

## **EMPOWERING PARENTS OF COLOR -A MORAL OBLIGATION**

Barbara Rubin  
Franklin Elementary  
Madison Metropolitan School District

A group of African-American parents are gathered with teachers and administrators discussing their children's transitions from second to third grade and elementary to middle school. Another group plans lessons with teachers to be presented to classes of children. A group of Latino parents along with school staff plans the structure of and lessons for an after school Latino Club. Staff serve Hmong parents a meal restaurant style in a school library, while other staff explain the customs surrounding traditional American restaurant behavior.

During all of these meetings the children receive lessons relevant to their culture and also play together. The lessons obviously vary with the group. A few ideas of the many lessons taught follow. The Hmong children heard stories about Pandau (the Hmong tradition of stitching cultural stories using cloth) and then drew or stitched their own story quilts. The Latino children made posters celebrating themselves and told about their country of origin. These posters were then displayed for the whole school to see. The African-American children watched a video of Faith Ringgold and her painted story quilts, read one of her books, and then made their own painted story quilt.

Does this sound like the description of a typical evening at a public elementary school? How did this come about? What are the critical factors that made it happen? Could you expect to see this at another school next year? All these questions will be addressed as you read on.

My action research question is: **How can we replicate, throughout a school district, parent empowerment groups that have grown and are thriving at an elementary school?** This paper is the beginning of the answer to that question. The rest of the answer lies with you, the reader. Do you have the belief, energy and commitment to sustain a similar endeavor at your school? In your response is the beginning of the solution.

It is my belief that we must eradicate the idea that there is a deficit among our families of color. The deficit lies in the majority culture's inability to respect and make bridges so that all can succeed in a system that is stacked against people of color. The very system ensures that white children and their parents will stay on the top of the academic and economic piles.

If you have the energy and the courage to engage in this process, it will lead you on a journey whose end you cannot imagine. You will be humbled daily and constantly question your beliefs about race, education and our culture. You will meet many new people of color and hear the stories they tell of sadness and humiliation at the hands of well meaning and not so well meaning white people. You will hear how people of color prepare and toughen their children to the realities of living as a person of color in a racist society. I am confident that many of you will read on and join in a process whose time has come. You will join us because it is the RIGHT thing to do.

If you are already convinced, become convinced along the way, or don't like stories, you may at any time skip to the nuts and bolts of this paper, The Appendix entitled Starting Parent Empowerment Groups 101. There you will find suggestions on how to start parent groups and ideas for publicizing and funding them. There is also a step-by-step checklist to follow for planning and conducting each meeting. You will also find bibliographies that can be used with African-American, Latino, and Hmong children. A fourth bibliography suggests adult books that will help convince you of the efficacy of your endeavors.

Be assured that your road will be different from ours. You will have to remain constantly aware of the possibilities that arise and use them as spearheads to carve your school's path on the road to better **servicing all our children**.

### **Background**

Ask any teacher and you are almost certain, at some point, to hear that students who do well in school, generally have parents who are involved in their child's education. In fact, often you hear the criticism that some parents don't care about their children's education and don't think it is important. This criticism is often aimed at parents of color whose children are not achieving in our schools.

A teacher who knows little about a particular student's family or background most often levels this type of criticism. There are cases where try as he or she might the home is unreachable. This, however, is an exception. In my own experience and watching colleagues engage families, it is clear that parents do care about their children and do see education as an important tool for success in the community and in life.

I truly believe that, with rare exceptions, every parent does care about his or her child. They also believe in the importance of education in reaching life's goals. Unfortunately, many parents of color are hindered by barriers including: negative experiences in their own educations; speaking a different language; and not understanding the educational system. Are these parents able to access the system in the same way that white parents do? No. In addition to these barriers institutional racism and economic factors all can play a part in a parent's ability to negotiate the system.

The establishment of parent groups at our school has been a way to bridge the gap that parents of color encounter in trying to help their children be successful in school. Our story is one of persistence, hard work, disappointments and pride at having stayed with the idea and made it work. Are we successful yet? This is an ongoing process that will take many more years of work to achieve. At least, we are on the road.

