus, WC's parent engagement work was part of broader efforts to build community and civic participation in the neighborhood. Teachers and Family Allies identified families in need of support and/or whose children were struggling academically or socioemotionally, but they recruited all families in the schools to participate in neighborhood-based activities and events (such as their summer and year-end summits), with a particular focus on those living in the large subsidized housing development in the neighborhood.

Data and data collection. From November 2012 to June 2013, our research team (two faculty and five doctoral students) studied these nested efforts to build more meaningful systems of parent engagement in education (with additional data collection for one site in January 2014). Overall, we conducted 68 interviews (and five focus groups) with district and school leaders, teachers, family support staff, CBO leaders and program providers, and parents (see Table 3 for specific breakdowns). We identified interviewees through a snowball sampling method, first interviewing formal initiative leaders (both within the cross-sector collaborative initiative and each program initiative) and then selecting additional participants based on their roles and participation in program activities. We conducted the majority of semistructured interviews (which ranged from 45 to 75 min) near the end of the year to ensure sufficient experience with the initiative, using a protocol tailored to each role and site. We conducted approximately 115 hr of observations of trainings, meetings, workshops, and gatherings, and collected an extensive array of documents, including regional and site-specific reports on families and parent engagement, district publications, parent and educator training materials, strategic plans and grant proposals, and flyers, brochures, and newsletters related to communication between schools, families, and community.

Analyses. The analyses for this study were conducted in several iterative rounds. First, we transcribed the data and our research team of five doctoral students and two faculty coded the data using a common codebook (developed iteratively over repeated coding and comparison meetings, following Guest & MacQueen, 2008). The first few transcripts were coded independently by all members of the research team to establish interrater reliability (eventually above 85%), then subsequent transcripts were assigned a primary coder (generally the person who had collected the data) and a secondary coder (to review codes and identify points of disagreement to resolve via consensus). Pairs of researchers assigned to each site generated ongoing site updates and wrote analytic memos during the coding. Base codes for the first round of analyses included codes based on the equitable collaboration framework to identify initiative goals and outcomes (for instance, "*goals*: student achievement" or "goals: self-sufficiency"), *roles* (e.g., parent, district leader, or community organizational staff roles), and *strategies* (e.g., improving parenting, advocacy, decision making). Rather than following the "tradition-laden effort to document failure" by critiquing the conventional deficit-based strategies most prominent in the data (p. 9), we took up Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis' (1997) methodological stance by seeking first for goodness, with the understanding that it would be laced with imperfection, tension, and complexity. We attended particularly to efforts that moved beyond conventional

school-centric approaches to families, and drafted detailed preliminary findings' memos using the equitable collaboration framework (focused on goals, roles, strategies, and processes). In the spirit of community-engaged scholarship (Gordon da Cruz, 2015), we shared these memos with each of our sites for feedback. After discussing and incorporating the feedback that we felt was consistent with our data and analyses, we constructed final full case studies of each site. We then identified themes across cases using thematic matrices organized around the framework of equitable collaborations, presented preliminary cross-case findings to a gathering that included all the sites (as well as others in the cross-sector collaborative initiative), and produced a report that incorporated feedback from the gathering (Ishimaru et al, 2014).

In the second major round of analyses, I worked solo to thematically group the coded strategies data (base codes included activities such as improving parenting, advocacy, classroom-based support, sharing information/resources, policy/decision making) into three groups: parent knowledge building activities, outreach efforts, and systemic capacity/change strategies. These thematic categories were based on a prior literature review focused on quantitative constructs of parent and family engagement as well as feedback from research partners, who noticed a convergence between the common indicators we had identified (in a different part of the partnership) and the strategies in our initial findings. Then, in a third round of analyses, I applied the dimensions of equitable collaboration strategies (described in the conceptual framework) to distinguish between individualistic, unidirectional, unilateral approaches, and more collective, reciprocal, and relational strategies aligned with equitable collaborations. To address threats to validity, I shared my claims and data with two interpretive communities (Maxwell, 2005), which included my faculty collaborator and research team of doctoral students who were involved in collecting the data and a group of five other researchers whose scholarship focuses on issues of social justice in education.

Limitations. Several limitations to this study are important to note. First, the cross-sector collaboration in this case was young—it formed less than 2 years prior to the beginning of data collection for this study, and thus, did not constitute a "best case scenario" of mature efforts to align family engagement efforts across sites and multiple sectors. Although parent and community engagement had been designated as a key lever for attaining the Pathway Project's goal, and the formal leaders of each study site, other organizations, and staff for the cross-sector collaborative met regularly, efforts to align or coordinate work between initiatives within the Pathways Project were nascent. Moreover, this study design does not enable me to causally attribute more equitable strategies solely to the cross-sector collaborative effort or to

parse, which were shaped by local circumstances and which resulted from Pathways convenings, conversations, and efforts. The common cross-sector collaborative is, thus, a key contextual factor, but not the only one that shaped initiatives' strategies, and the findings from this study do not generalize to all family engagement efforts within cross-sector collaborations. Future research might examine a variety of initiatives over a longer time frame within the context of a mature cross-sector collaboration to better assess the possibilities for change under highly conducive conditions.

