

“IT STARTS WITH YOUR HEART AND RADIATES OUT”:
BUILDING DEMOCRATIC PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLS

by

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

“There’s a certain PTA way of doing things... maybe it works better if you aren’t doing it that PTA way.”

Parents want what is best for their children, teachers want what is best for their students, and we can all be more successful in reaching these goals when we work together. These are not revolutionary ideas. What would be revolutionary, however, would be to actually trust that communities have the answers to our own questions. Rather than calling on outside experts, we need to build democratic parental participation in schools so that families and educators can collaboratively advocate for children. This is not an easy task; it takes the steady and intentional effort of reflecting on power dynamics, building relationships, and improving conditions so that all families are represented and able to participate.

This is the work we are doing with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) in my neighborhood school, a majority Latino school in a gentrifying area. When white middle-class parents started the PTA, we were in danger of alienating other families and further dividing the community. Though this has not been an easy or straightforward path, through establishing authentic relationships with more parents and learning what all families want for their children and need from the school, the PTA has been successful in improving representation and increasing participation. This project has used Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a method to support, inform, and facilitate this work. That being said, these questions were being asked by leaders in the PTA long before the formal beginning of this project, and this project would not have been possible without the many reflective parents and educators committed to questioning their role in the community and improving the conditions for all students and families in the school.

This is a project near and dear to my heart. I am writing about my friends, the educators who care for my son, and a public school that I truly love. I am attempting to pull lessons from our story so that we can sustain our commitment and so that other communities can learn from our work. There is a César Chávez quotation that I have always found inspiring, and I think it applies. He once said, “That’s what love is all about. It starts with your heart and radiates out” (Chávez, 2002, p. 71). If we want to make positive social change, we must start with ourselves and our own communities. Through self-reflection and getting to know others, we can learn how to work together to make this world a better place. That is what we are trying to do in my neighborhood school’s PTA. There is a long road ahead, but we have made progress and are committed to continuing the journey, together.

Doing the PTA Our Way

I’d like to begin by telling a story that highlights both our hard-earned progress and the long-term commitment required to build democratic parental participation in schools. It’s the story of a recent PTA meeting at which a diverse group of parents came together to work collaboratively on projects that aligned with their hopes and dreams for their children. It’s a story about how we all need supportive relationships and conditions to make us feel represented and so that we can actively participate. Perhaps most importantly, it’s a story about the need for ongoing individual and collaborative reflection to improve the ways in which we interact with each other and work together (Casey, 2016; Michael, 2015; Singleton, 2014; White, 2012).

On the evening of this particular meeting, I parked in front of the school half an hour early so I could help with last minute odds and ends. I saw my friends Rosa and Mr. Lopez already setting up the table where we would sell dinner. (These and all other names are pseudonyms. Parents will be addressed by first name and teachers will be addressed by last

name.) While lining up soda cans in orderly rows, they greeted me as I walked across the expansive courtyard. It was a lovely, warm, spring-like evening though it was the last day of January and our first PTA meeting after the winter holiday. Rosa, a Latina mother of four, had on her Patriot Elementary School T-shirt. Seeing this reminded me of the many mornings during her first year as PTA Vice President (VP) that she had been out on the courtyard selling spirit gear to families, seamlessly welcoming parents in English and Spanish. Mr. Lopez, a fourth and fifth grade dual language teacher and our PTA liaison, was dressed more like a gym teacher this evening because he was planning to play the “Dance, Dance Revolution” video game in his classroom with all the children of the families attending the meeting.

We stood around talking and laughing while we waited for Jason, a white middle-class father of three and the PTA President, to show up with the food from a nearby restaurant. Forgetting he would be busy doing childcare, Rosa tried to convince Mr. Lopez to do the Spanish interpretation for the meeting. In her role as VP, Rosa oversees membership and spearheads most of the communication for the PTA. Even though we routinely depend on her skill as a bilingual translator and interpreter, she is still often nervous doing so in front of a crowd. Mr. Lopez joked with her that “half of them will not be able to understand you anyway!” While this is a simple fact, as many of the families only speak English, this lighthearted joke turned the cultural legacy of the PTA upside down. After years of uneven translating and interpreting, PTA discourse had been dominated by English-speaking parent leaders. This left parents who only spoke Spanish unable to participate, so it was a refreshing reversal to imagine the English-speaking parents like me grappling with that experience.

Jason soon arrived with boxes of food, and we all helped carry them to the table to set up. We discussed prices and settled on two dollars for a sandwich or corn dog and tater tots, and for

three dollars we would throw in a drink. After we agreed this would allow parents to feed themselves and their children for a reasonable price, Jason ran inside to set up his computer. With ten minutes to spare before the meeting was supposed to start, families began to trickle in and wander over to the food table. We were joined by Will and Ms. Aguilar, a PTA parent and the other teacher liaison respectively, who immediately rolled up their sleeves and started serving food. As the PTA Treasurer, I took money and made change, and even swiped a few credit cards on a Square reader plugged into my phone. Families came through and purchased meals, with older children carrying a stack of trays over to the benches where their siblings sat. Once the line died down and our PTA Secretary Julia arrived, I asked if she was willing to take over with the money so I would not miss my chance to give the Treasurer's report. She agreed and stayed outside with Will to help any stragglers get their dinner.

I ran inside and the meeting was already underway. Jason and Rosa were at the front of the auditorium, taking turns explaining the PowerPoint slides in English and Spanish. I counted at least thirty parents spread around the room as I took my seat. It was a diverse crowd that was predominantly Latino, like the student body. Some held small children, but they all seemed able to listen to the presentation because the older kids had been whisked away to dance in Mr. Lopez's classroom upstairs. Most of our meetings featured a student performance to boost attendance, a trick shared by PTA veterans with newbies like us, but we were challenging that conventional wisdom by hosting this meeting without entertainment and solely focused on PTA work. This meant that all the parents in the auditorium were there because they wanted to participate in their child's education.

Jason took the group through his typical presentation, skillfully updating everyone on PTA projects and purchases and making announcements about upcoming events. He explained

that every time the PTA raised a little bit of money, such as by selling dinners at meetings, it was used to purchase an item from the teacher wish list the PTA had compiled, such as document cameras to model writing and editing and a date stamp to mark student progress. As he struggled to be heard clearly through the old microphone, Jason announced with relish that the PTA had recently made a larger purchase: a new sound system for the school auditorium.

Rosa's interpreting followed a simple back and forth pattern with Jason's announcements until he presented a survey mandated by the district. The school had been deemed Improvement Required (IR) for two years per the state accountability measures, and the district was seeking parental input regarding concerns and possible improvements. At this point, a parent more comfortable speaking in Spanish asked if we did not have a school security guard and full-time librarian because we had not met the state's requirements. Rosa explained the parent's question in English and then answered it in both English and Spanish, with another bilingual parent joining in on the conversation in both languages as well. In the countless PTA meetings that I have attended over the last four years, I had never previously witnessed a conversation between Spanish speaking parents dominate the floor. Though the school is majority Latino, the meetings do not usually look or sound that way. This was another small step away from white middle-class parents who look and sound like me dominating the agenda and discussion (Flores, 2016; Lee, 2005; Lopez & Lopez, 2009; Park & Holloway, 2013).

It was not just language that made this conversation notable. In Spanish, they were discussing something that I have not heard come up very often in PTA meetings. While the PTA is usually focused on providing "extras," this discussion conveyed revealing beliefs and misunderstandings about the function of standardized testing in schools. Jason and Rosa explained that no, we were not being punished; rather, there were other supposedly rational

reasons why we did not have the services many parents felt we needed. For example, schools must have enrollment above a certain threshold to be assigned a full-time librarian. So then, another parent asked, why are the test scores low? Jason said he would be a rich man if he had the answer.

While he was making a lighthearted joke likely intended to help move the conversation along, his response has ironic resonance within the current climate of education policy and school improvement. The desire to hold schools accountable has provided investment opportunities for consultants and providers of school choice operating from outside the public-school framework while discounting the experiences of the hardworking administrators, teachers, students, and parents on the inside (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2014; Hagopian, 2014; Kumashiro, 2012; Lipman, 2011a; Ravitch, 2010b). This conversation was limited by time, but it was a spark of dialogue amongst the people who feel the impact of these policies.

It was then my turn as PTA Treasurer to give a brief budget report about the money we had raised and spent on resources for the school. Next, Jason asked the leaders of various PTA projects to stand as he described our work. First, he introduced Brian, who oversees the Soccer Club. Then he re-introduced me and explained that I was working with Room Parents. Next, he asked Yesenia to wave from her seat in the back and explained that she would be working on campus recycling and neighborhood litter clean-up. Abby would meet with those interested in helping with the Valentine's dance, Tasha was leading work to start a new Cheer Squad in the school, Rosa wanted help planning a fifth-grade trip to NASA in Houston, and Jason himself would be spearheading the Showcase Dinner. He explained that parents could pick a project and learn about how to get involved.

Parents shuffled over to the groups that most interested them. I had five moms in my Room Parents group, three white and two Latina. We discussed an upcoming Black History Month door decorating contest and the possibility of collaborating with teachers to support classroom Facebook pages. One mother shared her guilt for not doing more in her role as Room Parent, so we brainstormed ways to connect with the teacher and other interested parents for support. The conversation slowly moved from concerns to solutions. One mother apologized that her English was not very good but explained the benefits of a class Facebook page, helping everyone in the group think through the process. Impressed because of my own linguistic limitations, I told her how great her English was and asked her name to make sure I could contact her in the future.

Jason called us all back together and thanked everyone for coming. As parents walked out of the auditorium to rejoin their kids in the courtyard, PTA leaders collected around the food table and shared success stories from the evening. Everyone was happy with the number of parents in their groups and the enthusiasm they had received for their projects. After offering a discount to the remaining parents in the courtyard, we sold the last of the food. Jason and Will counted the money and announced that we had broken even. Jason laughed, suggesting he would have rather profited so we could make another purchase for the school. We had discussed in the past that the main goal of providing meals was to provide a low-cost service to families, however, so no one seemed too disappointed. Mr. Lopez also proudly shared that he was sending the kids home happy and tired after their dance competition, ready to rest up for the next school day.

As we cleaned up, I debriefed the evening with a smaller group consisting of Rosa and Julia. Julia, a Latina mom of two girls, shared that she and Rosa had met at a PTA meeting

similar to this one at the beginning of the previous school year. We joked that they were celebrating their “PTAnniversary” and recalled that they had met me soon after, when they had the idea to plan the school’s first Tamale Cook Off. Both had attended Patriot when they were children, and they had bonded over their enthusiasm as Pre-K parents new to the PTA.

At that time, I was working on the proposal for this dissertation, a Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project in which I hoped to work from within the PTA to promote integration in our diverse public school, despite the fact that it operated under the shadow of neoliberal education policy and neighborhood gentrification (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; López & Burciaga, 2014; Lipman, 2011b; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014; Ravitch, 2010b; Saporito & Lareau, 1999; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007). PAR is characterized by “research conducted by participants [which] is oriented to making improvements in practices and their settings by the participants themselves” (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014, p. 4). As a white, English speaking, middle-class parent, I recognized that it would be impossible for me to successfully carry out this project on my own due to my limited perspective, linguistic ability, and the blind spots that resulted from my privileged position in society.

Enamored with their ideas and deep connection to the school, I interviewed Rosa and Julia in their family homes and asked them to work with me on the project. Zaal and Terry (2013) outline the process of PAR as “establishing a collective, identifying a research question, conducting research, gathering and analyzing data, and taking action” (p. 43). Since those first interviews when we discussed our common goal of unifying parents in the school to support all students, Julia, Rosa, and I facilitated the creation of a parent survey in both English and Spanish, distributed it at multiple school events and online, conducted group interviews, analyzed the responses, and presented our conclusions at the PTA Summer Retreat. This PAR

research exemplifies a rejection of “conventional research approaches where an external expert enters a setting to record and represent what is happening” and instead relied upon collaboration amongst members of the community to collect information and make meaningful social change (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014, p. 4).

Everything about the recent PTA meeting reflected what we had learned throughout the PAR process: the faith that parents would come without the lure of a student performance, the rebooting of energies at the beginning of the second semester, the bilingual presentation, the babysitting, the inexpensive meal, the project-oriented committees, the supply of resources to a school that is neglected by the powers that be, and, ultimately, the focus on community and the idea that all parents have the desire and skill to contribute to their child’s education. All these ideas were previously conveyed in the survey and interviews we had done together. Myles Horton, a popular educator of the Civil Rights and Labor Movements in the United States said, “research becomes a form of action when it is done by people who themselves must act... it is a way for community people to define problems, collect the facts, and act collectively” (1976, p. 252). Unlike traditional descriptive research where the goal is to control, observe, and report phenomena, PAR is used to bring about social change.

The research that Rosa, Julia, and I conducted reinforced many goals that we had already been working toward as a PTA committed to building community and providing resources, and our inquiry as a collaborative research team would not have had any traction without the ideological and practical commitment of the larger PTA group. Still, this PAR project functioned as a catalyst and reminder of how to realize these commitments every day, in every interaction. It gave me the confidence to approach new people whom I admired and ask them to work with me on something close to my heart. It gave us a framework for collaborative inquiry

that would help us get closer to reaching our goals collectively. As is often the case with PAR, this project both captured and enhanced the work already taking place. This dissertation therefore represents not only a snapshot of the real work we as a PTA were already doing but also the transformational potential of participatory research (Freire, 2000; Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Zaal & Terry, 2013).

One way that our PTA has been transformed in the past year is that Rosa and Julia went from new PTA moms to PTA board members. With the previous four years of PTA boards being all-white, all English-only speaking, and comprised of many “outside” community members without children in the school, it is significant and powerful that we now have a PTA board comprised only of parents with children in the school, half of whom are bilingual and two of whom attended the school themselves. In a generational majority Latino school, families feel more welcomed by a PTA leadership that better reflects the school’s population and an agenda that more closely mirrors the priorities of the community. I would like to highlight, however, that this PAR project did not “empower” these women to be leaders or materialize characteristics they did not already have; it merely provided practice with talents they brought to the table. On the first day that I met them, Julia and Rosa possessed the leadership skills and commitment to community and education that they demonstrated throughout this project, which is why I was so drawn to working with them and why they are such valuable PTA leaders today.

This is not to say that our work is done. A fairly small group of relatively privileged parents still completes most PTA projects, typically in a last-minute and chaotic manner. We still struggle to host events that make all families, regardless of cultural background, feel welcome. We still strive to connect parents with teachers in meaningful, educationally beneficial ways. And many parents still share profound concerns about the quality of education that their

children are receiving, for reasons both within the school's control and imposed on it from the outside. Yet, we have made significant progress toward putting a more democratic framework in place in which families and educators can work together to make the school a place fully deserving of all the students and families who call it home. As I have listened to interviews and marveled at my friends' stories, I am struck by our successes. We are a special PTA where the overwhelming majority of people involved recognize the importance of cultural differences and the responsibility to support public schools and are self-aware enough to be critical of their own roles. Although this has been a long slow process of trial and error, this is the nature of the work. We will keep walking along that path, as we create it together, one step at a time.

I love this school because I love all public schools. As a former high school teacher, a future school leader, and a parent, I think public schools are a venue where families must work together to demand what they deserve in a world that does not provide for everyone equally. As a white middle-class woman, I recognize that my role in society comes with privileges, power, and blind spots that keep me from being able to do this work on my own. Faith, commitment, and humility are prerequisites to successful PAR studies. Building democratic parental leadership in schools requires a belief that everyone has something to offer and everyone has a lot to learn, including and perhaps especially academic researchers. This project served as terrific practice in my ongoing quest to be a better educator and human being. My trust that teachers and parents overwhelmingly want what is best for students has been reinforced. My ability to build relationships and work collaboratively with people who are different from me has been strengthened. My belief that we are stronger together has claimed an even bigger piece of my heart.

The Founding of the PTA

To fully understand the lessons we have learned about building democratic parental participation in schools, we have to reflect on where this story began, at least for white middle-class parents like me who are relatively new to the community and school. When I moved to a gentrifying urban neighborhood in North Texas five years ago, I was immediately struck by the consensus of many people I was met that the public schools were “bad.” As a former social studies teacher in North Carolina and a student in public schools my whole life, I was particularly troubled by the assumption of new colleagues and friends that my local school would not be good enough for my growing white middle-class family. Pregnant with my first child during our first year in a new town, I could not believe I was already supposed to be worrying about where I was going to send my unborn child to school, years away in the future.

With a little exploration, I confirmed that white families in our area had been opting out of traditional public schools in astounding numbers. Patriot Elementary School is in Southwestern Independent School District (SISD), a comprehensive urban district in a large city. While the city is over 42% white, the school district is only 11% white (United States Census Bureau, 2017; Texas Education Agency, 2017). Even when they do enroll their children in public schools, many parents are vying for spots in the highly desirable Programs and Schools of Choice in the district rather than sending them to their traditional neighborhood schools.

SISD Programs and Schools of Choice offer families the opportunity to apply to specialized academic programs housed in their home school or a school outside of their attendance zone (2017). In an effort to keep families from enrolling in private or charter schools, the district has been “giving students and their parents the power of choice.” The SISD website boasts that these choices provide “what every parent wants – a learning experience that engages

their child, supports his or her interests and opens pathways to success.” Within the public-school system, students are given the opportunity to apply for schools and programs that are tailored to meet specific interests and needs. The site claims, “the District is ushering in a new era with winning opportunities for every student at every skill level” (2017). The only problem is that students have to apply for the limited spots in these programs, so it is not possible for every student to have access. Even once families have applied, it is not possible for everyone to win the lottery, and the application process is self-selecting and deepens residential segregation along lines of race and class (Cucchiara, 2013; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2015; Kimelberg, 2014; Posey, 2012).

While the SISD website would have you believe that “gone is the old ‘one size fits all’ model of learning,” this appears to be true only for some students (2017). Racial and economic trends in school enrollment bear a stark contrast, suggesting that white middle-class parents are most likely to apply for choice schools and programs. According to the Texas Education Agency’s School Report Cards for the 2015-2016 school year, Patriot Elementary School is only 10% white, and 85% are economically disadvantaged, a number which was considerably higher than the district’s and state’s rates of 76% and 59%, respectively. Rainbow Montessori, the nearby choice school is nearly three times as white (30%) white and only 50% economically disadvantaged (2017). Of the 335 students enrolled at Patriot Elementary, 68% were Latino and 18% were black. Though a smaller group than in previous years, 38% of the students were English language learners. The Patriot Elementary School student body is not representative of the increasingly middle-class and white population in the gentrifying neighborhood. When they do enroll their children in public schools, white and middle-class

parents overwhelmingly fight for spots in choice schools and programs, effectively allowing them to self-segregate with public resources.

As a former public school teacher and a current graduate student in Educational Leadership, I decided that I needed to see the school for myself. Both high schools where I had previously taught had bad reputations, and I knew from experience that these usually stemmed from preconceived notions about class, race, and test scores that did not represent the nuanced beauty of what really takes place in classrooms (Cucchiara, 2013; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2015; Kimelberg, 2014; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Posey, 2012). I had the idea of writing articles about the school for the neighborhood newsletter, thinking it was a great way to get my foot in the door as well as spread some positivity in the community.

As soon as I entered the building, I was comforted by the cheerful and orderly learning environment. The school has large classrooms spread across three stories and multiple wings of the building. With various additions to the original floor plan, the school grounds have a rambling quality. Though the building is well kept and decorated with student work, the interior walls and flooring are drab and aged. The cheerful voices of teachers counteracted these characteristics, spilling into the hallway from their well-organized classrooms. The instructors are a diverse group: different experience levels, ages, and racial backgrounds are represented across the grades. Teachers are enthusiastic and approachable, greeting community members and parents when they visit the school. Other school employees are similarly helpful and kind. Overall, I was thrilled—but not surprised—to find a positive learning environment where I knew I would happily enroll my children there once they were old enough. For this reason, I often urge other white middle-class parents who are wringing their hands over the bad reputations of

public schools to go and see for themselves. The reality of hardworking educators and sweet students typically debunks the myths.

As I wrote a series of articles about Patriot for the neighborhood newsletter, I started to connect with other community members interested in the school. One warm June morning in a local coffee shop, a group of us decided to seek out advice on starting the school's first ever Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Some of us were current parents, some like myself were future parents, and others did not have a formal connection to the school but were active in the community and wanted to offer support.

Many of the key players in the early PTA were white middle-class parents who first applied for choice schools and did not get selected in the lottery. Emily, a white middle-class mother and the founding president of the PTA, was at that meeting. Talking to her more recently at a defunct typewriter repair shop transformed into a sophisticated wine bar, she told me she had first entered the lottery for Rainbow Montessori, a choice school in the neighborhood. When her son did not get in, Emily decided to send him to Patriot, the traditional public school blocks from her house. With a background in education, she threw herself into being a booster for the school within the broader community. Though many parents saw Patriot as a backup plan, once they enrolled their children, they wholeheartedly committed themselves to active participation in the school.

While I was proud to be part of a group of parents and neighbors who wanted to offer support, many of us were also apprehensive about how our efforts as a small group of people who were relatively new to the community and school could function inadvertently as an imposition on the parents and educators who had been there all along. Even just organizing the PTA in the first place raised some important questions. Before the official organization of the

PTA, individual parents and an unaffiliated Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) had helped to plan events and provide support for the school. Emily reflected on why we started a formal PTA when the school already had a PTO. She said, “the main reason we turned it into a PTA is you have more legal backing, it’s just more official. Whenever money is exchanging hands and you are gathering donations and stuff... you just want their back.” School PTAs are member organizations of local councils, state-level PTAs, and the National PTA. This protection of these established groups comes at a steep price, as Emily explained, “you are paying \$4.50 out of every \$5 [of member dues] to them, but they also provide speakers, lots of literature, logos, and you know, it looks legit.”

Even with the potential benefits of starting an official PTA, in many ways this new organization was imposed on the school community from the outside. Emily worried about how this transition felt to a leader within the PTO whom she had tried to recruit to work with the PTA. She shared, “What has always been in the back of my mind, was she thinking, ‘okay, here come the white people taking over.’ This big group of us who haven’t been there.... like, ‘who are these people?’” Emily explained that “she was unwilling to kind of cooperate with us for whatever reason, and I am trying to think it was probably more our fault than hers.” Emily reasoned that “she was used to doing it a certain way, and then we came in, and she didn’t like our way.” Years later, Emily still wondered “how I could have handled that situation ... if it was possible for me to do that and what I could have done to make that better.”

Not all parents active in the PTA saw Patriot as a second choice, but most viewed their participation as a form of service to the school. Jason, a white middle-class minister at a church in the neighborhood, was another parent at the meeting when we decided to start a PTA. While he did not try to get his children into a choice school before enrolling them at Patriot, he and his

wife Mindy were motivated to support the school and PTA as part of their “faith, that’s what’s driving me to want to bring people together and to connect with people and offer hope and mercy and justice.” Jason and Emily “knew one another through church, so [Emily] contacted us about helping to start a PTA so that’s how we got involved. They needed people to be officers and on the board and so, we were there.”

Jason and his wife Mindy took turns with various roles in the PTA until Jason took over as President after Emily had served for two years. He decided he was willing to take on the role when Emily told him “she felt concerned about the PTA, that she felt that they had done some good stuff but feeling that maybe it’s not going to continue, she wasn’t sure who was going to take the next leadership role.” After their conversation, “it got me thinking maybe this is a way that I could step in and provide help... I think the PTA is important and I wanted to keep it going.” Emily agreed that Jason had valuable skills to offer the PTA: “his background, the ministry, it’s hard for me to go up to people and just introduce myself, like, ‘join the PTA!’ And he’s really good at that.” She was pleased to see the direction of the PTA under Jason’s leadership, “I really am looking at it from the outside, lately. I have not had time to be in the trenches of it, so I am seeing it in a really positive light, because he puts in it a positive light.”

The generosity and commitment to service that defines Jason’s church has had a significant influence on the PTA and school. Jason shared that many Patriot families “come to our food pantry or get clothes here, or attend church here, or come to our school store and get school supplies.” He hoped that “maybe those families, even though we have a lot of differences, they feel comfortable with me because they know, ‘hey, he’s a good guy, he’s a minister, and they do good stuff for our neighborhood.’” He and Mindy “were counting up how many people from our church have volunteered or helped out, and it was something like twenty-

five to thirty people who have at some point stepped foot on campus.” As a minister, he saw this as a reciprocal relationship, “I think that can help our church, really, to just be engaged in a neighborhood school, be serving, be a blessing.”

Outsiders in the community were also drawn to Patriot for multiple reasons, both moral and pragmatic. In addition to recruiting many volunteers and providing the school with resources, one critical way that Jason’s role in the church influenced the PTA was the recruitment of PTA Board members who did not have another formal connection to the school. Bill and Lara were a married couple who were both experienced with PTAs and passionate about community support for schools. Bill, a white middle-class man, explained that both he and Lara “went through public school ourselves and my mom taught public school and we just felt like it was important to try to make public schools better.” They had been involved in the PTAs at their own kids’ schools until both children graduated, and when they heard about the PTA getting started at Patriot, they were excited about helping a new PTA get off its feet. As Emily explained, “they had the best intentions of anybody,” but she also shared that one source of Bill’s “big ideas about the way we are going to help schools in the neighborhood [is] because his main thing is to raise property values... he is a commercial real estate agent, so all of this is important for his business.”

To volunteer for PTA work, it must be personally rewarding in some way. Whether it was concern for our own children, a spiritual commitment to service, or a desire to raise the value of nearby real estate, everyone who signed on to the PTA in the early days was getting something out of the hours they gave. These purposes were often overlapping, and even, at times, conflicting. I had my own varied motivations: as a graduate student passionate about the role of public schools in society, I not only wanted to do my part for my neighborhood school

but also needed a site to conduct graduate school assignments. Additionally, it did not escape me that any work I did for the school was likely to benefit my own children as future students and could even improve the sticker price of my own home.

The early years of the PTA were determined by this small group of people who did not look, talk, or live like most families who sent their children to the school. Instead, our small group of white middle-class parents and outsiders sat in long meetings held in the library, hours after students, parents, and most teachers had left the building. We sent meeting and event reminders to a small group of personal email addresses. We hammered out every excruciating detail as a group when we planned events, from where to buy the cake to how much tickets should cost. Sometimes PTA leaders guessed what other parents in the school would want, while other times they assumed they knew what other parents in the school needed. These discussions often felt inefficient and sometimes totally unproductive, and as exhaustion and frustration set in, personalities would take precedence over pragmatism. We often discussed how we wanted to get other parents “involved” but floundered when it came to actually doing so. As a group of newcomers and outsiders united by the altruistic goal of offering support and service, our well-intentioned efforts ran the risk of inadvertently excluding and marginalizing the majority of families and educators in the school (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Posey, 2012; Posey-Maddox, 2013; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014).

The fundamental problem was that we had not yet been successful in making meaningful connections with most of the parents and educators who called Patriot home. As one parent explained, “it’s a generational school. If you talk to some of the parents and grandparents that were there, they went to the school.” Instead of assuming our help was needed, we needed to ask

members of the established community what they thought. Instead of struggling to find ways to plug families into our vision of what parental involvement should look like, we needed to ask families what they wanted for the school and what conditions would allow them to actively participate in making that happen. We needed to act as a community of equals learning how to work together instead of acting like the “good” parents who were going to help children from “bad” homes. Such labels are often a shorthand for those of us from privileged backgrounds trying to understand the very real challenges that other families face, but this oversimplification ascribes judgement and removes agency and power from the very people with whom we need to be collaborating and learning.

Though PTAs are founded on altruistic goals, the organization can cause problems when it is seen as an external imposition on an established community. According to the National PTA’s website, “the overall purpose of PTA is to make every child’s potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children” (2015). The district council of PTAs urges parents to “get involved for your children and for your community... as a PTA member, you are more likely to be an informed, involved parent” (2015). This all sounds promising, but the entrenched conventional wisdom in PTAs can play out quite differently.

Pat, a white middle-class grandmother who helped get the Patriot PTA off the ground, understood this. Even though she did not have a direct connection to the school, she helped found the PTA before stepping back from a leadership role when she became President of the SISD Council of PTAs. Through her work in that position, she had developed a critique of the role that PTAs played in many schools across the district. She shared, “I see PTA as transplanting this organization into any school, and that is what I was trying to do for many years, take the PTA, plop it over here... it’s not always the best thing.” Pat thought that it was

not that PTA leaders actually wanted to take over, but “it’s just that they don’t see there is a wider world out there.” This meant that parents who had already been in the school were “not feeling as welcome. There are these people that are a part of [the PTA], and you are not one of them.” To reach those parents, “you have to overdo it, you have to overinclude, [be] overwelcoming.” In particular, she had learned that “in Hispanic Spanish speaking family schools and African American family schools, they are quite averse to the PTA. I was told on the east side not to call it a PTA because people would absolutely not come.” As a result of these experiences, she had concluded, “I am kind of walking away from the PTA perspective because I can kind of see it’s not one size fits all.” She was encouraged to hear of the work we had been doing to build democratic parental participation at Patriot and reflected, “there’s a little lesson there... there’s a certain PTA way of doing things, and you guys aren’t doing that, which tells me, maybe it works better if you aren’t doing that PTA way.”

Though PTAs can feel like an imposition in established communities, they do not have to operate in a dominating manner. Principal Johnson, an African American educator who has held the top position at Patriot for four years, has always urged the PTA to make a concerted effort to reach out to more families. She was the Assistant Principal for four years before taking on the Principal role, and as a result, had a deep knowledge of Patriot’s diverse community. She challenged us to be reflective and critical leaders by frequently reminding white middle-class leaders to question the limitations of our own perspectives and consider the different ways other families might feel about the PTA and school. This did not always make for a comfortable relationship, but Principal Johnson maintained consistent engagement in the PTA and was optimistic about our progress and potential. She said, “I think the future is bright for all PTAs

that keep that lens open, everyone is doing the best they can when they can, and it takes every little effort to make everything a success.”

When we started the PTA, we were a long way from truly representing the school and fostering democratic parental participation, but the best thing we had going for us was that there were so many individuals who were open to questioning their roles in the community and the power dynamics at play. The progress we have made was possible because thoughtful people from diverse backgrounds made a conscious effort to get to know each other and learn how to collaborate. Through those connections, we have slowly but steadily built a model—however incomplete—of democratic parental participation.

Conclusion

This PAR project has both documented and informed the work of reflective individuals from diverse backgrounds who came together for students. It seeks to learn how to build democratic parental participation so we can work together to make all schools worthy of all of our children. When schools do not meet the real needs of students and families—not necessarily according to standardized accountability measures but based on parents hopes and dreams for their children—white middle-class families tend to opt out or take over, while parents of color are more likely to feel alienated. This power differential puts the burden on privileged parents to participate in public schools in ways that are good for all families.

Rather than blaming “bad” parents for not being involved enough or holding teachers responsible for the systemic limitations on their classrooms, we need to work together to make meaningful participation possible and improve the conditions in schools. Participation in the school should be welcoming and feasible for all families, enriching the hard work parents do for

their children. With democratic parental participation, families can advocate for the unconditional public support that schools deserve.

After reviewing the relevant literature and the method of PAR in chapters two and three, the next three chapters examine different aspects of what we learned about the diverse community at Patriot Elementary through our participation in the PTA and our work on the survey and interviews. The concluding chapter gives an update on the most recent work of the PTA and outlines what has worked for us as we strive to build democratic parental participation in our school.

Throughout this project, I worked with amazing parents, educators, and community members who believe in the potential of public schools. By coming together, we have multiplied our power. The story I have written here is not just my own, but one that I hope conveys the ways we have all learned from each other. While I wish we had gotten to know even more parents, and I look forward to expanding parental participation in the school even further, I am grateful for the relationships I have built and what those individuals have already given to this project and the school. This is their, and our, story.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Building Democratic Parental Participation in Diverse Urban Schools

Neoliberal policies have both segregated and gentrified cities and schools. Through the strategic disinvestment and reinvestment of resources, privatization has contributed to the segregation of urban spaces (Lipman, 2011b; Pedroni, 2011; Watkins, 2012). Neoliberal school choice policies, though marketed as a way to provide high quality educational programs to all students, actually allow parents to participate in the segregation of schools along racial and economic lines (Cucchiara, 2013; Kimelberg, 2014; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Posey, 2012; Sohoni & Saporito, 2009). While more middle-class families living in gentrifying urban areas are opting to send their children to their neighborhood public schools, the ways in which these parents involve themselves in the schools often function to displace or marginalize other families (Posey-Maddox, 2013; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014). Instead of looking to middle-class parents to improve urban schools, diverse communities need to unite and participate in schools democratically (Auerbach, 2011; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014). To build democratic parental participation in schools, leaders need to be committed to the ongoing process of collaborative problem solving. This requires a positive school culture, shared decision making in the school community, and meaningful relationships with parents (Khalil & Brown, 2015; Lumpkin, Claxton, & Wilson, 2014; Milanowski et al., 2009; Range, Duncan, & Hvidston, 2013). Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a methodological tradition that can be used to facilitate democratic inquiry and parental participation in schools (Fals Borda, 2013; Fine, 2013; Guishard, 2009).

Neoliberalism in Cities and Schools

Neoliberal policies remove support for public entities while increasing dependency on privatization. Neoliberalism “subordinates the needs of society to the market, and deem[s] public services and goods an unconscionable luxury... the logic of the market undermines the most basic social solidarities” (Giroux, 2008, p. 112). This makes accessing services more difficult for those who need them and more profitable for those who own them, prioritizing the accumulation of wealth by a small minority of people over the attainment of social justice for the majority (Giroux, 2008; Harvey, 2007; Lipman, 2011b). Differences are exploited under neoliberalism, particularly race (Lipman, 2011b; Watkins, 2012). These divisions are used to fuel competitiveness and individualism. Under neoliberalism, “citizenship became consumerism” (Gulson, 2009, p. 151). This prevailing ideology has taught us that we must individually make passive selections out of predetermined choices rather than collectively engaging in democratic society (Giroux, 2008; Harvey, 2007; Watkins, 2012).

Once examined through the lens of neoliberalism, the segregation of urban spaces and schools follows a disturbing logic. When middle-class whites fled nonwhite urban areas after World War II, American cities experienced profound disinvestment. Now middle-class whites are being lured back to the city with a return of capital resources (Lipman, 2011b; Pedroni, 2011). Neoliberal policies encourage this seemingly paradoxical logic of creative destruction, which is “the *destruction* of extant institutional arrangements and political compromises through market-oriented reform initiatives; and the *creation* of a new infrastructure for market-oriented economic growth, commodification, and the rule of capital” (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 362). Also termed rollback and rollout, the strategic withholding and return of capital makes the cycle of decline and repair more profitable than ongoing maintenance (Lipman, 2011b).

Race and white supremacy play an important part in this rollback and rollout. As investors and policy makers strive to bring whites back to cities, they use “branding initiatives [that] work to supplant the present dominant racially-coded narrative of black, chaotic, crime-ridden industrial hulk with a vision of the metropolitan region as a gleaming, dynamic, hip (and discursively white) global hub of emergent mobility technology” (Pedroni, 2011, p. 204). In this neoliberal version of reality, coded language is used to express these racialized and colonial concepts: terms like blight, abandonment, and dilapidation describe areas of disinvestment while terms like improvement, reform and salvation signify a return of investment (Lipman, 2011a). The result is that cities are prepared and packaged by and for investors rather than citizens (Pedroni, 2011).

The logic and language of urban reform is remarkably similar to that of educational reform; what unites them is the underpinning of neoliberal ideals (Pedroni, 2011). Urban areas were cast as dangerous, and public housing was leveled across the country, paving the way for profitable revitalization and investment. Similarly, accountability models have been used to deem public schools as failing, justifying increased privatization and competition in education (Gulson, 2009). The privatization of schools and cities do not occur separately, however. They are mutually reinforcing phenomena. Schools “play a vital role in maintaining or relinquishing one’s stake in the city, which is why they are central to both the fostering of and resistance to neoliberal urbanism” (Pedroni, 2011, p. 213). Schools are historically some of the stronger black institutions in cities; as they are labeled as failing and closed, this black space is destroyed while free market school choice opens up white space in urban areas (Pedroni, 2011).

Though there was optimism that the election of Barack Obama would bring the focus to issues of equality in education, once in office he instituted Race to the Top, a set of policies that

further entrenched neoliberal education reforms with a disproportionate negative impact on urban schools. Specifically, Race to the Top provided for the use of externally controlled data systems, the consideration of test scores in teacher evaluations, interventions for schools with low test scores, and the expansion of charter schools (Lipman, 2015). Each of these characteristics increased centralized accountability and decreased democratic control (Lipman, 2011b, p. 4). While accountability is necessary to ensure equity in schools, it should center around meaningful performance assessments rather than standardized exams (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2014). Standardized testing emphasizes individual metrics for success and distracts from collective issues of inequality in education. Instead of contesting the whole system, families fight for their children to get ahead (Hagopian, 2014; Kumashiro, 2012).

The threats to public schools and urban environments are interwoven under neoliberalism (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Watkins, 2012). For communities to contest these conditions, “we need a fundamental rejection of neoliberal policies and of the capitalist system and its grounding in racial oppression in the United States and a new social vision seeded, in part, by an education movement in the making” (Lipman, 2011b, p. 168). Educational institutions, as critical sites for neoliberal urban takeover, also possess unique democratic potential should educators and families work together to challenge the ways in which privatization is shaping their cities and schools.

School Choice and Urban Segregation

There are many socially and politically acceptable ways that parents’ choices contribute to the segregation of schools (López & Burciaga, 2014). The neoliberal ideologies of individualism and competition have seeped into educational arenas. Rather than functioning as a

collective enterprise, education has become “a private good, an investment one makes in one’s child or oneself to ‘add value’ to better compete in the labor market, not a social good for the development of individuals and society as a whole” (Lipman, 2011b, p. 14-15). This means that the responsibility for success has moved from a societal issue to one that parents, students, and teachers seemingly must shoulder alone (Gulson, 2009; Lipman, 2011a; Lipman, 2011b).

School choice is often framed as a way to provide high quality educational options to all students, but it typically functions to segregate students along lines of race and class. Many middle-class parents embrace the market-based approach of school selection, which puts families in competition with one another (Cucchiara, 2013; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Horvat & Baugh, 2015). While advocates of school choice argue that these policies increase accountability and give all families more options to find schools that are the best fit for particular students, less advantaged families often do not have all of the information they need to make these decisions (Cucchiara, Gold, & Simon, 2011; Horvat & Baugh, 2015; Saporito, 2003). Rather than functioning to extend options to less privileged students, school choice policies are most often used by privileged students to avoid schools with negative reputations (Kimmelberg & Billingham, 2012).

The ways that parents select schools tend to reinforce racial and economic segregation. Middle-class families generally spend a lot of time deciding where they should send their children to school (Cucchiara, 2013; Kimmelberg, 2014). Parents do not use rational criteria of school quality to make these decisions, but instead tend to base their school selection on emotion, snap judgments, and perceptions (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2015; Posey, 2012). Parents cite anxiety as a strong motivator in their decision making process (Cucchiara, 2013). Word of mouth is a much more powerful source of information than concrete research, resulting in the

tendency of middle-class parents who identify as supporters of public education to cluster together in a small pool of urban schools with strong reputations (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2015; Kimelberg, 2014; Posey, 2012). Though race and class are significant factors in the school choice process, they are often unstated or coded-language is used (Cucchiara, 2013; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012). White parents often cited concerns that their children would not fit in or would feel isolated in more diverse schools (Kimelberg, 2014; Posey, 2012). Middle-class parents also discussed the perceived safety of white middle-class schools as more desirable (Cucchiara, 2013).

School segregation amplifies the racial and economic divisions present in urban spaces. Schools are more segregated by race than their surrounding neighborhoods, with fewer white students in public schools than in the neighborhoods they serve (Saporito & Sohoni, 2006). White families avoid schools with higher percentages of non-white students even when controlling for other factors such as poverty, test scores, and safety (Saporito, 2003). Saporito (2009) found that while Asian, black, and Hispanic student enrollment in private schools does not vary depending on their community's racial composition, there is a positive correlation for white students between the percentage of children in their communities who are black and those who attend private schools. In other words, white families are more likely to send their children to private schools when there are more black families in their neighborhoods. Segregation is even more pronounced between white and Hispanic students than it is between white and black students (Saporito & Sohoni, 2006). Saporito concludes that "race, or factors strongly correlated with race, continues to have a significant influence on the choice of school for white parents" (2009, p. 189). Class also plays a significant role in school segregation, with poverty more

concentrated in public schools than in their surrounding areas because middle-class families tend to avoid schools with higher poverty rates (Saporito, 2003; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007).

School choice has made more options available to middle-class families, which has allowed families to self-segregate in public schools (Saporito & Lareau, 1999; Saporito & Sohoni, 2006). Because “private, magnet, and charter schools contribute to overall racial segregation within most school districts... public schools would be less racially segregated if all children living in a school district attended their local, neighborhood schools” (Sohoni & Saporito, 2009, p. 569). While residential segregation is prevalent in our society, the ways that families select schools under choice models actually exacerbates the problem (Saporito & Lareau, 1999; Saporito & Sohoni, 2006).

School Gentrification

Not all middle-class and white families are opting out of urban public schools, however. Middle-class families are attracted to renewal projects in cities, and with their arrival they outcompete long-time residents (Watkins, 2012). This is gentrification, or “the appropriation of working-class and low income neighborhoods and their ‘revitalization’ for a new middle-class clientele” (Lipman, 2011b, p. 32). With more middle-class families living in cities, an increasing number of parents are also choosing urban public schools for their children. This trend is often seen as being beneficial to public schools because these urban middle-class parents tend get involved in schools and provide resources. Still, their engagement is often individualistic and not always good for all students (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Posey, 2012; Posey-Maddox, 2013). School gentrification occurs when an increased number of middle-class families move to lower income schools and displace or marginalize working-class

students and families as they make changes to the school infrastructure and culture (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014).