### **Beginning**

Six years ago our kindergarten through second grade elementary school received a Comprehensive School Reform Grant. Using funds from the grant, the school was restructured so that second language learners were no longer removed from the classroom for instruction. Regular education teachers instructed them in the regular classroom. These teachers either had English as a Second Language Certification or were working on attaining it.

Using this new model, children with English as their second language were no longer removed from the regular classroom to receive extra instruction. While the old model gave the English Language Learners a relationship with another adult in the building and exposure to English vocabulary and grammar, they missed whatever was going on in the classroom. They often left and returned to the classroom in the middle of a lesson. They had to leave what they were doing and then return to a setting where the

rest of the class had completed the task and moved on to something else. The classroom teacher had to bridge the gap that they experienced by either stopping the whole class or having the returning English Language learners wait. This resulted in these students feeling lost. Despite teachers' efforts, they thus felt different and not a part of the group. The children sometimes felt and were regarded by peers as less than full functioning members of the classroom community.

Regular education teachers were encouraged to get English Language Learning training. A large percentage of the staff took an introductory class taught by a University professor on teaching English Language Learners. This class gave the staff new information and also allowed current staff to discuss issues relative to including ELL students in classrooms.

The new model ensured that the children are always viewed as part of the group. The regular education teacher with certification as a teacher of English Language Learners can incorporate specialized instruction into the regular flow of the day. In addition, emphasis can be placed upon the strength of these students who know, not only one, but also two languages.

### **The Journey**

In addition to the change in service delivery for English Language Learners, parent groups were begun with each of our Latino, Hmong and African-American parents. These parents were not represented in our monthly Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). They did not feel welcomed and reported that they did not feel a connection to them and there needs at the PTO meeting.

The initial thrust of each of the Latino, Hmong, and African-American parent meetings was to inform parents about how the school worked. It was felt, that if they were able to come to school and meet together to share information with staff, they might feel more comfortable and thus become more able to advocate for their children.

We deliberately had separate meetings for each group. Even though there was some commonality in the needs of the groups, each group came with a separate language, culture, and history in this country. The strengths within each group could be used to

further empower members of the group to share their skills with each other and communicate with teachers about the strengths and needs of their families.

While our intentions were admirable, I remember thinking that, in some ways this was just a way for the school to fix people who were not quite as good as the rest. Unfortunately, back in 1999, we were still under the assumption, to some degree, that white people had the answers, if only the people of color would get their acts together. As the years have passed this perception has changed. Teachers look at this learning as a two-way street. Parents come up with and carry out ideas far beyond what was ever imagined by staff five years ago.

We have learned more and seen the evolution of the groups, giving people information gives them power. Each group has stepped up, in ways significant to them, to forge new ground for their children and the entire school community. Again, the journey has brought us to places we had no way of imagining.

A key factor in recruiting parents for these meetings was the expertise of our two bilingual resource specialists who already had a relationship with both the parents and children in our schools. We also were able to obtain the services of an African-American parent who had ties both to the African-American community and to our staff.

These three people made personal phone calls to the families, encouraging them to come to the meetings. Flyers were sent home on colorful paper announcing the meetings. Both backpack mail and US Mail were used to distribute the flyers.

While ensuring that we did not demean or belittle anyone's pride, a nutritious meal, childcare, and transportation in the form of cabs were also provided. The meals were sometimes prepared by a group member and included food specific to the group's ethnicity. We also were able to arrange with Pizza Hut to have pizza delivered at a reduced rate. We then purchased salad fixings, dressing, fruit, cookies and apple juice to complete the meal.

At the first meeting the parents generated topics for future meetings. We asked what topics were of interest to them, also suggesting topics that we thought might be helpful. In the beginning parents were somewhat reluctant to ask for help and advice. Pride and history got in the way of families being able to bring medical, housing, and immigration issues to the forefront. There was follow-up at future meetings, so families

recognized that their issues were acknowledged and addressed. While meetings were devoted to the aforementioned pressing issues, the staff felt it very important to include topics that would help parents understand the workings of the school.

The African-American parents expressed a great deal of anger and frustration at some of the policies and traditions that were taken for granted at the school by the white majority. As the only white person at the meeting, I found myself feeling uncomfortable with the criticisms the parents voiced, but also agreeing with their ideas. It was a phenomenal experience to be able to listen and learn about the parents' concerns and the pain they felt in having to protect their children. They were protecting them from a system that treated them as less than worthy.