In addition, the Pathways Project was "cross-sector" in that many organizations beyond those in this study—such as city governments, nonprofit agencies, universities, community colleges, funders, and advocacy groups—engaged in other "collective" efforts around college attainment, youth development, early childhood education, and English language learners. However, within the Project's family engagement work, districts and direct service organizations predominated, and other organizations—such as libraries, afterschool programs, museums, and other expanded learning organizations played very limited roles in the initiative and in the discussions of family engagement in the Project. To be clear, none of the initiatives in this study, individually, constituted a cross-sector collaborative. Rather, they shared a common context within which district leaders and staff and community organization staff met regularly to discuss their efforts and identify common indicators around which to align their work. However, this context was a critical factor that shaped and constrained the strategies taken up by these initiatives, and it would be inaccurate to represent and analyze the initiatives as if they had existed in isolated contexts.

In addition, although all the initiatives in this study—and the broader cross-sector collaboration—ostensibly focused on family engagement for the entire continuum from early childhood to high school, in practice, each targeted high-poverty elementary schools and families for their initial year of focused work. Thus, the strategies in this study were primarily focused on elementary-age students and families, with only a few families with older children. Thus, engagement strategies targeting families with older children or predominantly White, middle-class backgrounds might look quite different from those identified in this study.

Finally, my role and that of my team as researchers are important to acknowledge. During this study and beyond, we also worked extensively with the Pathways Project stakeholders focused on family engagement (including representatives from all three sites) to develop a set of common indicators to measure and align their work. The codesign of these indicators enabled us to develop collaborative relationships with the leaders of study sites in ways that may have opened access for our research. However, the

work also entailed inevitable tensions as we worked to balance differing priorities and perspectives, reconcile research with practice, and navigate political complexities, which may have constrained sites' willingness to be frank about their initiatives given the potential implications of our findings for future funding and resources within the Project.

Findings

Conventional Parent Involvement Strategies at Multiple Levels

The Pathways Project provided a common context for the three initiatives in this study within which to improve their strategies (ideally) or constrain innovation (in practice, as elaborated later in the "Discussion and Implications" section). As part of their participation in the cross-sector collaboration, all three agreed to use a set of common metrics to align their work, and the funder and the project staff hoped that the monthly (or more frequent) meetings and exchanges between the organizational leaders—along with other district and CBO directors—might foster cross-fertilization of ideas and learning. Despite these ongoing interactions, however, our observations and meeting agendas indicate that sites' engagement *practices* were infrequently the primary topic of discussion. Rather, the meetings focused on a variety of broader topics, including new engagement-related undertakings within the Project, common indicators development, policy advocacy agendas, competitive grant and award discussions, district parent engagement policies, and Project-wide parent and community engagement support priorities. In addition to these work group meetings, our research team also facilitated five professional learning meetings between the sites and other community–school partnerships within the Pathways Project (selected by the local funder). These sessions explicitly focused on supporting sites' ongoing reflection on their family engagement practices and the use of indicators to inform their efforts. As elaborated in the "Discussion and Implications" section, these sessions often defaulted to generic conversations about common challenges, such as educators' low priority on family engagement and limited time and financial resources to do the work.

At the level of the Pathways Project itself, the few strategies undertaken to directly engage families mirrored unidirectional, individualistic parent involvement approaches. For example, the Project strongly promoted an intervention aimed at changing parenting behaviors, in the form of an app that would send parents messages about things to do to stimulate their children's brains and engage them in learning activities at home. In spite of the novel technological delivery, the strategy of professionals informing parents

about what they should do differently defaulted to conventional involvement approaches and put the onus of change solely on parents (notably, there was no app to provide information from parents to educators or to schools about what *they* should do differently). Likewise, nondominant parents had little voice or influence in the Pathways Project itself. "Unaffiliated" parents (who did not work as staff for a participating organization) and families did not sit on committees or participate in Project meetings, and a survey of organizational partners conducted for the formative evaluation of the Project indicated that 77% of the respondents "did not know how parents were represented in the Project.". Although some argued that "real parents" should have a role and voice in project decision making, others questioned whether parents would be interested in or capable of participating meaningfully in such meetings. Rather, some district and CBO staff claimed that their frequent interactions with parents and families enabled them to "know what parents need," and suggested it would not be a good use of parents' time to have them participate in such meetings.

Not surprisingly, then, the strategies that predominated within the individual sites also aligned with traditional parent involvement approaches. These strategies included informing parents about school expectations and the importance of home support activities (like nightly reading and homework completion), encouraging parents to attend conventional school activities (such as open houses and parent–teacher conferences), and connecting families with resources to meet basic needs for food, housing, and health care, as well as school-related needs for language translation and information about who to talk with about additional student learning or behavioral supports. Such unidirectional parent involvement strategies reinforce asymmetric power between families and schools, and imply that parents alone must change their behaviors and attitudes to improve student outcomes.