Though middle-class parents' involvement in urban public schools is often motivated by good intentions, the impact is often not beneficial for all students. These parents choose to send their children to urban public schools because of a passionate ideological commitment to neighborhood public schools and identifying with an urban lifestyle (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2015; Kimelberg, 2014; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Posey, 2012; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014). Even so, "efforts to increase community support for their local school ended up attracting those of similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds... ultimately threatening the diversity of [the] student population that many parents cited as an important school asset" (Posey, 2012, p. 30). Good intentions are not enough: middle-class parents interested in supporting neighborhood schools need to be aware of the ways in which their privileged actions play out in diverse settings and the fact that they inadvertently erect barriers for lower income families.

There are many ways that the involvement of newly resettled middle-class parents can have detrimental effects on the established communities in urban public schools. Though they do often provide resources to schools, the middle-class newcomers do not always distribute the resources within the school in an equitable manner. The improvements they tend to make to schools also inspire greater competition to enroll and therefore can function to worsen exclusion and segregation. Additionally, the ways in which middle-class parents tend to get involved can be alienating to lower income families (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Posey, 2012; Posey-Maddox, 2013; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014).

Cultural Assumptions and Deficit Thinking

Parental relationships with schools are defined culturally, with privileged parents being more recognized and other families frequently being blamed for not fitting within white, middle-class, and English-speaking standards. The contributions of white and middle-class families tend to be more valued by educators, which undermines the many ways that parents from diverse backgrounds can engage and participate in their child's education (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Fernández, 2016; Horvat & Baugh, 2015; Lareau, 2015; Posey, 2012; Lareau & Munoz, 2012). Middle-class involvement, which tends to be defined by volunteerism, often takes on more of a professional quality and as a result gets more visibility and is more valued than other forms of parental engagement (Posey-Maddox, 2013). These particular skills reflect greater social capital and can bring special status to middle-class parents in schools (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). The involvement of middle-class parents is largely seen as satisfactory while there is more of a deficit mindset regarding the perceived lack of engagement and participation of working-class and poor parents. Deficit thinking alienates parents and discourages participation in schools (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Horvat & Baugh, 2015; Lareau & Munoz, 2012).

Validating the many ways parents engage in their students' education at home and welcoming more expansive definitions of parental participation in the school would include more families. Many educators blame student and family shortcomings for difficulties in school, a practice that alienates parents and limits their involvement (Auerbach, 2010). Educators need to move away from deficit thinking and instead cultivate an asset-sharing mindset, where they “recognize the value of what parents bring to children's home and community environment as well as to the school” (Auerbach, 2010, p. 750). Deficit-based thinking needs to be replaced with an asset-sharing approach because focusing on student and parent strengths encourages

more families to contribute and collaborate. Shared leadership is not possible while deficit views persist, so these ingrained attitudes need to be challenged for meaningful parental participation to take place (Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010).

Definitions of appropriate parental behaviors in schools vary by culture. Some Latino parents report that they think it is their duty to support students at home rather than be directly involved in the school, and yet teachers and school leaders often assume the worst when they do not see parents on site (Auerbach, 2011). Huntsinger and Jose (2009) found that “European American” parents were more likely to volunteer at school while Chinese American parents tended to systematically support academics at home. Educators need to be aware that “black and Latino parents become involved in their children’s schooling but may do so in ways that are not detected or appreciated by school administrators and teachers” (Park & Holloway, 2013, p. 116). Further exacerbating these negative attitudes, educators often underestimate parental participation, not recognizing or remembering interactions with nonwhite parents who have attended specific events (Bennett-Conroy, 2012).

Language differences are often a root cause for a lack of parental participation in schools (Flores, 2016; Lopez & Lopez, 2009). Park and Holloway (2013) found that even when controlling for economic status, Spanish-speaking parents reported the lowest levels of participation in school. Non-English speaking families have difficulty participating in educational environments where English is the dominant language. Lee’s 2005 study of family participation in a Korean-English two-way immersion program revealed that Korean parents felt alienated by meetings that were primarily held in English. Even when translators were present, subtle culturally specific social interactional rules left Korean families feeling like outsiders in an educational program that had been originally founded by Korean parents. As a result, the non-

Korean parents assumed that weak participation from Korean parents reflected a lack of participation in student's lives. Non-Korean parents felt burdened by the imbalance in parent participation and blamed Korean parents when language and cultural differences were responsible.

School leaders need sensitivity to overarching cultural and linguistic differences while also making room for individual approaches, a pair of practices that will allow them to avoid stereotypes that only exacerbate misunderstandings (Park & Holloway, 2013). Rather than relying on a limited middle-class definition of parental involvement, schools need to validate, encourage, and support diverse forms of parental participation in schools.

Democratic Parental Participation in Schools

Subscribing to one definition of parental involvement in schools limits participation from many families. To serve diverse communities, schools need to value and welcome the contributions of all families. One way to provide for this is through the democratic organization of schools (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014). Democratic schools require a positive school culture, where teachers, students, and parents have meaningful relationships and participate in collaborative decision making (Khalil & Brown, 2015; Lumpkin, Claxton, & Wilson, 2014; Milanowski et al., 2009; Range, Duncan, & Hvidston, 2013).

Parents are more likely to participate in the school when they have meaningful relationships with each other and with educators. These relationships can provide opportunities to reflect on individual experiences and learn about cultural differences (Michael, 2015; Singleton, 2014). White educators and parents have particular responsibility to critically engage with their privilege and power in schools and society (Casey, 2016; White, 2012). Small-scale, personalized outreach has the potential to be much more responsive to parent needs and can

foster the unmasking of more parental voices in the school (Auerbach, 2011; Posey-Maddox, 2013). Parents also feel more positively about participation when school employees take the time to get to know their students as individuals (Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008). In general, “constant and vigilant efforts to build relationships across the fault lines of race and class are key” (Posey-Maddox, 2013, p. 256). By developing a more nuanced understanding of the communities and families they serve, school leaders can encourage inclusive participation.

When schools are structured so that leadership is shared amongst various stakeholders, families are more interested in participating (O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). The most positive attitudes regarding parental participation were found in schools with partnership governance, where teachers and parents are involved in transparent and cooperative decision-making (Addi-Racah & Ainhoren, 2009). Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2011) argue that students benefit when school leaders use their power to foster more inclusive participation in parent organizations. Horvat, Curci, and Partlow (2010) examined three administrations during a 30-year period at an elementary school, and even though the external conditions and internal school culture varied greatly under these separate leaders and throughout this lengthy period, the benefits of structured and meaningful parental participation persisted over time. The key to success is “bringing parents to the table in a true spirit of partnership to learn and work together for the mutual benefit of schools, families, and communities” (Auerbach, 2011, p. 21).

There are many other factors that contribute to whether or not families feel welcome to participate in school. Communication, organization, and responsiveness to feedback all have a significant impact. While technology can facilitate communication amongst educators and parents, it is important to be sensitive to issues of access when using these strategies to connect schools and families (DiNatale, 2002; Lewin & Luckin, 2010). When using technology such as

email, texting, and social media to communicate with parents, connectivity and hardware are prerequisites for participation. Even when families have access, varying levels of comfort with each method can often reward more professional and assertive parents (Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Lewis & Luckin, 2010; Ozcinar & Ekizoglu, 2013; Thompson, 2008; Villano, 2008).

Technology offers methods, but not guarantees. The types of interactions between home and school are more important than the ways in which they are transmitted.

Parents need to feel welcomed and valued by the school if they are going to be interested in participation. Volunteer opportunities need to be carefully planned to make sure they are constructive experiences for parents. DiNatale (2002) explains that parents need advance notice regarding volunteer opportunities so they can plan and take time off of work or other commitments. Once they arrive, parents need to feel welcomed and that they are part of the school community. All volunteer opportunities should reflect parents' interests and talents by using survey data to match volunteers with specific tasks (DiNatale, 2002).

Parents feel more positively about their participation when they are included in the planning process and asked to provide feedback (Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008; DiNatale, 2002). Parents can offer specific ideas that make them feel more welcome, and therefore, more likely to participate. Auerbach (2011) reports that Latino families preferred separate Spanish-language meetings rather than being singled out by having to wear a translation headset at an English language event. Educators can only employ such ideas when they ask parents of their preferences. Active listening should be used to develop more meaningful relationships with parents (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010).

While it is important to make sure all families feel included, welcomed, and valued, participation should not be limited to one-way communication and volunteering. Instead,

democratic parental participation requires leaders to engage parents in the everyday functioning of the school (Mullen, 2010). Democratic leadership is a process; it requires commitment to foster meaningful, reciprocal relationships and shared decision making, both of which contribute to building parental participation in schools (Auerbach, 2011; Brown, 2010; Waite, 2010). Democratic educational leaders need concrete practice with these skills, one of which is facilitating collaborative inquiry and problem solving (Brown, 2010; Glanz, 2005).

Participatory Action Research

PAR is often used in educational settings to facilitate democratic participation in ongoing improvement. PAR is a radical research method with foundations in movements for social justice (Dawson & Sinwell, 2012; Zaal & Terry, 2013). Fundamentally anti-capitalist, PAR has been influenced and embraced by critical theorists, feminists, Marxists, and democratic thinkers (Jordan, 2008; Sanchez, 2009; Torre, 2009). In providing a framework for activist research, PAR is a model that includes the oppressed in challenging issues of power (DeMeulenaere & Cann, 2013; Glassman & Erdem 2014).

PAR is a research method that strives to disrupt traditional power dynamics. Much of the legacy of PAR can be traced to anticolonial movements in the Global South (Glassman & Erdem 2014; Jordan, 2008). Orlando Fals Borda was one of the early thinkers to outline PAR in Latin America, while PAR was also connected with Mahatma Gandhi in India (Fals Borda, 2013; Glassman & Erdem, 2014). Paulo Freire helped to popularize the idea in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In it, Freire writes that traditional education employs a banking model, where knowledge is simply deposited by a teacher into a student (Freire, 2000; Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Zaal & Terry, 2013). In contrast, “in problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world... they come to see the world not as a

static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 2000, p. 83). Freire speaks to the agency, knowledge, and expertise in all students who must work in dialogue with teachers. Dialogue, “founding itself upon love, humility, and faith... becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence” (Freire, 2000, p. 91). This is the philosophical basis for PAR, where researchers and participants work together as a collaborative team who share in the construction of a research agenda, process, and analysis.

PAR strives to break down barriers. Many PAR advocates believe that traditional research is a form of cultural imperialism because a privileged few are granted power to conduct research on others (Fine, 2013; Jordan, 2008). The distinction between the ostensibly objective researcher and those being researched has been challenged by PAR with a call for more democratic participation and appreciation of individual subjective experience (Fals Borda, 2013; Fine, 2013; Glassman & Erdem, 2014). Rather than conducting research on their participants, participatory action researchers work with them to make changes collectively, breaking down the distinctions between researchers and researched as well as the research-activism dichotomy (Fals Borda, 2013; Fine, 2013; Guishard, 2009; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; McIntyre, 2006; Sanchez, 2009; Smith, Rosenzweig, & Schmidt, 2010; Torre & Ayala, 2009).

In the rejection of hierarchical dualisms, PAR opens up space for more authentic dialogue and shared expertise. Academic researchers offer their frameworks and experience in collaboration with the more local knowledges of participants, expanding the possibilities for what it means to be an expert (Fals Borda, 2013; Fine, 2013; Torre, 2009). Participants offer expertise from the bottom up, offering valuable insight and allowing PAR teams to construct knowledge together (Fine & Torre, 2006; Glassman & Erdem 2014; Guishard, 2009; McIntyre, 2006). PAR strives to facilitate authentic research, where “one aims at shortening the distance

between superior and subaltern, between oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited. Furthermore, different types of knowledge are combined or enter into dialogue, for instance, academic erudition and popular knowledge” (Fals Borda, 2013, p. 160).

Unlike traditional research that reports on merely observed phenomena, participating in social change is a core value of PAR. The dialogue central to PAR helps to build a foundation for collaborative action (Fals Borda, 2013; Fine, 2013). Action should be guided by theory and principles, all of which need to be considered within a broader historical context (Fals Borda, 2013; Zaal & Terry, 2013). PAR projects should involve insiders in critically challenging the status quo rather than centering on outsiders offering help or technical improvements to existing programs (Kemmis, 2006; McIntyre, 2006; Smith, Rosenzweig, & Schmidt, 2010; Sanchez, 2009). Even as they are engaged in a collaborative project, individual members of PAR teams bring multiple identities, agendas, and privileges to the table (Torre, 2009; Torre & Ayala, 2009). PAR, as with any other research method, is not a silver bullet but can itself reinforce oppression when individual roles and group dynamics are not interrogated (Guishard, 2009).

Though PAR is a radical method, the label is often used incorrectly. PAR has frequently been confused and misused by many who do not subscribe to its more radical roots (Jordan, 2008). Action research, though it has some similarities to PAR, has actually developed as a separate school of thought (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). Whereas action research maintains more of a distinction between the researchers and those being studied and tends to be used to improve professional practice, PAR thinkers have pushed this further to question the binary and implement radical change (Jordan, 2008). Supporters worry that with entities like the UN and the World Bank inappropriately claiming to use PAR, it is being coopted and depoliticized

(Dawson & Sinwell, 2012; Fals Borda, 2013; Giushard, 2009; Jordan, 2008; Kemmis, 2006; Torre, 2009).

Strong defenses of PAR's radical roots can be found in Feminist and Youth PAR. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* has been an influential work in the maintenance of PAR as a radical research method. This book focused on unpacking the concept of borderlands, where individuals exist between worlds (1999). Anzaldúa argues that individuals carry multiple identities and exist within complex social realities. PAR gives voice to individuals and provides a process for making meaningful collaborative change in communities.

One such example can be seen in the work that Michelle Fine and her colleagues have done with PAR in women's prisons. Exemplifying Feminist PAR, Fine and her colleagues recruited prisoners to work as full collaborative partners throughout the research process. As valued collaborators, the women prisoners shared and learned things that could not be discovered without them, but as a result they also experienced a vulnerability that the academics could only imagine. This exemplifies Feminist PAR's dual purposes as both working for social justice in the real world and also challenging academic methods of inquiry (Fine, 2013; Fine & Torre, 2006).

Youth PAR is another application where this tradition is being pushed to maintain its radical origins (Galleta and Jones, 2010; Glassman & Erdem, 2014; McIntyre, 2006). Rather than serve as mere informants, Youth PAR centers on the belief that young people should be active members of a research team helping to direct the process (Galleta and Jones, 2010; Zaal & Terry, 2013). Youth PAR is often creative as it strives to find different modes of expression to engage its younger participants (Galleta and Jones, 2010; McIntyre, 2006). In studying the ways youth experience violence, or the transnational identities for Latina youths, or the ways in which

privileged students can interrupt power dynamics, Youth PAR has been employed in a wide range of areas that allow young people to take control of situations that would typically be handled by adults (McIntyre, 2000; McIntyre, 2006; Sanchez, 2009; Stoudt, 2008).

PAR is a model for ongoing, collective learning and improvement that has often been used in educational settings. PAR breaks down traditional distinctions and engages the community in knowledge production and collaborative problem solving, serving as a useful model for increasing democratic parental participation in schools.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the ways in which neoliberal privatization of cities and schools has contributed to gentrification and segregation. Given these power dynamics, schools need to be organized democratically so that diverse communities can unite to fight for better conditions together, though all too often the involvement of middle-class parents threatens to deepen segregation and inequality. PAR is one method where parents and educators can challenge both neoliberal policies and school gentrification through collaborative inquiry and democratic school improvement. The next chapter will build upon this foundation to outline the particular process used in this study.

CHAPTER 3: Method

“We all have to row the same way for the boat to keep moving along”

We can all learn more and have a greater impact when we work together. As my friend and collaborator Julia said to me, “we all have to row the same way for the boat to keep moving along. Once somebody starts going backwards we aren’t going to get anywhere.” As a Patriot alumna and parent, Julia wanted to work with other families to provide a positive educational environment for all students. She said, “Thinking back, this is how my experience with school was, you want to make it a better place.” Her participation in the improvement of her community represents a valid and important form of knowledge production that can provide useful lessons for other families in other schools.

This chapter begins with an overview of how we used Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a framework for this project. PAR is a radical research method that strives to break down the traditional distinctions between researchers and participants as well as research and action (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014). PAR should address concrete problems within a broader social context, critically examine practice, and inform collective action through democratic research (Kemmis, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). The remainder of the chapter will then tell the story of our collaborative work.

The Complexities of PAR

PAR encompasses a wide-ranging style of research that has powerful potential to bring people together for positive social change. It is a useful term, but such academic language also has the potential to be alienating and even confining if thought of as a strict set of rules rather than as a philosophical commitment to inclusion. PAR is flexible method and must be redesigned and renegotiated with each group of collaborators (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005;

Smith, Rosenzweig, & Schmidt, 2010). Remaining true to the collaborative and action-oriented spirit of PAR is more important than strict allegiance to a predetermined plan or specific strategy.

This PAR project both functioned as a catalyst for important PTA work and reflected efforts that were already underway. Freire argues that “the starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people” (2000, p. 95). PTA leaders had long been interested in making the PTA a more welcoming and inclusive organization for all parents so that it could better serve students and the school. Rosa, Julia, and I were teammates who brought different experiences and skills toward tackling this shared goal. While we formed a small core group focused on this project, as with any PTA task, we communicated with the larger organization to share our progress and get their input. Still, because one of the purposes of the project was to push the boundaries of leadership and participation, we did not limit our focus and or methods to the established practices of that group.

In many ways, this project was defined by its many intersecting and divergent social and scholarly purposes. Expanding the identity, scope, and impact of the PTA would be impossible for one person, but I alone was the instigator of the overlapping scholarly work (Guishard, 2009). I initiated the formal research as individual exploration, but because my questions were rooted in authentic social questions, my investigation depended upon the cooperation of my collaborators (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). Still, it is important to allow collaborators to determine the limits of their participation (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). I understood that I had to respect the boundaries of others concerning how much time they were willing to give. I was ultimately

responsible for producing the academic report, so I needed to provide structure, continuity, and opportunities for feedback within our necessarily collaborative work.

Though the spirit of this project required authentic collaboration, there were parts of the study that I completed alone. Smith, Rosenzweig, and Schmidt (2010) argue that the best PAR reports demonstrate planning in advance that makes the critical aspects of the project clear, while also being explicit about the specific roles of various participants. I conducted interviews with many parents, teachers, and community members to capture the rich backstories, perceptions, and reflections of various players, but I felt that it was not reasonable to expect my busy PTA colleagues to commit to such an undertaking. Similarly, we analyzed our collaborative research together, and I used this as a foundation for further analysis on my own. Throughout the study, I had to balance the need to produce useful and timely information for the PTA while also striving to create an enduring document with academic legitimacy.

These dual purposes also raised the issue of multiple audiences. Due to the nature of the research, there is information in this dissertation that serves the very specific community of Patriot Elementary School at this particular moment in time. While some of these ideas might not seem like noteworthy contributions from a strictly academic standpoint, they are significant to this study in that they represent the efforts of a diverse community to find ways to work together and reflect on our practices. It is not necessarily the specific mechanics of participation offered in this report that contribute to the more general discussion about how communities and schools interact but rather the active efforts to foster more democratic parental participation for all families that have significance for other communities. In other words, while some of these ideas might not be revolutionary, the fact that we used them together is what makes this project powerful.

PAR is a cyclical process that can be imagined as a “spiral of self-reflective cycles of the following: planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of a change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, replanning, acting and observing again, reflecting again, and so on...” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563). I have attempted to distill the various roles and partnerships in this multifaceted story into a coherent narrative that makes both the process and lessons useful to multiple audiences.

Positionality

To be an effective researcher, particularly on a collaborative project, it is critical to reflect on positionality. It is important to engage in “self-reflection by the researcher regarding assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation” (Merriam, 2014, p. 229). In PAR we must interrogate “ourselves and the circumstances in which we find ourselves – looking ‘inside’ ourselves and ‘outside’ towards the conditions that shape how we think, what we do, and how we related to others and the world” (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014, p. 7).

The various layered lenses I wear as an insider and outsider doubtlessly accentuate some phenomena and miss others altogether. As a future parent representing the gentrifying forces at work in this neighborhood elementary school, I am an outsider with investment in the future. I am a white, middle-class, English-only speaking woman interested in working with the majority Latino school population. As a leader in the organization with a commitment to social justice, I am a critical insider engaged in the everyday work of the PTA. My background as an educator in an under-resourced urban school allows me to appreciate the profound commitment of the teachers and families who have already worked so hard to make this school great.

Ultimately, my roles in society as a white woman, mother, and graduate student ascribed certain power, privileges, limitations, and blind spots. I am sensitive to the fact that “power relations between professional researchers and participants are not necessarily equalized or erased through the mere act of participation” (Jordan, 2008, p. 603). With the many roles we all play and the different identities we embody, it is virtually impossible to have truly non-hierarchical relationships (Galletta & Jones, 2010; Guishard, 2009). Though my own experiences are an asset in some areas and a hindrance in others, “knowledge production from all positions is valid as long as one is honest and reflective about the limitations of one’s multiple positionalities and takes them into account methodologically” (Herr & Anderson, 2014, location 3585).

I love this PTA and the people I have worked with in it for years. I cannot tell a story that does not reflect that simple truth. Nonetheless, there are issues on which my beliefs might diverge from my friends and collaborators. I believe that “at the local level, it is nearly impossible to protect the identity of either the case or the people involved” (Merriam, 2014, p. 233). Ultimately, because it is difficult to mask defining characteristics for readers who are familiar with the research setting, I hold myself accountable to all of the people who worked with me (Fine, 2013). I have written a story that I will proudly share with friends and collaborators: these are real people, at a real school, right down the street. I also hope to accurately represent the areas where we have struggled as a group. When in question, I erred on the side of protecting their privacy while still doing our story justice. We are all working hard, and it is my responsibility to share our successes and difficulties so that we may continue to improve.

Researcher, Collaborator, and Participant Voices

This project strives to convey and honor a story experienced, shaped, and told by the voices of many collaborators and participants while also creating a coherent narrative with widely applicable lessons. Due to the shared ownership of PAR studies, researchers must grapple with the messiness of multiple democratic voices and feminist quandaries (Fine & Torre, 2006). To honor all the varied contributions and experiences of participants and collaborators, complexity, nuance, and contradiction are to be embraced over the traditional goals of clarity and simplicity (Fine, 2013; Guishard, 2009). It was critical to the success of this study that I included voices other than my own and that collaborators bring their individual identities to the table (Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Smith, Rosenzweig, & Schmidt, 2010; Torre, 2009; Torre & Ayala, 2009). The result is a weaving and blending of my voice with others through participant observation, interviews, survey responses, and group discussion. As the primary researcher but also a collaborator and friend, my own voice has multiple dimensions and differing tones throughout the work. My perspective has disproportionate influence as I am the ultimate filter for what ends up on the page. Even so, I have tried to represent our specific context and the perceptions of unique participants (Fals Borda, 2013). Providing the reader with access to many voices means that “the person who reads the study decides whether the findings can apply to his or her particular situation” (Merriam, 2014, p. 226).

With considerations of voice we must also examine the role of language. PAR researchers need to recognize the “fundamental role of language within the research and action process” (Fals Borda, 2013, p. 160). Language is a means through which privilege is reproduced, so my collaborators and I had to make sure that language was not a barrier to participation for parents. (Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Stoudt, 2008). Julia and Rosa are both

bilingual, and I simply could not have communicated with the many Spanish speaking parents who participated in the study had I been working on my own. At the same time, I am sensitive to the fact that the skills they possess could be a burden on them, and I tried to not take advantage of their generosity with their time.

Participant Observation and Journaling

Due to the participatory nature of action research, “action researchers are proposing to document what can seem like a moving train where they are both passengers as well as part of the train crew” (Herr & Anderson, 2014, location 2108). I developed a system for taking field notes and journaling to capture my experiences as one of the players in this complex story.

Field notes were difficult to keep up with but an important source of observations. While observation always requires the researcher to take in information through their own lens, the more engaged and invested nature of “doing participant-observation accentuates the role of the researcher as the research instrument” (Yin, 2011, location 3473). As a busy mother and graduate student, I had to think creatively to make sure I wrote field notes in a timely manner following meetings, events, and salient interactions. I adapted a system in which I took notes on my phone during events, audio-recorded reflections on the way home, and compiled and elaborated on this information when I could get to a computer during the next possible break in my duties as a stay-at-home mom, usually during nap time.

Journaling also provided a fruitful venue for reflecting on my experiences and questioning my own biases (Guishard, 2009; McIntyre, 2000). A fieldwork journal is “an introspective record of the anthropologist’s experience in the field. It includes his or her ideas, fears, mistakes, confusion, and reactions to the experience and can include thoughts about the research methodology itself” (Merriam, 2014, p. 136). Though I doubtlessly focused on issues

that interested me to the exclusion of others, my journal was one of many rich sources for information throughout the project. I also found it impossible to be as honest, open, sharp, and outgoing as I wanted to be in the moment. Journaling allowed me to capture my delayed reactions and reflect on developing themes.

Individual Interviews

I started the project by interviewing Rosa and Julia because they were straddling a critical border between the PTA and the rest of the school. Together, we got to know more about all the families who call Patriot home. Though the heart of this project was the work I did with them to learn about what all parents in the school wanted for their children and the work they were willing to do to make it happen, I also circled back and talked to more established PTA leaders to provide context for this collaborative research. In total, there were 22 interviews for this project.

In both applications, the more intimate setting of an interview provided opportunities for dialogue, one-on-one reflection, and ongoing problem-solving. In semi-structured interviews, “the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time” (Merriam, 2014, p. 90). I used this evolving list of questions to collect backstories, recruit collaborators, and ask questions that helped me think through issues with others invested in the school and community (Appendix A). A semi-structured “format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2014, p. 90).

While I learned volumes during these conversations, there were still many people whom I did not get to interview. It was much easier to connect with people who look like and live like me. There were many times that scheduling conflicts or sick kids got in the way of lining up

interviews. In particular, I regret that I did not interview any African American parents or veteran teachers, as both groups would have added valuable perspective to the study.

Survey and Group Interviews

Julia, Rosa, and I wrote and conducted the survey and group interviews together (Galletta & Jones, 2010; McIntyre, 2000; McIntyre, 2006). At Julia's urging, we brainstormed potential questions with other PTA Board members and crafted the final product using their feedback. To make the survey accessible to as many people as possible, we offered it in English (Appendix B) and Spanish (Appendix C) and distributed it in person at multiple events and online through multiple means. Similarly, we planned the group interviews for a convenient time and family friendly location. We also offered two sessions, one in English and one in Spanish (Stoudt, 2008). While we reached a larger and more diverse group of parents with the surveys than we ever could have with just individual interviews, the information collected was not as in-depth. The group interviews helped mitigate this as they allowed us to write questions where we could reflect and process the survey findings in a group of thoughtful and interested parents (Appendix D). It is difficult to reach people who have different experiences than your own, and while we made every effort to do so in this project, there are always more parents to talk to and more perspectives to consider.

Analysis

Analysis within the study was cyclical and ongoing, allowing collaborative reflections with participants to inform the next steps. Ongoing or interim analysis is "an informal process of ongoing data analysis and reflective planning, which [involves] looking at and thinking about data as it is collected and then making changes or additions to strategies" (Hendricks, 2013, p. 138). Collaborative analysis is when knowledge is "recreated in the hands of the many who are

making meaning of the data for multiple purposes” (Herr & Anderson, 2014, location 2942). Ongoing collaborative analysis allows for research teams to hone in on themes and make adjustment to their cooperative process as needed.

There were many opportunities for collaborative analysis during the project. Julia, Rosa and I analyzed our surveys and group interviews together so we could present our findings at the PTA Board Retreat (Torre, 2009). This analysis was relatively casual due to time constraints, but it allowed us to reflect and process together in meaningful ways as we created a presentation to share with the group (Appendix E). The presentation also gave other participants an opportunity to give us feedback both at that meeting and in subsequent individual interviews. Principal Johnson, who could not be at the retreat, previewed our presentation and provided written feedback so that her input would be included in our conversation. Formal interview questions were also continually fine-tuned to allow for collaborative analysis of emerging themes within those conversations. Ultimately, transparency and reciprocity with participants and collaborators were important throughout the project and will continue to be vital as the written report is completed and shared.

Throughout the study, analysis began with a wide lens and narrowed into more specific categories as we progressed. As Rosa, Julia and I first discussed the surveys, we used open coding, which is to “be as expansive as you want in identifying any segment of data that might be useful” (Merriam, 2014, p. 178). Eventually, I used the list of themes that the three of us had developed in our initial analysis to move toward analytic coding. This shift from open coding to analytic coding marks a change from inductive to deductive thinking because eventually “you are very much operating from a deductive stance in that you are looking for more evidence in support of your final set of categories” (Merriam, 2014, p. 183). When I transcribed and coded

the individual interviews I had conducted without Julia and Rosa, I used analytic coding to plug that information into the thematic framework we had developed as a team.

Collaborative Research Process

Recruiting Collaborators

I began this project with the simple goal of listening to other people. I hoped that if I got to know them better, we might be able to work together. As I set out to schedule my first interviews, I asked myself who I thought could help the PTA progress toward a more inclusive and participatory future and immediately thought of Rosa and Julia. I first met them on a rainy Saturday morning at Patriot, where the PTA was hosting a Room Parents meeting so teachers and families could brainstorm ways they could collaborate in the classroom. As the adults talked and snacked on a potluck breakfast, kids played together, stacking cups into intricate towers in the back of the gym. Julia and Rosa approached me after the meeting to ask who they should talk to about planning a Tamale Cook Off as a fundraiser for the school. They were so excited about the event and so concerned that they not been able to connect with PTA leaders that I was immediately drawn to them. Though they struggled to feel supported by established PTA leaders as they did the hard work of planning this event, Julia and Rosa felt Tamale Cook Off was a huge success, bringing out new families who had never participated in the PTA before. It was Rosa and Julia's honesty and resolve that appealed to me; they knew what they wanted to do, they knew they had every right to do it, and they knew it could not be done alone. Selfishly, I thought the perfect anecdote to my frustrations with the PTA would be to interview them, and I knew they had a lot to teach us.

On the day I had scheduled my first interview with Rosa, I walked the few blocks across the neighborhood to her house. When I arrived, she was at the sink finishing dishes in her work

uniform. She admitted she was nervous about the interview, and I promised her it would be more of a casual conversation so she did not need to worry. We sat at the dining room table and talked while her kids played in the next room. When I described the project and asked Rosa if she wanted to work with me, she said,

I would love to, because I feel like, I love doing this. I've been so lost these past years because I've been a teen mom dedicated to my kids and everything in my world revolves around them so I have lost touch with the outside world and I've never really known what's my purpose, and I feel like this is a step in my path. Like this, helping, being involved in school with students, makes me feel satisfied and like a sense of purpose. She summarized, "I want to help, definitely. Just to make the school better for everybody, for the students." She reflected on her own children, "I definitely want them to have something special where they can remember and look back. I want to really make it special for them." Rosa is humble, and she is a doer. She said, "I always liked helping people." When she is hit with inspiration, which is often, she immediately starts making plans but refuses to take any credit. Julia and I have teased her many times about her superwoman status, but in fact we are in awe of her ability to accomplish so much and make it look easy.

Julia also invited me to her house for our first interview. I parked across the street on a cold winter morning and was relieved when she welcomed me into her warm, dark home. We sat on a couch in the living room, which was cozy and loud with birds in a cage punctuating our conversation with their chirps. She shared with me that she was motivated by her children: "I want to make sure that I contribute to their success instead of for them to feel all the strength, and for them to really feel like, 'okay, my mom cares and makes sure that I am going to succeed and she is going to help me succeed.'" Participation in the school was

important to her because “I want to know the environment that my daughter is learning in. And I want to make it better. Not just for her, but for other kids.” Julia shared a metaphor for the responsibility we have as a community to take action. She said, “if little rocks start to appear in the little flow, eventually it is going to stop flowing and what’s going to happen? I think that it is important for us to try to change what we can.” When I asked her if she wanted to join Rosa and me in working on this project, she said, “I do want to open up my circle, I want to know what’s going on, where can we help, what is it that we are failing to see.” She also generously offered that “anytime that you need someone to speak Spanish for you, call me.” There were so many times when the power of Julia’s words would stop my heart, such as when she said, “this house, this humble house, is your house.” She has a knack for expressing herself with a poet’s precision and impact.

After I left each of their houses, I spoke into the audio recorder on my phone and shared my reactions and reflections. In both cases I was grateful to have been invited into their homes and relieved that they wanted to work with me. As a naturally shy person, I have tried various tricks throughout my life to convince myself that I am actually friendly and outgoing, and using my dissertation was a great strategy to get over my own nervousness and to reach out to people I might not have otherwise gotten to know. What surprised me was that both wanted to talk about how they had not felt welcomed by some PTA leaders. They talked about how difficult it had been to get a response when they were asking for support in planning the Tamale Cook Off and how the attitudes of some people at PTA meetings had made them feel unwelcome. I confessed that at times I had felt the same way, though I realized that it was much harder for them to admit as new members. I was so glad they were comfortable sharing with me, but I was also

heartbroken that two wonderful people who were doing exactly what PTA leaders had claimed we wanted more parents to do were being made to feel unwanted.

Creating and Conducting the Survey

In the next few months, Rosa, Julia, and I took turns meeting at each other's houses to plan the survey. All three of us were stay-at-home moms, so we typically brought our kids with us to play while we talked. Coffee, snacks, and frequent interruptions by children marked our work sessions, improving on traditional playdates because they were purposeful and productive.

The idea for the survey came up in my interviews with Rosa and Julia. Both had talked about the disconnect between teachers and parents and between the PTA and the general community. They felt that we needed to learn more about the families in the school to bridge those divides. As another Latina mom suggested, the

PTA would have to make more things on a personal level, I guess you would have to go up to a group of families and just say 'hey, we are the PTA and we need you to be a part of this,' and then ask them about their family, their kids, and what their hopes and dreams are for their kids, and then make folks understand, "well, that's what we want for your kids also, and we could do this together if you would join PTA we could help guide you and give you the resources that you need.

A survey was a concrete tool we could use to approach new people, ask them about what they wanted for their children, and begin to establish a common purpose within the school. As Ms. Aguilar explained, "that's the only way to get better, really, is get more input, okay that was good, that was bad, how can we change it?"

Julia had the idea that we should get the PTA Board to help write the survey questions. We asked Jason to put it on the agenda for the next meeting, and in ten minutes, I had scribbled

pages of their ideas. The questions suggested by the board ranged from practical to idealistic. A few PTA leaders were concerned that the survey was too long or too ambitious with many open-ended questions, but most of us agreed that parents would take the time to respond thoughtfully when it came to matters concerning their children's education. After a round of feedback, the final survey was ready for distribution. Rosa translated the survey into Spanish, including a consent statement required for my dissertation. I felt guilty asking Rosa to deal with such technical language, but in her typical manner she did not bat an eye, which was all the more reason for me to not take advantage of her generosity.

The more Julia, Rosa, and I got together, the stranger it felt to journal about time with friends after they and their kids had left. I would get my kids their dinner or settle them down to watch *Curious George* so I could jot down my reflections about these developing relationships. We talked about our husbands, our kids, our parents. We shared our ambitions and laughed at our idiosyncrasies. During these many discussions, Julia and Rosa told me about the classes they were taking in the Padres Solidarios program, which was hosted at the church across the street from Patriot. Padres Solidarios was started by a teacher at a private school in the neighborhood who had recruited two Spanish speaking public school teachers to work with him. They offered classes to help Spanish speaking parents with their English and parent leadership classes taught totally in Spanish. Patricia, a Spanish speaking parent who also attended Padres Solidarios, highlighted the importance of the English classes when she shared, "I struggle to help my daughter with her homework. I can help her with the homework that is in Spanish, but the one that is in English, I can't help her."

Mr. Lopez, a fourth-grade dual language teacher at Patriot, taught the parent leadership class and explained that "we talk about how you are thrown into being a parent, you didn't know,

there isn't a manual, there is not right or wrong way, so we all have that mentality that we are all there to grow." He shared, "It's kind of like the [recreation] center, you can learn whatever you want there, and its free of charge you just go and better yourself. That's more of my vision, being able to help everybody that wants to learn something." He shared that the classes culminated with a graduation, adding,

We had a graduation ceremony, the kids were all so excited. The kids will see me in hallway and will say, 'hey that's my mom's teacher, and you will be my teacher, too.' Again, it goes back to that sense of community. Everyone is involved and, anyway, as long as there is communication, it doesn't matter how. People are just here to help each other and that is something we have developed in the past few years.

He hopes to keep deepening this sense of community with a focus on leadership development. He said, "one of my goals is to have the students become the teachers, that's something that would be really cool. They've been through the program first hand, they know how we have the conversations, they have lots of input."

Rosa and Julia had invited me to Padres Solidarios events, dinners, and classes many times, so when I was finally able to attend Rosa's class with her I was thrilled to experience it first-hand. Everyone was very kind to me, though our ability to communicate was limited. The class was conducted entirely in Spanish, and I did my best to follow along with my inadequate vocabulary and my more refined practice with nonverbal communication. The teacher welcomed me but wasted no time as she jumped into the topic for the day with her class, nutrition. I thought I knew and understood everything on a nutritional label, but eavesdropping on their energetic discussion about sugar, calories, and vitamins made an impression on me that resonated for days with each meal I ate. With this contained topic, time was spent asking

questions, testing answers, and building a support network for living these lessons in the real world. There were times I was able to follow the flow of conversation, and others when I simply let my lack of understanding wash over me as I nodded and smiled. At the end of class I was absolutely exhausted and introspective, thinking about what it must feel like for a Spanish speaking student at the end of a full school day taught mostly in English. I really did have fun, but I remembered I was a special guest and that they had made a point to include me. How different it must feel for Spanish-speaking parents attending PTA meetings conducted entirely in English. I doubted that we ever made them feel like special guests; probably they were made to feel like an afterthought at best.

Though Padres Solidarios classes focused on Spanish speaking parents, its leaders discussed the possibility of offering similar parenting classes in English as well as Spanish classes for English speakers. I suggested that Rosa should consider teaching those classes because I selfishly wanted to be her student. As with many volunteer service organizations, Padres Solidarios is limited in what it can provide and how much it can extend their reach. That being said, the group's existing program was having a huge impact on parents in the community who wanted to support each other and do what was best for their children. It was definitely not a coincidence that both Rosa and Julia attended Padres Solidarios and were participating in the PTA. I am sure that these two women showed up on the first day of class with great ideas and cooperative personalities, but their time with Padres Solidarios helped them establish the support and confidence they needed to apply their talents in new venues.

One arena where they practiced these skills was in distributing our survey at the Pastries for Parents event, which we planned to coincide with a PTA sponsored soccer tournament, thinking that donuts and coffee would be a great way to entice families to take our survey. As

Rosa explained, “people come to events... something more intimate is better.” Julia agreed, “maybe they would feel a bit more relaxed, a bit more comfortable” at Pastries for Parents than in other settings. She reasoned, “whenever you are having coffee with anybody, its less formal, they are more likely to open up and say, ‘well, this is my idea, what do you think?’” Julia was totally fearless, crossing the soccer field to approach every last parent so she could ask them to take the survey. She told me later, “I guess because I worked for customer service, I was a supervisor, so it came natural to me, to talk to people.” She did admit, “I was a little bit nervous, like what are they going to think? I was nervous about their answers, to find an answer maybe that we couldn’t help directly.” While she had the confidence to talk to anyone, her greatest worry was not being able to help them.

Like me, Rosa tended to be a little timid and was relieved that “everyone was interested, listening, respectful, like, ‘yeah, definitely, I’ll fill it out.’ Which is surprising, I didn’t expect people to be so willing.” To help with our nerves, she and I teamed up to approach people together. She reflected, “I am glad we got to go together, handing out the surveys and talking to people, doing that together, I liked that part. It made me more comfortable, and I feel like we got to more people that way.” She shared, “Afterwards I felt good because I got to meet new people and they got to know me, and now they can put a name to my face.” I agreed with her that having a buddy helped with my confidence. I had been nervous about talking to Spanish-speaking parents but soon realized that having a stack of Spanish surveys and a smile was often enough to make my request clear.

We were thrilled that twenty-five parents had filled out surveys at Pastries for Parents but wanted to reach more people. We sent online versions of the survey out through PTA email, posted it on the PTA Facebook page, and sent it to parents in text messages. Together, these

methods persuaded another fifteen parents to respond. We had initially hoped to send a paper copy home with students but ended up unable to do so after Principal Johnson worried that it would look like it was coming officially from the school. Ultimately, we did one last final push and got eleven more parents to participate at the Showcase Dinner, the culminating PTA event for the school year.

The Showcase Dinner took place on a beautiful spring evening under the trees in the school's front courtyard. The white middle class event planners were committed to holding the event on campus for the first time, while in previous years we had crammed hundreds of people into Jason's church building. The organizers had visions of an elegant event and needed help in accomplishing this goal. As one board member shared, "No one person can do everything" by themselves, and some key players had dropped off the radar without much explanation. The Showcase Dinner and other similar events might have been unnecessarily complicated, however, as one mom explained: "There may be some things that don't have to be done. I know [they] sat and tied three little crayons together like a thousand of them one night. Like, we might not have to do that." At board meetings in the months before the dinner, the planners shared increasing levels of frustration, noting that they wanted more people to be involved in executing the tasks necessary but not making clear requests or providing venues for contributions until the last minute. As often happens in the PTA, the Showcase Dinner turned out to be a lovely event despite all the stress and conflict leading up to it. I still wonder if perhaps it was not the best use of our limited time and energy. Though I had a great time eating with my family, listening to student performances, and talking to new acquaintances as they filled out the survey, I could not help but imagine other ways to celebrate the end of the school year that might better utilize and develop our assets as a community.