They spoke of having to tell their children that it was necessary for them to work harder than white children in order to succeed. It was very important for them to learn as much as possible about what their children were learning in school and how it was taught. They also wanted to know how to communicate with their children's teachers, the questions they should be asking.

They talked about the dance held each year called The Sock Hop. It was a fundraiser held by the PTO and was considered an ongoing part of the PTO's function at the school. They felt no positive reflection of their culture in the music or dancing that was included. One woman reminded everyone that the 1950's were not a particularly good time for African-Americans in our culture. Yet no one in the white culture questioned any of the practices around this dance that were offensive to those not in the majority.

As a result of this ongoing discussion, the PTO was approached and the name of the dance has been changed to the Franklin-Randall Dance. Music is chosen to reflect the interests of the Latino as well as the African-American cultures. Our Hmong Bilingual Resource Specialist explained to us that there is really no connection that Hmong people can feel to this event. He suggested that we not expect Hmong people to participate in the dance.

As the year drew to a close, we were able to generate a list of group accomplishments for the African-American parents. The list was well received by parents and gave us all a sense of group efficacy. It was helpful in encouraging parents to return

the next year. While the accomplishments were difficult to achieve and seemed small at the time, in retrospect, they helped create a very strong bond among the parents who participated. Some of those same parents are still participating in the group.

Many of the parents, especially those in the Hmong group, had never had formal schooling and felt overwhelmed not only with the language, but also with cultural expectations that were totally new to them. They expressed their frustration through our Bilingual Resource Specialist who had worked with them at our school for a number of years.

One of the most moving experiences was an evening when several of the Hmong parents agreed to come and talk to the staff about their experiences in coming to America. They also agreed to tell of their frustration at not being able to help their children with schoolwork. Especially as their children get older, the work gets more difficult and they are unable to help them. The parents pleaded with us to understand that they cared deeply about their children's education, but were unable to do what they would like to for their children.

Out of this discussion came a grant written by several Franklin teachers. The teachers were awarded funding to buy backpacks, tape recorders and books. They were able to get volunteers to tape stories, which the children could take home with the books and listen to them at home. While this is only a small step in helping children of color to get the help they need, it reflects an affirmation of a problem brought to the school by parents.

Similar issues arose with the Latino and African-American parents. Again, the language barrier was somewhat alleviated with translation. The cultural expectations of white American teachers were not apparent to either of these groups, though. This fact did not actually come out clearly until several years into the process, when parents became comfortable enough to voice their concerns. Initially, they were so overwhelmed with the entire process that they were either unaware of their voices or reluctant to voice their concerns. They might have also been unaware of what their concerns were because they were too engaged in trying to understand what was expected of them and their children.

As you read on you will again and again be reminded that this is a slow process that needs time to evolve. In large part, it has to do with building relationships of trust with people who have been largely disenfranchised for centuries. There is no reason for them to trust or understand what is going on in white culture. There is no reason for them to think that white people actually would like to share the cultural capital that they need to succeed in the white educational system or society.

The first Parent Teacher interaction of the school year is the Ready, Set Go (RSG) Conference. At that conference parents and teachers sit down and talk about expectations for the year. The teacher wants to know as much as possible about the child: how he/she behaves; her/his likes/dislikes, strengths/weaknesses and also to see what the parent/s would like for the child. At our first meeting all of these aspects of the RSG Conference were explained to the parents. We also provided them with questions that they might want to ask. We did role-plays, having one parent pretend to be the teacher and the other ask questions. This was fun and allowed us all to laugh and see the humor in a potentially tense situation. At a subsequent meeting, parents were given the opportunity to talk about the conferences and share with one another what was helpful and what worked for them.

Parents indicated it was helpful to know what questions to ask and the kind of information teachers wanted. They also felt supported and empowered by being able to share with each other what had gone on at the conferences. Often, a parent with older children could answer a question or speak to a concern that a parent of a younger child voiced. Thus, the parents were able to support each other in helping their children become more successful in school.