Progress Toward Equitable Family Engagement Strategies

Despite the predominance of parent involvement strategies in the Pathways Project and the three focal initiatives within it, all the sites were working to improve their work and enact more equitable interactions with parents and families to support their children's education and success. Although the Pathways Project later began to take up strategies to engage parent leaders more meaningfully at the collaborative level, in this study, the promising strategies that built different, more empowering approaches to parents emerged from within the district and neighborhood initiatives. Because the literature has thoroughly documented the problematic nature of deficit-based practices, I deliberately focus on the strategies that were more collective, reciprocal, and/or relational in nature

Parent/Family Capacity-Building	Parent-School & Parent-Parent Relationship-Building	Systemic Change & Capacity-Building
Family-driven programming on navigating schools	Drawing on "cultural brokers" to build welcoming climates & trust with educators	Building infrastructure, systems and educator capacity for collaborating with families
Building knowledge and access to information	Designating spaces for parents with similar backgrounds to share experiences and concerns	Scaffolding parent leadership and influence.
Embedding family learning within community contexts		

Figure 1. Reciprocal, collective, and/or relational family engagement strategies.

and, as such, might suggest possibilities for equitable collaboration between families and schools. Across the initiatives, I identified three types of strategies: (a) *parent/family capacity-building strategies*, (b) *culturally specific relationship-building strategies*, and (c) *systemic change and capacity-building strategies.* The first set of strategies focused on building parent/family knowledge and efficacy in navigating academics and the educational system in ways that fostered parent agency. The second set—parent-to-school and parent-to-parent relationship-building strategies—leveraged school "cultural brokers" to connect with nondominant families and create spaces for parents to build relationships with other parents. Finally, systemic capacity-building strategies addressed infrastructure and capacity for educators to collaborate with families as well as platforms for parents/families to exercise leadership and influence in schools and school systems. These approaches formed a typology of strategies (see Figure 1) that sought to engage nondominant families as key actors in the education of their children.

Parent/family capacity-building strategies. All the sites in this study were engaged in some form of parent education. These efforts included information about how schools work, whom to talk with to address questions or resolve issues, and academic concepts, such as grades, test scores, and standards. Efforts to build the knowledge of parents/families often assume that nondominant parents lack knowledge or capacity to shape these strategies, but all three sites employed strategies to ensure *family-driven programming on navigating schools* rather than allowing educator assumptions about families to drive programs. For example, Fairview District's programming started from the premise that parents knew best what they needed and wanted to understand about schools. A teacher recalled,

So we started off with just the conversation of what do parents want to know and it was really good. I do need to say that we had a great turnout that very year in regards to it . . . And it really was good because we found out, hey, well a lot of them didn't know what they could do to help.

The Fairview parent involvement "framework" emerged from this series of open-ended workshops. According to the district family engagement director, the agenda for the district quarterly stakeholder meetings was set by a district-level parent advocacy team in a similar way:

So instead of the district saying you're going to come and you're going to hear about Common Core, and you're going to hear about PTA—no. The parents are a part of what's on the agenda for these quarterly stakeholder meetings.

Similarly, in the WC initiative, both students and families were asked to identify school-related concerns for the initiative to address by voting for a list of issues. During a subsequent family literacy night at an elementary school, this process highlighted different academic priorities between parents and teachers that, according to WC staff, became data that the principal subsequently used to inform the School Improvement Plan, an example of a more reciprocal flow of information and knowledge between families and schools.

Other strategies to build *knowledge and access to information* built parents' sense of agency and ability to interact with educators to advocate or affect change for their children or themselves. Rather than disseminating information to parents, these strategies aimed to help parents develop and practice skills, such as talking with teachers or other educators to access information or raise issues, particularly through the use of role-plays, used in both district initiatives. Parents participating in Kellogg's PSS program shared stories of their growing sense of confidence and efficacy in interacting more productively with educators as part of a "team" to help their student. After facilitating a class of parents in the program, one low-income White mother highlighted a major shift in her own approach to the school:

I have more tools to voice my opinion in a more positive manner, we'll say. Not so personal, because [before] it was personal. I felt like I was being personally attacked when certain things weren't being taken care of educational-wise with my kids because I wasn't able to articulately communicate my concerns or address the teachers' concern. Now I'm able to do that.

Another, more established Latina parent leader described how Kellogg's PSS program helped her to see her role as developing other parents' capacity to get answers for themselves, rather than simply giving them information:

[Before PSS], I always kind of saw my role as getting parents information. And now I see my role it's more important for me to give parents questions so that they can go get information from the teachers. I think the most memorable part of PSS was . . . the pretend discussion between the teacher and the parent . . . And it was like they were mimicking a parent-teacher conference . . . And now I see it's more important to empower parents to go get those answers themselves than it is for me just to tell parents things.

Such district-based strategies focused primarily on building the knowledge and capacity of individual parents to engage one-on-one with teachers and other educators through existing, somewhat constrained, school channels, such as parent–teacher conferences.