Using Surveys to Plan Group Interviews

In early June, with teachers packing up their classrooms for the summer and families learning how to adjust their daily routines without the structure of school, I made plans to meet with Rosa and Julia to review what parents had written on their surveys. Despite all the complexities to juggle in a PAR project, the goals of this meeting were actually quite simple. Three friends, excited about the work they had been put in for the last few months, were going to open our gift from the families of Patriot Elementary and decide on our next steps.

After a long stream of text messages over several days, we scheduled the meeting for an afternoon at my house. I was surprised when only Rosa knocked on the door; Julia was sick and had to stay home. My son and daughter were disappointed that they would not get to play with Rosa's kids, who were also somewhere else that afternoon, busy with older friends. After settling them down with an episode of *Sesame Street*, I asked Rosa if she thought we should wait to go through the surveys until Julia felt better. We decided to go ahead and start with the understanding that we would all three need to meet again soon, and we could catch her up then. As with any PTA project, when you have people together ready to work, it's usually a good idea to press on, but we agreed it was important to make sure Julia stayed in the loop.

We sat across from each other at the dining room table and divided up the surveys. We had 51 total: of the 36 paper surveys that had been completed at school events, I grabbed the 23 that had been completed in English, and Rosa took the thirteen written in Spanish. I also printed out the fifteen surveys that were completed online and added them to the piles (twelve in English and three in Spanish). Both of us started poring over them, reading selections aloud when something stood out to us. We were struck by the similarity of parents' responses across different backgrounds: their far-reaching hopes and dreams for their children, their hunger for a

stronger connection with their child's classroom and teachers, and their demands for a more rigorous and comprehensive educational approach. I grabbed a pen and paper and started making a list of themes as they emerged in our conversation.

This was an admittedly casual strategy: I wanted Rosa's opinions and ideas, but she could only stay for so long whereas I knew I would need to put in more time with the surveys later. Out of respect for their busy schedules, I tried to follow Julia and Rosa's lead on how much time we spent on tasks as a group. For example, I asked Rosa if she thought we should translate the responses word-for-word, and she said she would prefer to focus on developing themes and only translate key passages. I was happy to defer to her for the immediate purpose of planning the next stages, earmarking the question for when I came back to do further analysis on my own. Grappling with this question over the next few months as I worked to pull together the surveys and interviews for the dissertation itself, I decided I wanted to compensate Rosa for her translation of larger documents and recordings. While she tried to refuse my payment, I made a distinction between the work we did together that directly fed into the goals and missions of the PTA and the labor she was willing to help me with that was solely necessary because of the dissertation I was writing.

The last question on the survey asked parents to leave their contact information if they were interested in discussing the school and the PTA in more detail. Rosa and I decided we would plan group interviews to follow up with parents in a way that made the most efficient use of our time during the busy summer. Building on our success in hosting family-friendly events, we picked a playground as our venue so children could play while their parents talked. Rosa thought the conversation would be more relaxed and natural if we had separate sessions in English and Spanish because then we would not need to interpret every statement. Thirty parents

had expressed interest; I agreed to call the seventeen English speakers, and Rosa would call the thirteen Spanish speakers. Both of us also agreed to brainstorm possible group interview questions based on the survey responses. Though I was anxious about letting them out of my sight, Rosa took the Spanish surveys with her to make her calls and use for her brainstorming. I awkwardly offered to photocopy them first and she assured me she that doing so was unnecessary; a friendly, valuable, and perhaps unintentional way of putting me in my place. Rather than worrying about the dissertation I had to produce, I needed to trust my friend and her legitimate stake in our collaborative work.

A couple weeks later we met at Rosa's house. The kids ran off to play, and we settled in with snacks and coffee. Julia was eager to see the surveys and hear about the previous meeting she had missed. I read her the list of themes we had written, and she chimed in as she shuffled through the papers. While Julia took her time with the surveys, Rosa sheepishly shared that she had not had time to write any group interview questions. Not wanting her to feel bad, I told her I completely understood. I had already emailed my questions to Julia and Rosa, and Rosa said that they looked great. I worried that she was quick to go along with my questions because she felt guilty for not writing her own. Upon reflection, this type of task would have been much better to do together in person rather than individually between meetings. I regret that we did not have a more in-depth conversation to craft the questions from scratch, but we discussed the questions I had written and made adjustments together. Julia and Rosa made plans to translate the questions and facilitate the Spanish group interview. I shared that I was nervous about how many parents would come but also offered reassurance that even if it was a small group, we would learn from every individual willing to share their time and experiences.

Conducting Group Interviews

We had scheduled the group interview for a hot day in late June before the three of us would go our separate ways for summer trips with our families. Julia, Rosa, and I met early to set up a cooler of water and a platter of watermelon. Thankfully, there was a covered picnic area with a functioning ceiling fan; we were able to stay reasonably cool while the kids ran off, laughing in the early summer sun. After some internal debate, I had left my kids at home with my husband. Perhaps hypocritically, I found it difficult to take advantage of our child-friendly set up while juggling everything I was trying to achieve. I could imagine my four-year-old son playing happily with Julia and Rosa's kids, but I knew my two-year-old daughter would spend most of the afternoon in my lap, making it difficult to be fully engaged. Even when we made events child-friendly, I was deeply aware of how much schools and PTAs expect parents to manage as well as the reality that my attention was no more divided nor my labor any more valuable than anyone else's. Even so, I took advantage of the easily available child care my husband provided.

I laid out my phone to record the conversations beside the necessary consent forms, answering Rosa and Julia's questions to help them prepare to explain them in Spanish to other participants. Patricia soon arrived, a woman with a ready smile whom I recognized from Padres Solidarios events but to whom I had never spoken beyond timid, friendly greetings. With an excited grin pasted to my face, I tried to make myself helpful as Julia and Rosa welcomed their friend, offering her food and water as we all settled into our spots at the picnic table. After a few minutes of wondering whether other parents would come, Rosa suggested they get started.

As they began, I watched their body language and noted the pace of the discussion. Rosa and Julia took turns reading the translated questions from a notebook, their tone initially forced.

A crack emerged in the formal interview's façade when Patricia struggled to respond to one of the questions and her friends rushed to demystify what they had asked. A stiff, awkward interaction slowly developed into an authentic meeting of the minds similar to those taking place in parks everywhere—moms sharing notes on their kids and their lives. Marveling at the feeling of being washed over in a discussion I could not understand, it was one of the countless times I felt profound gratitude for Julia and Rosa's participation in the project. Without them, this group interview would have been impossible. While I did not understand what Patricia was saying at the time, I knew she had something to say, and I was so appreciative that Julia and Rosa were there to listen. We can always learn more together than we can alone.

After Patricia's interview wrapped up, and she left, another family arrived. Amanda introduced herself as her husband ushered the kids over to the playground. We started the interview and were soon joined by Monica. They greeted each other warmly, both Pre-K parents who knew each other from daily pick up and drop off, and Monica's daughter ran off to join her former classmate. Because of their relationship and the fact that we three interviewers were warmed up from the first conversation with Patricia, this session took on an even more casual tone. We had agreed beforehand that I would facilitate this English-language interview, but in the end all five of us discussed the questions, letting the conversation wander freely while negotiating multiple interruptions from hungry, thirsty, and affectionate kids. As with all the interviews, I felt lucky to be there, listening to people's stories and marveling at the many ways in which we express love for our children, families, schools and communities. It was chaotic and laughter-filled, exceptional and ordinary, and I realized I never would have gotten to be a part of it without PAR for inspiration.

The late evening sun of summer kept us out later than planned. As Monica and Amanda loaded up their families to go home, Rosa, Julia and I shared congratulatory smiles. Riding high from the conversations, we agreed to get together soon to discuss what we had learned and prepare our presentation for the summer retreat. I spent the next few weeks chipping away at my list of individual interviews that I had not gotten to during the school year, informing those conversations with what I had learned from the survey and group interview work. In each step along this cyclical, rambling path, parents shared a universal passion for education sliced with widespread frustration for the many demands placed on families and schools and optimism that the PTA can help provide the experiences children deserve.

Conclusion

PAR is a methodological tradition that accounts for the messy and nonlinear but beautiful potential of informed, collaborative problem solving. It opens the door to exploring new strategies of knowledge production by freeing us from the unattainable goal of creating a mock laboratory and instead grants us permission to get messy as we engage in real life. Though I only scratched the surface of what could be learned from these families in this school, I know strict adherence to rigid methodology would have tied my hands even more. There is an inherent elitism in academic research that requires a quiet office and lots of time. As a stay-at-home mom with small children, I had to adapt my methods accordingly. PAR challenges the norms of traditional research, daring us to learn new lessons, from more people, in more ways.

This approach also focuses on learning and change at a very human level. PAR focuses our work on interpersonal relationships, misleadingly small social units that can be so disproportionately powerful. At times this focus on a small group of parents trying to make change in one school felt too small, but time and time again I came back to the belief that this is

where we really have the most potential to really change ourselves and others. When there is trust, we can be transformed. PAR is also a critical way to build, rather than simply measure, consensus. It is active and instructive. It acknowledges that individuals and communities are dynamic and provides a means for facilitating improvement. As we gained practice with methods for collective inquiry and growth, we used them in other venues. Research is a tool, and through it we can build collective power.

This cyclical, collective, and action-oriented nature makes it difficult to fit PAR studies into a traditional research report (Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Guishard, 2009; Smith, Rosenzweig, & Schmidt, 2010). While it was pragmatically necessary to define a beginning and ending for this study and attempt to squeeze the complex beauty of the story into distinct chapters, life is not a controlled laboratory and the real story did not unfold in such a clean narrative. Perhaps one of my greatest challenges in this project was determining how to tell such a multilayered story in a way that would present the “findings” and make sense as we moved through time.

Chapter four focuses on the reflections of the mostly white middle-class parents and community members who established the school’s first PTA. In these early days of the PTA, this small group of newcomers grappled with their role in a generational school surrounded by a gentrifying area, navigating the limited options provided by school choice and betting on their own involvement to pave the way forward for their neighborhood school. This chapter relies primarily on interviews I conducted on my own to provide context for the collaborative research that Julia, Rosa, and I completed together.

Chapter five shifts into exploring what Rosa, Julia, and I learned together through our survey and group interviews. This chapter focuses on getting to know more of the diverse

parents who call Patriot home and highlights their shared desire to work with teachers and provide their children with a rigorous, well-rounded education. Chapter six also uses the surveys and group interviews but moves the focus to the conditions that parents identified would help them participate in the school and PTA. Chapters five and six also draw on interviews I conducted on my own that supplement the research that Julia, Rosa, and I did as a team.

Chapter seven begins with an update on the Summer Retreat where Rosa, Julia, and I presented to the PTA Board and then provides an overview of the work the PTA has done to implement changes based on what we learned. The remainder of the chapter explores what worked for us in building democratic parental participation in the school: being self-reflective, developing relationships, and improving conditions to bring about greater representation.

This arrangement is misleadingly clear, though in reality our work was anything but. With PAR you cannot wait until a predetermined time to act because “although the process [is] organized sequentially, it [is] not linear and fixed. Rather than wait until the end of a project to advocate for an issue or educate the public, research collectives embedded actions throughout their collective work affecting change along the way” (Zaal & Terry, 2013, p. 43). Even as I write this we are still learning, testing, trying, and growing, so it is impossible and would be dishonest to cast this as a simple story of inputs and outputs. Instead, I have done my best to collapse a story in which questions, answers, actions, and reactions spiraled outward with each development into an instructive and accessible narrative.

CHAPTER 4: Reflecting on the Impact of Neighborhood Change in the School

“They were coming in with the mindset we are going to change the school, we are going to make the school better.”

Mountain View is a gentrifying neighborhood in the urban center of a large city in North Texas. The new residents are largely middle-class and predominantly white. In contrast, the long-time residents are mostly Latino working-class families, many of whom have lived in their homes for many years, if not decades. It is a neighborhood in upheaval: walk the same street a month apart, and the houses and people in them might be unrecognizable. Many families with generational ties to their homes and the community are being crowded out by newcomers eager to accelerate the changes taking place. This shift in the neighborhood has just begun to spill over into the local public schools. Many newcomers move to the neighborhood despite warnings from realtors about the lackluster reputation of the area schools, so they plan on enrolling their children in private, choice, or charter schools. Those plans do not always pan out, however; not everyone can afford a private school or win the lottery to get into a school or program of choice.

Whether by design or default, a small number of middle-class parents new to the community started enrolling their children at Patriot Elementary School, and many of these parents rolled up their sleeves and got involved in the school with the same gusto they had for neighborhood development. In its early days, the Patriot PTA was an organization that reflected just a faint image of the process of gentrification in the neighborhood, as the school was still considered a harder sell than Mountain View. Depending on the ways that these new parents interacted with those that had generational ties to the community, the PTA had the potential to either challenge or exacerbate these trends. Reflecting on these dynamics allows us to examine the ways that individual choices impact others, a critical first step for establishing relationships,

changing conditions, improving representation, and ultimately advocating for the schools we know all children deserve.

Neighborhood Gentrification

“People who have lived here their entire lives, they feel threatened”

Both new and longtime residents were excited about the many developments in Mountain View. With an active neighborhood association, more festive art and community events than anyone could ever attend, and a constantly updated offering of restaurants and bars, the area was getting more and more desirable, a sharp contrast to its previous reputation. As we sat at a brewpub on the main commercial drag blocks from the school, a Latina parent shared that though she did not live in the neighborhood now, “we lived in the area when no one wanted to live in the area. It was pretty bad.” They had moved away but “we still had family and friends in the area so we were able to see the transition... it’s improved a great deal. Before, you wouldn’t even want to walk down [this street]. This is nice.” Nonetheless, she reflected that “maybe the residents aren’t used to it... I think it’s important for the existing residents of the neighborhood to still feel comfortable.”

Julia was a longtime resident who appreciated many of the changes taking place in the neighborhood. I interviewed Julia for the first time in her living room, just a few blocks from my house. This was a neighborhood I had only called home for a few years, but she shared she had lived there “my whole life, I used to live next door. And then, we moved here, but we used to live in the next house over.” I asked her if she had seen it change much in that time, and after detailing the transitions of a few houses on her block, she summarized, “It’s changed for the better... most of the people you see new here are families. We know that a lot of doctors and nurses are moving into this community.” She also shared, “I’ve actually had a relationship with

the school since I went to school there.” In addition to being an alumna, she also had “maybe five friends for sure that have their kids there. There’s a lot of friends of my mom’s that have their grandkids there.”

While Rosa also had deep roots in the community and school, she did not feel connected with the active neighborhood association responsible for many of the activities and events in the area. During her first interview, Rosa shared with me that we were sitting in her childhood home. Not only had she attended the school herself but, she said, “I have other family members that live in this area as well, and I know all their kids went there and keep going there, too.” Rosa explained that “a lot of people that I went to school with there have their own kids there... We reconnect because we all have our own kids there.” With these generational ties to the community, Rosa still saw herself as an outsider in the official neighborhood association. She explained, “I am not involved with the [Mountain View Community] or what they have going on. I am not really aware of what they are doing.”

Brittany, a resident of the community and member of the SISD School Board, shared a story about how the neighborhood association sometimes excluded longtime residents in area. She said that a few years ago “all of the neighborhood events were planned at private residences, and it was very exclusive” and unwelcoming to many people in the community. When planning the next event at an association meeting, she asked, “why don’t we have it at [the] park? It’s bigger and we can do more.” She got into an argument with a neighbor who thought they should not have the event at the park because, “we need to keep the riff raff out.” She was angry that the newer influx of residents were not respectful to those that came before them. She said, “the Latino families who lived on the street, they owned their homes outright. They’d lived there for

thirty years. If anyone had more of a stake in their neighborhood, its them.” Still, she witnessed that there was “this concept that they couldn’t participate.”

Though many longtime residents value the changes in the neighborhood, these changes come with potential threats, particularly when new residents do not make an effort to include them in the community. Principal Johnson shared that “there were people who were like, ‘they are going to pressure us to sell our house, they are trying to change it...’ I do understand how people who have lived here their entire lives, they feel threatened.” Emily, the PTA’s first president, reflected, “We are pushing people out, with taxes, with rent, with homes that are no longer affordable to people... the houses are worth triple.” As a new resident, she hoped that “instead of pushing out the families that were here first, [we need] to include them... I think we are all trying to figure that out as we go.”

For the time being, these groups share the neighborhood. This diversity could be short-lived if the cost of living keeps increasing, a development that would have a negative impact on the generational connections in the school. Ms. Aguilar, a Latina dual-language teacher who grew up in another part of the city, illustrated the parallel, yet largely distinct, communities that temporarily coexist in the neighborhood and their potential collision in the school. While she had friends who celebrated the skyrocketing values of homes they had purchased, she said, “there’s still a lot of houses our students have lived in for years. I mean years, like their parents went to [Patriot] or something, or their older sister, younger sibling went to [Patriot].” Where these two worlds would potentially collide is if affluent buyers went looking for more inventory, but Ms. Aguilar said, “I haven’t heard any stories of people like trying to buy out the houses, at least not yet.” This possibility concerned her. As the demographics of the neighborhood change and property values and taxes increase, displacement could impact the generational ties within

the school. She always looked forward to “just being able to see the families again, if their siblings are still here that means I still get to see them and the parents. It just keeps that family feel of the school still there.”

School Culture

“The core recipe is done”

Patriot Elementary recently celebrated its 100-year anniversary in a landmark historic building. While most of the new residents in the neighborhood have never been inside, many long-time community members consider it a second home because they have watched their children and even grandkids grow up in those classrooms. Principal Johnson described it as “the most diverse, the most warm and nurturing campus that I have ever worked on.” Having grown up in a rural area, she appreciated the tight-knit community. She said, “everyone knew everybody, the parents grew up with other parents, the kids were together, that’s why I say I know [Patriot] has the potential to be a great school.” She believed that “once you feel comfortable or safe, whether you are an adult or kiddo, you can progress and you can learn. You can’t if you don’t feel safe and if you don’t trust the people in front of you.”

Teachers at Patriot were on board with this family feel in the school. Mr. Lopez, a Latino dual language teacher, agreed that from his first day he was stuck by the power of the relationships in the school, saying, “Right off the bat I felt good, like everyone was there for each other, teachers, kids, teachers for teachers, kids for kids. Having someone to fall back on every once in a while.” Another teacher, Ms. Lark said, that to her the school is “more like a family, I feel like this is probably my first home, I’m here all day, like twelve hours, and then I go home.” Students and teachers spend so much time together, she noted that “we’re here all day long so this is your family and then you go home and that’s your family. We can’t get away from each

other ... we try to keep it positive.” She appreciated that “since this is my first job in this school, other teachers are like ‘yeah, other places I have worked at, you can’t even make friends with your coworkers, kids don’t even know other teachers around the school.’”

Parents appreciated this intimate, family feel in the school. A white middle-class parent contrasted her experience at Patriot with the suburban school her daughters had attended before, noting “It’s a little bit more down to earth” compared to the other school, which at pick up time at the end of the day was “so militant, I mean, you had to have your sign in the window... and you had to drive through this way and out that way, and they would bring your child to the car.” She laughed as she acknowledged that system was “safer than, sometimes what I see at [Patriot], I pull up and people are just like crossing, blocking, someone almost gets hit like every day, but nobody ever does. And I think it’s such a stark contrast.” The suburb she had come from was a “wealthy city, high dollar, and they have a lot of great city services because the taxes are really high, but the police officers drive Suburbans, and they will stop you for everything. It’s just very big brother... so there’s tradeoffs.” Overall, she missed some of the amenities her old suburb had to offer but preferred the urban environment at Patriot. Another white mom agreed, “You have this small, close, kind of feel. This community feel. Sometimes it gets to be too, corporate almost, in a school.”

Though the intimate feel of the school was positive for many families, some wondered if they were treated this way because of their role in the school and community. Emily loved the small family feel of the school, or in her words “the fact that you can email their teachers and get a response back within hours. I can text their principal and ask a question... it’s nice, you know... I hope everybody feels that way.” She often wondered, “Am I getting that treatment because I was PTA president? Am I getting that treatment because the teachers want more

families who are involved? Am I being catered to? That's always in the back of my head.”

Emily described the school as having “low socioeconomic status, large percentage of kids on free and reduced lunch, super diverse. My son is in the minority. He is one of two white kids in the class most of the time. He has yet to notice.”

Aware of their role in the changing neighborhood, some new residents attempted to have a positive impact in the community and school. Jason, the second president of the PTA after Emily, explained that his family “moved into the neighborhood intentionally because I am the minister here... we wanted to be in the neighborhood of our church building.” He expressed that this was important for “ministry reasons, to serve and be a blessing, because of that we felt like we needed to give the public schools a fair shot.” He explained how “the proximity of everything, living in a neighborhood, going to church in a neighborhood, going to school in a neighborhood, there is power in that.” This allowed him to be “extremely involved in my children's growing up because of that, whereas if we were living twenty minutes away and they were going to school twenty minutes away at a private school, I just wouldn't be able.”

Other parents echoed this sentiment, valuing the tight knit community that was possible within such a small geographic area. One white middle-class mother shared that “one of the main reasons we moved here was to eliminate our dependence, or at least minimize our dependence on our cars.” When they moved, to “cushion the transition, we were still driving [the kids], all the way down, it was like a 35-minute drive each way twice a day” to a school in the suburbs. Eventually she and her husband “sat the boys down. We kept pointing out, look, the school is right there,” and they eventually convinced their sons to switch schools. Another couple agreed that “proximity and the fact that in a very grassroots way participating in the building of the power of the parents at the school” attracted them to Patriot. First, the school was

“right down the street and we loved the principal.” They also knew many of the people on the PTA “from other walks of business and everything else, and community, so that was a huge catalyst.”

Yet, even when parents were optimistic about the school, there was a sense that the relationship was probationary. One parent shared that though she thought that “the core recipe is done” for the school to be successful, but “the jury is still out for me” on whether or not her son would stay there long term. Principal Johnson said that there was “some apprehension when there were some new families checking out the school. People within the school for many years were kind of like, ‘uh, well, here we go, they won’t stay.’”

New Families

“This is an experiment”

With young families moving to the neighborhood, there is passionate discussion during playdates at city parks and on the popular Mountain View Facebook page regarding where parents plan to send their children to school. As a fourth and fifth grade teacher, Ms. Aguilar had noticed a shift in the student body because of the changes in the community. She saw “more neighborhood kids, but they are starting off in the lower grades mainly.” A white middle-class parent had observed that younger families new to the neighborhood seemed to be enrolling their children in the school and “maybe because there is more parent involvement and things like that, but most of them have positive things to say and really like it.” She thought like this was promising over the long term, “because I think the neighborhood is revamping I feel like the school is as well, hopefully they’ll both just keep going up” as younger children grow within the school.

This might not play out, however. Multiple parents shared that they were more willing to try Patriot while their children were younger, but only with the understanding that they might change their minds later. One white middle-class mother explained how in “kindergarten, they are finger-painting, and learning ABCs, and 123s and all of that” so her daughter’s education seemed fairly straightforward. She felt more pressure the following year. She explained, “then it was like first grade and it’s like, okay, she really needs to be learning her spelling and her reading.” Ultimately, she was the most uncomfortable when her daughter was “going into second grade and turning seven, for some reason it was like this big kid to me. This is really where her educational foundation begins.” Another white middle-class mom summed it up as “this is an experiment, if I am not satisfied by first and second grade and he is already falling behind, we are going to have to do something else.”

Even when parents wanted their children to remain at Patriot Elementary through fifth grade, many were concerned about the middle school into which it feeds. Bill, a white middle-class PTA volunteer, described what a parent had said to him at the Soccer Tournament: “I just love all this stuff going on at [Patriot] it’s so great, my kid loves it here, it’s just fantastic, we love the PTA, it’s all great.” Even with these rave reviews, she told him, “I don’t know what I am going to do next year, because I will tell you, I am not putting my kid at [that] middle school.” Another mom shared, “I am definitely determined to go to another middle school.” Her son had already attended the middle school, and she did not want to send her daughters there as well because “it’s a sad school, I hate to say it, and very tiny, it’s a real small population, they don’t have much money they don’t have anything.” She also thought that her son did not have a great experience because “they have just done some things, like changing his schedule without

telling us, and they've done some stuff like that and we've had to really go in and advocate for him a couple of different times.”

This concern about the middle school caused many parents to consider alternatives when their children left Patriot. Tiffany, a white middle-class mom, had worried about where her oldest son would attend middle school because “he’s more of a follower, he’s going to start to follow the wrong crowd.” She was concerned about the middle school because “I’ve heard lots of things, I’ve talked to parents who have had their kids there and pulled them out.” One thing she had heard was that “there is like an early gang presence, or there had been, and there had been some issues with fights breaking out.” She was hopeful that “maybe in a couple years that school is going to be okay” but ultimately decided “I am just not comfortable with it right now... so I signed up for the different choice schools.”

Parents and educators saw Schools and Programs of Choice within the district as good opportunities for all students advancing to middle school. Ms. Aguilar had required all of her fifth-grade students “try to do program of choice, so that they have an opportunity... [and] about half [are] going to schools of choice.” As a loyal teacher in the district, she was quick to add, “Not to say that [the] middle school doesn’t have a great program, you know it does, but why not? Those opportunities are there.” In particular, she thought it was great practice for students to fill out the application. She said, “They are going to need to know how to do that anyway... they are able to, they are capable of it.” Also, choice programs in the district cater to specific interests. Ms. Aguilar explained, “One of my students is going to the STEM one, his main goal is to become an engineer, so why not go to a school that is going to focus on math, science, technology?” She also thought this was a good overall experience for them as they left elementary school “to help them just grow up. Otherwise they get stuck in the routine and who

knows what could happen, but if they have somewhere where they are focused and centered on... what they want to do” she thought it could make a big difference in their future.

To prepare for the transition to middle school, students need extra support from their teachers and parents. Ms. Aguilar believed this transition was particularly important because many students seemed to lose their way in fifth grade. She tried to reach out to parents and say “hey Mom and Dad, some things we just got to nip it in the bud, like now, so like it doesn’t progress and get worse in middle school.” Some students tried on different personalities, and Ms. Aguilar held them accountable and helped them stay true to themselves. She told them, “that’s my sweet boy, that respectable kid that I know, like I don’t know who that other kid is, get rid of him. Whatever is going on anywhere else, whoever you think is your friend... no, stay who you are.” One mom shared that with her fifth grader, “I’m having a little struggle with him, maybe it’s typical for every family.” This forced her to imagine what would happen as her daughter in Pre-K got older, “looking into the future, now that I have a little guy that is going to go into the fifth grade... where did the motivation stop? I hope I can keep [my daughter] interested... she still likes school.”

Though older kids still need the support of their teachers and parents, there was often more parental involvement among those with kids in the younger grades. For example, Ms. Aguilar had noticed that when “kinder, first, and second, they had their PTA program, it was one of the biggest ones they did and that place was packed.” She had observed that parental involvement seemed to wane as students got older, “yeah, when they are little they feel that love, but when they are older that is when the insecurities come.” Regardless of racial or economic background, “there were plenty of parents there for their [graduation] ceremony, we wanted to see you all year.” She argued that parents cannot just show up when kids are little, or for big

events. Rather, “you still need to do stuff and want to be involved when they are older, too, because that is when they need more of that support and push.” She confessed, “I still need my mom now, at thirty-one... sorry, you signed up for this, you’re my mom.”

PTAs also tend to be more active in the younger grades. Bill reflected that PTAs often “focus these efforts on the elementary schools” because “everybody wants to volunteer in elementary schools... being with little kids is fun.” He argued, however, that where students really needed the support was “in the middle schools is where a lot of kids veer off into what we used to call the dark side. They start running with the wrong crowd, they lose motivation.” Unfortunately, “nobody wants to go volunteer at a middle school and all that stuff kind of drops off... it picks up again when you get to high school, but by then it’s too late for a lot of those kids who dropped off and aren’t really active in anything.” He argued that “the opportunity is really in middle school” to support students and make a difference over the long term. Ironically, as students get older, parents view school selection as having higher stakes, but they are also less likely to be involved. Students need parents to participate throughout their educational careers, and doing so can help make all schools more desirable to families.

School Choice

“Giving people a free pass”

As the housing prices go up, the popular assumption of new residents is that the traditional neighborhood schools are not good enough and you need to apply to a SISD School or Program of Choice if you want to get your child a better education in the public system. The demographics of the neighborhood are changing, and as many parents who would send their children to the neighborhood schools are being displaced, many new residents in the community elect to send their children to private, charter, or choice schools. One Patriot mom admitted, “I

can't afford to live here in [Mountain View], maybe someday. It's harder and harder to get in to this neighborhood." At the same time, she explained that parents who can afford to move into the neighborhood "all take their kids somewhere else!"

School selection is something that white middle-class parents wring their hands over, wanting to provide the best education for their children. Brian explained that in Mountain View "there's three schools within the neighborhood and they all criss-cross who they are taking from in the neighborhood, and there is definitely a bias regarding where you want to get your child in and we did the exact same thing." His son ended up at Patriot instead of Rainbow Montessori because he "didn't make the lottery. And every other string I could pull, because we live a block away." Another mom shared that "we moved here in the middle of the school year and put our kids in just the neighborhood schools... I really fought it and I tried doing the lottery a couple of times and it just didn't work out." After a while, her daughters "were loving their teachers and loving their friends and even the thought of changing schools, I was the bad guy to even bring it up." Though Rosa never tried to get her children into a choice school or program, her husband had asked her if they should. Rosa was sad about many of the changes she saw at Patriot since she was a student there, but ultimately felt she had a responsibility to remain at her childhood school and invest in making it a great experience for her kids.

Many new parents don't even realize that school choice exists until other parents start asking them about their plans. Tiffany shared her experiences negotiating the process with her two sons. When she was a first-time mom, "like every young parent you're like, 'oh, I have options, so wait, so they don't just go to this school?'" Though school choice initially seemed liberating, she ended up asking, "Why should I have to send him to another school?" to get her

son what he needed. When schools specialize and compete, families cannot count on universally offered provisions.

Some parents believed that school choice might be more appropriate as students got older. Tiffany stated that “I don’t like choice programs in elementary schools, I am not a big fan.” She reasoned that “elementary school is where you form your childhood friends, your bonds, you want them to be neighbors, so they can see each other on a regular basis and form that community.” For these reasons, she thought elementary schools should be rooted in neighborhood zones rather than part of the school choice program. On the other hand, she was more open to the choice program in middle school because “by the time you get to middle school everyone has to drive at that point, it’s bigger, it’s further away” anyway. In addition to this logistical consideration, she also thought that older students were more likely to benefit from the specialization of choice programs, because “he’s developed an interest in science, and math, so I am going to send him to this choice program.” Another mom was thrilled when she shared her son “got accepted into a performing arts program, he’s a little artist. I kept telling him as he was struggling through the year, it will be over soon.” This mother was excited to have found a school where she felt her son would be more comfortable and stimulated.

Though school choice can provide great opportunities for students as they develop, these opportunities are limited to those specific programs and campuses. While Tiffany was supportive of choice programs for middle school, she pointed out that many of the specialties they provided would benefit all students if offered everywhere. For example, “that applied learning setting should be the standard, you know. Teach them the skills, and then let them solve the problem, let them figure out how to use what they’ve learned in a project based setting.” Rather than only make this option available to some students, she asked “why should you have to

apply to go to a school to learn that way, when the alternative is you are doing worksheets and looking at a Promethean board all day?” If the best methods for teaching and learning were offered at all schools, then “you take that option away, everybody goes to the home school and it’s great. Then, you have all those involved parents that take the time to put their kids somewhere else are going to be in your home school.”

School choice has an impact on parental involvement in schools. With school choice, Tiffany added, parents have less time and energy to be involved because they “focus the entire semester leading up to the next year [on] how am I going to get them into that school, this other school... because shopping is all they are doing.” Parents are “searching for that opening to take their kid somewhere else... it takes the parent’s focus off the neighborhood schools from the get go. It gives it a negative taste, its already the second choice.” Tiffany had experienced this first hand. She wanted her older son to take advantage of an opportunity to try a choice school where they had applied. She told him, “you know, if we say no, you can’t ever go back, you can’t get back in. If we say yes and you hate it, give it a month, we can withdraw you and we can always take you back to [Patriot].” Traditional public schools must take everyone in their zone, so they are often viewed as the fallback plan while other options are considered more enticing.

Even with all of the problems school choice could cause in the district, parents often considered these schools and programs to be the best opportunity for their children. Though Tiffany had concerns about the choice program in the district, she felt that given the current arrangement it was often the best option for students and parents. She admitted, “I can’t dismiss the parent who wants their kid at another school if their kid’s not getting what they need at their home school. I mean, it’s a vicious cycle, it really is.” With her older son already enrolled in a choice middle school, she and her husband had turned their focus onto their younger son, “we’ve

talked about it, will [he] be okay at [the middle school]? Should we be applying for choice schools? We haven't applied for choice schools for [him], yet. I know a lot of people are, in our school." Ultimately, she thought parents had to do what they thought was best for their children, "I feel like we have a loyalty to [Patriot], but at the same time I feel like if another opportunity that will be better for my child in the long term comes up, I can't say I wouldn't take it."

Parents make these individual choices in the interests of their own children, but these decisions can function to exacerbate existing inequalities in the district overall. Bill explained that public schools were already segregated before the choice program, where being zoned for more desirable schools encouraged people to pay more for houses in certain neighborhoods, resulting in "people who concentrated on purpose to go there." Rather than deal with this problem, Bill argued that the district was making it worse because "all [the district] does is say, 'oh well, you are right, we have to compete with the private school.'" By providing choice to families within the public school framework, the district is essentially allowing parents to self-segregate even beyond the residential segregation already present in our society, or as Bill put it, "now you are saying by the way if you don't want to go to that school, you can transfer someplace else, so you are just basically giving people a free pass."

Choice schools and programs are positioned as highly desirable. Bill said they have "good academics so we are going to suck up all the good people out of some of the other schools." He thought the perception of traditional public schools was that "we don't teach to the higher-level kids at some of these schools, to get that you have to, at least the feeling is, you have to go to some of these other schools." The message to parents from the district is "we have basically told them if you love your kids, if you want to get them a good education, then you need to get them out" of their traditional neighborhood school.

With school choice options being more sought-after, this system draws families, students, and resources away from traditional pyramids feeding into area high schools. Bill has been involved in multiple schools and PTAs throughout the district, and had been recently talking to a high school principal who told him, “I am going to [a feeder] middle school graduation and I will sit there and listen to them celebrating all of the kids who are getting out” of his school pyramid. The principal said they “are going to all these other schools to pursue these programs of choice and get out, I want them in my school!” Bill reasoned that “other places have one big high school and everybody feeds up to it and you have all this school pride and we don’t have that.” To strengthen the whole public school system, “you have to focus on the whole pyramid. You can’t just have this school, this school, and this school. You have to look at the next level, and you have to have high academics all the way up.” Mr. Lopez shared that the district is really emphasizing to teachers that “all the schools [need] to work together and they had us go to meetings with other teachers in the pyramid and come up with goals and how we are going to ... get the kids to graduate and whatnot.” This goal is difficult to achieve if families are taught to see schools within the pyramid as something to flee and when they are provided with a district-sanctioned escape route.

How Parents Decide

“The best school education that I can find”

Under a system of school choice, parents shop for schools and advertise their selections with their peers. This dynamic only heightens the inequalities that result from school choice as reputations are crystalized in people’s minds through such conversations. In many interviews, parents marveled at how much the conversation about schools seemed to have intensified in their lifetimes. Jason reflected, “People our age with young kids, it’s just a trendy thing right now,

and I don't know if it's our generation or what, but to be very concerned about schools, about where our kids go." He linked this to "a general state of anxiety in our culture right now. Just a lot of fear, anxiety, and concern. Whenever you have that you just start over-obsessing about certain things, and maybe we are over-obsessing about education." Middle-class families feel pressured, Jason explained, "because we can be so focused on education and think that is so important to where we think, 'I've got to get my kids the best school education that I can find.'"

Parents look to their neighbors and peers to gauge and confirm reputations of schools. As a leader in his church and the community, Jason and his wife Mindy had been called on by other parents to talk about schools. He said, "Families invite us over they want to talk to us about education, and they wanted our input on where to send their kids and that kind of thing." While they used these conversations as an opportunity to "encourage other parents to send their kids to [Patriot]" he and his wife make a point to be "very honest and truthful. We say, here are the benefits and here are the challenges that we have had."

To highlight the possible difficulties middle-class families might experience at Patriot, Jason told me a story he often shares in these situations. It was his son's first day of kindergarten, and "we were having a lot of those feelings of our first kid going up to school and it's an unfamiliar situation, it's an urban environment, don't know exactly what to expect." Jason remembered that "it was raining that day, and I took him to school... we had been to the meet-the-teacher [event] the week before but we walked into the class and there's about twenty extra kids" in addition to what the school had been expecting. He was already nervous about leaving his oldest child in an unfamiliar situation, and it was made worse by the fact that "there's forty kids in there, and the teacher is late because it's raining outside and the traffic is bad." Jason was relieved when the teacher finally arrived, "she walks in and actually seems to be like a

pro and handles it really well, has the parents all sign in and has the kids all sit down and says, ‘okay I will take care of them.’” Nonetheless, it took a leap of faith for Jason to entrust her with his son. He remembered, “I walk out of the classroom and I think what am I doing... some parents couldn’t handle that. We just learned to roll with the punches. Things are going to change, it’s going to be hard.”

Public schools can feel tumultuous, but some parents are drawn to the possibility of being able to make a difference if they enroll their children there. In the years since that rainy, confusing morning, Jason had learned that “the nature of public school is change. So, every year faculty may change, teachers may change... always people coming in and out, transferring students in, transferring students out. As parents, we have learned to expect that.” Though he has some concerns about his children’s experiences at Patriot, “I view all of this through the lens of Christian ministry and serving, and being like Jesus and being a servant, and helping others and caring about justice and the poor, and those kind of things.” When he talks about this with other families, particularly those from his church, Jason explained, “I offer that as a vision to say, you can come alongside of us and help us in this.” He believed this altruistic calling was also applicable “for those who don’t share that background, there still can be a commitment to community and neighborhood, with education in general.”

Some parents used conversations with others in the community to try to debunk negative perceptions about the school. Emily, who had demonstrated considerable commitment to the school, often felt put on the spot when people wanted to talk to her about Patriot. During her son’s early years at the school, Emily was teaching “in a private preschool, [and] people asked me about the school with a grimace, kind of like, ‘well, how’s it going over there?’ and I would always be defensive, ‘it’s great!’” She felt pressured to demonstrate her commitment to her

children, and did so by making sure the other families knew that “we are really happy and the minute we are not I am going to let them know!” Emily thought it was necessary to convey her assertiveness on behalf of her children, but she also wanted to make sure they knew that the school was so much more than its reputation. She would tell people that the teachers in the school “are doing a really good job, they meet the needs of every learner as far as what I have seen so far.” As an educator and parent, Emily wanted to share that what makes a school successful is so much more than what is typically conveyed and perceived, “I know it’s not how many stars they have from greatschools.net or whatever. It’s way more than that.”

When considering schools for their children, many people search for information online. One mom shared that online ratings had particular significance for parents because often “that is the first thing they look at: what are the school’s ratings? So, I feel like a lot of parents are like, ‘oh, we aren’t going to move to that neighborhood.’ Or they might choose to put them in private school.” This parent was encouraged by a friend who knew teachers at Patriot to “not focus so much on the ratings” when she was looking for a school for her sons. This resonated with her because the elementary school her sons had attended, “and even the high school, was rating exemplary, and we had issues there. You can have the highest, best ratings, but still have problems.” These online ratings are typically a compilation of standardized test scores, and parents need to examine what that data really conveys. Brittany, Patriot’s representative on the School Board, warned that test scores reflect inequality in society and cited the racial gap as being even more significant than economic disparity. She said, “there are privileges that are associated with socioeconomic factors, but it is disproportionate when compared to the racial gap.” Though many parents look online to learn about a school, they need to be critical that information.

Families with generational connections to the school shared positive reviews online, but this didn't necessarily translate to a positive experience for parents and students who are new to the school. Charlene shared a story about looking up Patriot's online user reviews when she was thinking about enrolling her son there. She was impressed, there was "a lot of enthusiasm, so I started looking at all the reviews and they are not all the current parents, you know they went to school there and their parents, grandparents." In contrast to other more regarded schools in the area, the Patriot community had demonstrated their generational commitment in these online user-generated reviews. Though their passion for the school made an impact on Charlene, her son had some struggles as he got used to the tight-knit culture of the school. She shared that "he had some issues adjusting throughout the year with breaking the barriers into different groups, because they've all been together for three or four years for the most part." She wanted to help her son adjust because "he's trying to find a way to connect with them, and you know I have sat in on a couple of lunches... just to listen to what they talk about, and I get why he's having issues." She thought he might be having a difficult time connecting socially because "he doesn't watch Sponge Bob. There are things that he doesn't do that they do. So, he's having problems, and it's not even cultural, he's into math and science and engineering."