Several years into the project, a parent suggested that the first meeting of the year focus on the nitty-gritty of what a parent should know about the classroom and the everyday workings of the school. She suggested that we have the parents do a mini-scavenger hunt. We listed questions such as: Who is your child's teacher? What is your child's room number?; "Who is the School Nurse?"; and "What is the safe arrival number"? Phone books and sheets were provided to help the parents answer these questions. The parents took them home to put on their refrigerators for future reference. Several parents took two sheets: one for the refrigerator and the other for the bulletin board at work.



Three meetings that year were devoted to what is taught in reading, writing and math in the kindergarten through fifth grades. Teachers from each grade came to the meetings bringing materials that they use to teach the various subject areas. A meeting was devoted to each of the subjects. Sometimes we made games and materials that the parents could use at home. Some of the meetings were also devoted to demonstrations of reading with children. One of the meetings focused on how writing is taught.

Parents gave good feedback on these meetings and said they had a better understanding of how their children were taught and what was expected of them. Even in the early years, it was clear that all the parents were deeply concerned about their children succeeding in school. They wanted teachers to be honest with them in assessing where their children stood in relation to their peers. They wanted someone to be honest with them, so that they could be the best parents they could be to their children.

The first year under the Comprehensive School Reform Grant childcare was provided. Teachers or student teachers were paid for the service. The children played in a classroom after eating dinner and then moved down to the gym for more activities. The activities were not structured. We did find an unanticipated benefit from the time they spent together. Because children of a particular ethnic group are separated from one another in classrooms, they often had little or no time to spend with their ethnic peers. The meetings gave them a time to share together. They all reported enjoying this time and looking forward to it. To this day, a child often comes running up to me on the playground or in the hall asking excitedly, "Is there a meeting tonight?" Another benefit was that they were able to see their parents in school interacting with teachers on an ongoing basis. The adults in their world spoke to each other and worked together for a common goal.

### **Making Progress**

As a result of the energy and positive reaction to the first year of the parent empowerment groups, we decided to write two grants to obtain funding to continue the parent groups. We applied to the Madison Foundation for Public Schools and the Rennbohm Foundation for funds to continue the parent groups. We referred to them as Parent Empowerment Groups and asked for funding to develop curriculum to use with the children while their parents were meeting. We planned to continue with a similar

format for the parents, but add lessons for the children. We intended that the lessons be short, as we did not want the children to miss out on the all-important social playtime that they already enjoyed. We wanted the children to have a deeper understanding and appreciation of their cultural heritage.

We received joint funding for our idea from both applications. In addition, our PTO agreed to pay for childcare and meals for the meetings. We were very excited about the funding. We didn't realize what a difficult and time-consuming endeavor we had undertaken. Eighteen meetings, six for each group were planned. For each meeting we needed a parent topic, a lesson for the children, food, staff to be with children and adults, publicity, and someone to arrange cabs. This is not to mention the logistics of purchasing and making materials, arranging for food, buying needed dinnerware and generally coordinating the flow of the meetings. The grant provided for the purchase of materials such as books and art supplies. The staff volunteered to create lessons using these materials. For the Latino and Hmong children, we stressed the uniqueness and benefits of speaking two languages. We had lessons on careers that someone can pursue when they are bilingual. .

The Latino children heard stories and made decorations for El Dia de Muerte (The Day of the Dead), read a book and knocked down a piñata from a tree (outside, on a December night in the dark) for Los Posades. We spent several weeks finding the countries where they or their parents were born on a world map and sharing the information with the entire group.

The Hmong children heard a book about a story quilt and did pandau, made paper cut outs of traditional Hmong costumes to dress paper children and read about the countries that their parents traveled through to get to Madison.

The African-American children heard stories about famous African-American inventors, authors and poets and wrote and drew about them. They also completed large construction paper sheets telling about themselves. We took photos of each of the children and attached them to the sheets.

A special bulletin board was established at each school where the artwork and activities that the children did were displayed. Teachers were encouraged to bring their

classes to view the bulletin boards. Children of color as well as white children were often seen looking at the board and sharing with each other.

The second year we were able to have a representative from West High School attend one of our meetings. He talked about their group called Parents of African-American Students. They used the acronym PAAS. He said that their group would be delighted if we also used the name. They met one Saturday a month at Wright Middle School. While that group has since disbanded, at the time, it gave our small group of about eight parents, encouragement and focus to continue.