The Westfield Center Family Allies took a more collective, community-based approach to building family knowledge that *embedded family learning within community contexts*. Although these efforts were a secondary focus at the time of our study, Family Allies (all mothers of color) periodically created and led family "field trips" to introduce families to dominant cultural institutions and experiences (such as museums, the public library, boat rides, and even a flower festival). These experiences intentionally engaged students in learning experiences out in the community (rather than in the school), and engaged families collectively while also building relationships with the teachers who accompanied and helped to facilitate the learning. The director explained that their efforts to build family knowledge emphasized strengthening existing skills and capacities:

So within the whole family, we want to make sure we're utilizing family strengths, and not just looking at families as people that we need to train up and give them skills, they don't have any. Strengthening the multilingual, multicultural parent resources for student success. We know with our community that that's really important. Supporting parents as informed decision-makers and community leaders, so there's still a training component there in trying to help parents be as self-sufficient, and make smart decisions that will aid in their student success, as well as become leaders themselves. And then that connecting families to each other piece as well.

Consistent with this approach, the Center's community celebrations embedded parent learning—not only about engagement with schools but also about the broader community issues that affect families (e.g., immigration, transportation, drug use, housing)—within broader efforts to build community agency and develop plans to change or address common neighborhood concerns.

Overall, the parent/family capacity-building strategies highlighted above appeared to engage families in more collective, reciprocal, or relational ways that could potentially build foundational capacities for more robust interactions, but they largely aligned with educator-defined agendas and expectations for how parents should behave and, as such, maintained the status quo of schooling and asymmetrical parent–school power relations. For instance, both Kellogg and Fairview district programs encouraged parents to ask teachers what they could do to support learning at home, but there were no mechanisms for teacher learning or changes to instructional practices as a result of parents sharing their knowledge, expertise, or home-based support strategies. Thus, the parent/family capacity-building strategies may have built a foundation, but they appeared insufficient for more robust forms of participation and influence.

Parent–school and parent–parent relationship-building strategies. Across the sites in this study, district, school, and community leaders consistently emphasized making families feel welcome and part of the school community as a crucial step in engaging culturally diverse parents. These efforts sought to (a) build parent–school relationships by leveraging "cultural brokers" within the existing networks of schools and (b) build parent–parent relationships by providing spaces and opportunities for parents to interact and share experiences and concerns with each other, often in culturally specific spaces.

Drawing on "cultural brokers" to build welcoming cultures and trust with educators. Schools in our study—and in the literature—were often experienced as hostile or alienating to nondominant parents. The parent–school relationship-building strategies in this study sought to change that dynamic by leveraging parents, community members, or staff who represent different cultural communities in the student population as "cultural brokers." Cultural brokers have a foot in two worlds: the world of the school and formal organizations and the world of a specific cultural community (Jezewski, 1990). These individuals—many of whom shared the cultural and linguistic background of the parents they sought to engage—translate between those worlds and help families from nondominant cultural communities to understand and access information, resources, and opportunities from the dominant institutions. In a more reciprocal conceptualization than currently exists in the literature, cultural brokers also help institutions to understand and change to address community needs and priorities.

One set of relationship-building strategies engaged cultural brokers to create a comfortable, "home-like" climate in schools. For example, bilingual (Spanish/English) Fairview family liaisons called families to attend school

events, greeted parents with hugs, encouraged parents to talk with them any time, and visited homes to help address issues when needed. One Latina mother contrasted her experience with the Family Liaison at the school with other experiences, alluding to a perception of racial discrimination related to the lack of welcome:

> Parent 1: *Antes nos hacían a un lado . . .*
> Parent 2: *Aja, cuando yo venia aquí yo no me sentía como que era bien-venida en ninguna escuela yo me sentía que era bienvenida, he visitado las escuelas de mis hijos mayores y yo no como siempre ha habido esa discriminación hacia los hispanos"*
> Parent 1: Before they pushed us aside/ignored us . . .
> Parent 2: Yeah, when I used to come here I did not feel that I was wel-comed, I did not feel that I was welcome in any school, I have visited the schools of my older children and like always there has been dis-crimination toward Hispanics. (Parent Focus Group, Fairview District, June 5, 2013)
> In these instances, the focused attention and welcoming approach of cul-tural brokers helped to build positive relationships between parents and the school. Likewise, a Somali father experienced a new sense of con-nection and trust of Kellogg School District staff as a result of becom-ing a facilitator in the PSS program:

> For me, now I can just walk into the school district, and see all the faces I know . . . So I know that I can come to them if I need some help. That's the difference. Before, they were like outside. You were looking at displays . . . But now, if you have a wrong question, you can still come and tell them, so they will tell you if it's wrong to ask. Because you know that you can actually trust them, because you're already involved with them . . . They are there for you.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) highlight relational trust as a critical "social lubricant" in the hard work of school improvement, and the social capital literature suggests that such relationships between nondominant parents and educators can provide access to institutional knowledge, opportuni-ties, or resources that can aid students' academic success (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Although these relationships appeared to remain somewhat unidi-rectional and hierarchical in nature (with parents seeking help rather than influencing change), more positive family–educator relationships may provide a foundation for more robust forms of engagement (see Ishimaru et al., 2016, for an in-depth treatment of cultural brokering practices in this context).