While some white middle-class parents shared concerns about their children's ability to fit in, many found the diversity of the student body appealing. One white middle-class mom shared that she liked "the diversity. A friend of mine... sometimes she wished [her son] went to [Patriot]" instead of the nearby school with the better reputation because "nothing against wealthy people or whatever but she was like 'there are a lot of rich snotty people, you know, and I want him to be around different types of people and not be spoiled.'" Another white parent said, "I do love that my kids are being raised in a really diverse neighborhood and school

situation.” She thought that “to be honest, an all-white school is, from my experience, it’s just mean spirited and cliquish, and I am kind of glad they are not getting that experience.” She explained that “my son, all of his friends are all Hispanic... he is so happy with that, and they are best friends. He goes to their house and he eats pupusas and the parents don’t even speak English.”

Diversity is often thought of something that helps develop student character. Brittany, a white middle-class mother of biracial children argued that “there is a healthy way for everyone to come together. When your child goes to a school that has more diversity, and where they are able to respect and celebrate that diversity, they grow up to be more well-rounded adults.” She said this was because “they are more successful in college, they are more successful in their careers, because they are better at working with more people.” She thought it was important to note that all forms of diversity could be healthy and powerful, “racial diversity, religious diversity, and economic diversity. Being able to work with people from all aspects of life is one of the things that will allow you to be better in business, better all around.” As a member of the school board, Brittany wanted her district’s schools to promote this vision of healthy unity and diversity.

Some parents were excited that buzz about the school was increasing in the neighborhood. One Patriot parent shared that someone who had recently moved to the area with young kids had heard, “our neighborhood schools are really working hard to get better and turn around.” She suspected that this new parent was referencing the enthusiasm surrounding the PTA at Patriot and was glad that the “word is out, at least a little bit, so that is exciting. A parent of a young one who is coming up, and now to think, this is turning around, like the neighborhood is revitalizing.” She thought the PTA could continue to improve its standing with these new families in the neighborhood by selling “a little sticker for the car... that’s what you are going to

be seeing more than signs in the yard. That pride, that like, ‘hey, we support this school, this school is up and coming,’ you would just have hit the pavement and talk to the right people.” Even selling “little decals or stickers for businesses to put up, like pay \$100 or something and they have a support [Patriot] sign, especially right around here because these are our neighbors.” This would allow the PTA to collect donations from businesses thriving on the commercial strip two blocks from the school while simultaneously using that relationship as an opportunity to advertise to new community residents. Hearing good things about the school through the grapevine made her happy, “it’s nice to think that the more families that we have with parents who are really going to be involved like that, the better.”

That being said, not all of the parents new to the neighborhood and school planned on sticking around. After years of active involvement in the PTA at Patriot, Jeannine had decided to enroll her daughter in a private school. She had also heard that some community members thought new Patriot families were “dropping like flies.” As an active PTA parent and someone well-known in the neighborhood, many people asked Jeannine about her decision. When she talked to other parents she said she made a point to both talk about “what is so amazing about [Patriot], and why I chose to move on. I would never say anything negative, the negative things I have to say are not specific to [Patriot], they are our shitty public school system.” While most of her complaints were in regard to systemic problems, Jeannine wished she “could have said... ‘I get your fear, I was there, look, I have been on the PTA the last two years, everything the PTA has done for that school and the way we are really building relationships and everything, go check out the website.’” Jeannine thought an online presence was extremely important for winning over the hearts and minds of new parents. She said, “I would love to be able to say that, go see what we have been doing, go read what the kids are writing... [the internet is] where we

go for everything. You want takeout tonight, are you going through the drawer for paper menus?”

Even when they decided to remove their children from the school, some community members still wanted to see Patriot’s position in the community improve. Though she had decided to take her daughter out of the school, when other parents in the neighborhood were trying to decide where to enroll their kids. Jeannine said, “I don’t want them trying to get into other schools, I don’t want [Rainbow Montessori] to be the only good school in our neighborhood.” She knew that parents asked themselves, “Do I want to send my kid here? Is this going to be the best education for my kid? And then they see alternatives, and I hate to see that.” She thought that for the school to be successful in enticing these new parents from the neighborhood, the PTA needed to “make it a comfortable and working environment [for those] that want to be involved. Entice those parents that would be involved. We are more than those test scores: awesome kids, parents, teachers. Stop filtering out potential parents.”

Ultimately, most parents make the choice that they think will be best for her children’s future. When Jeannine visited the private school they were considering, “I fell in love, and I knew that she would thrive there.” She could not ignore that when “they wanted her [daughter] to come do a visit and she went all day... I haven’t seen her beam like that since kindergarten.” Though Jeannine considers herself to be committed to public schools and sensitive to the challenges imposed on them, she was concerned about her daughter’s experience and progress, “as much as I want to believe, and do believe, in the public school system, and that it can and should be better, it’s just for me, I couldn’t watch her fall behind anymore and be bored.” She concluded that “I have to make the best decision as a parent for what is going to be best for my daughter educationally and emotionally for her well-being, and that’s what it was.”

Parents articulated their frustration with the limits and burdens put on public schools and expressed apprehension with the alternative that private school provided. Charlene explained, “There has to be a bridge in between what public schools are doing and not being allowed to do and what private schools are doing... without it costing a huge amount of money, you know what I mean.” Parents recognized the relative freedom afforded to private schools, but that such freedom came with a hefty price tag, both financial and social. One parent marveled that a private school tuition was like “a second mortgage, it’s crazy... and I don’t know if it’s much better.” Jeannine admitted that when she took her daughter out of Patriot “I didn’t really want to send her to a private school, because there are a lot of social issues that come with that” such as “that almost elitist feel that you get... you [actually] go through a gate, you have to have a code... it just feels very stiff.” She did not “want that environment, either, but I don’t feel like public school is right for her, what’s the in between?”

Even when they were not satisfied with the school academically, some parents remained committed to the experience they and their children were having in their diverse neighborhood school. Jason reasoned that Patriot was “not the best situation in some ways for our children, but there is going to be broader benefits that you can’t see, they don’t show up in test scores or scholarship applications or things like that.” Though Jason had at times struggled with his and his wife’s decision to put their children in their neighborhood school, he thought that “if I want my kids to learn character and virtue, that is going to lead me down a different path of decision making than just I want my kids to get in a really good college.” When selecting a school for their children, parents have the choice to prioritize individual advancement or collective improvement.

Deficit Thinking

“I don’t think it’s malicious... It’s an entitlement kind of a thing.”

Many families new to the school were motivated to make a difference, but their assessments of why this needed to happen often relied on deficit assumptions about the families who had a longer relationship to the school. Parents do not feel welcomed or included in the school when their experiences are oversimplified or when they feel judged for their circumstances. To engage the whole community in democratic parental involvement, we must get to know families that are different than our own so we can appreciate what they bring to the table.

Developing relationships is an important step in appreciating differences in the community in order to work together for democratic parent participation. Pat, a white middle-class grandparent who had served as the President of the district council of PTAs, reflected on experiences she had trying to help parents with PTAs in numerous schools. She remembered a meeting where “there was one lady who spoke Spanish, nobody else spoke Spanish so we never saw her again.” Over time she had realized, “That’s very entitled of me, that I think, ‘oh, I will help but you have to speak English to me.’” She had numerous experiences seeing how parents were alienated when someone wanted to help them without really getting to know them. When she thought about district and PTA leadership not actively working to include more parents with services such as translation, interpretation, and childcare, she said “I don’t think it’s malicious, I think it’s just unaware and uncaring, it’s not listening. It’s an entitlement kind of a thing, ‘well sorry, they will just have to not be involved.’” Pat said the burden was on PTAs and the district to find better ways to work with “parents that have two or three jobs each, and that’s when there are two parents, and that is way more the norm in our district.” By reflecting on her experiences

working with parents from diverse backgrounds, Pat had learned that leaders need to include more families without trivializing their perspective or looking down on them. This is what we must do if we hope to truly collaborate with others.

When talking about why some parents were involved and others were not, parents and educators often referenced the very real struggles that families and public schools confront. These different experiences need to be understood and provided for, but the trick in doing so is to not overgeneralize, make assumptions, or ascribe value judgements to the people themselves. These statements are often made in attempt to understand what other people are going through. As a teacher, Ms. Lark delineated the difference between the parents “that are really, really involved in school are on the PTA, they come and help out and volunteer, and then there is like the other side, they are all like in poverty, I don’t know.” A white middle-class mom observed, “There is an economic divide, there is definitely a class kind of issue, and I think that the people who are really poor are working... however many jobs and have no time, to really be involved.” This sympathy was mixed with judgement. She said, “You can see a child who’s just obviously not getting support at home, they are just acting out, falling way behind in everything... that’s why so many parents are not involved, because literally they are just so stressed from life.” Another white middle-class mom summarized, “The school is full of kids that maybe don’t come from good homes or have a lot of money.” These labels reduce and dismiss the complex experiences of diverse families, causing us to miss out on the opportunity to understand each other and potentially work together.

The words we use ascribe hierarchical judgements to the different experiences of families, giving some people more value, credit, and agency than others. Principal Johnson is sensitive to the various backgrounds of families in the school and is careful to point out that all

parents want for “the next generation to do better than the previous generation.” She made a point, however, to distinguish that “for some, that’s a big reach to come out of the hole, for others, it’s like, okay we are already here let’s go a bit higher.” Educators tend to view school as a sanctuary as opposed to the image they have of students’ lives at home, “there are so many kids that come to school, and that is a vacation. It’s a safe place, it’s the only place they get outside of their front yard, or maybe their apartment complex.” As a result, schools are often seen as places where students and their families can be saved, albeit by people who care about them and love them. Principal Johnson explained, “I’d like to think that with a positive and proactive approach, we can begin to eliminate some of the fight or flight behaviors. When done right, school behavior can influence the homes. The key is relationships.” Brittany talked about how the district had partnered with an organization focused on “treating the condition of growing up in poverty through the lens of post-traumatic stress.” Educators and supporters of public education must walk a fine line between trying to understand injustices that impact some families disproportionately while also not reducing these experiences in a way that robs students and families of their power.

Considerations of gender were also sometimes attached to assumptions about families and culture. As one half of another active PTA couple, Jason said, “I think it’s a good thing, for dads to be involved in PTAs just to provide balance.” Jason explained, with some degree of hesitation, “I think there are some gender differences there just having a male in the room can help make decisions, or I don’t even know what.” He reflected that “I think there is a lot of impact that a male can have by being present in an elementary school in an involved way, because a lot of kids don’t see that.” His argument hinged not only on his perception of both gender dynamics but also his ideas about families from different cultural backgrounds. He said

he goes to “eat lunch with my kids, the other kids in their class gravitate towards me and I feel like a rock star when I am there.” He thought, “maybe because I am a dad, and some kids, maybe they don’t have a dad or see their dad that much. I think that it’s a really good thing and that it should be encouraged.” Jason argued that “in a poor urban environment, lots of times there aren’t very many males.” He described his impressions of families of color: “the African American community you know, there is kind of the grandmother who is kind of the leader of the family and there’s oftentimes not men who help in leading” and also “sometimes in Hispanic communities, the men go work all day and drink at night and they are just not present for the family.” In our work to support the school it is important to avoid relying on stereotypes that oversimplify the experiences of families that look different from our own. As President of the PTA, Jason admitted that “managing cultural differences has been a challenge. The reality is, there are white, there are black, there are Hispanic people at our school, and race isn’t just a color of skin, there is a whole culture and a whole history.”

Yet, it is not necessarily the recognition of other people’s challenges that is the problem, but rather the assumption that their lives can be “fixed” by others that gets in the way of real collaboration. Prejudiced assumptions about children’s home lives inform the line of thinking that outside help is needed for students to be successful. Principal Johnson called on the PTA “because there are so many children who don’t have support at home, the parents that are available to come to school can make things so much easier for the ones who need someone else to care.” As a parent whose kids had already graduated, Bill’s work in many schools across the district was motivated by this idea, “look at some of the top performing schools and you look at the demographics... I am not saying that the white kids are smarter, I am saying that the white parents tend to have been more involved.” He thought PTAs could “help do a lot of the stuff that

a lot of parents aren't able to do because some of them are having to work and can't get off, and some of them don't have the resources that we had."

Bill described what he felt was his impact working with students who were in the band with his children in high school. He stated that "for a lot of Hispanic people, graduation from high school is it. I remember they had a lot of big parties for the kids graduating from high school because that was the culmination of their educational experience." He was proud that "a lot of those kids that were in band are in college. I think otherwise they might not have gone to college but because we got them hooked in and enjoying school and stayed with it, it resulted in a better educational experience." He said that to get more parents involved you had to focus on extracurricular activities, "they don't go up to the school every day and sit in the classroom, and they don't mentor kids, and they don't volunteer to do reading or anything like that. Where they volunteer is extracurricular activities. That's where you get parents involved." He thought that if you could hook them through extracurricular activities like soccer, then "the people of the community realize if we want to make this a great school we need to get involved... just changing the mindset so people see this could be a great school if the parents would get more active." He saw his job as being one of "the community people here who are involved with the PTA, it's kind of like putting training wheels on to kind of help get it going." This metaphor is revealing, as training wheels are for children learning a concrete, objectively valuable skill from adults. On the other hand, a successful parent organization needs to work with all parents as equals, truly listen to what parents from different backgrounds have to say, and trust that everyone has something to learn from each other.

Deficit thinking creeps in to the most thoughtful and generous of individuals, often under a shorthand banner for trying to better understand the legitimate challenges many families

confront. To facilitate collaboration amongst diverse groups with different backgrounds and values, we must remain vigilant in our effort to not ascribe value judgements or oversimplify experiences that diverge from our own.

Gentrification of the School

“Let’s turn the school”

Families are drawn to Mountain View for the renovated historic homes, the walkability of the tree-lined streets, and the convenience of nearby restaurants and cafés. The neighborhood also attracts new residents with a community-orientation: those looking to meet fast friends on front porches, during crowded street festivals, or at countless meetings of local organizations held around the neighborhood aren’t disappointed. Mountain View’s identity as an “up-and-coming” neighborhood centers on an urban ethic of community involvement that spilled over into Patriot with the middle-class parents who have sent their children there. Though Patriot was not necessarily their first choice, many of these parents have committed themselves to supporting the school. While this support is well intentioned, it is sometimes grounded in the idea that the school needs to be fixed. If something needs to be fixed, it implies that it is broken. Outside experts are typically called on to fix broken things, but insiders possess unique knowledge of the conditions they have directly experienced. The contributions of the diverse families of Patriot Elementary School need to be valued—not discounted—if they are to feel welcomed and included in democratic parental participation.

Public schools are often seen as a problem to be fixed by outsiders. Early PTA leadership included “several people that don’t have kids in this school but want to help because it is their neighborhood school,” according to a board member. Another involved community member argued, “it doesn’t matter if you have kids there, it doesn’t matter if you have kids, it

just matters that they are our school and they are part of the community and we care.” A Patriot parent reflected, however, that this could spell trouble for the longevity of the organization because “two of the biggest players in the PTA didn’t even have children there this year. Maybe that’s just kind of revving the engines and getting it started, but I don’t know, it’s just hard to say what the future will be.” Though she was concerned, same parent was also inspired by the outside help, they were “just drumming up community support and that was exciting and interesting to me, okay we don’t just leave the school, and what if everybody put a lot into it, and it created something that you really wanted it to be?”

Even when it wasn’t their first choice, community members often dedicated themselves to the school once they were enrolled, in part because of the activist ethic common in the neighborhood. In contrast to the stereotype that PTAs are dominated by women, Brian and Charlene are one of many couples who approach their work on the PTA as a team. Brian explained this as being partially a result of the “economic makeup of our neighborhood, both parents work. So, parental responsibility is more evenly divided in our neighborhood than other areas.” In addition to the fact that regarding career and family “times are changing, but it’s also to be honest, I think it also lends a lot to [Mountain View]. The dads are more involved.” Charlene agreed that the PTA benefited from this aspect of neighborhood culture: “the dads are more involved in [Mountain View], and they are not waiting to be invited. The dads are just, they just show up to stuff.” Brian chimed in that “participation is high in our neighborhood. Regardless of activity.” Once he found out his son had not made the lottery for Rainbow Montessori, Brian thought “maybe this is our calling to help the school along. So, we did some scrambling to get into another school and then we looked at this and said, ‘well, if we’re gonna be here we are jumping in full force.’” He and his wife Charlene decided “if it is going to be

[Patriot], we are in. Let's go. Let's turn the school. Let's go, let's go, and let's go." As active community members, this felt right to them because Patriot is "in the middle of [Mountain View], we've been in [Mountain View] for eleven years, and we did the same thing, we moved into [Mountain View], we're here, we're here to make a difference." Though he had resisted sending his son to Patriot, Brian ultimately thought the PTA could serve a critical function in the school and community he cared so much about, "I love neighborhood association meetings. It's like the lowest and most interactive form of democracy available. It's just the same thing, the PTA for education."

Assuming a school needs improvement without taking a good look at the systemic reasons for perceived problems can discount the rich history of the families that came before. Though many new parents and community members who were involved in the school were motivated by altruism, these feelings can get tangled up in ambitions for the same urban development that is displacing families with generational ties to the school. Part of Bill's interest in Patriot was that "it's in the medical district, it's a school that could be like... some of those other schools that are doing really well, it's got the potential because it's in an area where there are lots of young families moving in and lots of development." Jeannine also compared it to other schools in the area that had experienced a boom after an increase in community interest, when "parents came in and said no, we are going to help this school, we are going to build this school.... and I think that is what [Patriot] can become, that was the potential I saw from the beginning."

With the changes in the community, there was some tension surrounding who the PTA should serve. Jeannine explained that Principal Johnson had said, "'most of our kids aren't [Mountain View] kids.' Well, you are in [Mountain View]. I don't think she has spent enough

time in [Mountain View] to know how diverse it is.” With the constant shifting within the community, the definition of a neighborhood kid is a slippery thing to pin down. One parent new to the community shared, “I do think that maybe the younger grades, the newer, younger parents are moving into the neighborhood.” Other white middle-class parents generally saw this as a good thing. Emily was excited to share that “we’ve got some really influential families with kids in the school now. We need them to be involved.”

Though there was excitement when new families decided to send their children to the school, this was still a relatively small number overall. While she was encouraged by certain community leaders sending their kids to the school, Emily admitted, “it’s going to be a lot longer road than I originally had envisioned when I said, let’s start a PTA!” She explained, “I thought, we’ll have this thing up and running in a year, next year we’ll have twice as many parents, next year we’ll have twice as many, and it’s just going to be a lot slower than that.” The longer she was involved, the more she realized that “whole cities are segregated,” and schools and PTAs play their part. At the school across town where she now teaches, Emily shared that “our playground has not one tree, so when school started [in August] it was 120 degrees on the blacktop pavement.” On the other hand, another school closer to Mountain View has “the nice brand new shade structures and the beautiful trees.” She said, “All of that is PTA. The bike rack, PTA. The nice shade stuff, PTA. The pretty flowers, PTA.” She remembered that at Patriot, “My mother in law came and planted flowers, did the garden in the courtyard. That was one of the first projects that PTA did. And why? Why is that?” Part of the reason might be that “if something looks nice, you want to go there, you want to be there, and even though it might not be the best,” as Ms. Aguilar explained. PTAs often focus on improving a school’s image, an effort that sometimes, but not always, supports the educational goals of a school. Ms. Aguilar

thought the PTA had done a good job of providing “something nice, something to look forward to, something to do. Just activities, and just the extras that are not to do with the school... things that make [Patriot] unique and apart from everybody else.” While improving grounds and programs is good for students and families already at the school, this is often a first step for PTAs concerned with improving a school’s image for recruitment purposes.

A well-resourced PTA can have a huge impact on a school. Bill shared that in the same city, you have schools on either end of the state rankings. He said, “In that six miles between you have dropped 4,100 rankings, why? What’s the difference? Is it the teachers are not good? Or the principals are not good? Or is it that the parents don’t parent their kids the same way?” He shared that he gave “a very high level CEO this scenario and he said ‘well, it’s got to be the principal, it starts with leadership.’” Bill conceded that “there is probably a little bit of that, but I don’t think you would have to be a super star principal for [that top ranked school] to be a great school.” He said, “Those parents will not tolerate less than high standards and good academics and great programs. They do a fundraiser and raise \$100,000 easy. [They] didn’t go to private so you’ve got a lot of money involved over there.” This led Bill to believe the difference was that “you’ve got a lot of resources that make the school better. You’ve got parents who are involved, parents are throwing their money at stuff so you have all these programs, which makes the teachers... fight to get in.” Pat agreed, sharing that even when competing for limited district resources, the “squeaky wheel got the program when there are places that aren’t getting what they are supposed to have.” This starts a vicious cycle where reputation begets resources and resources influence reputation.

In other words, it’s not that one school is actually doing a better job than the other. It’s that more privileged families call one of those schools home. In the name of school

improvement, many people want to recruit more affluent families. While this might make it appear as if the school has gotten better, it is really just that the school now serves a different clientele who better fits the middle-class definition of success. Having been involved with the PTA back when it was started, Brittany observed an attitude of “‘this is how we are going to make the school better.’ It completely alienated an entire group of people.” She thought all the new “white parents coming to the school, they were coming in with the mindset we are going to change the school, we are going to make the school better, we are going to gentrify the school.” She thought it had been insensitive for the PTA “to come in and say we are going to make yard signs but if you want yard signs you are going to have to pay twenty dollars. They are looking at us like, ‘y’all are idiots, this is our school.’” The parents who had a generational connection to the school saw the new white parents “like an interloper. You are coming into the school and you are going to change things, the same way they have for their neighborhood.” Brittany argued, “That is not how you create positive change, that is forcing change down people’s throats and forcing assimilation, it’s just not something that is going to be healthy or beneficial to the school.” To truly support the school, she said white middle-class parents must realize “there is more than one way to be successful... [Patriot] has its own culture and its own things that make it special, so if you try to make them [like another school] you are going to fail.”

Building democratic parental participation will require an appreciation of the varied experiences and contributions of families in a diverse school community. Jason had realized “learning to work together with different races, you have to recognize we are not going to see things the same way but we are going to have to work together. Not everybody is going to see it my way.” The first step in appreciating the complexity of other people’s lives is to recognize the limitations of your own understanding.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a reflection on the role new residents and parents are playing in the community and school. In a gentrifying neighborhood where families are being displaced, there are concerns that the same thing will happen in the local schools. This has been at least temporarily stalled as many middle-class parents, most of them white, have utilized school choice as one way to avoid the negative reputation that their peers share about Patriot. Even so, not all parents want to or can win those lotteries, so more of these families have been enrolling their children in the school. Many of the parents new to the neighborhood and school had sincere hopes to offer their help so the school could improve, but the assumptions in this desire are inherently hierarchical. Reflection on these roles is a necessary step in building relationships across lines of difference. The next chapter will focus on better understanding the hopes and dreams of the many families that call Patriot home. Newcomers need to get to know other families so they can better understand and appreciate their deep roots in this generational school and appreciate what these parents have to offer. Though parents come from diverse backgrounds, it is their shared desire for their children to be challenged, supported, enriched in all that they that can unite them in common cause.

CHAPTER 5: Building Relationships with Patriot Families

“The more people feel like we care and are connected to them, the better the whole school community is going to be.”

With generations of families connected and committed to the school, but not yet represented in the PTA, we needed to build relationships with all parents in the diverse community. As Julia explained, “the more people feel like we care and are connected to them, the better the whole school community is going to be.” Rosa, Julia, and I set out to do the survey and group interviews so we could get to know these parents’ hopes and dreams for their children and what they wanted the school to provide. When we made a point to learn more about all of families who call Patriot home, we found out that parents from different backgrounds generally wanted the same things for their children. Parents wanted to partner with educators to help students develop a love of learning and have the tools they need to be successful. They wanted their kids to grow up to be good people who are academically and socially well-rounded. Finally, the families of Patriot wanted the academic, social, and linguistic needs of diverse learners to be met in a way that brought the community together rather than kept it apart. Reaching out through the survey and interviews allowed the PTA to build relationships with more parents, a valuable step toward identifying the conditions needed for participation, representation, and advocacy.

All Parents Care

“You care the way you know how”

Regardless of background, responses on the survey and interviews highlighted that it is not a shortage of caring parents that stand in the way of educational success. Parents want what is best for their children, though the way this caring manifests itself is shaped by culture,

privilege, and access to resources. Rather than assume that the cause is familial shortcomings when students struggle, caring parents can be part of the solution.

While some members of the PTA board feared that the question on the survey asking for parents' "hopes and dreams" for their children was too broad and ambitious, others agreed we should keep it for its far-reaching implications. Parents' responses were genuine and powerful. They wanted their children "to succeed in life and to learn and explore as much as possible" and "sea muy inteligente y triunfador en su profesion que elija (be very intelligent and successful in the profession that you choose)." While many parents wrote that they wanted their children to be successful in school, college, careers, and beyond, some were careful to point out that they wanted their children to attain this success in a way that made sense for them as individuals, "I hope to see my children grow and develop at their own pace and at their own time. Pressure can only complicate a child's true calling." Many parents suggested the school should foster a child's individual growth and not stifle intellect, creativity, and curiosity. One hoped his son "enjoys learning and remains in a positive learning environment that encourages him to think." Another confessed confusion in approaching the educational system as it is today versus when she was a student, "I am concerned about how much I should demand from them without forcing my own belief system on what ought to be done. Things have greatly changed since I went to school." Most parents included well-roundedness, happiness, and health in their answers. One proudly wrote "sky's the limit."

Though parents wanted to the best for their children, they also recognized there was work to do to provide that for them. With the parents she has worked with as an educator, Principal Johnson witnessed this, "everybody has the same goal, to be happy, and have success." We do not tend to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, however. She shared "I've been around long

enough to hear parents say about other parents, or teachers say about teachers, parents, and kids, ‘they don’t care.’ That’s never true. You care the way you know how.” Of course, caring does not necessarily mean we have all the answers. One parent confessed, “being a parent is the hardest job ever. Talk about a job with an endless list of responsibilities where nothing ever gets taken away, it just gets added.” Another mom agreed that parents “always think I am not doing it right or doing it enough?” Principal Johnson explained that we all have room to grow, “I may say to a parent, ‘you need to do this.’ Doesn’t mean the parent doesn’t care. I may tell a teacher that ‘this is not going to work this way, try it that way.’ It doesn’t mean they don’t care, it means they just didn’t know what to do.” We must assume parents and educators care, and from that place we can work to make improvements together.

While all parents conveyed profound love for their children in survey responses and interviews, the overwhelming majority said time was the main limit on their participation in the school and PTA. All parents who were not PTA members cited time and work as the reasons for not joining. Members shared they had joined because they wanted to “help support the school,” to “be connected as a community and active with [my] child,” and to “know more information that my son doesn’t get in a newsletter, and to be a part of my child’s development in elementary school.” Most of the PTA members said they were actively involved, explaining “that’s what I signed up for,” and that they contributed “as much as I can between all the busy schedules.” To explain why they were not as involved as they would have liked, some cited personal or family health reasons such as pregnancy or elderly parents. Others reiterated the struggle with work and extracurricular schedules.

Even parents very interested in the school were very concerned they did not have enough time to actively participate. When I first interviewed Rosa and Julia, both had evaluated the

feasibility of their participation in relation to other responsibilities. Rosa explained that she joined the PTA for the first time this year because “I definitely was going to have time. My work schedule was really flexible and all of my kids were going to be in school.” She had wanted to contribute earlier, but said, “I’ve had my little one at home, it’s just a lot of work, and then I was working more hours so I just wasn’t able.” With the change in her schedule, she had more time for the PTA but still juggled this commitment with her other responsibilities. When I asked Julia if she was interested in working with me on this project, she said “I am willing to help in whatever it is, it’s just my schedule. You know, life, sometimes it gets complicated. Other than that, I am excited.” Though she had so many wonderful ideas to contribute, like many other parents Julia was concerned that she simply did not have enough time to participate.

Parents’ perspectives on participation were influenced by the amounts of time they have to dedicate. Emily, the first President of the PTA, explained that the assumptions she had about parental involvement were shattered when she went back to work as an elementary school teacher. She shared that as President, “I thought, if you don’t show up to meetings, and you don’t show up to events, and you’re not scooping nacho cheese at the Valentine’s Dance, then you are not involved.” Her circumstances have changed drastically. She said, “last year I was up there every day... [now] there are weeks where I don’t even show my face at the school. I absolutely can’t.” And yet she recognized her relative privilege, explaining, “I have got everything else easy. You know, there are parents who work way more than me who make a fraction of what I make, and have all the struggles that I am not having.” Her experiences as a teacher gave her perspective she did not have as PTA president, having worked with “parents who have to go to the laundry mat and can’t get medicine for their children because their doctors keep changing, their insurance keeps going in and out, all of those things I keep seeing with my

students.” Rather than assume this meant parents could not be involved, would not want to be involved, or did not have anything to offer, Emily put the responsibility back on the PTA to “have lots of different opportunities, because I feel bad, and I know they feel bad, too. Because they want to be able to be there for their kids.” As Emily illustrated, rather than wallowing in individual guilt or assuming a lack of involvement reflects a lack of commitment, recognition of the pressures that everyone faces allows for a reframing of the ways parents can contribute.

Time is such a valuable resource for families negotiating their responsibilities at home and work that for participation in the PTA to seem worthwhile, it must contribute to parents deeply held goals and dreams for their children. In Rosa’s translated transcript of the interview she and Julia conducted in Spanish, Patricia argued that despite the many pressures families face, “I think that we have to make time because our kids are important.” She shared a story where a boy asks his father, “‘Dad, how much do they pay you at work?’ The dad says, ‘they pay me ten dollars an hour.’ The boy says, ‘here I have ten dollars, give me an hour of your time.’” This story is powerful, but kids don’t tend to have money to pay their parents, and neither do PTAs. For participation in the PTA to be worth parent’s time, it must help fulfil their hopes and dreams for their children.

Home and School Connection

“It’s a triangle: the child, the teacher, and the parents”

Parents expressed a desire to strengthen the connection between home and school. Paradoxically, while teachers spend all day with students, parents learn very little of what goes on inside the classroom. Similarly, teachers have no real way to know what happens between the time students leave at the end of the day and arrive the next morning. Parents balance household responsibilities and their own work schedules with little time remaining to reach out to teachers,

and the time-consuming nature of preparing lessons and grading means that phone calls home often fall to the bottom of a teacher's long list of things to do. It is not that parents and teachers do not care, but that their caring is not readily translated into a venue where the other party can easily participate.

Parents from diverse economic and racial backgrounds grappled with confusion and anxiety about what happens during the school day. In particular, parents of younger children expressed how difficult it was to not be more informed about their child's experiences at school, both because for many families it is new to have them away from the home and also because the children are not as capable of explaining their experiences to their parents. A Pre-K parent shared her disappointment from the previous school year, "I wanted to be more involved in his classroom. I just expected that." During my first interview with Julia, she told me about the conversations she had with other Pre-K parents at pick up time, "We still talk about it. We say, 'okay, has your kid gotten comfortable coming to school?' We have parents that still say, 'oh no, I still struggle with my kid coming to school, to feel comfortable,' and you wonder why." Though her daughter has always been happy when she drops her off, Julia said "There are days where I just wonder how school is going. I ask her, but of course kids just say, 'well, I had a good day'" and they run off. Or they lose interest, they don't want to talk." Parents are hungry for more information, as Julia explained, "I want to make sure that the communication is open between the teachers and the parents, that's how everything is going to work well." Another parent agreed, sharing their expectation of "just having open, honest communication with her teachers and knowing she has their support."

Parents wanted feedback about student performance and advice as to how to support their students at home. Julia explained her goal with her child's teacher, "I want to be able, if she has

any concerns, for her to be able to talk to me and for me if I have any concerns for me to be able to talk to her.” Rosa told a story about calling her daughter’s teacher when she brought home a report card with a low grade in Social Studies. The teacher said, ‘She’s fine, it’s okay. It’s just because kids don’t like reading, Social Studies is a lot of reading.’” Rosa was frustrated that “I didn’t get any help, any tips, ‘you can make her do this or do this.’” She craved a more collaborative relationship with the teacher so they could work together for her daughter’s success. Similarly, Patricia was shocked there were not established times for parent/teacher conferences, “If the parent cares about their child then you have to go ask the teacher how your child is doing. I think that the teachers just give us a quick answer. That does not help me at all.” For parents to learn more while considering the time required for teachers, Patricia suggested, “They should have conferences by grade level. That way it’s a small group, but the teacher gets it done in one day and we as parents can ask questions.”

Parents and educators agreed that they needed to establish stronger connections for the good of students. Patricia painted a picture of what her ideal relationship with teachers would look like. She said, “It’s a triangle: the child, the teacher, and the parents. If there is not that union, then the triangle will never connect. We as parents should never slack because we have our child’s best interest.” Interestingly, fourth grade teacher Mr. Lopez’s definition of parental involvement evoked the same simple, powerful image: “This is a three-way triangle of everyone communicating and everyone being in the loop... communication, with the parent and the teacher, the teacher and the student.” While everyone must participate for effective communication, Mr. Lopez put the burden of responsibility on the teacher, “I need to be that instigator; my best interest is the student, and I am assuming the parents best interest is also the student. You know parents are always busy, but teachers are always busy with the students.”

Rosa agreed that the pressures many parents are under made it difficult to stay informed about what children are doing in school. She said, “there are parents that are like, doing two jobs, they just don’t have time at all, they don’t even know what’s going on, if they are doing their homework or turning it in.” Ms. Lark concurred that communication was difficult for parents “because they are worried about what’s going on at home.” Ms. Lark ultimately believed it was up to her to connect with parents in a way that was compatible with what they had to offer. She explained, “I think as teachers we just have to reach out more and just make them feel comfortable... if it’s something that they can help with, I’m sure that they’ll help.”

Social media was often cited as a useful tool for helping busy teachers and families connect. During one of the group interviews, Julia shared that she found her daughter’s class Facebook page to be helpful in establishing a link between home and school, and shared that when the teacher would ask for supplies. Julia said, “Sometimes we would end up fighting, ‘I want to bring it!’” Beyond functioning to recruit volunteers and resources, the Facebook page also made the exchange of information more routine, Julia explained, “It helped me distress. Here’s pictures from this activity, it’s my first child so what do they do all day?” With her son in the same class as Julia’s daughter, Rosa explained that the Facebook page was also used to prompt parents to “make sure you ask your child about...” the various topics they were studying in class. Rosa appreciated this communication with her son in Pre-K, but had never experienced it with either of her older daughters. She was optimistic that as her son progressed through the school, perhaps this culture of strong communication could move up to the higher grades. To successfully reach out to families, Rosa suggested that teachers should “survey your own parents, what is the best way to communicate with you? Every teacher really needs to have a parent meeting and ask what is the best way, how could we do this? Texting, Facebook, our own

Facebook page?” By considering parent preferences, teachers could establish effective communication with all families.

Social media helped parents and teachers improve their communication, but there was still difficulty in negotiating how to welcome parents into the classroom in a way that busy teachers could reasonably accommodate. Though the Facebook page was teacher-initiated, Julia confessed she sometimes felt parents overwhelmed the teacher with their responses and desire to be included in the classroom. When the teacher would promote an event, Julia said, “We would be like, ‘Oh can we go?’ We want to be there, but we didn’t feel invited. We kind of invited ourselves to everything. That made them happy, ‘Oh, my mom was in my class today!’” She was laughing as she said “She’s probably like, ‘Thank god I don’t have them anymore’” now that her daughter would be in kindergarten the following year. Julia got more serious when she reflected, “That’s important. I want to feel like the teacher is welcoming me.” During the group interview, another mom asked Julia, “What about parents having lunch with their kids? Is that allowed? Is it encouraged? If you had fifteen random parents every lunch, the [behavior] issues in the cafeteria wouldn’t exist.” Julia answered, “I had to ask. You are never told you are welcome to come. Only the parents that request, that’s what we did, and we invited more moms.” Parents recognized that it was not easy for the school to accommodate everyone that wanted to be involved in the classroom, but one parent explained that she thought the goal should be to build “community of normalcy of everyone coming in and helping out, without stressing out the teachers.”

To take down the wall between home and school, parents and teachers must agree on the best ways to welcome each other into their separate worlds. Principal Johnson understood where each party was coming from, “I’ve been a parent before, I’ve been a teacher, and now as an

administrator, I've seen from every aspect of how people could feel a little bit nervous about what's going on during the school day." Principal Johnson stated that her goal was "everyone feels comfortable, and everyone has their roles. We all know our roles and do what we need to do to make that child feel comfortable that they are going to be a success, which makes the whole school a success." Everyone has a part to play in serving the school and supporting the students, but those roles might not always be clear. Families and educators need to establish guidelines about when and how parents participate in the classroom in a way that is accessible to everyone and that promotes the school's educational goals. The benefits of welcoming families into the school are twofold: parents get to participate in their child's education, while teachers learn more about student's families.

A Rigorous Learning Environment

"Teaching to the test is terrifying"

Parents want their children's schools to be places where they are happy, safe, and challenged to grow intellectually. Of all the surveys and interviews, not a single parent expressed a desire for their child to score higher on standardized tests, while most parents shared they would like the educational environment be more rigorous so their children could have greater investment in their own learning. One parent wrote, "It needs to be challenging and engaging with many activities to balance all the time spent sitting still and concentrating." Others wanted "enough challenges and fun activities" and "creative learning opportunities" in the classroom. One parent explained, "I would like there to be more enrichment for all students in the classroom. Less focus on teaching to the test and more emphasis on holistic teaching about multiple areas."

Ironically, parents perceived high stakes testing as having diluted academic standards rather than raising them. Rosa lamented the changes since she was a student at Patriot, and was sad her children were not getting as good an education because “the test scores really went down and that is what is really affecting everything else.” Drawing on her experience as a high school teacher as well as a parent, Amanda explained how end-of-year state testing often means districts employ more frequent benchmark tests. She said, “If you are an English teacher, you have all these mini-tests throughout the year that are just like the tests they are going to have at the end of the year.” Increasing the frequency of these standardized, high pressure tests has a trickle-down effect. Amanda argued, “Everything is geared toward teaching them how to take the test all year long... it’s about trying to decipher about what could possibly be on the test, they even make them do their homework on printouts that look like their answer sheet on the test.” The danger is that the passion could be taken out of teaching and learning as classrooms and schools become outcomes-focused. Amanda believed the impact to be far-reaching, “They are not learning because learning is fun and rewarding, and realizing that it is awesome to be smarter. There is not that creative aspect of exploring and learning anymore because we have to teach to the test.” As both a teacher and a parent, she argued, “Teaching to the test is terrifying. It’s a huge concern.”

In general, parents of younger students expressed more satisfaction with what their children were learning and how they were being evaluated. Amanda shared that teaching to the test was not a problem in Pre-K because “it was more of can they focus, know his ABCs, numbers, can he tie his shoes. It’s all those kind of basic things, it’s like: he’s accomplishing this or he’s accomplished it.” She was pleased that in this skill-oriented setting “he has learned to read. He has done really well, he can read a lot of basic words. He has forty or fifty words now,

which is pretty impressive in Pre-K. I thought maybe my memory that wasn't until kindergarten." Additionally, Amanda appreciated the focus on learning appropriate behavior for school, "I like the structure, you drop them off, he knew to open his bag, put his folder in the thing, put his name in the deal, and go sit in the spot." This all culminated with timely, age-appropriate feedback. She said, "You got a smiley face for the day or you got a number," which allowed parents to stay in the loop on their child's progress.

Parents of children in older grades, however, expressed more concerns. Patricia, who has been in the United States for eight years, was surprised when she compared the schools with those in Mexico, "I assumed that getting here to the United States that it was going to be, in regards to the school... more advanced than ours. And I see that, that's not the case. I see that they are behind." When they transferred from Mexican schools, Patricia explained, "My daughters already knew what was being taught two grade levels ahead. My daughters would tell me, 'we already learned this a long time ago.'" She thinks part of the reason is that "they don't let them struggle." She told a story that when her mother would help her with homework as a child: "I would barely reach for a pen to write out a problem and she would already know the answer in her head. Imagine back then, I depended on a pencil, but in my mom's generation everything was in here" she said as she tapped on her temple. In parenting her own children, she said, "I don't let them just try once and give up. No, because that's how life is. It's not easy. You have to figure out how to do things. You can't just say 'I can't' if you haven't even tried."

The more frequent testing for older students caused some parents to have serious concerns about rigor and engagement in the classroom. One mother was upset because "the kids aren't engaged, they just zone out." Still, she did not "blame it at all on the teachers, it's systemic." Emily shared a similar concern. She said "He is getting to a point now where he is

bringing home 100s on everything. I am not saying that my child is brilliant, but I really am starting to wonder about the rigor.” She drew on her experience as teacher in the district, sharing, “I can see how hard it is to challenge your students because the focus from the district and from everybody is those low babies.” Another mom explained how difficult it must be for teachers to meet the needs of “twenty to twenty-four kids on all sorts of all different educational levels... it seems like only the kids that are right spot on where they should be are the kids that are actually getting the full benefits.” She argued that struggling and advanced students alike suffered in large classes. She watched her daughter “getting bored, I could see her not being as interested in studying even her spelling words [because] she would be like, ‘Well, I can already spell them all.’” She reflected, “I don’t think it was the fault of the teacher or the school specifically, I think it was the fault of the entire breakdown of our school systems as a whole: having to teach this core curriculum and standardized testing.”

Some parents tried to supplement what was being offered at school from home. To enrich her daughter’s educational experience, one parent tried “to do things at home with her, and she enjoyed it, but I was like why am I doing this at home?” Another mom also experimented with enrichment activities for her daughters. She said, “I know that so much of what they learn whether they are in school or not is what we do at home... and we can always supplement their education with a lot of other things.” This was difficult to maintain because after the end of a long school day “we are all tired.” Families have so much on their plate and want to make the most of the extensive time their children already spend at school.