In the spring of 2003 we applied for and received another Aristos Grant (the Rennebohn Grant). In this grant we requested funding for parents to receive stipends for working with teachers to prepare lessons to be taught in their children's classrooms. We also requested money to have school wide performances, should the parents decide that this was a good idea.

The most exciting part of receiving this grant has been the unanticipated creative ideas and energy that the parents have generated. The staff sat back in awe of the wonderful ideas and enthusiasm parents have for school and their children.

The Latino Group decided that they wanted to start an After School Club Latino. They not only invited their own children to participate, but also included fifteen white children in their group. They are meeting for 16 weeks and will present information about a different Latino country each week. Children travel from Franklin to Randall after school and join in the club's activities. They are then transported home by a special after school bus funded by the Grant.

The PAAS group has encouraged its members to go into their child's classroom and work with the teachers. Parents have come in to read stories such as Cornrows, Bintou's Braids, and Wild, Wild Hair. They then involved the whole class in braiding activities. Other parents have shared stories of soul food and prepared food for the whole class to taste.

Also using grant money an African-American teacher, who had done presentations for the PAAS Group, came to our school and did presentations for three groups of five to six classrooms. She read books and performed raps riveting the attention of one hundred children and their teachers to the text. She emphasized to

everyone the importance of reading and re-reading, listening to teachers, and enjoying literature.

Of particular note was the excitement and joy seen on the faces of the African-American children as she performed using authors and text written by people of their culture. She was able to single them out and call them onto the stage to help with the performance. Parents of color attended the performance, thus enhancing the awareness and presence of African-American adults in the building for all the children.

How can the impact of this one performance be quantified? Numerous staff members approached me with gratitude about the power of the performance. Several staff approached the presenter with requests for materials and ideas to use in the classroom. The photos of the children, I am sure will bear out the power of this experience for them.

### **Our Journey Will Continue**

Our School Improvement Plan (SIP) Meeting also attests to the power of what these groups have done and will continue to do at our school. Part of our SIP calls for the continuance of these groups to involve more staff and parents next year. We also have asked the PTO to continue funding the food for our group meetings, as well as materials, consultants, and the Club Latino transportation. With the grant's money this year, we have been able to purchase books and video resources. This will provide materials for the next few years.

The question of attendance at the meetings was and is a difficult one for the African-American group. There is a solid core of parents who come faithfully. That core has grown now to the point where we usually have about fifteen adults and between twenty and thirty children at each meeting. Despite our efforts in sending out save the date notices, announcement flyers, and making phone calls prior to each meeting, our attendance represents less than one third of the possible attendees.

In an effort to address this challenge, I surveyed the PAAS parents and children. I asked questions to find out what parents and children liked and didn't like about the meetings. The responses were over-whelmingly positive. Parents felt they had learned

about the school and how to advocate for their children. They also felt empowered to voice concerns and have their voices heard. The children loved playing together and many wished we could have more meetings. The adults were all willing to call others and tell them about the meetings. Carpools were also suggested. One child suggested advertisements as a way to attract more families. Several parents felt that the meetings should be held at more schools.

In order to share what we have done with the larger community, the PAAS group plans to make a video to be broadcast on the local cable channel. A goal of this video is to challenge parents to become involved in their children's education. Another goal is to provide parents and teachers with a blueprint of how to start a parent group and how to sustain it. We will be working with District staff to write and produce the video during the fall semester. The commitment of our parents and their amazing ability to articulate the needs and concerns of African-American parents will ensure a very powerful piece of work.

### **Begin Your Journey**

Reader, if you have continued to this point, you are probably close to beginning on the journey that we undertook five years ago. I encourage you to get started. After you begin, you must continue. While you could say, "We tried it for a year and we had very few parents attend," this attitude will invite failure. Your persistence must be grounded in an underlying belief in your absolute moral obligation to empower parents of color to be advocates for their children's educational success. Relationships and trust take time to establish. As we begin our sixth year, we have only scratched the surface of reaching our potential participants. In some ways, I feel like we are in the same place as you are.

Please call for help whenever you need it. We are only too willing to answer your questions. Listening to you, we can learn more about ourselves: where we were and where we need to go.