Designating spaces for parents to share experiences and concerns. To varying degrees, the initiatives in this study all created opportunities for parents to meet and develop relationships with one another, particularly with those who shared their home language and culture. Kellogg's teaching of the PSS curriculum in five different classrooms in nine+ languages was perhaps the clearest example of this strategy. Although they were working from a common set of procedures and curriculum, the PSS facilitators adapted their recruitment and instruction to their cultural context. For instance, Somali parent leaders went door to door in their community, phone calls and in-person reminders connected with Latino families, and a Burmese cultural broker picked her students up in her car and brought them to the school together. Kellogg parents pointed to the relationships that developed between parents in the workshops as a critical aspect of the program's success, echoing a sentiment expressed broadly across participating parents:

> The key strengths of the program was, I believe, what I saw, was seeing the parents be engaged with each other. And though each one come[s] from different avenues, they have the same concerns. And addressing those concerns and finding out what are different areas. Even with me, I'm a parent, but also [a] facilitator/recruiter, and for me, hearing other parents' strategies on how to perhaps get one child to do something, then another one, I took a lot of stuff home for me and utilized at home. And then what I've used, other parents are like, really? And so to get that was nice. That was really nice. (PSS Facilitator, Kellogg School District, May 6, 2013)

> Parent participants and facilitators both highly valued the opportunity to build relationships with other parents. Often formally designated by language, these alternative spaces enabled nondominant parents to interact in culturally specific ways, share experiences, identify common concerns, and offer one another support, ideas, and resources—in short, to engage collectively. A Fairview cultural broker saw opportunities for immigrant parents to develop relationships with one another as a foundation for building a school-wide sense of belonging:

> [W]e know those parents will feel—wow, that's what I used to do in my country—[we] used to get together with the same group, we used to speak the same language and we can connect, and we develop friendship and relationships and we feel welcome in the whole community.

However, focusing solely on language-specific spaces also had unintended consequences for the participation of not only English-speaking parents of color, particularly African American families, but also Pacific Islander and Native American families who were largely absent from these initiatives. For

example, when asked about the limited participation of African American parents in PSS classes, one principal seemed puzzled by the possible barriers to their participation:

> I don't know [why participation was so limited]. And yet they're our greatest under-achieving group of children in the school. And they're the kids we should be able to connect with. We're not talking about language barriers. Cultural barriers? I don't know.

Similarly, district leaders in both Fairview and Highland (the district in WC) had heard concerns from African American families that they were not provided the same opportunities as those who spoke languages other than English. When asked why the district did not designate race-specific spaces, the Kellogg district administrator was adamant that it would be far too politically volatile to even talk about designating groups by race. Thus, although language was a proxy that enabled spaces tailored to the cultural practices of many groups, some African American families felt overlooked and excluded by these practices.

Finally, in both Fairview district and the WC initiative, the designation of a physical space specifically for families in the schools provided a location for families to gather, to share resources, ask questions, and connect about common concerns or issues. For instance, a WC's Family Ally referenced such a room in one of the neighborhood schools:

> That's a space where parents know they can come in any time to connect with each other, but at the same time, in that room we will have different family bilingual staff who will speak whatever language the families need. And they can come in there and they will be able to get whatever support they need for their families. There can be training happening . . . based on what the families need, whether it's understanding the school system, what the assessments are, how to navigate [resources], or different things like that. But it really starts with having a place where they can go to get that support.

Likewise, one of the shifts at a Fairview elementary that parents referenced repeatedly was the designation of a room right at the front of the building from the principal's office to the family room, where the family liaison was based and where regular parent coffees and meetings were held.

Overall, these relationship-building strategies seemed to make schools a more welcoming space, especially for Latino families, and to foster more reciprocal and collective family–school interactions. However, for all the warmth, welcome, and cultural specificity, these strategies were still primarily school-centric and largely maintained the unilateral power dynamics

between schools and communities (Crowson & Boyd, 2001). That is, they focused on bringing parents and families *into* schools and, through relationships with each other, returning to school, to get information, access programs, or interact with educators in ways that mostly reinforced educator-set agendas and power asymmetries. Like the parent capacity-building strategies, then, the relationships themselves appeared to have little impact on the core of teaching and learning in classrooms or schools, beyond minor adjustments to better serve individual students, and did little to balance power or reshape schooling. As the U.S. Department of Education family engagement framework concedes and numerous studies have found, relationships and a sense of shared experiences and concerns only go so far without parallel openings, shifts, and capacity on the part of educators and school systems. Rather, equitable collaboration suggests the need for shifts among educators and systems.

Systemic change and capacity-building strategies. The few and isolated systemic change and capacity-building strategies identified in this study aimed to change the structures, systems, and practices in educational systems that systematically exclude or marginalize families and their influence. These strategies included (a) building infrastructure, systems, and educator capacity for more robust forms of family engagement and (b) scaffolding parent leadership and influence on key school and district issues. Although these systemic capacity-building approaches were not fully realized in this study, they suggested opportunities for building more equitable and reciprocal collaboration between families and educational systems.