Low test scores result in sanctions from the district and state, which puts tremendous pressure on teachers, students, and administrators that many parents consider counterproductive in school improvement efforts. One parent expressed confusion with how to make the school

more rigorous, “I don’t know how you change the academics. Because they put so much pressure already on the teachers and the children through testing... but it’s grueling, you don’t want to put even more pressure in that direction because it doesn’t seem that effective.” Teachers struggle to keep up with testing requirements in their classroom, and Rosa felt it impacted their ability to collaborate with the PTA. She said, “We haven’t been able to really work with them because of that because they are just busy. And it’s because of the test scores. They are harder on the teachers.”

This pressure also falls on administrators. Instead of spending her time supporting teachers, Principal Johnson felt she was constantly pulled in other directions. She said, “I would like to be more, part of the instruction, but with so many demands... it wears you out at times.” She says she knows what needs to happen at her school but is not given the freedom to implement these changes. She explained, “I can do the work, give us time to do it. Someone is always in my office. You need people that can be there all the time, don’t just come in, you are distracting me! That is so frustrating.” Principal Johnson was consumed by the pressure: “there are days when I am thinking this is way too much for me to take on in my regular job.” She understood that students and teachers experience the same strain. She said, “I really believe that with less anxiety and fear it just makes for a better environment.”

Parents want students to be held to high standards, while also providing for multiple definitions of success. Rosa claimed, “Everybody is being lenient, they are not making them struggle, they are not making them work their brains.” Amanda had witnessed that “kids get passed on because they are doing the best they can as opposed to, no, this paragraph is incorrect.” She elaborated that at the high school level, “We graduate seniors who read and write on a seventh-grade level all the time, and they are passed on because we have to pass them on.”

One father agreed, “We aren’t big fans of coddling, or moving along. Fail the grade, there is trade school. Nothing wrong with that. Give the children as many tools as possible. Not everyone is meant to be a doctor.” In other words, hold students to a high standard, while making available multiple paths for advancement.

While the focus on testing detracts from other educational experiences, some parents thought test scores did not accurately represent what takes place at a school. Emily shared her thought process when enrolling her sons at Patriot, “I kept thinking, when I started them, well, what makes a good school? What’s good? Well, I know it’s not how the kids perform on [state tests], you know?” In some cases, it seemed as if parents were resigned to testing being the metric for school success, even when they personally had issues with the approach. Jason, the current PTA President, shared he and his wife were relieved to learn about an improvement in the school’s state test scores even though “we have our concerns about testing, but it is a measure, and it’s what the school is putting a lot of emphasis on because the district and the state are forcing them to do that, and so to me that is a sign that there is improvement.”

While not one parent directly stated a desire for higher test scores for their own child, even parents critical of testing’s broader impact typically accept scores as at least one measure of school quality. In their advocacy for a more rigorous educational environment, parents must confront the ways in which the focus on testing itself can hold their students and their school back from making real progress.

Providing the Support Students Need

“It’s all based on numbers”

Parents believed that the school’s responsibility in educating students did not stop at the classroom door. Students are complex beings who require support, enrichment, and relationships

to be successful. Additional tutoring, a comprehensive Gifted and Talented (GT) program, and a state of the art library were all cited as services parents would like to have available through the school.

On the survey, parents requested additional supports and enrichment for their children. One parent wrote that they hoped the school could be more successful in “defining students in need and helping/aiding with those needs in discreet and compassionate ways.” One way to do this within the school would be through “mejor consejería para los niños y los padres (better counseling for children and parents)” and another wanted to see “more attention [paid] to the after-school program.” A frequent request was more opportunities for one-on-one instruction and tutoring, both within the school day and after school. One parent wrote they would like their child to “conseguir ayuda para clases de escritura y matematicas (get help for writing and math classes)” and others cited reading as an area of concern. Some parents suggested that establishing partnerships with “outside resources: community daycare, scholarships, etc.” could be a promising way to serve students within the school.

The GT program was one way the district and school aimed to meet the needs of advanced students, though some parents had concerns about the criteria for participation in the program. One white, middle-class mother questioned the criteria for the program as she explained her own daughters’ experiences. She said, “They are in the gifted and talented program and they are just considered one of the smarter kids but I am not really seeing that... they still come home and are terrible spellers and not very good readers.” She said she thought her children might be in the program because “it’s just more about parents being informed in their child’s lives, and modeling how to be a good reader, how you research things, how do you make all of this an active part of your life, always learning.” Her concerns were twofold, first its

“not that they are that much smarter, but they didn’t come from a different kind of home, you know, than other kids have to deal with,” and second “I don’t think that they are challenged that much.” Not only is the criteria unfair to kids from different backgrounds, but it did not even serve her own children to be lumped into a category that did not accurately deal with their real strengths and weaknesses as students.

On the other hand, access to the program was more of a concern for other parents. Tiffany had been much more impressed with the way the GT program served her child and others in the school, her only complaint being she wished a full GT class was available in every school. In the beginning, Tiffany was pleasantly surprised about her son’s inclusion in the GT Program, though she confessed, “I shouldn’t say surprisingly, it sounds awful from a parent, [but] we weren’t expecting it based on his aptitude or interest in learning prior to kindergarten.” She said he never seemed like a focused learner because “he jumps from one thing to another... but once he drills into something that he really likes, he can really get into something... [he] comes home every day and will talk to me nonstop for five minutes about this invention.” Tiffany was grateful for her son’s experience in the program. She said, “Once he plugged into that and got to explore that nontraditional learning setting, I think that’s really given him confidence to think outside the box.”

When students would thrive in a GT setting, it can be frustrating for them and their parents when those services aren’t available. Tiffany wished her son got to experience such an engaging and challenging learning environment even more frequently. She explained, “He gets pulled out three days a week now which is just great, and he gets so excited when he gets to go to GT.” While the program has recently expanded, Tiffany “would like to see him being challenged at that level, at the GT level, consistently. He does get bored in the classroom, he

does all of his homework in like an hour for the week.” When she asked for more GT services at the school, “The answer from the district right now is send them to a choice program. Well, I want my kid in my neighborhood school.” In her son’s class, the students who got pulled out were “a diverse group. I was really happy to see, because the only kids that I knew for sure were getting pulled out were... the white kids, great, and, whose parents are working professionals.” Tiffany argued that GT services should be available at all schools, serving children in all neighborhoods, “It shouldn’t just be solely at certain campuses... those kids go everywhere.”

Parental advocacy would be required to implement a full-fledged GT program at Patriot. The GT teacher told Tiffany the pull-out program was a step toward a full-fledged GT class, and each school needed to “identify a certain number of kids and as the needs increase... then they apply for resources.” She described the efforts that were underway to expand the program on campus: “Our school is pushing for parents to speak up if they think their kids needs this, to be pulled out.” She argued it was critical for parents to advocate for their own children “because a lot of time teachers may not have time to recognize, and it could be that there is a really quiet kid who is not speaking out, but not being challenged.” This advocacy served the whole school “so that the district will apply more resources to our campus.”

The library was another area where parents wished the district would dedicate more resources. One parent wanted “enfocarse en mejorar a la biblioteca. Para que los ninos se motiven a la lectura se a mas creative (focus on improving the library. So that children will be motivated to read and be more creative). Rosa agreed, “The library is a big thing for me. I feel like we really need to tackle that, so hopefully we can this year or next year, but hopefully we can soon.”

Not only did many parents feel like the library facilities were outdated, but there were concerns because the school shared the librarian with another campus. Principal Johnson explained that “it’s all based on numbers” for the librarian, the Assistant Principal (AP), and other key positions within the district. She said, “The only reason that I have a full-time AP is because we have an alternative school... I want to say 400 [is the cutoff] and we have never reached that since I have been here, we’ve always been like 380.” Brittany, a member of the School Board and former Patriot parent, said, “I would really like it if we could have a librarian at every school, but I also just know that from a funding perspective, we can’t do it.” When the school board was confronted with the decision to put a librarian at each school or hire more people for dyslexia services “dyslexia services won. That is an area that has been chronically underfunded for two decades. We just added back a full-time nurse at every school, which was like pulling teeth.”

Due to financial constraints, district officials were forced to choose between these positions. Brittany evaluated what she saw as their impact on campus: “Librarians, for what their role is now, which is basically unlocking the library and keeping track of the books. I don’t think it’s necessary.” Brittany argued, “Before we get to a librarian on every campus, we need to have an AP on every campus, because APs handle discipline.” She said, however, if “you actually have a librarian who is a key stakeholder on that campus and a driver of the administration on that campus, I think that is looking at it through a different lens.” Brittany outlined her ideal role for librarians. She said they should be “considered part of the reading program and they actually have curriculum through the library, and it’s actually done to actually promote literacy, which is one of our strategic goals for the district.”

While having the right person in each role is important, there is also a fundamental need to simply have enough positions to serve all the students in each school. Principal Johnson agreed the most important variable for a successful librarian is that “the person needs to be willing to do the work.” Splitting these positions could be a self-fulfilling prophecy, however. Principal Johnson shared, “Other principals say it’s like not having an AP at all if you have to split it with another campus.” This limitation could also be applied to librarians asked to divide their time between two schools. In each of these cases, the fundamental problem is that schools are asked to share these positions at all. Particularly in the case of a high needs campus like Patriot, Principal Johnson pointed out that “we do need more people, not less of one person... it takes so much from everyone to support the children, to get us where we need to be.” Schools are constantly asked to do more with less, an equation that sets them up to fail.

A Multilingual School

“I would love for the students to be integrated”

Literacy and communication impact all aspects of student’s academic and social progress. Every single student possesses different linguistic skills and goals: there is not an easy, clear-cut solution to make sure that schools can meet all their needs at the same time. While attempting to serve the needs of diverse learners, it is important be careful of the ways in which this goal can functionally segregate students and contribute to cultural division on campus.

Multiple parents shared a desire to have Spanish speaking and English speaking students learning together. One parent wrote on a survey, “I so wish the Spanish speaking children weren’t separated by classes...I would love for the students to be integrated and for the Spanish speakers to teach the English-speaking students, and vice versa.” During one of the group interviews Amanda asked, “Why do we have Spanish speaking kids in one class and English

speaking kids in another, why aren't they together, why aren't the kids teaching each other Spanish and English... that really bothers me." Many parents were confused about the way the dual language and regular program classes functioned and interacted on campus. One white parent asked, "Do they even eat lunch together? I guess if they have to eat with their class, even if they are in the same lunch they are still not communicating with each other because they are different." Her son was having a hard time in his class and she went to see if he could switch to another teacher. She said, "I was fed up that day and I didn't talk to [my son] first and he was like, 'Mom, there is only one other class and its Spanish speaking!' I was like, 'Oh well, you're stuck!'" Another white parent had wanted to put her children in the dual language program. She explained, "I would have loved for my kids to have that opportunity... but we weren't really even given a choice."

Even parents within the program did not always fully understand how it functioned or if it was necessarily the best placement for their child. Julia's daughter was in the dual language Pre-K class, and she shared "my daughter being bilingual, it sometimes confuses her." Though Julia and her daughter are bilingual, Julia explained, "Spanish is actually my second language. I learned English before, the Spanish I learned was from my parents and then I went to Spanish classes." Julia gets frustrated because "I cannot tell her the ABCs in Spanish, I can tell her in English, but not in Spanish. That's where it gets difficult for me to help her with her homework." Each family has different experiences and challenges, so it can be difficult to separate students into two distinct groups that appropriately meet all student's needs.

The dual-language program at Patriot is one-way and intended for Spanish speaking students to learn English, though many of the students are bilingual when they start the program. A parent explained that to be eligible for the dual language program you have "to take a test at

the language placement center and you have to be Spanish dominant in order to qualify.” Ms. Aguilar, fifth grade dual language teacher, loved the program but she was not sure it is the most appropriate for the needs of the school. She said, “our students are very bilingual... I mean everything is so English everywhere that it is hard for them to just focus on the Spanish.” She outlined how the program was designed to progress throughout a student’s educational career:

Starting in Pre-K everything is in their first language, which is Spanish, the only thing that would be in English is Math... then Second [Grade] is when they are starting to introduce English literacy... and then Third Grade Spanish starts to become equal to the English so once they are in Fifth Grade they are getting equal time for everything. The purpose is for them to be literate in the first language, first, and then in English all they have to do is learn the vocab words which is just translating it over, and then by third, fourth, fifth grade they should be biliterate.

Ms. Aguilar thought the dual language program was very good for her students intellectually. She explained, “Like mathematical stuff, we’ll talk about quadrilateral, and where have you heard that before, like cuadrado, like that’s four, so you have to use that and know that your Spanish is going to help you with your English.” She encouraged them to see their bilingualism as a hard-earned privilege. She told them, “You know English and Spanish, use that to your advantage... you’ll thank me later!”

On top of the academic benefit for Spanish speakers, there was also potentially a social benefit within the dual language classes because they almost function as a smaller academy within the school. One parent explained, “All the other kids that started out in kindergarten will be moved onto the next level and are going to be in the same classroom... so it builds a greater bond.” This parent also observed that the dual language classes seemed to have fewer students

with more shared cultural background, resulting in “more of a level of understanding with the teacher and the students and what’s expected.” Ms. Aguilar saw this play out in her relationships with parents. She said, “Culturally, I am dealing with Hispanic parents, the communication is there.” This translated into connections with her students, as well. She said, “Growing up with Hispanic parents and it’s something I can relate to with my own students. A lot of them are first generation and I can tell them, ‘Hey, I’m first generation.’” Ms. Lark had witnessed the outcome of this bond from across the hall. She reflected, “I feel like their behaviors in the dual language classes are way better than in the regular program.”

Though this bond was beneficial to students within the dual language program, it could potentially have a negative impact on the overall campus culture. As a regular program teacher, Ms. Lark was concerned about what this separation meant for the overall school community. She said, “Some kids, like they might never cross paths because one is just always in the dual language class growing up and one is always in the regular class growing up. I feel like they just need more practice mingling.” Unsure of what change would be best, but wishing something were different, Ms. Lark said, “I wish that we could also like teach Spanish in our class or like just have a mostly English class and then have some Spanish time, and we could all kind of just be together.” She even went as far as to say we should have “dual language all across the board, like all the kids.” She reflected, “I wish I was bilingual and I really wanted that in my schools. Now you are going to have to, because people want you based on speaking two different languages, in jobs.” There are many reasons why parents and students find bilingualism desirable. Tiffany’s son came to her and said, “Mom, I think I need to learn to speak Spanish because a lot of the kids I play soccer with only speak Spanish. How am I going to play in high school if all the kids are from Mexico or Argentina?” Principal Johnson shared, “I raised an

African American son that I think should have learned Spanish... especially in Texas.” She stated, “It is my hope that all schools will one day provide bilingual education for all students.”

Though Patriot’s program is one-way dual language, some schools in the district offered two-way dual language for English and Spanish speakers to learn both languages in the same classroom. Ms. Aguilar clarified, “There’s really only three to four schools [in the district] that really have dual language if you really have no Spanish background.” She confessed she did not entirely know how the two-way immersion programs in the district worked, but said, “I don’t see why every school shouldn’t have it... I think it would be great.” She referenced her experience student teaching in a blended kindergarten classroom: “their minds are still developing, and they soak everything up and even just the morning songs they would have days where they were all in English, and days where they all sung in Spanish and so they learned it.”

While two-way dual language programs were attractive to many families, they were not without their own complications. When speaking about her grandchildren at another school, a community member said those classes were also segregated. She explained that “all of the overachieving parents are in those classes. That’s crazy because... there are ten parents that want to go on a field trip, and none for the other classes.” She also had concerns about her grandchildren’s academic success. She said, “I worry that by the time they get to sixth grade, will they have learned science because they were learning it in Spanish? I worry because it’s brand new. The district has no plan beyond fifth grade; they are the experiment.”

Some parents’ stories suggested it is not always seamless to introduce young children to multiple languages. I interviewed Charlene and Brian, a married couple who both speak other languages in addition to English, and they shared their thoughts on this topic. Charlene described her experience with her son:

If you try and do two languages from the beginning and you don't wait until their first language is established, then their first language, the native language, suffers. And so, we had experience with that with [our son] because I spoke French with him from when he was born. So, then his English was exceptional when he started speaking. He had his entire verb tenses correct before he was three and a half, and his English was beyond his years, and then somewhere around, right before his fourth birthday, he started speaking as if English was his second language, and he starting switching verb tenses, pronouns, flip flopping as if he had just learned English... so, I backed off on the French for six months and his English came back.

Based on this experience, Charlene's husband Brian concluded, "You've got to get the grammar structure down in one language, regardless of what it is, and then once that is established at age three, four, five, depending on the child, great, move on."

The rationale behind most ESL, bilingual, and dual language instruction is to promote English literacy for all students in an English dominant culture. Brian made the case that "first generation children, immigrants into the school, or any learning environment, the goal is to get them up to speed as quickly as possible... push them in accelerated English to move them along." He supported Spanish instruction for native English speakers once they had a handle on their first language. He said, "It helps the cultural divide. It helps understand other cultures." He did not think they should be taught in the same class as those still learning English, however. Brian argued, "You go to the slowest general level of either language. Because if you teach Spanish to the English speakers, that's fine. But during that same time native Spanish speakers as a first language are going bored out of their skull." When asked what his ideal language program would look like, Brian responded, "Using Spanish to move English along as quickly as possible"

for non-Native English speakers. He then argued, “From a bicultural standpoint, at second grade, [all] the children should be learning a second language.”

Though many parents expressed a desire for Patriot to develop a more integrated bilingual culture, this is not always the case in majority Latino schools. Brittany shared an experience she had as a School Board member where she felt ambushed by parents at a meeting who did not want two-way dual language instruction at their school. She said, “They had kids make signs that said, ‘If you want to learn Spanish, move back to Mexico.’” She made sure I understood, “This was Latino parents. This was third and fourth generation Chicano parents that didn’t want their kids to learn Spanish.” Before advocating for a particular position, parents must gauge consensus within the school community. These questions are not without controversy in a society where immigration status, nationality, and racial identity are politically charged.

The potential linguistic and even behavioral benefits to sorting students according to language must be weighed against the legitimization of segregation and division within the school. Because the school is predominantly Latino, discussions with parents and their survey responses focused on the English and Spanish languages, but it is important to remember this is only the beginning. There are other languages spoken in the school and other cultures represented; the goal is not simply a bilingual or bicultural school but rather a school community that validates and enriches the linguistic and cultural experiences of all students.

Teaching Respect

“If you see life with hatred’s eye, where are you really going to get to?”

Many parents highlighted their concerns about other students’ negative behaviors detracting from the educational environment, but disagreed about the extent to which these issues

were a result of parenting, teaching, or more systemic issues. On the survey, a parent expressed that their “main concern [was] having disruptive students in her class that affect her learning” and another wanted “discipline towards children that misbehave.” Beyond behavioral problems being distracting, one parent wrote they were afraid “pues que les vayan a ser intimidado (because they were going to be bullied)” and another wanted a “safe environment” for their child. Julia summarized how so many parents did not want to have to “worry about your kid every day, about his safety, about happiness, you want them to succeed.” Student experiences could vary wildly, for example, a mother shared that while one of her sons loved his class and was very happy, she had a hard time because her other son “struggled a lot. You know, kids picked on him, and he had a lot of issues... he would come home and he would be crying, it was miserable.” Rosa underscored the importance of respect in the classroom, “If there is not respect, the teachers don’t have time to really give quality teaching.”

Viewed from the outside, many parents were concerned that these negative behaviors resulted from the ways students were being taught. Rosa shared that daughter was “always complaining that the teacher is yelling, it’s more about the behavior than ‘Oh I learned this in class, or the teacher taught me this.’ She is more busy trying to keep them quiet.” Principal Johnson agreed that academics and behavior are related, but looked at it from another angle. She explained, “Students who are frustrated academically become behavioral. We will eliminate some of the unnecessary stress by teaching and making sure that all students are learning.” One mother shared she had experienced this with her daughter. She said, “I think that she was just bored so she was acting out in the classroom.” More and more frequently, this mother would get reports about her daughter and imagined she would think, “‘Oh, I know how to do this worksheet, I am done, so I am just going to sit here and talk to my friend.’ Well, your friend

might not be done and that is not the appropriate time to talk.” Patricia worried teachers were too lenient with the students. She said, “It seems that they let them do what they want. I feel like they have to be stricter. Strict but not mean. But they have to know that there has to be a respect.” While she wanted the teachers to be friendly with students, she also felt that “there should be a line that they can’t cross. When they cross that line, they don’t care anymore. When they grow up then you can’t control them... we have to teach them while they are little.”

Structural limitations such as class size also have bearing on student behavior. During one of the group interviews Amanda explained, “The kids can’t focus when there’s thirty [students]. So, the ones that are struggling get ignored because you are focused on the ones that are causing problems in the class.” On the other hand, she thought, “You don’t usually have the kids acting out if it’s fifteen or twenty. I know because I have had those classes that are fifteen to twenty, then when you have the class that is thirty, thirty-five, you are having to put out fires before you are doing anything else.” She acknowledged how difficult this would be to change at the school level. She said, “I don’t know how that can be touched. You need more money, and teachers. More teachers, which means more classrooms. It’s all about money.” Teacher experience levels and faculty turnover, factors related to the resources a school has, also have a large bearing on student behavior. Jason shared a story about his son’s third grade teacher who was new to the school. He said, “She didn’t know how to manage a classroom and it literally got out of hand, to where fights were breaking out in the classroom and it was uncontrollable, and there was no teaching going on at all.” The teacher was removed and replaced, and “the new teacher did reign in the classroom and did manage the classroom, but she was kind of an old-school disciplinarian, so if one person talked then the whole class isn’t going to recess.” Jason and his wife did not approve of this approach and considered moving their children to another

school, but ultimately remained at Patriot. He reflected on how difficult it was to have “your kid getting caught in the crossfire. That was a tremendous challenge.”

Parents connected student behavior to intolerance in the world beyond the school’s walls. Julia argued that while children learn attitudes at home, their behaviors impact the school and society at large. She said, “Respect starts at home and we continue to bring it into school.” Children soak up what they are surrounded by, Julia said, “They are barely learning who they want to be, they are still in that process of being molded into their own selves, and if parents are letting them be around all this hatred, that will affect us.” Julia warned that the implications were far-reaching. She asked, “If you see life with hatred’s eye, where are you really going to get to? Where are you going to end up? You can’t disappear whatever you don’t like, all sorts of people of all different cultures, values.” She explained,

If they grow up to be a doctor, what are they going to say, “I only treat certain people?” You can’t have a doctor that hates half the world. You can’t have a lawyer that only represents a minority. That is why it is important for us to stick to the core values and make sure that us as parents take responsibility... and stay active in all of our kid’s lives.

Rosa agreed with Julia. She said, “Parenting is very important so we can send our children well behaved, well-mannered and ready to learn and going to respect the teachers.” This takes commitment. She explained that parents need to “give our children quality time and parenting. It affects them in everything else outside of the house.” Rosa believed that the stakes are high. She said, “We need to teach our children so the next generation is hopefully better than ours.”

Students are constantly making observations about difference and learning about how to interact with others, and educators and families can use this as an opportunity to foster positive behaviors. Ms. Lark shared that her classroom is very diverse. She said, “To watch them all

interact, like they are all getting along.” Then when she taught them about Martin Luther King, Jr. her students asked, ““Why would they do that, because we’re brown?” Like, ‘Yeah, babe.’” She explained, “I feel like guilty, like I don’t even want to talk about this around y’all right now.” Though it was hard to interrupt their harmonious environment with this history of conflict, Ms. Lark said, “I think it’s going to be good as long as we teach them.” For her children, Rosa wanted “somehow making something so they can learn kindness. That is what lacks in this world.”

Some placed responsibility for negative student behaviors within the home, while others sought school-based or collective solutions. A parent hoped their child would have a “bueno educacion, buen comportamiento y sobre todo respecto (good education, good behavior and above all respect).” Educators needed “que enseñan a los niños con entusiasmo y les tengan paciencia (to teach the children with enthusiasm and patience).” Another parent suggested the PTA could help by “getting as many parents involved as possible, since that would positively influence in-class behavior, which cuts down on my child’s class time being used for policing other kids.”

One way parents model positive behaviors is through their commitment to the school. One parent argued that “students need to see that their parents are putting forth the effort, and that the parents feel and know that it’s important that they are a part of the school and the students will see that.” This would help students have “a greater level of respect for the school and the education.” Parents and teachers share the responsibility of teaching students to be respectful human beings. Until both parties also recognize that they struggle to do so within the same structural shortcomings, they will continue to blame each other when they could be working together to change the terms of the equation.

Conclusion

Whether it was rigorous academics, language instruction, a rich offering of extracurricular activities, or opportunities to develop students' character, everyone had more ideas than we could ever successfully implement given the practical limitations families must negotiate and the structural limitations present in public schools. Often, parents shared they felt guilty: for not joining the PTA, not going to enough meetings, not volunteering at enough events, or not being as involved as they had hoped in their child's classroom. It was not passion, commitment, or creativity that was lacking, rather, it was the absence of compensation for necessary labor, the shortage of adequate resources, and the constraints imposed because of standardized curriculum and testing that stood in the way of parents and educators making the changes they thought were needed in schools. If these heartfelt conversations and thoroughly completed surveys taught me anything, it is that we must avoid the temptation to point fingers at other parents and educators when everyone wants the best for their children and must confront obstacles in attaining them. Deficit thinking, guilt and scapegoating inappropriately place responsibility on individuals when our greatest problems have societal roots that would be better tackled with collective, systemic solutions.

While this chapter focused on learning more about the families of Patriot to build relationships across difference, the next chapter will detail the conditions that parents need for the PTA to foster their democratic parental participation in the school. The PTA needs to welcome parents by making sure all communication, meetings, and events are inclusive, practical, and educationally meaningful. Parents need to be approached in the language they are most comfortable, or they will not feel they are able to participate. Tasks must be manageable and fit into family's busy schedules to be feasible for parents. Parents are also more likely to

participate when the PTA project appeals to them personally and helps fulfill their goals and dreams for their children. Parents and educators all want what is best for students, but can only participate when conditions welcome and include them. If we approach this work as equals and also accommodate the needs of all families, we can make great progress together.

CHAPTER 6: Conditions for Building Democratic Parental Participation

“More like an actual family... where everybody knows each other [and] we are all working together for the kids.”

Parents and educators bring different experiences, expectations, limitations, and skills to their work in supporting students. Not better, not worse, but different. The PTA can foster democratic participation in the school by promoting unity through understanding and accommodating difference. When we stop spending time blaming others and ourselves for problems, we can work and advocate for meaningful change in schools. Rosa’s vision for the PTA is that

It’s more like an actual family, where everybody knows each other no matter the language, and that we are all working together for the kids, and I really want to see the school progress, and not be like, not have that reputation. Right now, we kind of have that, that we are like a lower educated school, and I really don't want that title anymore, so I want to get the school up there and have our kids, and have all these opportunities that like [Rainbow Montessori] has, give them to our students, too. I mean, they deserve it just as they do, so I really want the school to give all these opportunities to our students, to our kids. That's what I really want, and to have the parents participating.

Parents shared that there were many ways the PTA could support their participation in the school. They want consistent and timely communication provided by multiple methods, all of which is meaningless for many families in the school if it is not provided in Spanish as well as English. Parents also shared that meetings need to be fully bilingual and needed to be made more feasible for busy families with services such as dinner and childcare provided. PTA events also needed to reflect the multiple cultures in the school to feel welcoming. Parents want to

contribute meaningfully to the school, and are more likely to volunteer their time when it has positive impact on the issues that matter to them most. To build democratic participation in the school, the PTA needs to continue to fine-tune structures like committees, Room Parents, and Soccer Club to make sure they are reasonable, meaningful, and productive ways for all parents to contribute. While some of the strategies shared here might be considered conventional wisdom for more established PTAs, parents in privileged schools, or well-read researchers, it is their inclusion in this assessment of the conditions necessary to foster participation, representation, and collective advocacy that makes them noteworthy.

Remain United for the Good of the Students

“Seguir unidos para el bien de los estudiantes”

To build democratic participation in the school, the PTA needs to continue to develop shared ownership in the organization. Interviews and surveys suggested that while most parents had positive things to say about the PTA, they tended to do so in a way that framed the PTA as something they did not participate in directly. Many parents shared encouragement such as “seguir como hasta ahora, súper bien (continue like now, super good)” and “they are wonderful, always helpful.” Another parent wrote, “seguir trabajando como lo han hecho el trabajo, que hacen es super importante (keep working as they have been, the work they do is super important).” This appreciative yet externalized view of the PTA sheds light on the work still to be done to promote shared purpose and ownership in the organization.

When asked what the PTA should focus on, parents agreed on two things: supporting “el aprendizaje de los niños (the learning of children)” and to “get more parent involvement.” Parents thought the PTA should “recruit more parents” and “encourage membership” so that families can “hacer mas juntas para hablar sobre de nuestros hijos (have more meetings to talk

about our children).” Many parents wrote about how the PTA should help parents and educators build a cohesive community that serves the students. As one parent shared, the PTA needs to “seguir unidos para el bien de los estudiantes (remain united for the good of the students).” Another parent specified that the PTA should “engage more parents and teachers in the work of PTA. Listen more to the needs of the school. Work together in a more cooperative way among teachers, staff, and parents.” One parent explained, this requires “pacientes y honestos con las padres de fam (patience and honesty with the parents).” A grandparent revealed their relationship to the school and dedication to the community, “me encanta la escuela llevo 25 años en esa esa escuela lleve mis hijas y ahora llevo mis nietas (I love the school, I have been in this school for 25 years, I take my daughters there and now my granddaughters).” Valuing individual perspectives and experiences would allow members of the PTA to learn from each other, and as one parent shared, “construir una comunidad fuerte con los padres y maestros (build a strong community among the parents and teachers).”

Parents and teachers thought there were some cultural divisions to work through before the community could be truly united. As Ms. Lark explained, parents “need to build trust with one another, it does take time to work with each other and like, be friends.” Jason had also observed in society that “we are just more inclined to be around people who look like us, who are of the same political persuasion as us... but actually that creates more division.” Jason had wanted to be President of the PTA because he believed that “the PTA can be a unifying force to bring about a sense of community for the school, which is the best thing for the kids.” Julia agreed, and added that the PTA needs to “build more relationships in between both communities.” She thought this required the PTA to make it clear to parents that “we are inviting you to participate because at the end it’s for everybody’s own good, for everybody to

come together and make everything better.” With deliberate outreach to all families and educators, the PTA has great potential to build a united community in the school.

Routine, daily interactions are great opportunities to bring the community together, but can also function to further entrench divisions. One parent pointed out that “if we all just drop off our kids and then pick them up and go home, nobody talks.” To reach out to parents new to the PTA, Jason reasoned, “You have to be intentional, and you have to be welcoming... you are going to have to reach out to people that look different from you.” Brittany, Patriot’s representative on the School Board, had observed, “At pick up time when everyone comes to the front, all of the Anglo parents stood along the fence in one little group and everyone else was spread out and talking and visiting and socializing.” Brittany urged her fellow white parents to “actually talk to people. Talk to them and introduce yourself.” She believed the burden was on white parents newer to the school “to make them feel safe, to let them know you are not a danger and a threat, to let them know that you want the best for their kids like you want for your kids.” She shared, “having that communication solves so many problems.” The only way to build a unified community is by making the effort to get to know the parents and educators in the school.

People are often uncomfortable reaching outside their typical social networks and comfort zones. Brittany thought that one reason parents might resist talking to new people is fear of “language barriers, but you can work through that. I have had to do it for the last three years on the school board, and I have been pretty successful.” Experiencing vulnerability also allows parents to question their own beliefs. Brittany reasoned, “We make so many assumptions in society in general, I have had to challenge a lot of my assumptions, being able to understand the difference of something I know to be fact and something I am assuming.” Brittany argued that parents need to work through feelings of uncertainty to forge new

connections. She said, “People feel uncomfortable talking about these things, and you have to experience that discomfort.”

Everyone must be willing to take on some of that responsibility to build relationships across typical societal divisions. Principal Johnson reflected on her experience developing relationships as a school leader. She said, “Whether you are an administrator or a teacher, a PTA board member or a PTA member, how are you interacting with the people you are responsible for?” Principal Johnson argued that regardless of individual roles, interactions “can’t be standoffish, it almost has to be in your face in a positive way: ‘I’m here, and I’m here for you and your children, too.’” Leaders can send these messages with every exchange. She said, “With parents, they see you, but are you interacting with them? Do you ask them about their families? Do you care about them? People want to know that you care.” Interest and investment in each other’s lives is the only way to build authentic personal connections, which sometimes requires pushing through initial trepidation and discomfort.

At one of the group interviews, parents brainstormed ways the PTA could be more welcoming. When asked if the PTA was welcoming, one parent responded, “I wouldn’t say they are unwelcoming...” and another mom chimed in that “they aren’t unpleasant. They are there” but somewhat anonymous. She suggested hosting a PTA Social where parents could get to know the current PTA leadership because “when you know faces, you are more likely to go to a meeting and help.” During the same conversation, Rosa and Julia shared that they did not know who was on the PTA board when they first started out. This information could be helpful because “if I have a problem, I see her in the morning, I can catch her, ‘this is going on, can you bring this subject higher up so we can have things actually work out?’” One parent suggested the PTA “should have a bulletin board, who’s who, why not?” Another mom added that the

bulletin board could include students and school staff, and under the photograph of each person “you could have the answer to three simple questions, it would help everybody learn something about everybody... you need to know everyone is a person and we are all here for the same purpose.” Taking steps to build familiarity and camaraderie amongst parents, faculty, and staff could increase comfort, trust, and participation in the school.

Building meaningful personal relationships allows parents to learn from each other and forge common ground. Pat, the former President of the Council of PTAs for the district, shared her experience working with a parent at another school. As Pat helped this parent rebuild a PTA that had struggled with financial problems, she realized, “There are so many things people don’t see... she doesn’t have a computer at home, she does everything on her phone, it took a month before she would say” she did not have a way to print documents. Pat reflected, “As a PTA person you can’t imagine there is anyone that doesn’t have a computer” at home. This helped her see, “We’re not looking through their eyes... we are not hearing what parents are saying, and we are not just turning to them and saying, ‘What do you want from the school? What kind of relationship?’” Based on her work with countless PTAs throughout her life, Pat had come to realize, “The district, people like us, the community, campus administration, we all need to be open. We need to say, ‘Wow, we hadn’t thought about that.’” This requires humility and respect. She said, “It’s hard to do if you think you know what will fix it all. It’s an implicit bias. We only see what we see.” The PTA needs to be open to new ways of doing business, as Jason suggested, “If someone wants to help out and has an idea, come on. Do it. Instead of looking at it through this lens of, ‘Well, I don’t know if we’ve got that in the budget...’” For all parents and teachers in the school to feel welcomed in the organization, their perspectives, experiences, and proposals need to be valued and validated by the PTA.

The PTA needs to overtly question why some parents participate and others do not, and take responsibility for making some parents feel more welcomed than others. Emily worried that “probably the underlying issue is everybody is different. We look different and we talk different and have a different mindset. We have to make sure that is not the reason.” She reflected that during her time as President she could “name a couple of moms who just kind of dropped off without notice... maybe people think that about me, too.” Her experience going back to work taught her that rather than blame the individual parents for falling off the radar, the PTA would be better served by following up with those parents to learn why they had not been able to continue to participate. Like in Emily’s case it could be lack of time, or it could be the way they felt while participating.

Unfortunately, the behaviors of PTA leaders sometimes made new parents feel uncomfortable or not welcomed at meetings and events. Principal Johnson explained that for parents new to the PTA, there is a “trial period [when] you’ve got to trust and feel welcome.” For example, as PTA leaders get more and more comfortable working together, they can appear cliquish and intimidating. Julia confessed she did not always feel welcome in her earliest days with the PTA, “You’re used to being a certain way around certain people, and of course when new people come in you don’t know what to expect, or it’s not what you are expecting, so that brings a little bit of a clash.” She also cited “personality, or the age differences” that can function to make new parents feel unwelcome. Julia argued that the focus should be on the children and the school. She said, “I think us as parents, we should put it aside because it’s not about us. It’s about our kids and their future, and to make sure that they are doing well.” Though these interactions bothered her at times, she reasoned, “If you are really focused on the kids then you are not really going to pay no mind to that.” However, “Sometimes of course it

gets to you a little bit more than other days. Try to deal with it the best way that you can.” One way she thought parents new to the PTA could deal with not feeling included was “we should probably say, ‘You know what, I am sorry, but your character is not helping people feeling welcome.’” There are many ways that the actions of established PTA leaders can feel unwelcoming to new parents, and these exclusionary behaviors need to be proactively dealt with by the PTA to ensure new parents are not alienated from the organization.

Parents shared that a united community also needs to include teachers. One parent wondered, “It’s the Parent-Teacher association. I’m like, how did the P and the T get so far apart?” A possible explanation she offered was that teachers thought “we were asking too much of them or maybe not including them enough, I don’t know what, but I still felt that void there. I don’t even mean that in a negative way. Disconnect is a good word.” She argued it was important that the PTA continued to work on “that line of communication... it’s the key to anything.” Ms. Lark, a first-grade teacher, thought the increased visibility of the PTA had helped its relationship with teachers. She said, “we see people selling shirts, and at events, and at our staff meetings. I think we all know that y’all are working hard.” Ms. Lark thought, “the PTA should just be there as a support, and kind of sell the school, like just the way y’all are doing.” She agreed that communication was key: “I like the fact that we’re consistent, we are constantly meeting... just to communicate with the parents and teachers about what you are doing for the school.” Through greater consistency and improved communication, the PTA had been more successful in connecting with some of the teachers in the school.

Typically, parents expressed high opinions of Patriot teachers but recognized that it was a small number that were active participants in the PTA. Parents generally agreed with Julia’s sentiment that “there are quality teachers, they all seem welcoming, they all seem caring.” Even

so, teachers juggled a lot of responsibilities and the PTA had not been as successful in making connections with a broad base of the faculty. Ms. Aguilar, a second-year teacher, reflected, “The first year I was just trying to survive so I don’t think I was involved much of anything with the PTA.” One parent described the commitment that it required for teachers to be involved, saying, “I think the teachers are putting forth the effort. I mean, to think they work long hours, have to come in before school, have to stay after school, lesson plans, and then they are still participating in the PTA program.” This mother was careful to point out, however, “It’s always the same teachers, if you’ve noticed.” Another parent also observed it was only a few teachers who “were very involved with the kids and what they were doing, which was awesome. But other than that, not really” many other teachers participated. Multiple parents noted Mr. Lopez’s involvement in extracurricular activities such as the Running Club, where “he will run like eight miles around the school, never stop, encouraging them to do it, translating and everything, just a sweet man. Those are big assets to that school. There are people who are so dedicated to teaching.” Though they were generally appreciative of the hard work of all Patriot teachers, parents saw that many faculty members simply did not have time for active participation in the PTA.

Parents hoped to build a united community with teachers to work collectively for their students. As Julia shared, the common purpose that unites educators and parents is “we are for the kids.” Though the PTA still had a long way to go in building a truly united community, Ms. Lark had observed, “This year I think there is a lot more togetherness than last year.” Principal Johnson agreed that the PTA was making progress, slowly but surely. She said, “As time goes on and they see, okay, they are still here. They are still trying, so they want to work for their children as well... Everyone wants success for their children.” Understanding that all parents and teachers have something to contribute to this common purpose is critical to the PTA’s

success. While there is still work to be done, by building relationships, working to understand different perspectives, and being critical of unwelcoming behaviors, the PTA is moving in the right direction to build a more united community of parents and teachers.

Improving Communication

“Having a PTA, that in and of itself can be a stabilizing force”

Overwhelmingly, parents shared that the PTA could provide a service to the school by helping to improve communication. On the survey, one parent offered that the PTA needed to provide “a consistent and timely channel of communication between parents and teachers/staff through newsletters, social media, texts and emails.” Another wrote that the PTA should utilize the communication tools it had developed and “encourage teachers and staff to work through PTA to communicate with parents.” One parent said they were not involved “por falta de tiempo y comunicación (due to lack of time and communication).” The timing and method of communication both frequently given as limiting factors for parents who expressed a desire to participate more often. If a goal of the PTA is to increase parental participation in the school, as one parent shared, “communication is key to ensuring that parents are aware of opportunities to be involved.”

Communication needed to be accessible to all parents, regardless of their language preference. On one of the surveys a parent wrote, “la escuela en su mayoría es bilingüe, que TODO. Lo hagan así bilingüe (the school is mostly bilingual, so it should do EVERYTHING bilingual).” Julia underscored the importance of always providing communication in the languages parents need. She said, “There are also a lot of parents who are upset because they didn’t feel like they took me into account because it was in English. I think that would discourage someone from participating.” As Ms. Lark explained, many parents did not

participate “because nobody has reached out to them in their language.” This impacted parents’ perceptions about what they could contribute to the school. Rosa knew many parents who “are not involved because of language. They might even think, I have nothing to offer. A lot of people think that way.” Ms. Aguilar offered encouragement. She said, “I think our PTA has been doing a lot better at doing the two languages and the translating.” Rosa observed the impact of “having more Spanish speaking people already in the PTA... I speak perfect Spanish and I am there and I will just help you and we’ll communicate.” Another parent agreed, saying, “I love the fact that we are going to have some people on that PTA that are Spanish speaking... it gets more parents to feel more comfortable with the PTA and want to participate.” That being said, relying on bilingual parents for translating and interpreting puts a big burden on those individuals, something the PTA needs to approach with caution and respect.