## Starting Parent Empowerment Groups 101

1. In the absence of Bilingual Resources Specialists and/or parent liaisons, develop a relationship with one or two parents of color, who desire to be advocates for their children.
2. Recruit staff members that can be consistent in attendance and support one another as a team. The more you have the better.
3. Invite parents and children via phone calls, backpack mail, and US Mail to attend an evening gathering with their children where a nutritious meal, childcare as well as transportation, if needed, will be provided. The purpose of the meeting will be to discuss their child's school experience and how they can become a voice for their child at school.
4. Provide nametags and a sign in sheet for parents. The beginning of the gathering is social and allows people to get to know each other.
5. The children can eat in a separate room staffed by teachers. They can then draw and play games. If the gymnasium can be reserved, this is an attractive option for children of all ages. Short lessons can be planned to enhance self-concept and deepen cultural connections using materials relevant to the specific culture. (See Bibliographies for African-American, Hmong, and Latino books for children.)
6. Provide an agenda so that people know how the meeting will unfold. (See Meeting Agenda 101 for details.)

7. At the first meeting, it is important to listen to the parents. Find out what they expect from the group and use this information to set topics for future meetings.
8. If you set goals as a result of your discussion, be sure that they are small visible things that you want to change in your school. Examples of this might be: changing the name of a dance to a more culturally inclusive one; ensuring that children who get free lunch are not singled out or ostracized; providing books for all children from the book fair.
9. As goals are accomplished be sure to share positive outcomes with the group, staff and the school community.
10. Set a meeting time that is the same each week or each month. Weekly meetings are intense to set up and continue over a short period. The advantage is momentum and consistency. Monthly meetings are easier to set up, but you can lose momentum. Ask group members to invite friends to come with them to the next meeting.
11. Your persistence must be grounded in an underlying belief in your absolute moral obligation to empower parents of color to be advocates for their children's educational success.
12. Develop a notebook to record what happened, including agendas, lesson plans, and community resources. Include a record of your successes through photos, drawings, and videotapes.

## **Parent Empowerment Groups Meeting Agendas 101**

1. Provide an agenda that clearly states the activity and duration of each.
2. Pre-meeting flyers should reflect, in less detail, the agenda that will be handed out at the meeting.
3. At the end of the meeting, inform everyone of the goals for the next meeting and be sure people understand any tasks that they need to do in preparation for the next meeting.

## **Publicizing Parent Empowerment Groups 101**

1. Send home colorful flyers the week before the meeting. Provide an abbreviated agenda along with the fact that a nutritious meal, childcare, as well as transportation, if needed, will be provided.
2. Follow-up the flyer with a phone call, encouraging attendance and soliciting questions.
3. Do this before every meeting and don't give up. This is a process that takes a long time.



## **Funding Parent Empowerment Groups 101**

1. Work with your Principal on this one. Sometimes there are discretionary funds available.
2. The PTO, Rotary, Optimists can be a sources of funding.
3. Ask nearby businesses for donations or reduction in cost for food and supplies.
4. High School students getting childcare certification, volunteers from the UW, student teachers, and teachers, can do childcare.

## Parent Empowerment Groups 101 Meeting Checklist

- ❑ Set date
- ❑ Recruit staff to help
- ❑ Generate flyer
- ❑ Send flyer via backpack and/or US Mail
  
- ❑ Phone participants to inform them about meeting and determine if they need transportation
- ❑ Arrange for childcare
  
- ❑ Plan Parent agenda
- ❑ Plan Child lesson (See Bibliographies)
  
- ❑ Delegate responsibilities for meeting
  
- ❑ Write and copy agenda
  
- ❑ Purchase napkins, plates, cups, plastic ware
- ❑ Purchase salad fixings, dressing, fruit, cookies, juice
  
- ❑ Call to order transportation
  
- ❑ Order pizza or other food
  
- ❑ Set up meeting areas Name tags, sign-in sheet, agendas, materials for child lesson, and materials for parent meeting
- ❑ Follow agenda and set subsequent agendas
  
- ❑ Thank people for coming, helping etc
  
- ❑ Clean-up
  
- ❑ Develop a notebook to record what happened including lesson plans, agendas, and resources

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