Building infrastructure, systems, and educator capacity. Both district initiatives in this study built new infrastructure, systems, and capacity to support family engagement. The districts in this study developed new family engagement policies, designated financial and human resources for family engagement work, and developed opportunities for family engagement personnel to learn and coordinate their work. For instance, Fairview's superintendent referenced the district family engagement policy in designating budget allocations for Family Liaison positions and accepting private funding to engage them in professional learning. In the Kellogg district initiative, district administrators created new systems and policies to hire and leverage the expertise of cultural brokers, some of whom had limited formal education. The PSS director explained that previously, individuals could not be hired by the district without college credit:

> It required a lot of executive work . . . to get the people in Finance and HR to value other things than a college degree, value things like cultural expertise, language expertise. You can't get a college certificate for having lived in a refugee camp.

The Kellogg district also developed a system of training and ongoing coaching to support parent facilitators in leading the parent academy.

School and district leaders recognized the need for developing classroom teacher and other educator capacity to engage and partner effectively with families to support student success. Among the few efforts to develop educator capacity in this study, Fairview district's Dynamic Home Visit pilot program—loosely modeled on the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project (www. pthvp.org) in which teachers approach home visits as learners—represented a potentially promising strategy that aimed to build teachers' understanding and ability to engage with their families and students to improve classroom instruction. However, this pilot engaged a small number of teachers and appeared to have limited connections to other district family engagement efforts. Fairview district also partnered with a national technical assistance agency to provide a series of equity-focused workshops to integrate classroom teachers and counselors into family engagement efforts alongside family liaisons and parents. Although few classroom teachers participated, the effort led the district department to explore new efforts to build educator capacity in working with families.

Scaffolding parent leadership and influence. All the initiatives in the study sought to develop parents as "leaders" of their own children and sometimes other parents, and a handful of parents had the opportunity to be hired into formal cultural broker roles or to take on formal leadership roles (like School Board membership). Kellogg's PSS program stood out for providing scaffolded leadership development opportunities in the form of multiple roles at multiple levels for parents/family members to engage other parents and contribute to the success not only of their own children but also of children across their school, community, or district.

The PSS train-the-trainer model provided supports and opportunities for parent and community leaders to take on new "stretch" assignments with increasing responsibility and influence in the system and in their communities. "Stretch" assignments are tasks or roles that require knowledge or skills beyond individuals' current capacity to enable them to grow in their leadership (Hill, 2003). Kellogg parents and community leaders became recruiters, interpreters, workshop facilitators, trainers, curriculum developers, and even (formal) teachers within their communities. For example, Yates, a Somali

father whose youth had been spent in a refugee camp, started as a recruiter for the program, making phone calls and home visits to encourage his friends and neighbors to attend the academy. With his cousin, he facilitated the workshops, and he continued to facilitate conversations with Somali families at his home after the program ended. With one district leader's support, Yates subsequently created and taught a Somali parent–child native language class at his subsidized housing unit.

These leadership opportunities fostered more reciprocal dynamics with the system and enabled parent/family leaders to contribute their expertise on their children and communities to improve coordination between families and schools in supporting students. For example, a principal talked about what they had learned from parent leaders about communicating with the different cultural communities in the school:

> And so, we're learning that we have to really make face-to-face contact with [Somali families] . . . We've also learned from some of our groups that having our print materials translated is sometimes helpful and sometimes not, because the parents aren't necessarily literate in their first language. And so for some of them it doesn't matter what language the print materials come home in, there's going to be a challenge to interpret and read . . . So now we're asking ourselves a lot of questions.

Although the momentum initiated by these leadership opportunities had potential for affecting teachers and instructional practices, there was little evidence of such changes. In fact, one Kellogg teacher said that "nothing had changed" on the part of teachers as a result of PSS, but he saw changes in parents who had attended. Like several other Kellogg teachers, he was pleased that many more parents were approaching him to talk about their children's academic progress.

Overall, the systemic capacity-building efforts in the district initiatives were not integrated in ways that implicated transformative changes to the core work of schools. Whereas one district sought to provide ongoing teacher professional learning opportunities and another built infrastructure and scaffolded leadership roles for parents, neither realized more equitable forms of collaboration with parents and families in improving schools. As a CBO, Westfield Center Promise did not have insider access to the system to build district infrastructure or educator capacity, though the initiative aspired to building capacity at a multiorganizational level through the Promise initiative. Although previous studies have suggested that CBOs can play a key role in systemic educational change (e.g., Warren, 2005), the organization in this study appeared to have limited capacity and relationships with principals or district leaders to leverage influence or change.