In addition to language needs, the method of communication also made a big difference to parents. On the survey, text messages were noted as the best way to communicate with families, with email in a close second. A significant number of surveys were completed online, however, so these technology-dependent methods are likely to be overrepresented. Parents also marked the more traditional notes home in student folders and meetings as desirable methods for communication, with the sign outside the school and Facebook coming in last. Though those methods were not as popular, they still reached people. As one parent explained, the PTA should use many different methods of contacting families because “I hate checking my email so I prefer to get the note, but some people prefer the email. So, don’t type anything different, either way, some sort of note would be good.” Another parent was less concerned with the method and instead emphasized repetition, explaining, “I needed reminders. The meetings are on a regular basis but I personally get caught up in the rhythm of life and I have missed meetings because I

forget.” Another parent specifically suggested a “notice posted at the school on the entrance doors would help.” Using multiple methods and intentional reminders allows the PTA to make contact with as many parents as possible.

At various points, the PTA had toyed with multiple options for having a more long-term communication strategy with parents. Jeannine had taken on the responsibility of developing a PTA newsletter, an idea many parents supported, but explained that the resources required made such an undertaking a challenge. She explained that to produce a one page bilingual newsletter for the whole school, “We are talking almost a thousand sheets of paper a month on top of the toner and everything. So, who is funding that? Is that the PTA? Is that falling back on the school?” Jeannine preferred an online approach. She said, “I don’t care what language you speak, what your household is like, what economic bracket you come from, I hate those terms, but you have a smartphone, you look stuff up on the internet.” Jeannine thought we needed to “throw some money at building a decent website” with all the relevant updates, information, and links for the PTA, but that doing so would be “a lot for one person.” In addition to being a challenge to create, websites sometimes come with their own navigation issues. One parent told a story about her frustration trying to find the beginning of the school year supply list on the district’s website. She is “English speaking, [has] three degrees, capable on a computer. It took me fifteen minutes to find exactly what they needed. That is just too much to ask... it’s so disjointed.” Whether the PTA develops a paper newsletter, maintains an online presence, or both, information needs to be provided in a user-friendly manner.

Facebook and email are convenient tools that many parents are already accustomed to using, but they still require effort for the PTA to make initial connections with parents. Jeannine thought the best way to get started with a newsletter might be to “post it every month through

Facebook, and putting it into email.” Rosa agreed that Facebook was a strong tool for reaching families. She said, “Anybody in any culture is on Facebook, so that really helps. I just feel like we need to really let more parents know, ‘Hey, it’s there, sign up, like it so you can follow it.’” One community member explained the PTA needed to be more intentional about “getting everyone in the school to give you their email address so you can communicate with them. People talk about not everyone has access; everyone has an email address.” She said it was a simple but powerful strategy to talk to parents “after school, walking through the courtyard, ‘Hey do you get the emails from the PTA about some of the stuff they want to do? If I could get your email address I would really like to have your input.’” Tools on the internet could be powerful, but only if the PTA was willing to do the legwork to make connections with parents in real life.

The timing of communication from the school was often shared as an issue for families. One mom explained, “We’d always get something in the folder, there’s this event tomorrow, and I am like, I don’t have time to figure that out by tomorrow. One time it was after the fact... that needs to be a week before.” She also had this problem with the “dress up weeks, too. I guess we would get it Friday but it’s like Monday through Friday you have to have these costumes, and I only just got this on Friday.” Another parent shared that she had completely missed some events because of how late the information was sent home. She said, “It’s like, okay, tomorrow, and if you don’t see the note, tomorrow is this day! And you miss it, because there were days I think they had things going on I didn’t know about.” When I interviewed Charlene and Brian, parents of a second grader, the three of us brainstormed some ideas for how to get this information out earlier. Charlene explained that each day students bring home folders to parents where there is “a calendar and it has stamps on it for behavior, what it should have is a calendar with that month, as well. With what’s going on, so the parents open it up every night and it’s there.” Brian

agreed this would be helpful because “everyone is so busy these days. The lack of stay-at-home parents, most of our parents are dual income.” Charlene chimed in, “It’s really difficult to turn on a dime. Field trip tomorrow?” Brian thought planning the whole year in advance could be a good way to keep parents engaged. He said, “Organization on a calendar will give us returns in participation.” Whatever the method of communication, planning ahead gives families greater opportunity to participate in requests from the school.

An important function of the PTA can be providing a venue for parents and teachers to make routine, casual contact and stay abreast of current issues in the school. One parent shared the importance of “just talking about things, what’s coming up, it gets you excited, it makes you feel like, ‘Okay, we are in the right place.’” Another parent agreed, sharing that even though “there are people that are members of PTA that don’t ever volunteer their time but they are a member so they know what is going on because they get the emails, and just knowing what’s going on helps.” She pointed out that “communication needs to be a higher priority in all areas, like teachers with parents, faculty with parents, so we know what’s going on in the school.” Jason, the PTA President, agreed the PTA can provide consistency for families. He said, “Having a PTA, that in and of itself can be a stabilizing force to know that every year there is going to be a PTA that is going to be promoting, and serving, and helping the school.” Communication is a prerequisite for parental participation in the school, and the PTA can be a steadying force in the school by providing this service.

Purposeful Meetings

“Whenever we have our meetings, we should talk about what’s going on in school”

For meetings to help build democratic parental participation in the school, they need to be accessible to all parents and provide opportunities for meaningful collaboration and problem

solving. Most parents noted that they only “sometimes” attended PTA meetings, with the rest of survey respondents divided between “yes” and “no” as their answer. While this seems like inconclusive information, it does not contradict the realities of PTA meeting attendance. The PTA typically relied on the strategy of coordinating meetings with student performances to ensure parents would attend. These “PTA Performances” featured a grade level or two and were heart-warming and powerful as they showcased the talents of the students and the dedication of the music, art, and PE teachers. The only problem was each month the auditorium was packed with supportive families who might not have even realized a meeting was part of the agenda, and possibly did not have any intention of returning when their child was not on stage. Some parents attended meetings whether their child was performing or not, but this was a smaller number than the majority who came only intermittently.

PTA meeting agendas have tended to be short and focused on information sharing: a few board members, school staff, or district employees provided reports while parents awaited their children’s singing and dancing without having the opportunity to actively participate. Revealingly, in the first couple years of the PTA, even board members did not attend the general meetings as faithfully as they did the smaller board meetings where more specific conversations took place and decisions were made. This raises questions about the true purpose of PTA meetings in an organization that claims to promote parental involvement. While performances and information sharing are certainly valuable activities that should continue to be an integral part of PTA meetings, they are only a small piece of what parents can potentially accomplish together if meetings are taken seriously as an opportunity to build collective capacity.

In their survey and interview responses, parents shared many creative suggestions as to how to make it more feasible for families to routinely devote time to attending PTA meetings.

Most parents selected weekday evenings as the best times to hold PTA meetings due to their work schedules, but even this time proved challenging. As one mother explained, “Starting at 4:30 it’s the gamut of making the dinner, and the baths, the this, the that. To go back out...” after you have settled your family in for the evening is difficult. She said she would have attended more meetings if an affordable dinner had been provided, explaining, “I pay five bucks for the burrito you ordered, if I can do that... you could do it different ways every time, but have it simple.” By alleviating the stress of feeding the family, the PTA could make meeting attendance that much more reasonable for busy families.

In the same vein, half of the parents surveyed said they would be able to attend more meetings if childcare were provided. Parents shared that it was particularly difficult to bring younger children to meetings because of their inability to sit still and listen. One grandmother in the community reflected, “I remember juggling childcare so I could be in the PTA. Why should that be an impediment?” Similarly, “Younger kids, they are going to be school age kids when they get older” so they need to be accounted for by the PTA. Some parents had a spouse, older sibling, or grandparents to watch their children while they attend a meeting, but for many parents without that support, having to pay for a babysitter was too great a sacrifice. One parent pointed out there are many sources for childcare in the community. She said, “You have colleges and different organizations that need volunteer hours. That would be a benefit for both parties.” Amanda, a high school teacher, suggested that her students could help. She said, “There is a class of teaching students who want to be teachers... [and] they are always looking for community hours for Honor Society.” Though watching a large number of kids is a lot to ask of younger volunteers and makes some parents nervous, one mom said, “Parents are still there, but just able to pay attention” to the meeting while someone else entertains the children and attends

to their immediate needs. Amanda suggested that childcare be hosted in the gym because of its proximity and size: “you could do all kinds of stuff in there. You could have movie night, you could have a dance off, they could throw balls in there if it’s raining.” Not only would this allow parents to focus during the meeting, but children could have a good time and go home ready to settle down for the evening.

Even with meals and childcare provided, weekday evenings are simply not good times for all families. It is difficult to find one time that works for everyone, so some parents suggested holding smaller follow-up meetings. Amanda also thought email updates after meetings could help because many parents “spend a lot of time in desks in front of email... that’s a lot of reading or having to put stuff together on your end, but you could get feedback fast.” Another parent suggested, “what about a private Facebook page, or podcast meetings or something for those of us who... literally can’t make a meeting.” While a static recording of the meeting can only be passively consumed, posting it online could provide a space for parents to immediately share feedback, comments, and reactions with each other.

As with any other venue, language at meetings was also a big factor for parents. In a school with so many families who do not speak English, this was an obvious barrier. Patricia, during her interview in Spanish, shared that she had been to meetings but admitted, “I don’t get anything from it... sometimes I was with my daughter and I would have to ask her what was said.” Not only did she depend on her daughter to interpret for her, but because she did not speak English she felt participation was impossible. She said, “I would have like to get up and talk, but I couldn’t. How? Nobody would have understood me so I would just leave.” This was frustrating to Patricia. She said, “I deprive myself a lot. I would really like to contribute, be involved because I’m interested. I care about my daughter’s education.” In addition to feeling

as if she could not support her own daughter, her contributions to the whole school were also stifled by the language barrier. Patricia shared, “I would love to be involved to help. I would not only help my daughter, I would help a lot of kids.” When individual parents are alienated, the entire school suffers.

Once parents have been estranged, the PTA needs to rebuild their trust. Jason had tried bringing translation headsets from his church, but found parents did not raise their hand to use them when they were offered. Julia explained, “Sometimes it’s a little intimidating. You don’t want to feel dumb.” She suggested that rather than put the burden on Spanish speaking parents to identify themselves, the PTA could “make sure there is always a person able to help the Spanish speaking people... [a] designated person for every event, for every meeting, for you to be available.” Spanish speaking parents could then develop a relationship with the interpreter and reestablish trust with the PTA. Charlene pointed out that Spanish speaking parents probably felt singled out. She said, “If there were other languages represented, then it be like the UN, it would feel like it was equal. But if it’s solely ‘oh, you don’t understand English,’ [for] those who speak Spanish, it doesn’t work.” Brian agreed with his wife. He said, “The stigma is big, but almost in just that first meeting until they are comfortable. Once they know the ropes, you are good. But you got to get them comfortable.” Whether parents can get comfortable in one meeting or not, they can probably be made very uncomfortable in one meeting and not want to return. This means the burden is on the PTA to provide consistent and thorough translation and interpretation services across the board.

Even the most enthusiastic PTA member misses meetings occasionally, one reason being that the school year is long and demanding for families. While enthusiasm tends to be high at the beginning of the year when people first join the PTA, it can be difficult to keep up because as

one parent shared, the “days are long, the weeks fly by, and most of us are working parents, so it goes fast.” One parent talked about how at the beginning of the year “everything is exciting and new... then by the time March rolls around after spring break and you are like ‘Oh my god, if I have to pack one more lunch...’ I am exhausted.” Even Jason, the PTA President, shared that by the end of the year, “I was just a little bit burned out with PTA, and with just school in general, so I was just kind of ready to take a break.” A parent argued that one of the biggest hurdles for the PTA was “maintaining the excitement and getting people re-excited” mid-year.

One way to maintain engagement is ensure that the meetings are venues for meaningful discussion and collaboration. Julia imagined PTA meetings where the whole school could work as a team to promote student success. She explained, “Whenever we have our meetings we should talk about what’s going on in school.” She wanted parents to have discussions with teachers such as, “We’re working with second grade with their writing skills because they need to work on that... making sure that kids that need help with homework, or emotional help, stuff like that, are being helped.” If PTA meetings are just another thing parents need to do without the potential for meaningful impact in their children’s lives, the sacrifices families are willing to make to attend will be limited. By providing free childcare so adults can focus, translation and interpretation for parents who do not speak English, and affordable dinners for busy families, the PTA can make meeting attendance more practical. That being said, based on what parents shared, meetings need to be places where issues of real importance are discussed and actual decisions are being made to increase and sustain the commitment of families to the PTA.

Hosting Events

“I would like for the school to be the hub of the community”

PTA members spend a great deal of energy and time planning and hosting schoolwide events such as the Fall Carnival, Valentine’s Dance, and Showcase Dinner. On the survey, parents expressed enthusiasm about these events but also shared that they would also like to see more academic and classroom-based events. While events are enjoyable, can be a great way to build community, and help fundraising efforts for the school, volunteer hours are a limited resource and coordination of such events can be quite complex. The precious labor put into events needs to further the goals of the PTA and priorities of the families in the school. As one dad advised, one way to lighten the burden required to plan events would be to host fewer “impactful events than small events constantly.”

Events were a great way to bring the community together and allow everyone to have a stake in the school. Principal Johnson stated, “Everyone wants to bring their kids around to have fun, I’ve seen kids come and they really didn’t have money to do the activities, but just to be there around their friends and the other families.” Recognizing the considerable time and effort required to plan them, Principal Johnson shared, “I wish there was a way we could do more [events]. I would like for the school to be the hub of the community.” Though she initially resisted the idea, Principal Johnson was happy the Showcase Dinner had been hosted on campus in the front courtyard for the first time. She said, “I loved it. I thought it was wonderful, like just sitting out under the trees like you are in your yard at home... I was in awe the whole night.” For the previous two years, the Showcase Dinner had been hosted at Jason’s church building. Principal Johnson confessed, “I was nervous last year at the church, I really was, like ‘oh my gosh the kids are running,’ but they can do that at home.” Principal Johnson also saw events as a

low commitment way for families to contribute to the school, explaining, “I’ve seen the parents jump in to work, and they are not really buying a whole lot but they are contributing.”

Widespread participation makes events more doable, as Principal Johnson pointed out “the more people, the less work it is for others.”

By listening to the interests of parents, the PTA was beginning to support more cultural events at the school. It was Rosa and Julia’s idea to host the first Tamale Cook Off, an event that inspired some parents to participate in the PTA who never had before. Rosa reflected, “The whole Tamale Cook Off was just an awesome thing, to bring in more Hispanics.” Julia thought the event helped families see the PTA in a new light. She said, “I think they all think, ‘Okay well they’re interested in this,’ So that means they are more welcoming or they feel more open to participating.” Another parent agreed that the Tamale Cook Off was “the perfect example of paying respects to the culture and heritage that existed in the community before all these white people moved in.” A community member pointed out that PTAs should host events that reflect the desires, skills, and cultures of their members. If “some of their moms wanted to do tamales as a fundraiser, you have to not say, ‘Oh, let’s just do snow cones.’ You have to accept and realize they could do that, you have to say, ‘Great!’” She thought that too often, PTAs “plant our ideas of what should happen” instead of listening to what inspires authentic interest from parents. With the success of the first Tamale Cook Off, the PTA considered hosting either a combined or separate event for Hispanic Heritage Month. Julia outlined the benefits, explaining, “Everybody knows a little bit about the culture, but it will invite other people to say ‘This is what it really is, this is what the tradition is meant to be.’” Such an event could offer nuance to the community’s multicultural outlook, as Julia pointed out, “You get to get a little bit more from the people themselves.”

In diverse schools, events that focus on a specific culture can open up complications for families that still don't feel included. While the Tamale Cook Off represented a shift toward more culturally responsive events, Rosa hoped that we would not stop there. She said, "Next year we should really have not only Hispanic Heritage month, but also like Black History Month, [and] everything else and include everybody." During their joint interview, Brian and Charlene shared their concerns with specific cultural events. Brian explained, "Cultural appreciation events are important; however, they can't be exclusionary. They have to be very inclusionary and exact if you put your resources toward them." He warned that, "If you do a Latino or Hispanic appreciation event in the fall, you do an African American heritage event in February, you make them pronounced and all inclusive." This can be challenging, however. Charlene elaborated her concern that when each event is focused on "one culture you are exclusionary no matter what. It should be an international day, and everybody is represented within their own culture, they can all participate." She referenced her own experience in making this argument. She remembered, "I mean if I could count the many times that I have heard my mother say, 'Why do we have whatever day, we don't have Japanese American day?'" Charlene's concern was that "if you continue to do exclusionary things, all you do is create a rift and a divide. The intentions are good but it's not performed the way that it should be."

Though there was still debate amongst parents regarding the best way to approach cultural events, Principal Johnson summed up her view, "I support all multicultural events and would love to have more opportunities for all [Patriot] families." The PTA needed to continue engaging parents in the school in the planning of events to make sure they were relevant and impactful in building community in the school.

Providing Resources

“What can we give the school that they haven’t had before?”

PTAs are often primarily associated with fundraising for schools. As one parent explained on the survey, a major function of the PTA is “organizing fundraising events to facilitate programs and projects for our [Patriot] students that are not otherwise funded by the district.” Other parents agreed that a primary focus of the PTA should “estar al pendiente de las necesidades de la escuela y lo que age falta (be aware of the needs of the school and what is missing)” and “conseguir más recursos para invertir en más equipo y personal (gain more resources to invest in more equipment and staff).” Another parent enthusiastically urged the PTA to use their resources to “continue to keep the teachers as happy as possible! Happy teachers make hard workers! Compassionate workers!”

Teacher appreciation is also typically an area of focus for PTAs. One PTA member highlighted the importance of teacher appreciation, explaining, “We need to make our teachers happy or they aren’t going to want to be here, keep them motivated, so how is that going to happen? We are going to raise money to have teacher breakfasts and lunches and gifts.” Another parent explained that such appreciation efforts should be expanded to include other staff in the school. Therefore, “Not just their teachers but like librarians, even the lunch ladies, and it would be nice to get them things for teacher appreciation.” Emily shared that not everyone thought gifts and meals for the teachers and staff was the best use of PTA resources. She said, “When I was President I had parents who were all, ‘Are you guys just helping the teachers? Because we want to do stuff for the kids.’” As one parent wrote on their survey, perhaps the best way to show teachers appreciation for their work is to make “more help and resources available for the teachers” within the classroom.

Teachers appreciated when fundraising efforts were directly funneled to serve specific school needs. Ms. Lark was grateful that each fundraiser brought immediate benefits to the school. She said, “There’s activities planned to raise money for the school, and then using the money for something to benefit the school. Like, ‘Oh, we raised all this money and it’s going to go to this!’” From a teacher’s perspective, she felt well supported because “the PTA is always asking us what we want, or what we need for the classroom, so that’s a good thing.” To make a field trip more special for her students and help keep track of them while they were away from school, Ms. Aguilar had asked the PTA for “t-shirts... I get so paranoid I put stickers on them and everything.” She was encouraged to do so when Mr. Lopez told her the PTA had bought a document camera for his classroom. She said, “I think it’s just being comfortable, like [Lopez] asking for his cameras, I was like, ‘really you asked for that? You got it?’” The PTA purchased items for individual classrooms and for the school at large, such as a tablecloth for job fairs, costumes for ballroom dancers, and an honorarium for an inspirational speaker. Rosa agreed that this was an important function of the PTA for teachers and the administration because “money-wise, they come to us when they need things, supplies... a resource.”

Fundraising is often an easy goal for new PTAs to latch onto, but in and of itself, fundraising doesn’t serve the school unless PTAs are thoughtful about where those resources end up. Emily argued that as most PTAs got more established, they typically moved away from a focus on pure fundraising toward being more critical of the impact their activities and spending have on campus. She shared that “as a parent and as a teacher at my school, when the PTA just looks like gimme, gimme, gimme, it just turns people off.” She was pleased to see that the PTA at Patriot instead asked “how are we going to help the school? Not just with money, but what programs are we going to bring? What events are we going to have? What can we give the

school that they haven't had before?" When schools are asked to function with inadequate resources, the PTA serves as one way to fill in those gaps. While this is an important role of PTAs, it is inherently reactionary. In looking for creative ways to build community amongst parents while providing support for teachers, the PTA can simultaneously develop capacity to advocate for what the school needs within the district and the state.

A Well-Rounded Education

"We have to be diverse inside as well as diverse culturally"

A common theme in surveys and interviews was parents' desire to develop the whole child beyond academics. One parent wanted the PTA to "seguir asiendo mas actividades para los ninos (keep doing more activities for the children)" and another asked the school to provide "enrichment opportunities for children to grow and be challenged." There were many reasons given for this, some quite practical, such as "it is unfortunate to expect so much from the community but... I know that there have to be places maybe not so expensive for sports." Other parents focused on how such activities could support student's academic progress because they would "encourage them to see school as a fun place to be." Extracurricular activities also served important social purposes, as one parent explained, "some kids might just be looking for a way to fit in... if there is something we could try to think of in that sense that might try to interest the kids that might not have anything to be passionate about."

Parents also expressed their support for enrichment within the school day, such as music, art and physical education. Amanda explained, "I am a theater teacher, I know what brings a kid to high school is art, band, theater, all the extra stuff within the school. That gives them ability to focus on math." She sadly explained that one of the other high schools in the district "starting this year is taking away theater... used to be one of the biggest theater programs in this district,

so if that can happen where are we going?” Amanda feared what this meant for students’ inner development: “we have to be diverse inside as well as diverse culturally. It’s all integrated.” One parent argued in favor of more recess and play time for students because “the schools where they have two or three recesses are actually performing better... and then sometimes that’s punishment, they are not acting right, so you don’t get recess... a lot of times that’s the reason why they are acting up.” Parents wanted their children to have fun at school: while learning, to motivate them, and to provide release.

Though it was harder to find these things in school now, extracurricular activities used to be more typical. Rosa often reminisced about how happy she was when she and her sister were students at Patriot. She said, “We just loved the school. We still talk... we had gymnastics. We had all these activities we remember. I feel kind of sad because I don’t feel my kids have had that experience.” She appreciated the teachers and the programs offered as a student, “our PE teacher was our gymnastics teacher. So, we actually performed, he would take us to senior citizens... to do gymnastics shows, with a uniform, it was an after-school program. And we had ballet folklorico, band, baseball.” She was upset that the school had “lost some of their activities and opportunities that they offered to the students.”

Extracurricular activities can complement academic purposes. Based on her experience, Rosa was passionate about “doing more fun educational programs for the kids... because I know during the school they are booked and busy doing curriculum.” She did not see this as separate from academic goals, however, she argued such activities could directly supplement the learning students do during the school day. Rosa wanted to find programs that focus on developing “their imagination, their creativity... help them with writing but making it fun... I know they have a

hard time with writing. The writing part, and that comes into play, imagination and creativity with writing.” She even pointed out this would likely “help them with their test scores.”

Involvement in such activities can also be a big motivator for students. When discussing this topic with Patricia, Rosa shared her experience with her son in Chess Club. She said, “A teacher dedicated one hour to that, but it was something that the students enjoyed. He would always ask, ‘Can I stay after school?’ It is a motivation for them to get up and go to school because after school they have an activity.” Patricia thought Chess Club was a great idea. She said, “In my time in school we never had that. I would have loved it, I would have learned... they are board games, but educational games.” Rosa agreed, “It stimulates their brain.” Patricia suggested more sports such as “baseball, basket, soccer, football, anything. I think that would motivate them more, the kids. ‘Oh, today I have soccer!’ ... It’s a motivation no matter what.” She continued brainstorming: “even a type of dance, or kids that like to play instruments, that would be awesome.”

Extracurricular activities can serve students while also recruiting new families to the school and parents to the PTA. As Ms. Aguilar pointed out, in addition to serving the students already attending Patriot, offering a variety of enrichment opportunities could also help promote the school and boost its reputation. She said, “How can we stand out? How can we make things really awesome for our students and for the neighborhood to see that, too?” Such activities can also help foster parental participation. As a community member pointed out, “Everybody talks about parent involvement and how important it is to get parents involved, well, what do parents care about? They care about their own kids.” Parents want to play a role in their child’s education, so participation in the PTA should fulfill the fundamental needs of busy families rather than being an extra on top of everything parents already manage.

Everyone has Something to Contribute

“You have a skill that we need... let’s work together”

Everyone has huge demands on their time: parents, teachers, and school administrators shared how busy they are, but they also expressed a desire to contribute to the organization and school. The PTA needs to provide structures that allow for these valuable individual contributions to have collective impact and significance.

Given everyone’s demanding schedules, the PTA cannot expect parents and teachers to drop everything to participate. One parent expressed regret that she had not been as involved as she wanted, explaining, “It all boiled down to time for me... I have a job that I get paid to do, of course I have to do that. Anything outside my family, usually my time is spent there. I’ve tried to still stay engaged at least.” Rosa wanted to “explain and mention to recruit new people that they don’t have to be in every meeting. They don’t have to be at every event, just whatever they can.” Another mom agreed, sharing, “You don’t have to give two hours if you don’t have it... [but] you can still help out.” One parent thought we could build on what we had learned using the Sign-Up Genius website to coordinate volunteers for events, she said, “Just asking doesn’t do it, once someone puts their name in then it’s a commitment, and it’s an easy commitment... instead of ten people doing everything, you have fifty people helping with an hour, which is doable.” This same rationale can be used across the board: the PTA needs to find ways to better distribute labor and meet people where they are to fully utilize their contributions and experiences.

There are countless ways parents and teachers can support the goals of the PTA. In an early interview, one parent had suggested that the survey could be used to help find “your people, [ask] ‘what are you good at, what do you like doing, what are your hobbies? And

incorporate that into the PTA... just give everyone kind of a job.” On the survey, parents were asked what talents, resources, or skills they would like to contribute. Event planning was frequently selected, but cooking was even more popular. While PTA members spend significant amounts of time planning events, these functions always require food, so this could be a great way to benefit from labor that parents found more manageable. Spanish translation and babysitting were next in popularity, contributions that were also identified as making meetings more accessible and events more inclusive. A parent described how helpful childcare would have been at PTA events such as a garden work day she attended. She said, “I noticed the day my husband and I came to deliver the soil, there’s kids all over the place, I want my kid to be out there, but I also want him to be supervised while we are working.” If the PTA helps coordinate shared childcare on-site, it not only makes it more feasible for many families to contribute, it also takes advantage of skills parents possess. Survey responses reflected a range of other parental interests, from construction to “hands on learning projects” and from soliciting contributions to “giving donations.” Within the school, there are many parents who were willing to “help wherever is needed.” The challenge for the PTA is to facilitate the participation of the talented and generous families eager to support their children’s education.

A critical step in facilitating the participation of parents is to make sure they know their contributions are needed and appreciated. One parent thought the PTA needed to “reach out to the Hispanic community and let them know, ‘Hey, you are welcomed, please join us. You have a skill that we need or we can benefit from, so, let’s work together.’” In her experience, Principal Johnson found that parents are willing to share whatever they have if their contributions do not have to fit into a certain mold. She said, “What they could do, they did, and I made them feel welcome to do that.” She tried to make it clear that all contributions were

appreciated. She believed, “If you can contribute financially, [or] can you come and help me serve the kids at the holiday party. [How] can you contribute?” Principal Johnson believed that however they “provide for their child at home, why not at school? You have to have that mindset.” One mother suggested that PTA members need to approach parents and say, ““Hey I need you to be a part of this because...’ It takes patience.” This intentional outreach can help the PTA build relationships with new parents while recruiting them to support the school.

Multiple parents suggested that the PTA needed to adopt a new tone, establishing structured expectations for parental participation rather than simply asking for help. A PTA member claimed it was “imperative to get people to sign up at the beginning. Commit to something. Have your name, phone number, and what you would like to do” in writing at the beginning of the year. Charlene agreed with this idea, adding that Back to School Night was the perfect opportunity because “you got them there, get them in. It makes them feel welcome, it makes them feel participatory, and there is no onus on them to come back... if they don’t sign up, they don’t sign up, but I bet you” they will. Brian said the PTA’s approach needed to be “we expect you to be involved, we have seven categories where you can be involved. Choose one, here they are.” Charlene argued that the PTA should provide parents with “a schedule... as opposed to an invitation. So, instead of saying we hope you can join us... [instead] all new parents are expected.” In general, Charlene thought, “It has to be more formalized. It’s too casual, the way that people are approached.”

Some parents even suggested the PTA and school should require at least some degree of involvement. Jeannine shared her experience at her daughter’s new private school, where they require families to participate in the Parent’s Club “whether that is just bringing cookies to some sort of event or whether that is volunteering for every single thing under the sun.” Based on her

experience with schools in Mexico, Patricia agreed that the school should require parents to make time to be involved. She said, “You want your child to attend here then you have to comply with what the school is asking of you as a parent. It’s for the well-being of your child.” However, Patricia also maintained that the PTA had to make this practical for families, explaining, “If there is going to be a meeting, parents should be advised in a timely manner that the child has to attend along with a parent. Let them know with enough time so they can give notice to their job.” Mandating requirements for participation might be more practical in a private school setting where parents must contribute to the school financially to enroll their child. As parents shared in interviews, whether they are asked, expected, or required to participate, investment in the school needs to be accessible for everyone. If the structure of the PTA allows parents to tangibly contribute to their child’s success, parents are already invested in the outcome and willing to participate.

Committees, Room Parents, and Soccer Club

“Offer opportunities”

Three structures the PTA put in place to facilitate parental participation were committees, Room Parents, and Soccer Club. Charlene explained that she thought parents “would like to be more involved, they just don’t know how.” Brian agreed with his wife, to get more parents involved “you just have to guide them. Offer opportunities.” While these approaches had already been successful in providing accessible and tangible ways parents could contribute to the school, the PTA needed to continue to fine-tune these efforts to ensure parent availability and interests were effectively matched with classroom and school-wide needs.

Committees

Committees have the potential to engage more parents because tasks can be broken into manageable chunks and scheduling can be more flexible. Mr. Lopez believed that to help with scheduling problems, smaller groups getting together between general meetings allowed “more input from everywhere.” Emily reflected that, “The committee idea was awesome to really involve the parents.” This was because “committees can break down the tasks and say for this event we need this, they can send out their own kind of emails or notifications, and then parents can get involved that way.” This smaller unit within the organization made it more feasible for many parents to get involved in the PTA, but there were still questions as to how the committees were set up that impacted whether parents remained engaged.

Committees need to have an adequate number of members willing to work together on specific projects to be successful. Jeannine reasoned that parents might not realize what they are signing up for when they join a committee. She said, “At the beginning of the year, it’s like ‘Oh special events, I like planning, sign me up for that!’ And then it’s like, ‘Oh I am sorry, you need me to do what? I don’t have that kind of time!’” When committee enthusiasm dwindled, many committee chairs completed tasks on their own rather than spend their time working to engage other parents. It proved to be difficult for committee chairs to recruit and sustain a team to work with when they were focused on simply accomplishing their part of the next PTA project.

The way the committees were organized also proved challenging for committee chairs. With each committee focused on a different type of task across multiple PTA projects, communication and collaboration amongst committees was often required for a project to be successful. Jeannine explained how “if there is going to be a special events committee, that person should only be in charge of planning” the special events, while other committees need to

do their part to contribute to the success of that event. For example, the communications committee would need to make the flyers and the fundraising committee would need to solicit the donations. With committee chairs focused on coordinating with each other, that left less time to recruit and maintain relationships with parents on each committee. Additionally, with committee work feeling fractured across multiple events and applications, parental interest was harder to sustain than if each committee focused on a specific event or project.

Committee chairs ended up bottom-lining so much of the work that initial division of labor was not sustainable. Emily had predicted correctly that some committee chairs might not want to return. She said, “They probably don’t want to because they are exhausted.” With more stable committees “if we have the events people doing the events, they’ve done it before, they know what they need, and we are not switching hands,” as Emily explained. Jason thought that the success of the PTA moving forward hinged on being able to recruit a “good group of parents to help with the committees... that is going to be really important.”

To be successful, committee chairs need to focus on recruiting and sustaining relationships with parents interested in working on their specific projects. These projects need to be manageable and largely contained within one committee so that coordination efforts could focus on building capacity within each group.

Room Parents

While many schools have Room Parents programs, this was a new PTA led initiative at Patriot. The stereotype of a PTA Room Parent is a stay-at-home mom with time to come in and volunteer to help the teacher, a relationship that relies on privilege. While this program was started at Patriot with the hope of building a genuine connection between home and school, many teachers could see it as an imposition in their classroom by well-meaning outsiders wanting to

“fix” the school. For Room Parents to be successful, teachers and parents must find ways to collaborate that truly serve the classroom and the students.

Room Parents were another way that the PTA tried to facilitate parental participation through a concrete organizational structure. One challenge in establishing Room Parents as a constructive venue for participation was that parents and teachers were not used to collaborating. Rosa shared that having Room Parents was “new and parents don’t know about it still. It’s new to the teachers and the parents who don’t really know, ‘How can we help?’ [Teachers] are probably too busy to even think, ‘Okay this parent can help me with this.’” A parent asked what a Room Parent should do, and the teacher replied, “I don’t even know what to ask, I am just so used to not having anybody.” When she became a Room Parent during her son’s first year at Patriot, Nicole emailed the teacher but never heard back, so she went to visit the teacher “at lunch and go like, ‘Hey, I’m here to help you do anything you need just let me know...’ but I never got any feedback.” When she did not hear from her son’s teacher, Nicole figured, “They are probably not used to letting go, and they probably have to prepare things to give you, and just stopping to do that” when they are already so busy can be difficult. Another parent agreed that from the teacher’s perspective “it’s one more thing on that to do list... and another body in my room, an adult I have to redirect. Baby steps before we get there.” A fundamental challenge is that teachers are so busy, and while collaborating with parents could ultimately save them time, it requires additional planning and coordination on the teacher’s part.

For the Room Parent program to be successful, teachers need to feel as if it is compatible with the routines and procedures they have established in their classroom. Principal Johnson thought it was critical to make sure teachers were included in the process. She said, “The teacher needs to feel like she has a voice and not be overwhelmed. Nothing happens overnight.” Julia

thought that when a teacher already has “her system it’s kind of hard, I guess, for her to have also a lot of people to try to be with the kids.” Some teachers already had their own methods in place for getting support from parents. Mr. Lopez explained, “The formality kind of makes it a little strange. I like it to be a little more fluid.” For example, he shared that rather than planning parental participation according to a formal structure, he would happen to see parents around campus and ask “‘You want to help? Come out!’ Instead of like, ‘Oh, well, I better talk to this person and see if they are available.’” Ms. Aguilar also was constrained by the Room Parent structure at times. She said, “I like somebody that doesn’t need me to tell them what to do and is able to just go ahead, not like, ‘What do you need, what do you need?’ I am also a big person where I will just do it.” Ms. Aguilar thought that to be able to collaborate with a Room Parent, “I need to be a lot more open, and especially because I will be like ‘This is my vision, this is how I want to do it,’” and that can make it difficult to work with others. She said she hoped to connect with more parents and use more “outreach... a lot of it needs to be on the teacher... it’s like selling your classroom.” Parents want to support the teachers, but the Room Parents program is still new and it will take time for both parents and teachers to establish the best ways to collaborate.

Parents need to be invited to participate by the teachers themselves so they know their contributions will actually benefit the classroom. Ms. Lark argued that if it was only the PTA asking Room Parents to help, it did not feel genuine. While teachers “don’t want to burden anybody,” she reasoned that if Room Parents only hear from the PTA and “don’t get the phone call from the teacher, and then they are like ‘Oh, I guess they don’t need me.’” Ms. Lark suggested the PTA continue to “let the teachers know that your Room Parents are there to help you, and to call them if you need help.” Once teachers become more accustomed to parental

participation in the classroom, it can end up saving them time and effort in the long run. Nicole compared this to her experience at her son's previous school, explaining, "I think the more established PTAs, the parents were leaned on a lot more because they were used to having that help." She believed her son's earlier teachers "were more used to parent volunteers, they would send packets home saying 'please cut this, cut these shapes out, and paste,' and stuff like that." Nicole observed, "They aren't used to just letting the parents take care of things, and run with things. I don't know if that will change as they realize, 'Hey, I can give some of this stuff to the parents.'" Ms. Aguilar agreed Room Parents could be helpful. She said "I need a helper, I feel like every grade level needs some sort of an aide or a helper." Ideally, Ms. Aguilar wanted the Room Parent to be included in the classroom community and be "part of that family feel... needs to be a part of that classroom, like make it that ownership, like 'Hey, yeah, this is start to finish and we did it together!"

Many parents and teachers shared that the PTA could provide more structure and expectations to help smooth the way for collaboration. Mr. Lopez pointed out that "the communication between the parent and the teacher is there, but it would be a lot more helpful if the PTA communicated to the parent what the teacher needed" when there were regularly occurring events that would apply to all Room Parents. Principal Johnson explained, "It needs to be better understood of what their role would be." One mom agreed it would be helpful for parents if the PTA came up with guidelines "for the parents and that way in the beginning of the year, whenever you have your Room Parents you can say 'Okay, teachers need copies done, they need assistance in the classroom, they need X, Y, and Z.'" Another parent suggested, "Maybe they could be a head Room Parent, or maybe having a Grade Parent that is in charge of all the classrooms" to facilitate all the parents communicating through an "old-school call tree."

Whether through designating lead Room Parents or providing a list of guidelines, teachers and parents agreed that clearer common expectations provided by the PTA would be beneficial.

Parents also requested forums for sharing ideas. Julia explained that she wanted to the PTA to “bring us all together and talk between us... ‘my teacher is asking me about this, how about you ask your teacher if you’re not that involved?’ [An] exchange of ideas.” Mr. Lopez thought it could be helpful to plan “room parent meetings to where everyone is on the same page... all the room parents came to an agreement on what they wanted to do on a particular thing and then help all the classrooms.” Rosa agreed, but suggested that social media could be a helpful way to share ideas. She said, “I’m always on Pinterest, that’s how I find a lot of ideas. There are moms who have put things on there... we can give them examples, give them a better idea” of ways they could help their teachers.

There are many time-consuming clerical tasks parents could do to support teachers while at school or from home. As a teacher, Emily relied on a parent to come in once a week and stuff student folders with flyers. She said, “That was something I would normally do during my planning period, so I could take my planning period to plan small groups or plan my interventions for that week instead of stuffing folders. That’s where manpower really helps the teachers.” Nicole shared that at her son’s previous school, “I went to school and I put the kids name on the envelope, they put the report card in it but I labeled each one.” This showed her how many similar things she could do from home. She explained that “when things come up, send it home with a kid in their backpack and let a parent cut and paste, and then I think even your kids seeing you do that, they are like, ‘You are helping my teacher.’” Another thing that could easily be sent home is “the end of the year awards, you know, just putting kid’s names on envelopes... here’s the class list, here’s the envelopes, here’s the reminder.” Nicole suggested

that the PTA should “try to put it in the teacher’s heads before the year gets going, ‘Hey, here’s things that the PTA can help me with.’”

Teachers shared that parents could also help with the “extras” that make school special for students. While parents were typically more involved in the younger grades, older students could benefit from these things as well. Ms. Aguilar explained, “The Kinder[garten] teachers, oh my goodness, they go all out, it’s just so cute and so wonderful, and they are able to do that because they have a lot of parent support.” This contrasted with the older grades. She said, “I feel like with us we have a lot of pressure with testing and we have a lot of other stuff going on, that sometimes we forget they’re still kids and I want to do the cutesy stuff.” Ms. Aguilar and other upper grade teachers could utilize Room Parents to help with the “extras” that can be hard to make time for given the additional demands placed on older students. Ms. Lark pointed out that Room Parents could also help alleviate the stress during special events such as the Fall Carnival and the Valentine’s Dance. She suggested that the PTA contact Room Parents to ask, “Hey, you are the room parent for this classroom and they are scheduled to stay after, could you help them from like this time to this time?” A parent suggested that another way Room Parents could contribute to the positive atmosphere in the school would be to “run a little Shutterfly website, post pictures, to kind of see what they are doing in the classroom for parents.” Given how many parents were interested in learning more about what was going on in their children’s classroom, this seemed like a service that Room Parents could provide to other families.

In addition to clerical and supplemental tasks, there were also ways that parents could be utilized to support academics. Nicole shared that at her son’s old school she volunteered “twice a week to tutor kids that struggled with reading, and they would have either a little desk in the hall or a little room where you could go and do like games with them, learning games.” Nicole

reflected that when teachers had to reach so many students at different levels, “I think that kind of helps them because those kids are pulled out a little bit of time during the day and working with the tutor who is volunteering so they can get more done” with the rest of the class.

While Room Parents can provide valuable support, they must do so in a way that respects the needs of the teacher, students, and classroom. There are many tasks parents can do to take things off of teacher’s plates, but parents are also busy and don’t tend to have a lot of time to be in the school. For Room Parents to be a structure that helps build democratic parental participation in the school, it should help to strengthen the connection between home and school in a way that includes all families and teachers.

Soccer Club

Soccer Club was a successful PTA project that inspired students and engaged parents. Brian, one of the lead organizers of the Soccer Club, explained his commitment to offering extracurricular activities because they “play such a huge part in one tying the children to the school but also just rounding out the children as children, or good students, but also as good human beings.” Mr. Lopez worked closely with Brian to start the Soccer Club. As one of the lead teachers for the Running Club, he explained that “we want to keep those kids active, we don’t want it to stop. I personally want to keep going with all kinds of sports and things.” In addition to the health benefits, Mr. Lopez explained it “gives the kids a greater sense of belonging and accomplishment that school isn’t just to go take and pass a test and that’s like your crowning achievement at the school.” To make sure the program was accessible, students could participate at a very low cost and practices were scheduled as conveniently as possible, immediately following school and on Saturday mornings.

Soccer Club inspired many parents to participate that hadn't typically shown up for school functions in the past. The first season of the Soccer Club culminated with a well-attended and festive tournament on a Saturday. Brian believed Soccer Club had been such a success because "it's a subtle, bicultural bonding event... with the Latino population of the school, the ethnic makeup of the school, and especially to a lesser extent, we have immigrants from Africa as well. Everyone plays soccer, they watch soccer at home." He also argued that it helped "getting dads involved... soccer is a means of participating in the child's life when the dad, son, or daughter likes it, and it's not a burden. It's an easy way in." Mr. Lopez also saw Soccer Club as a way to bring more parents onto campus. He said, "We can use their help with lots of things here; I want to see more of them at the school." He hoped when parents came to pick up their kids they could "reel them in to have them stay longer and maybe want to come and help a little bit more and get into it once they see their student and spend their time." Charlene, Brian's wife, had witnessed this at practices and games. She said, "They starting coming and they were just sort of standing there, and [Brian] started just grabbing them like, 'You are doing this, you are doing this, you are doing this.'" She was struck how "once they did one thing you realized that they had a vested interest and that's why they had shown up and they were more than willing."

Soccer Club interested many new parents, but to get the most benefit from parental participation more coordination needed to take place in advance. Soccer Club was no small undertaking: 75 students participated the first season, and the PTA planned on expanding to bring in other schools the following year. Brian had been glad to see more parents get involved as the season progressed. He said, "They showed up the next time, and they brought beverages, they brought coolers" but he confessed "it kicked my tail though, my god it was so exhausting. It was just, I made an error in not getting more parents involved at the beginning." Brian realized

without last minute help from PTA board members “I would have been toast. Because I just couldn’t get the stuff needed done at each event. I could line the fields, I couldn’t [do] all the little things that had to get done for each event.” Though offering soccer had tapped into many factors that resonated with students and families, the organizers realized they needed to build structures for parental participation into the club from the beginning.

The success of the first season largely relied on donations from parents and the community, something that needed to be sustained to offer such programs in the future. Mr. Lopez shared that “the donations have been insane... people have got their money in their hands, they’re just ‘Take all my money, what do you need?’” Mr. Lopez shared described a “parent who donated 100 dollars to the PTA for soccer. Prior to that I had never spoken to that parent, that was a big help and now she’s wanting to get more involved.” While the enthusiasm and monetary support surrounding Soccer Club did not seem to be waning, access to resources would always be a factor when considering extracurricular activities the PTA could offer.

Soccer Club was a hit with many students and parents, but other members of the school community still wished there was an activity provided that interested them. Principal Johnson reflected Soccer Club was “one of the awesome things that happened this year... the kids talked about it constantly.” Soccer Club was a successful first effort at offering extracurricular activities through the PTA, but it was only the beginning of what parents wanted to see offered. Tasha, a parent new to the PTA and school, attended a PTA meeting and proposed establishing a Cheer Squad. Thrilled that the PTA voted to sponsor the team, Tasha held tryouts and signed up almost twenty students who would not necessarily have benefitted from the Soccer Club. Principal Johnson made it clear that with all the pressures put on teachers and the school “we will need more community support for afterschool activities.” To make activities like Soccer

Club and the Cheer Squad sustainable over the long term, the PTA needs to continue to secure the necessary resources and distribute labor amongst a group of committed and organized parents.

Though PTA committees, Room Parents, and Soccer Club had the potential to serve as structures for increased parental participation, they could also be exclusionary if they were not set up in a way to welcome all parents and make room for all perspectives and experiences. The work of Room Parents and Committees needed to focus on building collective capacity to accomplish tasks that meet the real needs of the students and the school.

Conclusion

When the parents of Patriot Elementary School recognize their shared purpose to unite with teachers in support of students, they are well-positioned to make positive change together. Patriot is a diverse community and all parents need to feel welcomed, included, and accommodated in all PTA communications, meetings, and events. All parents have something to contribute to the school, they just need to be provided with concrete and impactful opportunities to participate that meet their needs.

This and the previous chapter reviewed what Rosa, Julia and I learned when we surveyed and interviewed parents. Throughout this process, we initiated relationships with the diverse families of Patriot and learned about the conditions necessary for their participation in the school. We shared this information with the PTA Board at the Summer Retreat and made an action plan for the following school year. The final chapter will recount this experience through PTA leader reflections, including those of Julia and Rosa who were new to the board. Their leadership underscores the importance of representation, one of the components used to build democratic parental participation in schools. The rest of this concluding chapter will review all

of these components and analyze the progress and challenges of the PTA as they commit to the ongoing project of unifying parents in the school.

CHAPTER 7: Conclusion

“It starts with your heart and radiates out”

Communities are made up of individuals, and democracies are forged through understanding difference and unifying for a common cause. In previous chapters, we learned that parents will go to great lengths to support their children’s education, but we must learn from each other and work together if we truly hope to serve all students. In chapter four, the largely white middle-class leaders in the early days of the PTA reflected on their role and analyzed the power dynamics in the school and neighborhood. Chapters five and six traced Julia, Rosa, and my collaborative research as we worked both to get to know more of the families who call Patriot home and to learn about the conditions they needed to have in place to participate fully in the school.

This closing chapter will first give an update on the progress we have made since conducting the survey and interviews. With Rosa and Julia having been recently elected to the PTA Board, we marked a shift toward improved representation within the organization. We used the Summer Retreat as an opportunity to share what we had learned with the rest of the PTA Board and to make plans for the future. We have made great strides in using what the families of Patriot shared with us to improve conditions and increase parental participation. Still, there remains a tremendous amount of work to do to make sure we truly include all parents in the organization.

After this update, the remainder of the chapter will explore how we can continue our work of building democratic participation in schools, a process which begins with critical analysis of self and society with the aim of being able to make meaningful connections with people from different backgrounds. Through those relationships, each party learns what the other needs to be included, welcomed, and represented in order to advocate for common causes.

Overall, while the school and PTA have made progress in fostering democratic parental participation, it is an ongoing process that requires personal dedication, powerful relationships, and a long-term commitment to collaboration.

Where We Are Now

At the end of each school year, educators and families pack away their supplies and sigh with relief for the coming change in routine. While everyone prepares for some time away, many also recognize that August will assert itself sooner than expected, and a lot of planning needs to be done to get the next school year off to a good start. The PTA uses summer as an opportunity to reflect and plan for the year to come in an effort to grow with each cycle of the calendar. The surveys and group interviews provided us with rich information to guide our work as an organization continually striving to improve participation with all parents in the school.

Change in Leadership

As we prepared for the Summer Retreat, there was a noticeable difference in the PTA leadership and who would be attending. Jason reflected that “there has been a lot of turnover and I think a lot of the key players from the first three years are not going to be there, and so there is going to be a new crop of leadership.” One parent that was not returning was Jeannine, who shared that in addition to finding a private school that she thought was a better fit for her daughter, she was also overwhelmed from her work with the PTA. She explained, “I was done. I was exhausted. I am a volunteer. I love that school, I love the people in that school, but I only have so much to give. At what point do I say, ‘I can’t do all of this.’” She realized part of the reason for her exhaustion was her tendency to single-handedly take on tasks, “I am going to be the first one in a room to stand up and say, ‘I can do it all,’ but the truth is I can’t. So, some of that was self-realization as well.” Another PTA leader who was leaving was Jeannine’s mom,

who had overseen PTA events the previous year. Jeannine shared that her mom had been very frustrated with the process of planning various events and reflected, “I know that my mom can be very strong worded and strong willed and has a tendency to have a little bit of an attitude about her... I think that sometimes she doesn’t make it as easy as possible for people.” Letting one person get burnt out and upset when they ended up doing most of the planning themselves could also have the additional consequence of making newcomers feel unwelcome. The PTA would miss their contributions but could also use the turnover in leadership as an opportunity to look for ways to better distribute the labor amongst a more collaborative, diverse group.

Vacancies on the board opened up the possibility for more representative leadership. Rosa and Julia had decided to run for the positions of Vice President and Secretary, respectively. While both were apprehensive, they ultimately believed that their leadership would make the PTA welcoming to more parents. Charlene recounted that when Rosa and Julia had shared feeling unwelcome during their early days in the PTA, “they were saying when they first got there they were kind of intimidated because everybody seemed to know someone else from somewhere, and they kind of stepped back... and they had the most connection.” The predominantly white middle-class leadership for the first few years of the PTA had made Latino parents with generational ties to the school, like Julia and Rosa, feel unwelcome. Emily, the first president of the PTA, reflected, “I definitely have seen a shift this year from that core group of us who, a couple of us were parents, and then we had people who were just kind-hearted and that wanted to help a school in need.” She was optimistic: “I think the tide is turning where we are getting more parents who are involved who are actually on the board.” Bill, for example, had been ready to move on and offer his services as an unofficial PTA mentor to another school, so I volunteered to take on his job as PTA Treasurer. While the PTA had appreciated the hard work

of the community members and parents who were leaving, more representative leadership would allow the PTA to reevaluate the projects we worked on and the ways we spent our time with increased focus on building democratic capacity instead of merely copying traditional PTA models.

Preparing for the Summer Retreat

One summer morning Julia, Rosa, and I met at my house, crowded around my computer, and prepared our PowerPoint presentation for the PTA Summer Retreat. Rosa told me I would have to “teach” her how to make a PowerPoint, but I assured her it was easier than it looked. Our goal was to capture what we had learned from parents on the survey and during the group interviews so that we could share it with the rest of the PTA Board. We had already analyzed the surveys together as a basis for writing questions for the group interviews, so this time we reflected on the conversations held during that hot afternoon at the park. We talked about how the ideas parents shared in both the English and Spanish sessions had confirmed and deepened our understanding of what parents had written on their surveys. We took the themes from both the surveys and interviews and decided the order in which to present them, going through and composing each slide together. We teased Julia for sounding fancy when she came up with our title, “The [Patriot] PTA Journey to a Stronger Community,” but we agreed it captured our ongoing work perfectly.

We were all excited about being able to share our work with the board. Julia pointed out that “people most of the time don’t really speak up, and if nobody speaks up you don’t really know what areas you need to better, or what people expect from it, and how to make it better.” She argued that “maybe my kid’s problems are the same as other kids’ problems, and by not sharing it we are not fixing it.” Rosa was optimistic, adding, “I feel like this is going to be a big

year. The survey helped us to see our problem areas.” She also was grateful to discuss the issues in an intimate setting during the group interviews. She said, “I think we got a lot from that, and I was glad only those few people went because that way we got to really spend time with them and get deeper into the conversation.” She also liked that “we made it into a conversation and not really an interview. I like that, I like that you do that, [and] that you taught me to do that.”

Summer Retreat

Six people attended the PTA Summer Retreat: Jason, Rosa, Julia, Brian, Charlene, and me. Unfortunately, we had not been able to find a time that worked for Principal Johnson, Mr. Lopez, and Ms. Aguilar, the school employees who had worked most closely with the PTA, but the four core board members were present, and all six of us were current parents of students in the school. Also, four of the six were bilingual, with Jason and me being the two who only spoke English. Jason shared, “I like the core group of people that we have.” There was palpable excitement in the room, and we were all enthusiastic and interacted in a collaborative manner.

Jason opened the meeting with a list of our projects and accomplishments from the previous school year, asking us to reflect on our progress. He encouraged us to keep up the good, hard work of expanding leadership to more parents in the school. We agreed that personally calling parents to encourage them to attend meetings had been a really successful method for reaching out and getting new people to feel comfortable participating. The group also reflected on the difficulty of sustaining motivation throughout the school year, with more parents being excited in the fall and the challenge being to figure out how to maintain participation mid-year. Though they could not attend, we all also agreed that we were a much stronger organization due to the active participation of Mr. Lopez and Ms. Aguilar, who helped us stay connected to all of the teachers in the school, and Principal Johnson, who modeled a

commitment to partnering with parents. Jason pointed to programs like the Room Parents as starting to build more collaboration between parents and teachers. He said we were doing nothing less than helping to change the school culture, a big job that would not be easy though he thought we were making significant progress.

After this recap of the school year, Jason handed over the floor to Rosa, Julia, and me so we could present our PowerPoint. We had divided the slides into three portions that each of us were most comfortable and interested in sharing. Julia set the tone as the first presenter. She stood at the front of the room and exerted confident authority as she explained each slide, providing examples and anecdotes to illustrate the points. Julia later said she thought our presentation “was really good. It had just the right information for everybody to know exactly what we had learned so it was important to share that information with the rest of the group.” We had not discussed if we should leave questions until the end, so Julia responded throughout her portion of the presentation, with some questions evolving into larger discussions amongst the group. She had been “nervous, I guess, not knowing, what the response would be to some of the stuff that was said, but I felt comfortable.” She was worried about sharing “an answer that maybe other people didn’t want to hear. So you get kind of nervous, so what if somebody says something very negative and there is not a solution to it?” Though she had worried about having to represent other parents concerns to a potentially defensive group, the board responded to the presentation by collaboratively brainstorming solutions for each issue. When it was Rosa’s and my turns, we followed Julia’s lead and approached the presentation as a formal yet personalized opportunity to share the overarching trends that emerged from the large amounts of information we had collected. I was struck by how familiar we all were with the information. We had spent so much time together—creating the survey, distributing the survey, analyzing what parents had

written, preparing for the group interviews, conducting the group interviews, and ultimately compiling everything we had learned in this presentation—that we were able to share what we had learned with ease and authority.

While parents were generally positive about the direction of the school and PTA, there were many areas that they thought the PTA could continue to improve, such as how they welcomed new members into the organization. We offered an overview of the various suggestions we had heard from parents: that we needed to capitalize on excitement at the beginning of the school year to make parents feel connected to the PTA, establish clear guidelines and support for Room Parents, and plan meetings that were accessible for busy families. Improved communication from the PTA and school was also a major theme, with consistency, timeliness, and the need for Spanish interpretation and translation coming up as recurring requests. Parents also had ideas for the instructional program in the school, wanting to see more interaction between the English speaking and dual language students, more of a focus on rigor rather than testing, more extracurricular offerings, and more consistent behavioral expectations. We emphasized parents' desire to participate in the classroom, highlighting the potential to improve collaboration between home and school.

During the presentation, we brainstormed ideas for the next school year. We talked about parents' focus on academic improvement and reflected on the need for our labor as a PTA to better reflect this priority. Responding to concerns about communication, Jason reasoned that the PTA should help provide stability in the often tumultuous environment of public schools. Brian argued we could do this by providing parents with expectations for participation and a calendar of upcoming events. Jason shared that headphones for real-time Spanish interpretation had been offered at previous meetings, but that no one had raised their hands to use them. Based

on what I had learned from the survey and interviews, I hypothesized that this could make Spanish-speaking parents feel singled out. I argued that we need to offer back and forth English to Spanish interpretation during meetings, even though it was slower and less convenient, at least until Spanish-speaking parents were more comfortable. To help parents feel more familiar with leaders and other families in the school, Charlene suggested hosting a PTA Social where parents could get to know each other, and Rosa volunteered to make a bulletin board with photographs of PTA Board members. As was typical in the PTA, we were overflowing with reactions to the PowerPoint and ideas for implementation, with our only limitation being the time we had to make these ideas a reality.

Retreat Reflections, Lessons, and Outcomes

Unfortunately, though our conversations, reflections, and brainstorming were incredibly productive, we ran out of time to make concrete plans in many areas. It was difficult to schedule this meeting with everyone's various summer commitments, and we had only managed to pin down a few hours where we were all in the room. Jason reflected, "I think the discussions were all excellent. I do wish we had a little bit more time to do more planning and to kind of get a few more things hammered out."

Board members also regretted that we had not been able to have these conversations with educators and committed to making sure we partnered with them moving forward. Rosa thought, "We had a good discussion about everything and got good ideas from it," but admitted, "I wish more people could have made it, especially the teachers, they could kind of see what the parents are thinking, what feedback we got from them." Jason agreed, "I wish [Principal Johnson] could have been there, I wish we could have had teachers there, I was saddened by that. It's hard in the summer." Knowing she was not going to be able to attend, Principal Johnson had met with

Jason in preparation for the meeting. I had also sent her the PowerPoint in advance so she could review it. She had written up her reactions and sent them with me so I could share them at the meeting. Rosa followed up with me to ask, “You sent everything to [Principal Johnson], right, did you tell her what we came up with?” Julia also checked with me, demonstrating the group’s belief that we could only be successful if parents and educators worked together.

Principal Johnson was committed to this collaboration. At a taqueria around the corner from the school where teachers frequently recharged after a long day, she and I met for an interview later that summer. She told me that even though she could not attend the retreat, previewing the PowerPoint presentation had been helpful “to be able to see it in that way: there were some very positive things, there are some wants, some future wishes that are to come. I really do believe that we’ll get there, but right now, we are a work in progress.” She also shared that she had not realized what a collaborative project it had been, stating, “I didn’t know you worked with [Julia] and [Rosa] on it, but I thought it was an awesome PowerPoint, it represented what people were saying. I don’t always have the time to hear what’s being said.” I frequently look to Principal Johnson as an example, and I pondered how difficult it must be to balance everything she had on her plate. She said, “It’s harder than you think to serve in my role as administrator. It’s not all kicks and giggles and cupcakes and ding dongs by far.” She lamented that “every day is overwhelming” because with a young faculty, new PTA, and relatively new administrative team, “there is just so much newness to what we are doing, you know we are two or three years in, but it’s still very new, it just takes time, if you are willing to put in the time and effort.”

Communication was an area where Principal Johnson knew the school needed to improve, but she also struggled to find sustainable ways to do so. She shared that “at the end of

the day when I get the time to think about that, I'm already spent. The last thing I'm thinking about is how to communicate to the PTA, the parents." Principal Johnson was grateful that the "teachers help me share that, they do the best they can. They are also under the gun to provide the best instruction. If we all could work together." One opportunity to improve communication was through the hiring of a new Parent Liaison for the school. Principal Johnson shared that she wanted to hire someone who was "active on the PTA. Therefore, if they are working in the school every day with me, and if I'm communicating with them, they can easily communicate with the PTA Board and the PTA members and all the parents."

When considering the ideal Parent Liaison for the school, Principal Johnson realized that it was a steep order. She said, "I'm hoping they would be bilingual, that would help, but not necessarily." She also wanted to find someone "active enough and approachable, friendly, to where everyone could feel like they could talk to that person. They would feel comfortable going to that person." In addition to those interpersonal skills, she needed "someone capable and equipped to do the paperwork that needs to be done, and it doesn't pay a lot, so you are looking at a whole lot of issues, right there, and it's a whole lot of work." In my mind, it sounded like she was describing my collaborators on the project, Rosa and Julia. Principal Johnson said she had also thought of Rosa. She said, "I love her, I love her kids. She's my girl, I am going to call her. She was the first person who came to mind."

Formally recognizing the leadership role that Rosa and others had in the community would serve the school, community, and PTA. When I met with Rosa to orient her to her new position as Vice President, I asked her what she thought about the Parent Liaison position. She said, "We need it, the school needs it." She underscored that "language is a big thing, which goes into communication, that's why a lot of non-English speakers don't participate and aren't

involved because of language and the communication needs to be stronger.” Rosa wanted to see this change, because “it’s always been a strong Hispanic community.” I asked her if she was interested in the position, and she said, “I could do the job, I am pretty sure, especially if I get some training, I could do it. But, when it goes to requirements I get nervous that I don’t have that experience, that background that they ask for.” The qualifications she possessed were the ones that mattered most, and Rosa and Principal Johnson soon connected to further formalize her leadership in the community.

The New School Year

As the new school year got underway, we had more representative leadership in place to improve conditions and expand parental participation in the school. The PTA Board made a lot of productive changes based on survey and interview findings, though as always it was a struggle to be as systematic and thorough in making these changes as we would have liked because we are a volunteer organization that is always pressed for time. In the many meetings, events, and projects we have worked on this fall, we often resorted to flying by the seat of our pants, but at least these instincts were guided by a better understanding of the needs of the whole community and by the fact that we had committed ourselves to ongoing reflection and improvement.

In the past, we used the first PTA General Meeting of the year to try to plug interested parents into specific committees during small group breakout sessions. The previous year we had been successful in calling all parents who had signed up during the fall membership drive, making a personal appeal for them to attend. In fact, it was this outreach that first connected Julia and Rosa to the PTA. We hoped to replicate and build on this success for the first PTA General Meeting of the year, which had been scheduled for the same night as Open House. This proved to be too many events for the school community to juggle in one evening. The

auditorium was crowded and loud, and because he was already worried about finishing the meeting in time for families to be released to visit classrooms, Jason decided that we did not have time for Spanish interpretation. The meeting was chaotic and hard to follow, a reality that I would argue was only exacerbated by the fact that many families in the room could not understand what was going on. Reflecting at a board meeting afterward, we agreed that the meeting had not achieved what we had hoped and brainstormed solutions for the future.

The meetings since that first one have more successfully implemented what we learned. Jason has led the charge of providing affordable meals for families at each one, with offerings including chicken fingers, pupusas, burgers, and pizza. With a main dish, side and a drink for around three dollars, parents have enthusiastically purchased the food for themselves and their kids. The PTA has even made a small profit each time, money that has been immediately applied to fulfilling requests on the teacher wish list Brian compiled at the beginning of the year. Rosa, overcoming her nerves, has stood side by side with Jason at each meeting, interpreting his presentation in Spanish for appreciative audience members. Though general meetings are still mostly short and informational and are held before student performances that are the real draw for most parents, the way they are being planned is making it possible for more people to learn about what the PTA is doing and to get excited about participating in the school. Board meetings, where most decision making takes place with a smaller but now more representative group, have gone from being discouraging affairs I used to dread to something I now look forward to attending. They are fun and relaxed collaborative work sessions with a lot of laughter where we share our victories and reflect on ways to improve.

We have been successful in spreading out leadership in other arenas as well, resulting in more positive experiences for everyone. In addition to numerous smaller teacher appreciation

events, we have hosted three major PTA events: the Fall Festival, the Tamale Cook Off/Posada Festival, and the Valentine's Day Dance. Though each of these were a lot of work, they were each planned by different people instead of all falling on the same person, which helped to mitigate the stress and impact. Still, after each one we reflected on how to make sure the labor invested was really furthering the goals of the organization and the school. Rosa shared that she wanted to simplify the Posada Festival the following year, taking out the Tamale Cook Off that had been the most difficult part to coordinate and emphasizing the multicultural fair where students got "passports" stamped for learning about different holidays. My Jewish husband and children had been excited about running the Hanukah booth. The board reflected that this was a good way to make sure the event included the whole community while honoring the diversity of families in the school. Overall, each event provided the school with a fun community building opportunity while also bringing in some money to provide resources for the school.

Fostering collaboration between teachers and parents through the Room Parents program has still proved to be a difficult undertaking. There has been a lot of trial and error as the PTA tries to both avoid imposing on teachers while also facilitating projects that are educationally meaningful and that build the capacity for parental participation in the school. Room Parents were something that Julia, Rosa, and I had bonded over early in our friendship, so we continued to work on fine-tuning the project. Utilizing what we have learned about the importance of relationships, we established Room Parent Representatives as a way for PTA Board members to provide additional leadership and support for clusters of classrooms in the school. We initiated the creation of a student directory as a project on which teachers and parents could collaborate, but we had difficulty getting as much participation as we would have liked because it was already so late in the year by the time we got started. Rather than dismiss this effort, we

brainstormed ways to improve upon it the following year. Room Parents were more engaged with a Black History Month door decorating contest, something that tapped into traditional notions of how Room Parents can contribute in a way that is unobtrusive to the teacher while also promoting an appreciation of diversity in the school. About half of the doors in the school were decorated, mostly by Latina and white moms. Rosa played a role in decorating at least three doors, as her children were in those classes, but with each of those she collaborated with other parents. Overall, there was active participation in the contest beyond the typical PTA leadership that is encouraging for future projects.

Our communication efforts have also improved. One of the unanticipated benefits of the door decorating contest was that it provided a boost in the Facebook following for the PTA page. Photos of doors were judged by “likes,” and the viral campaigns run by supporters increased the number of people following the page from 200 to 225 in one day. For a school with only 335 students, this was already a pretty impressive following that speaks to the functionality of the page. Largely run by Rosa, the page lists monthly school calendars, event, and reminders in both English and Spanish, all of which Rosa also emails to our PTA list of 119 paid members, which I then condense into few enough characters to text out to the 44 parents who supplied phone numbers at the beginning of the year.

In her dual roles as Vice President and the Parent Liaison, Rosa has utilized her experience as a researcher to guide her work. She has prioritized ideas that emerged through the research process such as the PTA bulletin board and monthly calendars. She has also employed strategies for democratic inquiry and community building into her work. In an effort to make the support of Room Parents more meaningful and beneficial to teachers, Rosa distributed a survey at a Teacher Appreciation lunch to find out what they each thought could be the most useful

tasks for a Room Parent to complete. When leading a PTA project or event, she has utilized her friendship networks to encourage participation and recruit support. Perhaps one of the most significant contributions among many has been her mentoring of other new leaders, as she encouraged the parents planning the Fall Festival, Valentine's Dance, and teacher appreciation events to resist the urge to do everything on their own and instead always recruit a team for support. She also has helped to facilitate monthly "Coffee with the Counselor" sessions, inviting all parents to join in round table discussions about their students and the school. While her leadership has been invaluable, it has also in some ways taken its toll. She was particularly exhausted after planning the Posadas Festival, and has shared with me that at times she was overwhelmed by her work. The never-ending labor required to recruit and mentor new leaders while also bottom-lining many projects has caused her to worry that "it's always the same parents" who show up. As someone who was involved when there were less than ten white middle-class parents who were not representative of the school who showed up, I do my best to remind her how far we have come.

That being said, our growth has mostly been with Latino parents. While it is a majority Latino school, 18% of the student body is black and we have not focused as much energy on reaching out to these families. Principal Johnson brought this concern to the attention of the PTA Board and asked that we reach out to Tasha, an African American mother with a fifth grade daughter in the school. Julia, Rosa, and I thought she might be interested in working with us on Room Parents, so Rosa invited the three of us over for brunch one morning after we had all dropped our kids off at school. During this meeting and another one shortly afterward at my house where I provided a breakfast that paled in comparison to Rosa's multi-course meal, we got to know Tasha and shared some of our goals for Room Parents and the PTA with her. She asked

pointed questions about our homes, husbands, and jobs, and shared her own struggles as a single mom without family support and unstable employment. Tasha and Rosa commiserated on how difficult it was to pull yourself out of an economic tangle once you were in it. This allowed me to reflect on the fact that even though I have a different class background than Julia and Rosa, we still have so much in common that has made it possible for us to easily work together on this project. In contrast to Tasha, we are all married, have our parents nearby for support, and can rely on stable home environments. While we have opened up our circle, there is still so much further to go to truly include all parents.

Tasha had some interest in Room Parents, but the idea that really inspired her was to start a Cheer Squad for students. She proposed this at PTA Board meeting where we voted to help pay for the uniforms that Tasha was lining up through a friend of hers. Everyone was excited when she held tryouts, and eighteen students joined the team. She has been a passionate leader of the group, coaching them through new routines and preparing them to cheer at the Soccer Tournament and STAAR testing pep rally. It has not been seamless, however. As a result of some concerns with practice start times and a delay in receiving uniforms, Rosa and I reflected that we could have done a better job in supporting her as a developing leader in a new role. It is not enough to merely expand the circle, but you have to offer support and collaborate with all new leaders as they gain confidence and experience.

We need to make sure that in our quest to encourage more parental participation in the school that we are truly being democratic and welcoming all groups. For example, as a Jewish man raising Jewish children, my husband was irritated when my son came home with nothing but Christmas paraphernalia in the weeks leading up to the holidays. Also, as social justice advocates, both my husband and I were troubled by the school's presentation of Native

Americans during Thanksgiving. If the goal is to promote multicultural understanding and come together across difference, we must resist the tendency to oversimplify or marginalize experiences that are not like our own.

Progress comes in fits and starts, and for good reason there are many clichés to capture how many steps you must take back for each hard earned step forward on the long and bumpy road ahead. We really have come so far, though. At the risk of coming off like the naïve, privileged white woman I am, I often act as a cheerleader for the PTA and school. I point out our successes, such as the mid-year reboot meeting in January outlined in chapter one where we so effectively dealt with all our mistakes from the first PTA meeting of the year. At that meeting, thirty parents from diverse backgrounds attended solely because they wanted to be actively involved in the PTA. We had successful breakout sessions, meaningful conversations in Spanish, and babysitting and dinner for busy families. Though we have only just begun, we are on the right path.

My Evolving Role: Treasurer, Patriot Parent, and Future School Leader

My role, identity, and voice have played a big part throughout this long collaborative process. I have not been a static force, however. When I first helped found the PTA, my oldest child was only one year old. My status as a “parent” at the school was largely hypothetical. He is now finally in Pre-K, and I am looking at all this work through a different lens, and I am also being looked at differently as I am now associated with an actual child in the school. I started out as a “Volunteer Coordinator” all those years ago, then agreed to be Vice President for a two-year term, and ultimately volunteered to replace Bill as Treasurer this past year, which has given me an interesting window to the financial barriers that are paired with the social barriers I had already come to understand. Finally, I entered Patriot as a high school social studies teacher on a

hard-earned break, a break which has gradually evolved into an almost complete doctorate and principal's certification. I am not just looking at these dynamics as a teacher might, but instead I'm evaluating how I could handle the same issues as a future school leader

I will never forget waltzing through the doors at Patriot to enroll my son for Pre-K at nine o'clock in the morning and getting helped right away as the only white parent in line, while other Latino parents waited in a long line for a Spanish placement exam. This stood in contrast to the posts I had seen on Facebook earlier in the day, shared by my white middle-class neighbors who had been turned away from the Pre-K program in a highly desirable public school nearby after waiting in line since five o'clock in the morning. The two schools are one mile apart, yet the experiences of the families at each are like night and day.

In general, I have been thrilled with our experience as a legitimate Patriot family. I will admit, however, that it was hard in the beginning of the year when my son was having a difficult time at drop off each day. We all had to adjust; it was so different from the small, private preschool he had attended. As a parent, I had to learn to trust the teachers and let him go have his own experience, and this is coming from an active PTA member who presumably has more access to the school than most parents feel they have. My son also had to adjust to a room with 22 kids as compared to the ten he was used to in his preschool classes, and he had to learn the new more structured routine after being accustomed to school being primarily free time to play with educational toys. It helped to talk with other parents at drop off and pick up time, allowing me to see that this was just normal kid stuff. I also could not help but ask, however, if there was something traditional schools are getting fundamentally wrong about what kids need.

While I still mull over these questions, my son is truly thriving at Patriot. He still occasionally clutches my legs at drop off, but when I pick him up he excitedly rattles off the

details of his day: what stories he read, to whom he wrote letters, what games he played with his friends and teachers. I could not be happier with what he is learning, but I now have more caution about when and how I share such things. Instead of my cheerleading just reflecting back on me, the do-gooder PTA volunteer, now we are a real Patriot family. My husband's reputation as a history professor at a nearby university is a more heavily weighted part of the equation now that he has been recast as my precocious son's father and not just my husband. When I share my enthusiasm, I am more aware of how it sounds coming from our entire privileged family.

Shifting into the role of Treasurer has also provided insight. At the district training held at the beginning of the year, we were told use common sense, but I could not help but wonder whose common sense they valued. During my first few visits to the bank, it almost seemed as if they were hazing me, making sure I understood the stakes and the rules of the game, and once I learned I needed to roll all the coins and check all the boxes, I was "in" and they suddenly greeted me with huge familiar smiles. I have learned that where money is concerned, rules and procedures tend to exist to promote stability, which is inherently conservative. On the other hand, we as a PTA are committed to building a new multiracial democracy, which is inherently risky. As Treasurer, I am constantly confronted with decisions about whom to trust with the organization's resources, and the existing procedures kept that circle very small. We are working on opening it up in ways that are structured and fair while also minimizing the financial risk to the organization.

For example, the historic practice had been for event organizers to front all money required to purchase supplies, which could cost hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars. Then, once receipts were provided, the PTA Treasurer would write a reimbursement check to the organizer. This practice assumed that event organizers had access to large amounts of cash or a

credit card where they could carry a balance. As the new Treasurer, I was approached numerous times by organizers who were unable to do this. The first time, Jason and I discussed it and made an exception to front them the money. The second and third time, we decided we needed a new procedure that better provided for the very different financial situations parents might be in, and I created a check request form that documented the money they needed advanced to them to plan the event. While giving parents money up front had been unheard of up to that point, we decided it was a small and necessary financial risk necessary to open up participation to more parents. It also did not escape me that Jason and I were essentially acting as gatekeepers for other parents, a practice that I wanted to decentralize.

The check request form helped in most situations, but not all. There have been bumps in the road in acquiring the uniforms for the Cheer Squad, for example. Tasha was not able to cash the PTA check to buy clothing items at Walmart because she does not have an account with a bank. As a PTA, we supported the idea of buying the uniforms from her friend rather than a traditional vendor because Tasha had worked hard to arrange a good deal. The whole procedure was unconventional, but we were making an effort to be more inclusive in our all of our practices, including financial ones. That being said, I recognized the need for more support and for extra checks and balances to be put in place to make sure that we reduced financial risk with the new, more inclusive procedures we were implementing.

I also saw a need for the PTA to use funds to purchase technology so parents do not think they need their own devices to participate. Julia routinely borrowed my laptop to take notes at board meetings, and Rosa regularly used my smartphone to take credit cards for school spirit purchases. While I did not mind loaning them these items, if we were to invest in one tablet that

could do both things, we would have a common tool available to everyone, and parents would not feel dependent on others to perform their basic PTA duties.

Recently, I have divided my time between work on this dissertation and completing my administrative internship to apply for principal's certification. My experience working on this PAR project has solidified my belief that school leaders need to be immersed in their communities, building relationships as reflective leaders with the intent of developing democratic leadership in the school.

I learned so much from working with Principal Johnson, who reflected that because she started out as the Assistant Principal at Patriot for four years before she was given the Principal position, "I do know the community, the needs of the school, I know the people. So, to be able to go in with that lens, of not having to figure that out, it's incredible." Brittany agreed that the district leaders needed to support this work because "principals need to be allowed to be principals, we put them there because they are experts in their field." Immersion in the school and community is required to make lasting change, and shared trust amongst leaders at all levels is required for that to be possible. As Brittany explained, "We hire principals because we believe they are the best person to lead that campus. It takes five years to implement true change. So, if you are only giving them a year or two years to show change, that is unrealistic." I hope to earn the opportunity to become a leader in a school community, continually reflecting on my own role, developing relationships, learning what the community needs, and building democratic capacity to advocate for students over time.

I also have learned that both an overt commitment to social justice and daily affirmation of that commitment are critical to educational leadership. SISD has recently committed itself to equity and challenging institutionalized racism. As a respected civil rights historian, my husband

serves on the district's racial equity committee, where he recently worked with Brittany from the School Board and other district employees and community members to craft a recently approved district racial equity policy. When I interviewed her, Brittany had suggested that the PTA do something similar. She argued that it's important for organizations to have "some self-accountability. Setting expectations in advance, that lets people know those conversations will not be welcome here." She urged us to create a policy "making the appreciation of the diversity of the school one of the core values of the PTA. Having the agreement that all of your actions are going to be to promote and respect that diversity." I argue that parent organizations, schools, and districts need to formalize what they stand for, but they also need to continually reevaluate how their actions measure up to those promises.

For example, I am concerned that the district's racial equity policy can be used as a tool to implement changes that might not actually be in the best interests of marginalized communities. The superintendent has recently proposed reconstituting schools that had been on the state's "Improvement Required" list for the past five years. While this is an increasingly common strategy across the country for "failing" schools, it is one that has the potential to punish dedicated teachers and loving parents for society's failures. Brittany reasoned that as a district "we have some schools that can compete with the highest performing schools in the nation, and then we have some schools that probably need to be closed or converted to magnet schools. They need a new strategy." As a teacher in one of the most notorious "failing" schools in North Carolina for seven years, my colleagues, my students, and their families faced the looming threat of being shut down by the state year after year. This eroded the commitment of talented teachers and taught students and their families that they and their school weren't good enough. While I appreciate the district's stated commitment to racial equity, we must remain

vigilant and critical of how implementation of this goal does or does not take the community into account.

My experiences working on this project have taught me valuable lessons about the importance of building democratic school leadership, lessons I will utilize in my role as a campus leader (Brown, 2010; Glanz, 2005; Waite, 2010). I have recently been asked four questions that helped me to clarify my beliefs. On the way home from the Women's March in Austin, I reflected with friends about the challenges in the world and what we could do about them, sharing what I was learning on this project as an example. One of my friends, a parent who has started to get involved with the PTA at her son's school, asked me what could she do other than just talk to parents at her school if she wanted to make positive change? I told her that I actually thought that was one of the most powerful things we can do, truly listening to others who are different from you and learning how you can work together. My other friend in the car that day shared that as a teacher in the same school she was frustrated that she had to work so hard to convince parents to volunteer for family reading day in her classroom. I encouraged her to reframe how she was looking at the situation. She had done the work of building parental participation: she called them, she talked to them, she got to know them and learned what they needed, all of which demonstrated that she cares about their children and values them as parents. She had been successful in building relationships and improving conditions, which increased parental participation in her classroom. That is a major win, and as educators, that is our job.

On a separate occasion, after I had presented this project to a group of my fellow graduate students, I was asked two more questions that inspired reflection. One educator asked for advice in starting a new PTA at her school, and another asked what I would do differently if I were conducting this research again. I told them that we need to think outside the box in

organizing parents. Don't just go to the obvious choice, the typical leaders who can do it all on their own. Instead, dig a little deeper and try to think of parents who have shown they love the school, want the best for their children's education, and care about the community. There are many, many parents who fit this description, but they might not fit the traditional PTA mold. There aren't any shortcuts to building democratic parental participation; instead, we must commit to the slow steady work of bringing all parents into the work. Think of the people best situated to help you with that difficult but important project. Finally, I responded to the other educator that my biggest regret had been that I hadn't gotten further away from my own comfortable circle of peers as I tried to reach out to new people. Of course, this needs to be a never-ending commitment, but we have to remain devoted to getting further away from our own perspective to better understand the needs of the community. I think that this project marks major progress in the PTA and school's ability to do so, but there is still a long way to go.

Everything we do as a PTA, I see as a former teacher, a current parent, and a future leader who will try to work with everyone to build a democratic school community. I am learning every day as a mom in the PTA how to do what is good for all students, not just mine. As I stumble along, I can only imagine the falls I will take as an administrator, but I am eternally grateful that I have had the experience on this project for practice.

Building Democratic Participation: What Works

In PAR, where method and outcomes are tangled up and given meaning through cyclical, collaborative interrogation, the lessons from this study are drawn from both our research process and our findings (Fals Borda, 2013; Fine, 2013; Guishard, 2009; Jordan, 2008; Torre, 2009).

Through both my experience as a participant-researcher and the stories parents shared on surveys

and in interviews, I learned that it is possible to bring parents together from different backgrounds to fight for students.

Doing so must start with individual reflection, critique, and power analysis. Our individual decisions impact others, for good or for ill. I have observed that in schools and most other units in society, we tend to self-segregate based on hierarchical judgments, and those who opt out blame those who are different for their struggles. We all must take moral responsibility for our role in this. To make change, we must grapple with the ways in which we are complicit. That is the first step in recognizing that the solutions lie within all of us and that we are most powerful when we join forces.

It is not enough to reflect on our own experiences; rather, this is just the first step to building potentially transformative relationships with others. To establish those bonds, we must show that we honor other people's perspectives by being both aware and critical of our own. Similarly, the work of self-reflection does not end with a new friendship, but instead this is the backbone of all the work we must do to extend our democratic potential. By reflecting on ourselves, we are able to connect with others and develop an understanding of the different conditions required for each party to participate. The experiences, needs, and interests of each group need to be negotiated through dialogue, initially through representative structures but also increasingly through face to face conversations. After all, common purpose is forged through an understanding of difference, a slow building of trust and capacity to act as a collective.

Self-Reflection

To engage with others, we must reflect on ourselves. This means to question our way of seeing the world, to try to understand how others see it, and to be open to changing ourselves as a result of the process (Posey-Maddox, 2013; Michael, 2015; Singleton, 2014). In other words,

self-reflection is a method through which we can both examine and de-center our own experiences. Not only was my own self-reflection and critique important to my work as a collaborator and the primary researcher on this project, but I was also continually inspired listening to each individual share their story and process how their role impacted others. Self-reflection is a theme throughout this work, but one that is particularly strong in chapter four where some of the leaders in the early days of the PTA examined their role as largely white middle-class newcomers to the neighborhood and the school, and critiqued the impact their decisions had on others. This was a necessary first step to opening the door to building relationships with parents who had a longer term, and in some cases generational, connection to the school.

White privileged leaders bear particular responsibility to examine the ways in which how they see the world and communicate these beliefs impact the perceived value and participation of others (Casey, 2016; White, 2012). As a white School Board member, Brittany thought it was extremely important to have “an understanding of cultural differences and that the way we communicate with one another is different, but it’s not bad, it’s just the way it is.” She explained, “with white talk, we tend to be more focused on the data and look at things from a more academic perspective, whereas people of color can personally identify with the challenges.” Many highly publicized police killings of unarmed black men, women, and children took place during this project, and as Brittany explained, “you’ve got people who are getting shot in the streets because they talk with their hands. To some people this is threatening, to others, [its] passionate. It’s just understanding people.” She argued, “It’s not about changing the way you are, it’s about being conscious about the way you interact with others.” Pat, the former president of the district council of PTAs, reflected on her original belief that “of course

all lives matter.” After conversations with others that inspired self-reflection and an analysis of power dynamics, she said “I find out that’s not the perspective other people have... it is implicit bias, we all have it, we can’t do anything about it, but we can be open.” Reflection, critique, and openness to challenging our assumptions are critical steps for white leaders interested in social justice (Casey, 2016; Michael, 2015; Posey-Maddox, 2013; Singleton, 2014; White, 2012).