Discussion and Implications

In light of the new resources, attention, and learning possibilities that cross-sector collaboratives open for engaging nondominant parents and families in education, this study suggests promising but limited strategies for realizing transformative change. Although the strategies constituted innovations on conventional parent involvement practices, none of the approaches in this study—either individually or in combination—appeared to be accompanied by fundamental shifts in the power asymmetries between families and schools. For example, the capacity-building strategies aligned with educator agendas to change parents but did little to shift teacher learning or instruction. The relationship-building strategies brought families into the school to reinforce school priorities and power asymmetries. And, systemic change efforts were not integrated in ways that led to transformative or sustained change.

Although collectively, such a conclusion may read as an indictment of the initiatives' efforts to engage families in more meaningful ways, contextualizing them more broadly highlights the implementation of the cross-sector collaborative as a constraint to building more equitable and sustained forms of collaboration between families, schools, and communities. Moreover, cross-sector collaborative dynamics reflected a disconnect between the broader policy goals and ideals of collaborative reform initiatives and the current practices and policies of family engagement.

Promising Strategies Constrained by Cross-Sector Collaborative Implementation

In theory, a cross-sector collaborative initiative is an ideal context within which to embed efforts to build more authentic forms of parent and community participation because it draws on a broader segment of the community than typical engagement approaches have sought to do, and explicitly seeks to build the political will for sustained educational change. Such a context could also provide opportunities for mutual and collective learning to push beyond our current "best practices." In practice, however, a concept that helped describe a paradox of cross-sector collaboration implementation was what one participant termed *collabetition*. That is, the districts, agencies, community organizations, and institutions involved in the Pathways Project were ostensibly collaborating around a common vision and set of indicators, but in practice, the structures and mechanisms in the initiative created a sense of constant competition for financial and human resources, media attention, priorities, and opportunities for many of the project partners.

The notion of "collabetition" emerged as we shared preliminary findings from this study with our research partners, and it resonated strongly with

participants in making sense of the limitations of their efforts. For instance, the districts within the project jointly applied for and won a US$40 million federal grant, but the districts competed with each other for the bulk of funds through a grant award process. In the school–community partnerships grant, only districts could select community partners and apply, which reinforced power inequities between districts and communities and structured competition between community organizations. Likewise, the Pathway Project's award for collective impact efforts required district or CBO applicants to demonstrate their ability to work extensively with data and write about their accomplishments, a requirement that community leaders argued further pitted organizations against one another and disadvantaged smaller, grassroots organizations with less capacity. Notably, nondominant parents and families had no direct voice or influence in shaping the agenda or influencing change in either competitive process or, as mentioned previously, the broader cross-sector collaborative initiative itself.

Moreover, district and community leaders in this study also voiced concerns that the data and research on their efforts to engage parents and families created comparisons between them that were politically challenging to navigate, both inside and outside districts, with implications for funding and broader support. This dynamic may well have contributed to district leaders' reluctance to foster collective parent voice and influence; organized parents focused on equity concerns can operate at odds with public relations efforts to highlight district successes and garner public support (Mediratta et al., 2009).

Despite the intentions of the Project staff, sharing this research with the sites and the broader initiative also did little to catalyze collective learning. Rather, the "collabetition" dynamic in the broader context of these initiatives limited the extent to which district-, school-, and community-based organizational leaders were willing to be transparent about their practice and to engage with one another in improvement-focused professional learning. For instance, when we prompted a discussion with sites after sharing our findings, organizational leaders talked almost exclusively about the "model" strategies highlighted and shared vague generalizations about limited time and resources when asked to share their problems of practice with each other. Organizational leaders later confided that they felt nervous or constrained in discussing potential limitations of their work in the presence of the others, including the funder from whom they hoped to secure additional future support for their work. Thus, rather than providing an ideal context for realizing collective learning and engaging broader participation beyond the "usual suspects" of education reform (Stone, 2001), the cross-sector collaborative context in this

case appeared to limit the extent to which the initiatives within it could learn from, align, or connect with each others' strategies and approaches.

Cross-Sector Collaborative Potential Versus Family Engagement Policy and Practice

Cross-sector collaborative initiatives aim to catalyze the contributions and collective efforts of *all* the important stakeholders in a particular geography toward a common vision of educational equity (in this case), but the on-the-ground family engagement practices and policies tended to reinforce existing power asymmetries between families, educational leaders, and professionals. First, the parent knowledge and capacity-building strategies we identified aimed to respond to parent priorities and enable parents to advocate for themselves and their children, yet they also positioned parents largely as passive supporters of school-centric agendas that reinforced existing status quo dynamics and interactions. This positioning aligns with the policy focus on parents supporting educator work and expertise in improving student achievement. Family engagement "best practices" call for a "shared vision" (Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez, & Weiss, 2009), yet the U.S. Department of Education (2014) contends that family engagement initiatives must "align with school and district achievement goals and connect families to the teaching and learning goals for the student" (p. 9). Thus, by implication, families must be "connected" with the goals and vision educators have already set for their children.

Moreover, the trainings in this study built parents' capacity to engage in a narrow band of support activities, such as ensuring homework completion, monitoring report cards, and asking questions at parent–teacher conferences. Likewise, despite efforts in the field to recognize and encourage broader forms of engagement, family engagement policies rarely expand beyond the normative behaviors that "count" as legitimate support of school goals (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). For instance, competencies in the state teacher and principal evaluations reflect outreach activities designed to foster conventional parent involvement activities such as those described above, but do not articulate standards for professional practice that tap nondominant families as sources of expertise on teaching and learning or as agents of change in inequitable systems.

Second, the relationship-focused strategies in this study also implied school-centric *outreach* to bring parents into the school and make peripheral changes to schools, like providing child care or language interpretation, to remove barriers but not interrogate the underlying goals, values, routines, or

interactions with families. Again, this limited realization of relationship-building strategies reflects extant family engagement policy and implementation. As Auerbach (2012) highlights, the language of "partnership" in family engagement implies shared responsibility, agency, and power, but the vast majority of family–school partnerships presume the school (and its dominant cultural norms, practices, and agenda) should be at the center, and parents and communities—both physically and figuratively (in terms of their values and practices)—should come to the school. Thus, the parent-to-parent and family-to-educator relationships fostered in this study may be foundational for more robust interactions, but they implicated little change to existing power dynamics.

Finally, the few systemic capacity-building strategies found in this study had potential for addressing issues of power and the need for educational policies and practices to change, but there was little integration of systemic change efforts, educator capacity-building, and scaffolded parent leadership development strategies with one another or with core district priorities. The policy call for family engagement to become "systemic" (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; National Center on Parent, Family and Community, 2011) has manifested in a primary focus on district and school staff *positions* dedicated to family engagement (Westmoreland et al., 2009). Such positions may well provide greater capacity for engaging families, but in our study, there were few changes to the institutional structures, norms, and practices that relegate nondominant parents to marginal positions outside the conversation about the learning of their own children. The Pathways Project itself reinforced this dynamic in its own governance and decision-making processes.

Thus, the "collabetition" dynamics within the Pathway Project appeared to both constrain possibilities for innovation and to reflect a disconnect between the cross-sector collaborative ideal of all relevant stakeholders working together for educational change and on-the-ground practice consistent with family engagement policy aims.

Equitable Collaboration as a Journey

This study suggests promising approaches and raises key questions for efforts to build more equitable collaboration between families, communities, and schools within "new" cross-sector collaborative contexts. In light of these findings, collaborative initiatives, districts, and CBOs might work to enact strategies that integrate with one another within a vision that has been *jointly* crafted by professionals, community leaders, as well as nondominant parents and families. To move beyond "random acts of engagement" (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010), *systemic* collaboration practices may need to shift from

remediating families and staffing family engagement positions to cultivating reflective educator practice to fuel collective organizational improvement and leveraging family expertise to foster professional learning and innovations in designing equitable educational environments.

Theoretically, this study is a testament to the need for nuanced theoretical lenses for analyzing and improving family engagement, district–community partnerships, and cross-sector collaborative reforms. Beyond the rhetoric of "engagement," an equitable collaboration framework can help illuminate the structures, interactions, and strategies that shape family participation and influence and highlight more reciprocal, collective, and relational strategies within their broader aims and context. Future work might follow the example of other studies, such as Conner and Zaino's (2014) use of orchestration in youth organizing, to attend more closely to how strategies worked in tandem—or in opposition—to one another in influencing educational change.

Finally, this study suggests several key educational policy implications, both for family engagement and cross-sector collaborative initiatives. Federal family engagement frameworks might move beyond the pursuit of individualistic student academic achievement to constructing a road map that centers families and communities in systemic and institutional educational transformation for every student. Such a framework might build on the notion of dual capacity but explicitly address issues of race, class, language, sexual orientation, citizenship status, and other power inequities that profoundly shape possibilities for engaging families and communities as experts and fellow leaders in education. Teacher and leadership preparation standards and evaluations would also necessarily reflect such shifts. State and local family engagement policies might likewise shift from implicit theories of action focused on family adherence to school norms and agendas to efforts and indicators focused on collective capacity and relationships—among families who reflect the diversity of students, educators throughout systems, and community partners—to transform educational systems. Likewise, policies related to place-based collaborative initiatives might mirror—and intentionally align with—such equity-focused family engagement policies, explicitly addressing the need to engage nondominant parents and families as key decision makers in such initiatives at multiple levels.

As the field continues along the journey to equitable collaboration, future research must explore how we move from promising, but fragmented, school-centric strategies to integrated and systemic approaches that prioritize nondominant family and community goals and influence in pursuit of equity-based transformation and educational justice.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. By nondominant, I follow Gutiérrez et al (2009) and others in highlighting the role of power in the dynamics of marginalization by dominant institutions, policies, and practices. Although their experiences are distinct, low-income communities, those from immigrant or refugee backgrounds and communities of color do share experiences of being poorly served by dominant educational systems.
2. According to the U.S. Department of Education, as of 2010, 39 states and the District of Columbia had enacted family engagement policies (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).
3. All names of initiatives, districts, school, and individuals are pseudonyms.
4. The other work groups included early learning, English language learners, college access, youth development, and a cross-cutting group focused on data.

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