Jason’s reflections on the role of white parents in PTAs and schools are also a good example of the critique and power analysis we need to engage in if we want to build relationships, participation, representation, and capacity for advocacy with diverse groups of parents. Jason shared, “I think one thing about PTAs in general is that white parents are the ones that dominate the boards and the political efforts in PTAs, because we can be very aggressive when it comes to education.” He pointed out that “even in schools where white parents are the minority, white parents are the ones in the PTA, promoting the PTA.” This is significant because “sometimes what a white middle-class parent wants for the school is maybe not what the school needs.” To balance out this disparity in power and influence, Jason thought it was important that “the leadership of the PTA has to be intentional about thinking through who they are appointing, who they are inviting” to participate. Even more so, the PTA should not impose their ideas on new recruits. Instead, leaders should “encourage them in doing it rather than me trying to control it or someone else trying to control it and make it to the way that I want it to be.” Democratic participation can only take place amongst equal parties whose ideas are all considered valuable.

It is important for leaders—particularly white, privileged leaders like Jason, Pat, Brittany and myself—to participate in this analysis of power dynamics and our role in them. Though we by no means have all the answers, a willingness to examine our own perspective as it interacts

with power and privilege in society is a critical foundation for engaging diverse populations in democratic social change (Casey, 2016; Michael, 2015; Singleton, 2014; White, 2012).

Relationships

There were times during this project that I felt overwhelmed by the huge injustices in this world and embarrassed that my own efforts seemed so small: one neighborhood, one school, and a few friends asking and answering a few questions. In these moments, what I came back to time and time again was my belief that our most radical potential is forged in these intimate relationships. There is profound possibility when reflective individuals engage in intentional dialogue together (Michael, 2015; Singleton, 2014). This helps us reveal the unproductive habit of looking for others to blame when, in fact we share a common purpose and have more power together. There is never any real limitation on reaching out across difference, yet in society we tend to stick with our own. Principal Johnson reasoned, “People always reflect back to previous experiences, and if you have experiences with someone that looks like this person or that person, you are holding them accountable for everything someone else did to you.” The only way we break down stereotypes and stop using each other as scapegoats is to get to know one another. When we do this, we learn about what others need, want, and are willing to fight for. We learn about ourselves and our role in changing the world.

This project could be seen as a series of relationships in which individuals strengthen, support, challenge, and inspire each other to work for collective benefit. When they were planning the Tamale Cook Off and first getting introduced to the PTA, Julia and Rosa each shared with me that they were initially intimidated and felt unwelcomed by some of the established leaders in the PTA. Julia explained, “We were pretty lost when we were doing the tamale cook off but we are glad it came together.” Despite this success, Rosa reflected, “I put

myself down. I get intimidated and scared and I just never do things. That's me.” Similarly, Julia said, “I am scared that maybe my best is not what is expected of me.” When they attended meetings and worked together, they helped make each other more brave. This solidarity allowed them to crack through the unwelcoming façade of outsiders’ alleged expertise with their own fortified insiders’ perspective.

This trust initiated yet another set of relationships amongst the three of us that made me a better researcher and collaborator while also helping demystify the roles and structures of the PTA for them. Chapter three traced the beginning of these relationships and how they unfolded throughout the study. We truly took turns leading. As the initiator of this study, I typically led the group on process, always asking for their input and respecting the decisions we made as a group, but ultimately ensuring that we kept progressing in spite of our busy schedules. They led the way in areas equally, if not more, important. Their perspective as parents with generational ties to the school was invaluable as we defined our goals and methods within the overall trajectory of our work. I also tried to emulate their skills as hostesses. Each time I was invited to their homes, they provided artfully arranged trays of fruit or homemade beverages that made me feel like a special guest. Rosa prepared a complicated brunch for us one morning, and between visits Julia dropped off a gift of Mexican sweet bread with caramel tequila sauce and candy for my family. When we worked, our kids were almost always in the background playing, providing us with opportunities to share notes on how we taught them right from wrong, what we felt we needed to do to keep them safe, and how we shared the work of the household with our husbands. At one point when I was feeling like an overindulgent mom in contrast to their poise and composure as they each firmly led their children like little teams throughout their days, I realized that they were younger than me—maybe even as young as the high school students I had

taught years before but still kept in touch with on Facebook, who also now had kids the same age as mine. It warmed my heart to think about collaborating with and learning from women who were the peers of my former students, and it helped me critique the ways my age, experience, and privilege could be a hindrance in some of the community-building work we were doing.

I also cannot overstate the importance of their leadership on the many considerations of language throughout the project. Being bilingual in English and Spanish with relationships to parents and family members who only spoke Spanish meant they had a window into the alienation so many parents experienced with the English-dominant PTA and school leadership as well as the tools necessary to open doors between these worlds. The list of ways they educated me and provided for Spanish-speaking parents are almost too long to list here, but I will try. They insisted that we make materials available in both languages and gently reminded me when I failed to do so, they translated countless communications composed in English (such as surveys, consent documents, emails, flyers, and Facebook posts), they interpreted at numerous events and meetings, and they approached Spanish-speaking parents about the survey and other events in their own language. Perhaps most profoundly for me, they conducted a group interview in Spanish. Rather than translate or interpret ideas formed in English, Spanish speaking parents shared their ideas and brainstormed solutions in their own language, all while I let my lack of understanding wash over me and give me a small taste of what it must feel like to operate in a world that often leaves you out.

Simply put, I could not have learned what I did about the diverse families who call Patriot home without them. It is always difficult to reach people who do not look like us, live like us, and talk like us, but these connections can be built one relationship at a time. The stories shared in chapter five represent a step toward building a bridge between communities at Patriot.

For the largely white middle-class PTA leaders new to the school and neighborhood to develop relationships with the predominantly Latino families in the school, they had to get to know them. They had to be genuinely interested in what they wanted for their children, how they thought the school could improve, and what the PTA could do to facilitate these processes.

Through our collaborative research to uncover these things, I tried to reflect my belief back to Julia and Rosa that the insight, skills, and dedication to represent every family in the community was what the PTA really needed, not some removed artificial ideal of leadership. When I initially asked Rosa if she would consider a position on the PTA Board, she shared, “I always tell myself, I’m not a leader, I’m awesome at following directions, tell me what to do and I’ll do it.” This from a woman who at that time had already coordinated a large scale PTA event, shared multiple creative ideas for engaging the community, and demonstrated her tenacity in making sure such projects were accomplished. Though she demonstrated the same leadership qualities, Julia also shared her apprehension when asked about taking on leadership positions, stating, “I guess I am just really afraid of failing.” She did not want to take on responsibility only to hear, “We gave you an important role and you didn’t succeed.” Throughout our work together, I tried to not be too pushy, but I also made it clear that there was more than one way to be a leader and that I respected and valued their humble, inclusive, and creative ways. I did not, nor did this project, empower them. I do not like that term because I do not think you can give power to others. They already had it. I also am wary of the tendency for my appreciation of them to border on romanticization or reductionism of their complex humanity into convenient solutions for my limitations as a researcher. We all brought valuable talents and perspectives to the table. What we gave each other was trusting relationships where we could take risks, call each other on our mistakes, and gain confidence as we practiced leadership skills.

This project inspired all of us to reach out beyond our comfort zones. From serving as a catalyst to ask an intriguing new acquaintance for an interview, to giving us the confidence to ask strangers to complete our survey, to holding us accountable for sharing what we had learned even when those lessons were sometimes uncomfortable, this project laid the foundations for establishing new relationships that had the potential to transform us as individuals, a PTA, and a school. We have to challenge preconceived assumptions and overcome social boundaries, because as Julia said, “If people don’t feel like you care about the issues [they] have, or concerns, they are going to stay away.” The relationships we built with each other allowed us to build relationships with others, laying the groundwork for improving the conditions for participation, representation, and advocacy.

All three of us believed we had improved as individuals and also helped the PTA improve through our relationship as collaborators on this project. Julia said, “Even though it’s a project for bettering, but I’ve enjoyed getting to know y’all too. We were pretty intimidated.” Rosa agreed, “I am definitely glad that we’ve met and that we’ve been working together. I feel really comfortable with you...that’s a good friendship to help each other out in some way.” I am grateful for their friendship, I know I could not have done this project without them, and I believe the PTA is drastically improved for their commitment to the community.

Conditions

A critical component in improving the PTA and school is understanding the conditions parents require for participation. To build democratic parental participation, we must make accommodations to welcome and include all families in the school (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Mullen, 2010; O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). Chapter six detailed the experiences and suggestions of parents who want to participate but who are not always able or willing to do so as

a result of oversights within the PTA and school. The cultural divisions, deficit thinking, language issues, and other barriers that parents experience will need to be overcome to engage all parents in democratic participation for the school. Collaborative school culture is a condition already in place that will help make this work possible.

Cultural divisions. From PTA leaders, to parents who had never before attended a PTA meeting, to the principal, there was a general consensus that a cultural divide was holding many parents back from participating in the school. Julia shared, “We are all one community but it seems like you’re kind of divided where people feel more comfortable with their own people. I think that’s not the way it should be, we can all contribute together.” Principal Johnson explained that she thought this divide existed because “fear plays a big role in everything, and I know at times it can be difficult to approach someone, if you don’t know them, you don’t know how they feel, about you, your culture, your world, so you are standoffish until you feel welcomed.” Jason reflected, “The friendship networks that we have are going to be with people that look like us, so you are going to have to be intentional, and you are going to have to step out away from your normal friendship network.” To overcome the cultural divisions in the school, parents needed to intentionally reach out and welcome families who were different from their own.

Deficit thinking. Intentional outreach can only go so far if we approach others with a deficit mindset, however. We can be the friendliest people in the world, but if someone feels condescended to or looked down on, they will not want to work with us. Once you start listening for deficit thinking in how parents and educators talk about other families, you will hear oversimplification, reductionism, and value judgments that diminish the power and agency of individuals to make positive change in their own lives.

Deficit thinking is a result of using your own values as a barometer of success rather than recognizing that each person brings their own cultural expectations to the table, which are not better or worse, just different (Auerbach, 2010; Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Horvat & Baugh, 2015; Lareau & Munoz, 2012). Jason's reflection showed how, to some degree, the burden of dismantling deficit thinking falls on white and more privileged parents. He said, "I think that is a problem when white families come in and expect everyone to see it through their lens of values when people have other values and look at things differently." As Rosa explained, to engage all parents in the school the PTA needs to recognize that when it comes to parental participation, "there's not one way and there is not a right way. We have to really offer different options for everybody because of culture, language, and everybody is different in the way they think." We must resist the urge to judge and belittle what others are capable of, and instead offer tools and provisions that allow families from diverse backgrounds to work together. Recognition and accommodation of divergent need and talents is critical to establishing the conditions needed for all parents to participate in the school.

My experience participating in this project has confirmed for me that the conventional wisdom behind deficit thinking is a myth. We cannot blame uncaring parents for the problems in schools. Whether it was at the Soccer Tournament where Julia, Rosa, and I hosted Pastries for Parents, or at the Showcase dinner as families ate enchiladas and watched students perform, or at home in response to emails and Facebook posts, parents took the process very seriously. Similarly, when we held group interviews to follow up with interested parents, our interviewees' passion for their children's education and the school were contagious. Parents gladly gave their time to share their love for their children, their suggestions for the school, and the conditions necessary for them to be able to participate.

Language. Being communicated with in a language you can understand is a condition for most human interaction, certainly for participation in a school. Without parents' fundamental communication needs being at the center of all the work we do, we are sending the message that we do not care, we do not value what they have to offer, and we alienate large numbers of parents while simultaneously blaming them for not showing up.

English-speaking educators and parents, myself included, can fall into the trap of seeing Spanish interpretation and translation as a nice effort we make to be accommodating. Truly putting yourself in these parents' shoes, however, helps you see that meeting basic language needs cannot be tacked on as an afterthought (Lee, 2005; Park & Holloway, 2013). One white middle-class parent reflected, "This is the first year we've ever had Spanish translation, of any material. You'd think that would be a given, but it's tough and those kind of things have to be considered." While the school and PTA have made a lot of progress in a short amount of time, inconsistency and shallow efforts will only go so far. The PTA needs to strive for a truly bilingual, if not multilingual, culture. Discussions of import should take place in Spanish. English speaking parents, as the ones who have been setting the agenda and catered to in an English speaking society, can be left out from time to time. This helps foster empathy.

Rosa explained a Spanish speaking parent's thought process in regard to PTA meetings: "It's all in English, why am I gonna go? I am not going to be able to communicate; I am not going to be able to understand." As we heard from so many parents in their surveys and interviews, most parents will not come back to another meeting after attending one where their language needs were not met. Not providing communication in the language of choice sends a message to parents that is difficult to recover from. You get one chance to make parents feel included and valuable, and if you miss it, you have an uphill battle to rebuild this trust.

Other barriers. Cultural barriers, deficit thinking, and language considerations all discourage participation and must be dealt with to foster the conditions needed for democratic parental participation. These are not the only barriers, however. Requiring driver's licenses to enter school grounds, background checks to volunteer in classrooms, credit cards to front money for events, bank accounts to cash checks for reimbursements and only allowing store bought food at events are just some of the ways that schools and PTAs send the message to parents that they are not worthy of making a contribution. Meetings held during work hours, without childcare, or during dinner tell parents that if you do not have a support network to fall back on or money to pay for a babysitter and takeout meal, your presence is not needed. Assuming parents have technology to make PowerPoints for meetings, to take minutes during meetings, or to swipe credit cards at events can make parents feel inadequate. Uncritically focusing school improvement efforts on standardized test data that does not speak to parents' deeply held hopes and dreams for their children sends the message that the school and state do not care what they want and do not value their input. Unfortunately, there are many, many ways that schools and PTAs inadvertently communicate to parents that they are not good enough or not welcome, or that their values are not aligned with the institutions that supposedly have their children's best interests at heart.

Collaborative school culture. While parents face many barriers to involvement, the existence of a collaborative school culture opens the doors for educators and families to dismantle these obstacles democratically (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014). In her role as the leader of the school, Principal Johnson said, "The culture is number one, I think it's the first thing people don't think about but the most important thing for making progress or just making it a comfortable place to work every day." Mr. Lopez believed that Principal Johnson

promoted the attitude of “build a relationship with the students... and then you can teach them anything. That mentality kind of cemented in my head and that is pretty much how I approached my first year of teaching and every year since.” Teachers support each other by holding students accountable, as Ms. Aguilar explained, “It’s not like one of those you see a student and you don’t know them or you see them misbehaving and you don’t talk to them, it’s more like everybody is trying to help each other out, for the same goal, so that students can succeed.” Within the school, experienced teachers mentor the newer teachers, as Ms. Lark shared: “the teachers that have been here longer are more like mentors to us, to the newer teachers, and that’s been helpful. And now they’ve become friends.” Principal Johnson modeled a commitment to learning, listening, and working together. Principal Johnson shared, “The most important thing that I try to tell my teachers, it goes with everything in life, sometimes, instead of wanting to be understood, it’s important to understand... it changes the way you look at things.” A collaborative school environment where teachers, students, and parents feel supported and that they can take risks together is a critical condition for building democratic parental participation in the school (Khalil & Brown, 2015; Lumpkin, Claxton, & Wilson, 2014; Milanowski et al., 2009; Range, Duncan, & Hvidston, 2013)

Cultural, linguistic, and practical barriers stand in the way of building democratic parental participation. A collaborative school culture is a requirement to be able to recognize these barriers and provide conditions for participation that welcome and include more parents in the functioning of the school (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Mullen, 2010; O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2014).

Representation

The population of the school needs to be represented in the PTA to both shape an agenda that reflects the desires of the community and to recruit more parents to actively participate in an organization that looks like them and responds to them. The same barriers that stand in the way of widespread democratic parental participation also influence whether or not parents feel leadership roles are attainable or desirable. Julia and Rosa's election to the PTA Board marked a significant shift in the ability of the PTA leadership to represent and communicate with the entire school community, and they have helped others to feel more comfortable with the organization. After the election, Jason said, "I think moving into this next year there is great potential to even make the PTA more aligned with the general population of the school and the true needs of the school." Rosa agreed, "I feel like my story would help bring in other people. I would say, it was my first year and I was one of those people that thought, what can I offer?" She remembered when she first was starting coming to PTA meetings. She said, "I was just there to listen and see what's going on but y'all took into consideration what I had to say and great things have come of it." Though her leadership, she hoped to be able to help others gain the same confidence in their ability to contribute.

PTA positions are often interpreted as requiring professional skills and confidence, and willingness to take one on often requires a healthy dose of entitlement. It can take overt demystification of these positions to help parents imagine themselves in these roles. Julia and Rosa were intimidated by the roles of Vice President and Secretary, and what they read in the official PTA manuals only added to that fear. Friends can help each other work through these things, which is why building genuine relationships is so critical to successful recruitment. When I asked Rosa how she was feeling about her new role, she said, "I am excited, and most of

all nervous. I am so nervous, but I always get nervous with everything, and once I am there doing everything, I am like, it wasn't that bad. Is it the same with you?" I used my experiences and fears in learning the new role of Treasurer serve as an example. I shared that when I signed on to be treasurer, it was a position I was completely unqualified to perform, but was fairly confident I could learn what I needed to know along the way. Once she felt more assured in her new role as Vice President, Rosa had also been successful helping new committee chairs get established because she made an effort to get to know them and support them as they negotiated new roles.

These jobs do not need to be what they have always been. It is up to us to reimagine them as being fundamentally concerned with the powerful work that Rosa and Julia were already doing to connect with and believe in the community. Julia's enthusiasm about her new role was inspiring. She said, "I am excited. I am excited more to see what happens behind it. How do things get, how do they come up with all of it?" Now that she would be one of the leaders behind the scenes, she hoped to help other parents think about their participation in the school in a different way. She explained, "Everybody is like, 'Okay, I am busy with my own life.' They don't think of the ultimate positive and the ultimate big things they can achieve and help their parents achieve if you are actively in there and involved." She summed up her feeling that the PTA needed to serve everyone in the school: "it feels like what we want to do, to be people's voices and make sure everybody's needs are met, not just somebody but everybody."

Improving representation on the board is a critical step, but our efforts to bring about democratic parental participation cannot stop there. The assumption that PTAs always rely on small groups of dedicated leaders runs deep. One parent said, "That is going to be anywhere. They are going to have their core people that are just the meeting people." Another said, "It's

not even an 80/20 rule it's almost more of the 90/10 rule if that, that ten percent of the people are doing all the work." These ideas were not shared as a problem to overcome, but simply a reality to deal with. On the other hand, another parent shared that she had difficulty sustaining her commitment to the PTA because "the tough part about involvement is that it so often relies on a small group giving a lot of their time." She suggested, "Instead of having 10 really involved parents, it's going to be having 100 parents who can do something here and there... when they can, and not feel that crazy expectation of doing everything." As long as it is a small group of parents doing the overwhelming majority of the work, whoever those parents are, they will be too overextended to truly meet the needs of the whole school.

Democracy requires widespread participation, and truly representative leadership has insight into the conditions needed to recruit more people to the cause (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014; Mullen, 2010; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). A white PTA member reflected that Rosa would be an asset to the PTA because "I feel like she brings that kind of link and perspective, like, well, this is kind of how this group is feeling, they are afraid to speak up." Ms. Aguilar agreed it was important to have more representation in leadership roles for parents and students because "there are more minorities in positions where students say 'hey, you know, I look like that person, too. I can be a teacher, I can be a doctor, I can be a police officer.'" As a Latina, Ms. Aguilar valued the role she could play for her own students, "my parents had the same occupation that your parents do, you know my dad worked long hours like some of your dads do, my mom stayed at home a lot of the time like many of their parents do, too." That being said, it is not enough to have new people do more of the same. We need to change the way we do things, challenge barriers, and bring more people into the fold to forge sustainable democratic participation in schools.

Advocacy

Throughout this process of self-reflection, building relationships, understanding conditions for participation, and improving representation, many shared concerns bubbled to the top of our conversations and work. As we continue to reach for a more representative group of leaders in the PTA, it could make it more possible to advocate for issues that are of great significance to the families and educators in the school. From the need for an adequate amount of paid labor to serve students, to concerns regarding the focus on standardized testing, to questions about the best language program to serve the needs of diverse learners in the school, parents shared a desire to explore these issues further with the potential for advocacy to change and improve conditions. Investigation of these issues has only begun; continued inquiry will be a necessary step to developing consensus around solutions that truly serve the whole school community.

One theme that came up repeatedly was the need to have more people with more time paid to do all of the work necessary to support students in the school. Parents and educators know what they want for their students, but they do not have an unlimited supply of paid and unpaid labor to do so. So much of the work that PTAs typically do is to supply volunteer labor and fundraising for cash-strapped districts and schools, but perhaps we would be better served by exerting some of that labor to advocate for improved conditions for all students and more sustained, systemic support from the district and state. Parents and educators ruminated over the limits on critical positions in the school such as the Assistant Principal, librarian, nurse, and Gifted and Talented teachers. When forced to choose which of these invaluable roles is most important, students lose. In this zero-sum game of limited resources and positions, “sometimes the little things, they really aren’t little, they are really big, the whole child, the wraparound

services, there are not enough people for that, and for school turnaround at a school like mine... you just need more people,” explained Principal Johnson. Rosa has been able to accomplish so much in her new position as Parent Liaison because she is being paid to do the work she was already doing, but now she can dedicate more time, energy, and strategic purpose to it because she does not have to try to fit it in on top of other paid work in the same way. Even so, it is a part-time position, and she still works for her dad’s restaurant as well, so ideally even more resources would be applied to her incredible talent and valuable labor. Struggling and advanced students alike need to be better served in all neighborhood schools with enough paid adults in the building to do the work. Parents expressed interest in further exploration of this topic so that they might advocate for adequate positions and adequate distribution of resources.

Parents also shared concerns with the ways that standardized testing and accountability has influenced classrooms and impacted the school. Surveys and interviews conveyed widespread desire for teaching that inspires children to want to learn in personally meaningful ways. Throughout the project, as more parents built relationships, discussed these issues with others, and reflected on the power dynamics at play, there was a growing dissatisfaction with the increasing focus on improving performance on standardized tests and the ways this impacted the students and the school (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2014; Hagopian, 2014; Kumashiro, 2012; Lipman, 2011a; Ravitch, 2010b). As the barometers for success according to the state fluctuate and Patriot’s fate stands just above or below the satisfactory line, these labels do not effectively communicate the real challenges that the campus confronts, while the ensuing pressure can detract from the kind of learning experiences parents and teachers want for students. Rosa reflected on the potential causes for what she saw as her daughter’s lackluster learning experience. She said, it “now makes sense, why they are teaching

this way. That was my worry with my older ones, I feel like it's really textbook-ish, but it makes sense that they are teaching to the test." Julia agreed, but was concerned that there was not much that parents could do: "I don't think we have a lot of control, but if enough people are worried about it I think it is something we should actively put it out there some sort of way." With the school labeled "Improvement Required" for the second year in a row, this budding critique could be a catalyst for further investigation and advocacy to improve the conditions for students in a way that is in line with parents' real hopes and dreams for their children (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2014; Hagopian, 2014; Kumashiro, 2012; Lipman, 2011a; Ravitch, 2010b).

Another area for continued inquiry and possible organizing is the dual language program. Though the current program has some educational and social benefits for the Spanish dominant and bilingual students in the school, parents in both the dual language program and "regular" monolingual English program expressed concerns regarding the way students were functionally segregated. Julia explained, "I think it's important now, the way that society has changed, for us to make sure that we don't keep them apart." In a divided political climate, she feared children would be taught to think, "Well, they only speak Spanish, I don't want to talk to them." Or like, "okay, I don't want to speak to the other kids because I don't speak their language, or they don't speak it correctly." She feared that despite the potential benefits of the current dual language program, the school needed to explore other ways of meeting the language and social needs of all students. She said, "I think that keeps pulling people apart instead of bringing them in together. So, I think it's important that hopefully in the near future that is how it is, that they bring them in together." As a School Board member, Brittany offered advice that parents should approach the district to let "them know that there is community support for a program like that at [Patriot], we

are looking for more opportunities to bring in more two way dual language” where English and Spanish speaking students could be taught both languages in the same classroom. She cautioned against advocacy without broad-based community support, however, based on the backlash she experienced at one majority Latino school. Each school is a complex community with varied experiences, interests, and needs, particularly when it concerns bilingual language instruction (Flores, 2016; Lopez & Lopez, 2009). Democratic parental advocacy should reflect the needs and wants of each particular school community.

It is telling that issues of racial and economic justice came up throughout this project. This research project took place during a charged time in our country, when the Black Lives Matter movement got a major toehold in popular consciousness and during the hotly contested election of 2016, the results of which left many Patriot families feeling scared for their very existence within the United States. Brittany summed up the root cause of many problems in society and schools: “White supremacy is a very harsh way of saying it but it’s accurate.” Julia found herself asking, “This is the world my kids are going to live in? Things have progressively gotten bad over the years, I would have never expected it to get this bad.” Apart from anything else her children might learn in school, Julia believed the most important things for students to learn given the political climate was “To know that it doesn’t matter if anybody is different. It is okay to be different.” In a world where it could be difficult to find hope, she saw that “these movements are all happening everywhere, all these people are thinking alike, how am I going to go towards all of that? The PTA is something, it’s worth it, its life changing.” She and I are in agreement that the PTA, and the school as a whole, are venues for fighting the injustices in our world.

These injustices are not only taking place on a national stage. There are many opportunities to fight locally. One example is Southwestern ISD's investment in their Gold Seal Programs and Schools of Choice. Though they are marketed as a solution to the challenges in public schools, the role they play in heightening segregation while only providing innovation for select groups of students suggests this is an area where parents can and should do more investigation to explore the levels of support for possible change. Looking at the racial and economic breakdown and the corresponding state accountability ratings of the neighborhood elementary schools when compared to those of the nearby choice elementary schools reveals a striking trend. Across the board, the traditional schools serving more students of color and economically advantaged students were rated "Improvement Required" while the choice schools with more white students from economically advantaged families handily "Met Standard." The instruction taking place in schools is both measured and shaped by these labels as sanctions are put in place to purportedly measure and support these "struggling" schools. Meanwhile, more resourced parents fill out applications so they can opt-out of their neighborhood school and invest their time and resources in choice programs and schools.

In a particularly cruel twist, as these parents jump ship for more innovative educational programs, they actually take more district resources with them. The number of many professional positions funded by the district are based on the enrollment in each school. In the last five years, the same period of time that the housing prices in the surrounding neighborhood of Mountain View have gone through the roof, Patriot's enrollment has dipped below the threshold for a full time librarian. One parent shared, "The choice program in general, I feel like that is contrary to what I believe in that every school should be great and every school should have every opportunity at their home campus." As long as students and families must compete

for a quality education, someone loses. Competition amongst unequal parties encourages segregation, with those missing out being those who have the most to lose (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; López & Burciaga, 2014; Lipman, 2011b; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014; Ravitch, 2010b; Saporito & Lareau, 1999; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007).

Parents want an excellent education provided for all students in all schools. This requires fair distribution of resources, long term investment in mentoring all teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners, sustained commitment to providing meaningful educational experiences that will improve critical thinking (and incidentally, test scores) without an overt focus on teaching to the test, and trust and support of educational leaders who foster collaborative school communities and advocate for what their schools and students deserve. As Julia said, “If you don’t give 100 percent to your staff how do you expect that staff to give 100 percent to your kids? [If] our kids aren’t getting 100 percent, where are we going to end up?” Principal Johnson explained her goals within the confines imposed on her, “I can’t fight the district and I can’t fight the state, but I am going to be there for them. And the benefit of that, of trying to make a difference in the world, outweighs... everything that is so frustrating.” While school leaders can only do so much on their own, they need democratically organized parents to participate in the school and fight with them for what students deserve.

As a PTA and school, we are only just starting to raise questions about the issues that concern us and experiment with building collective capacity for advocacy with the district and even potentially the state. Rosa said, “They have to hear our voice. I’m all about protesting.” When we attended the district council of PTA’s training together at the beginning of her first year as Vice President, Rosa approached the superintendent after his presentation to advocate for our high needs school to have its own librarian. This is something that I was personally terrified

to do, and I was in awe as she confidently and politely made this reasonable and justified plea. This one interaction is but a kernel of what we can do when we engage in self-reflective power analysis, build relationships together, gain an understanding of the conditions we need to foster democratic participation and representation, and ultimately organize to advocate collectively for the schools and educational experiences our students deserve. In the end, building democratic parental participation in schools is about building collective power. While we do not know what future fights will hold, we know we have better odds together.

Conclusion

The long, slow, heartbreaking process of dismantling public education for private profit has picked up its pace. The only hope we have is rallying together and fighting for what our children and schools deserve. Ours is a culture in which loving parents are blamed for society's inequality, dedicated educators are the scapegoat for inadequate funding and counterproductive top-down policies, and neighborhood schools are portrayed as sinking ships when these critical community institutions could easily be stabilized with consistent public support. We cannot hold individuals responsible for not being able to single handedly fix societal injustices; instead, we must build democratic parental participation in schools so that families and educators can work together to advocate for what students deserve.

This work must always be informed by self-reflection and power analysis. As the largely white middle-class leadership in the early days of the Patriot PTA grappled with their role in the neighborhood and their impact on the school, they opened the door for building relationships. By getting to know more of the families who call Patriot home, some of whom had a generational connection to the school, we learned about the conditions and representation required for families from diverse backgrounds to be able to participate in the school and be

better represented by the PTA. These processes are the building blocks of democracy: through engaging in self-reflection that examines power, developing relationships that promote understanding, providing conditions that are inclusive, and recruiting representatives who serve the whole community, we are building our capacity to collectively advocate for schools and society that are good enough for us and our children.

The problems facing public schools are but one item on a menu of injustices in our world, and the time I spend with the diverse and idealistic families in my neighborhood public school's PTA is a huge source of hope for me. Though we still have a long way to go in truly including the whole community and bringing about the participatory democracy that will be necessary to save our society and the schools within it, there is no other venue in my life where I see so much of our collaborative potential on display. For me, the answer always has been and always will be to get to know one another, learn how to work together, and actively build the world we all deserve. Though this is blasphemous for an academic researcher to say, I am fairly certain that nothing in this project was truly new, but I still think it is a story worth telling because it is a lesson we must learn again, and again, and again. We all know the answers. We all know we have to work together to get anywhere. Perhaps what makes this work notable is not the particular theories that guided us or the concrete mechanics we tried, but the fact that we did it together, and through that process we learned that we will need to keep doing it together, down a long and winding road. Even though our implementation of this idea requires vigilance and ongoing critique, as César Chávez said, "it starts with your heart and radiates out" (2002). Wherever you are, whoever you are surrounded by, share love and power every chance you get.

APPENDIX A

Individual Interview Questions

1. Relationship to the school:
 - a. Do you have family members that attend the school? If so, what grade are they in?
 - b. How long has the school been a part of your life?
 - c. How would you describe the school to someone that has never been there?
 - d. Do you think that the school is changing? Why? How?
 - e. How would you describe the school's role in the community?
 - f. Do you consider yourself to be involved in the school as a whole?
2. Parental involvement:
 - a. Is parental involvement important? Why?
 - b. How do you define parental involvement?
 - c. Is there more than one way to be involved? Why or why not?
 - d. What do you think parents have to offer the school?
 - e. Are there any areas where parents wish they were more involved? What are they?
 - f. What services/support do parents need from the school?
 - g. To what extent are language differences a barrier to parental involvement?
3. Role of the PTA:
 - a. Ideally, what role should the PTA play in the school?
 - b. How is the PTA currently benefitting the school?
 - c. How could the PTA improve?

- d. Do you think the PTA is inclusive and welcoming to parents and teachers? Why or why not?
4. Teachers:
- a. How would you describe the relationship between teachers and the rest of the school community?
 - b. What types of support do teachers need?
 - c. Are there any areas where teachers would like to be more involved? What are they?
5. Room parents:
- a. What is the point of having room parents?
 - b. Are room parents new, or was this already happening informally?
 - c. Is there any benefit to formalizing this through the PTA?
 - d. What is the ideal relationship between parents, classrooms, and the PTA?
6. Next steps:
- a. Explain PAR and my research
 - i. Goal is to make positive change
 - ii. Can't do it alone – I don't have all the answers
 - b. Are you interested in being involved?
 - i. Use their ideas to make positive changes in the PTA and the school
 - ii. Neighborhood walk to reach out to community
 - iii. Are you able/willing to help translate?

APPENDIX B

Parent Survey in English

Results from this survey will be used to improve the PTA. Thank you for taking the time to share your responses.

1. Are you a member of the PTA (Parent Teacher Association)?

- Yes
- No

Why or why not?

2. Are you actively involved in the PTA?

- Yes
- No

Why or why not?

3. What are the best ways for the PTA to communicate with you? (Mark all that apply)

- Meetings
- Text
- Notes sent home
- Facebook
- Outdoor sign at school
- Other _____
- Email

4. Do you attend PTA meetings?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

5. When are you available for PTA meetings? (Mark all that apply)

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Morning							
Afternoon							
Evening							

6. Would you be more likely to attend PTA meetings if childcare were provided?

- Yes
- No

7. What are your hopes and dreams for your child?

8. What is your biggest need or concern regarding your child's education?
9. If there was one thing the PTA could do to improve your child's education, what would it be?
10. What do you think should be the main goals of the PTA?
11. What could the PTA do to be more effective?
12. What talents, skills, or resources do you have that you would like to contribute to the PTA? (Mark all that apply)
- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Childcare during meetings | <input type="checkbox"/> Projects/building |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish translation | <input type="checkbox"/> Event planning |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tutoring | <input type="checkbox"/> Soliciting donations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cooking | <input type="checkbox"/> Other_____ |
13. Which PTA events are you most interested in supporting? (Mark all that apply)
- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fall carnival | <input type="checkbox"/> Black History Month Event |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tamale Cook Off | <input type="checkbox"/> Showcase Dinner |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic Heritage Festival | <input type="checkbox"/> Other_____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Valentine's Day Dance | |
14. Results from this survey will be used to improve the PTA. Please fill in the information below if you would like to be contacted to talk about these issues in more detail.
- Name:
 - Phone number:
 - Email address:

APPENDIX C

Parent Survey in Spanish

Resultados de esta encuesta seran usados para mejorar el PTA. Gracias por tomar el tiempo para compartir sus comentarios.

1. Usted es miembro del PTA (Asociacion de Padres y Profesores)?

Si

No

¿Por qué sí o no?

2. Usted es activamente involucrado en el PTA?

Si

No

¿Por qué sí o no?

3. Que son las mejores maneras para que el PTA se pueda comunicar con usted?

(Seleccionar todos que apliquen)

Juntas

Texto

Notas a casa

Facebook

Letrero afuera de la escuela

Otro_____

Correo electronico

4. Usted asiste a juntas de PTA?

Si

No

a veces

5. Cuando esta disponible para asistir a juntas de PTA? (Seleccionar todos que apliquen)

	Lunes	Martes	Miercoles	Jueves	Viernes	Sabado	Domingo
Manana							
Mediodia							
Tarde							

6. Sera mas probable que usted asista a juntas de PTA si se ofrece cuidado de ninos?

Si

No

7. Que son sus esperanzas y sueños para su hijo/a?

8. Que son sus preocupaciones o necesidades respecto a la educacion de su hijo/a?

9. Si hubiera una cosa que PTA pudiera hacer para mejorar la educacion de su hijo/a, que seria?

10. Que piensa usted que debe ser las metas principales de PTA?

11. Que podra hacer PTA para ser mas eficaz?

12. Que talentos, habilidades o recursos tiene usted que podria contribuir al PTA?

(Seleccionar todos que apliquen)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cuidado de los niños | <input type="checkbox"/> Proyectos/Construir |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Traducir a Espanol | <input type="checkbox"/> Organizar Eventos |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tutoria | <input type="checkbox"/> Solicitar Donaciones |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cocina | <input type="checkbox"/> Otro _____ |

13. Que eventos de PTA le interesa apoyar mas? (Seleccionar todos que apliquen)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Carnaval de Otono | <input type="checkbox"/> Evento del Mes de la Historia Afro-Americana |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Competencia de Tamales | <input type="checkbox"/> Cena de Fin de Ano |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Festival de la Hispanidad | <input type="checkbox"/> Otro _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Baile de San Valentin | |

14. Resultados de esta encuesta seran usados para mejorar el PTA. Porfavor llene la siguiente informacion si gusta que se comuniquen con usted para hablar mas en detalle sobre estos asuntos.

- Nombre:
- Numero:
- Correo Electronico:

APPENDIX D

Group Interview Questions

1. Introductions:
 - a. Name
 - b. Relationship to the school
 - c. Grade of kids in school
2. What is your favorite thing about Patriot?
3. Does the school feel connected to the surrounding community? Why or why not?
4. Do you think the school has changed? If so, how?
5. Your impressions of:
 - a. Academics
 - b. Student behavior
 - c. Extracurricular activities: If we were to add more, what types do you think we should add?
 - d. Communication
6. Do you have any concerns about your child's education after Patriot (middle school, high school, college)?
7. Do you feel like Patriot is a connected community of families, teachers, and students? Why or why not? How could the PTA help improve this?
8. Does the PTA feel welcoming?
9. What could the PTA do to better support and involve busy families?
10. Have you been to PTA meetings?
 - a. If so, how could they be improved?

- i. Consistent interpretation
 - ii. Type of things discussed
 - iii. Performances?
- b. If not, what would help make it more possible?
 - i. Babysitting
 - ii. Taped meetings online

11. If you said you would be willing to offer to the PTA what would be the best way to go about making this happen?

- a. Translation
- b. Babysitting
- c. Cooking
- d. others

APPENDIX E

Board Retreat Presentation Outline

1. The Patriot PTA Journey to a Stronger Community:
 - a. Survey and Interview Parent Feedback
2. Overall
 - a. Surveys and interviews with a diverse group of parents (51 surveys with 16 in Spanish, 3 interviews with 1 in Spanish)
 - b. Parents feel like the school and teachers care about their children
 - c. Many parents are impressed with what their children are learning
 - d. Parents feel like the PTA is on the right track – have lots of ideas for continued improvement
3. Beginning of the School Year
 - a. Faculty, staff, and PTA officer introductions
 - i. Bulletin board with photos and information
 - b. PTA representative in each classroom
 - i. Room parents
 - ii. Back to school night/meet the teacher
 - c. Clear expectations for parents
4. Room Parents
 - a. Set goals that both teacher and Room Parent want to achieve
 - b. Clear expectations of what teachers would like Room Parents to do
 - c. Translated materials ready to go for room parents to use
 - i. Letter to other parents for a directory

- d. Parent work area
5. Meetings
- a. Recorded and posted online
 - i. Online Q and A
 - b. Interpreter at every meeting
 - c. Childcare
 - i. parents willing to help
 - ii. High school students
 - d. Basic, easy, flat fee dinners for sale
6. Communication
- a. Everything translated
 - b. Advance notice on meetings and events (at least a week)
 - c. Post reminders on school door
 - d. Teacher Facebook pages
7. Academics
- a. Impact of standardized testing
 - i. Pressure
 - b. Students should be held to a high standard
 - c. Library remodel, need for a full-time permanent librarian
8. Student behavior
- a. Students need to treat faculty and staff with respect
 - i. Taught at home and school
 - b. Student misbehavior can be a distraction in the classroom

- c. More accessibility to the counselor

9. Enrichment Activities

- a. Parents want more extracurricular activities for their children

- i. Within school day and after school

- ii. Sports, art, music (instruments)

- b. Tutoring

10. Bilingual school

- a. Parents want all children learning English and Spanish

- i. Learning from each other

- b. Need translating and interpreting available on campus at all times

- i. Counselor, etc.

- c. More multicultural events

11. The good news is...

- a. Parents want to participate in the classroom and school events

- b. Parents want to know more about what their children are learning and doing in school

- c. Parents want to be able to help their children learn at home

12. The PTA should “build a bridge among other parents, teachers, and staff that becomes a nurturing community for our children to grow both socially, emotionally, and academically.”

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ABSTRACT

“IT STARTS WITH YOUR HEART AND RADIATES OUT”: BUILDING DEMOCRATIC PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLS

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This Participatory Action Research project focuses on how one Parent Teacher Association (PTA) collaborated to build democratic parental participation in their urban public elementary school in a gentrifying neighborhood. When white middle-class parents founded the PTA, there was a danger of alienating and displacing families with generational ties to the majority Latino school. This study was inspired by the PTA’s goal to become more welcoming, inclusive, and representative. It began with individual interviews to recruit parents to a collaborative research team, who then wrote, conducted, and analyzed a parent survey and group interviews in both English and Spanish. The collaborative research team then presented what they had learned to the PTA Board, who used these lessons to inform their future work.

Both within the collaborative research team and between researchers and participants, developing relationships with parents from different backgrounds facilitated self-reflection and analysis of power dynamics in the community. The PTA learned that parents want to partner with educators to provide a rigorous and well-rounded educational experience for their children, but that the conditions in the school and PTA are not always conducive to their participation. Improving representation within the PTA better aligned the organization to the needs of the entire community; a prerequisite for parents to collectively advocate for students and the school.

The PTA has made significant improvements through this process of collaborative inquiry, though there is still work to be done to continue building democratic parental participation in the school.