

# A Case Study of a Low-Income African American Career Academy's Approach to Student Services

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The provision of support services has been found critical for meeting the needs of students and their families, but related research in predominantly low-income, African American/Black communities, is limited. Thus, through a case study we explored how a school, located in a low-income area with a predominantly African American/Black population, adopted and enacted support services. The setting was an urban high school with an enrollment of 700 students who are predominantly African American (98%) and 100% low-income. We conducted interviews with district, school, and community stakeholders; and we followed a thematic approach for the analysis. A major finding was that the adoption of support services built on the shared belief that the school should serve as a central place of support for students and the community. We identified two distinct strands of support services, one represented by in-school supports for students and the other designed to help families in the community. Further, we found an underlying philosophy of removing obstacles for students as a means to help them succeed in school. Regarding implications for practice, it is important to note the difficulty in replicating the efficacy of support services without culturally relevant leadership at the district and school level.

**Keywords:** career academy, culturally relevant leadership, student services, wraparound services

## INTRODUCTION

The lack of a holistic approach to providing low-income, African American students and their families with needed services to help them stay and finish school has been a lingering issue in the United States (Fries et al., 2012). In urban settings with large concentrations of ethnically and racially diverse and low-income families, school staff face the daunting task of helping students succeed amidst personal and family challenges (Levin et al., 2007). Providing support services to students and their families in these communities is a critically important challenge for our society.

From 2016-2017, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2019), high school completion in low-income and ethnically and racially diverse communities was 77.3% compared to an overall graduation rate of 84.6%.



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Completing high school has been a challenge in urban settings with limited economic resources, where the dropout rate of African American/Black and Latinx students is higher than their white peers (NCES, 2018). As such, many schools in low-income communities are considered “dropout factories” as they account for over half of the students not completing school every year (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Addressing this problem in schools is not easy because limited resources often interface with low student motivation to learn. These challenges stem from a lack of engaging curricula, health concerns, family issues, and limited school support (Fitzpatrick et al., 2015; Fries et al., 2012).

In this context, how can schools address the multiple needs of students to help them succeed? The provision of support services has been found critical for meeting the needs of students in communities with limited resources (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Sather & Bruns, 2016). Wraparound strategies, for example, build upon the identification and coordination of various supports including academic, medical, and mental services around the needs of youth (Fries et al., 2012; Penn & Osher, 2007; Sather & Bruns, 2016). However, there is virtually no research documenting how student services are adopted and implemented within schools comprised of high rates of low-income and African American/Black student populations. Thus, the study’s purpose was to explore how a school adopted and enacted student services. We focused on a school that is located in a low-income area with a predominantly African American/Black population. We focused on the following research questions: (a) what were the critical considerations adopting student services; and (b) what is the nature of student services.

## **Review of the Literature and Conceptual Framework**

**Student Support Services.** Living in poverty has far-reaching implications for student success, and helping youth in low-income communities has been a national priority (Melaville et al., 2006; Smrekar & Bentley, 2011). The use of student services has been identified as a critical support system whereby agencies pool funding from multiple sources to provide assistance to individuals in need. Mental health and child welfare agencies represent the most common partnerships. The National Wraparound Initiative seeks buy-in from relevant partners to identify and support youth who may require assistance to resolve immediate crises (Penn & Osher, 2007). With the assistance of a facilitator serving as the liaison for all stakeholders, the goals of the initiative are to promote youth self-reliance and goal setting (Penn & Osher, 2007; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009).

The practice of schools providing students with wraparound services represents a promising initiative to meet the needs of youth in communities with limited resources (Fries et al., 2012). Schools can contribute to such partnerships by addressing students’ personal, behavioral, and health issues (Epstein et al., 2005). In this context, the role of a wraparound facilitator is to serve as a coach for students as they work on steps to find stability in their lives as well as to promote goal-setting. In turn, youth are encouraged to identify a variety of resources within the social ecology of the community, including support from friends, family, and school staff (Epstein et al., 2005). To ensure the

efficacy of implementation, buy-in from school and community stakeholders is a critical requirement for adopting and implementing the use of student services in schools (Epstein, 2001; Blodgett & Dorado, 2016).

In general, the literature has suggested that low-income students in comprehensive high schools with limited resources, often show high levels of behavioral and/or emotional needs (Eber et al., 2008). In instances where schools provide integrated student services to students in collaboration with community partners, the practice is often referred to in the literature as community schools. Community schools utilize needs assessments, partnerships, coordinated support, and data tracking, to improve students' educational attainment and academic achievement (Daniel & Snyder, 2015). Through community partnerships, schools become hubs of community learning for parents and families by providing trainings and skill classes, such as GED, English language, home-ownership, and parenting in the evenings and/or on the weekends (Mellaville et al., 2006; Harris & Hoover, 2003; Blank et al., 2012). Community schools seek to identify social, family, and health services for students and their families in ways that are unique to their locations (Coalition for Community Schools, 2017; Peebles-Wilkins, 2004; Valli et al., 2016). Community schools serve approximately 1.5 million students in over 3000 schools with high populations of low-income and ethnically and racially diverse students (Daniel & Snyder, 2015; Moore et al., 2017). Nonetheless, there is limited research describing related enactment in schools comprised of low-income African American/Black students to help them focus on their educational goals.

**Overlapping Spheres of Influence.** Epstein's (2001) overlapping spheres of influence (OSI) theory was influenced by the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), Leichter (1974), Litwak and Meyer (1974), and Seeley (1981). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of family and school involvement emphasized separate, shared, and sequential responsibilities of families, schools, and communities. In this regard, Leichter's (1974) work noted the importance of families as partners in their children's education, and this in turn led to the term "families as educators." Further, Litwak and Meyer (1974) highlighted the need for connections and support between professional and nonprofessional institutions as well as individuals. They also discussed a need for professional distance between such entities. Epstein's OSI theory described a social organizational approach depicted by three spheres – the family, the school, and the community; children are placed at the center. The external structure, represented by overlapping spheres, encompasses an internal structure of relationships and interactions of parents, teachers, and students. All of these individuals have an impact on students' learning and development (Epstein, 1990).

In this context, OSI theory builds upon the whole-child approach to education as a set of policies, practices, and relationships to ensure that all students, regardless of the community, are healthy, safe, and supported in their schooling experiences (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Children have agency in the educational process and are regarded as the main actors in their education, development, and success in school. The three major spheres of influence (family, school, community)

form a partnership to support, guide, and motivate children to succeed. As such, the theory recognizes substantial contributions from families and communities. And, these partnerships produce positive outcomes for students (Epstein, 1987).

The three spheres may be kept relatively separate – such as when schools engage families and communities superficially and sparingly. Or, they can be drawn together – such as when schools deliberately engage deeply and interact frequently with parents and their communities. Suppose the message that emerges from these complex and interpersonal relations is consistently focused on the importance of school and support. In that case, students are more likely to understand the importance of working hard, achieving, and staying in school (Epstein, 1990). In this context, “family-like schools” should develop from the deep and intentional overlap between the family, school, and community spheres (Epstein, 1995, p. 702). That is, when schools and communities develop programs that are family-friendly and align with the goals of their schools, students experience learning communities centered on caring (Epstein, 1995).

In short, Epstein’s overlapping spheres framework is based on the premise that schools are better equipped to meet the needs of the community when parents, teachers, and community members work collaboratively and intentionally. This social framework has been reinforced by other researchers who argued that in a time of changing family demographics, an increasingly demanding workplace, and an increasingly diverse student body, additional resources and supports are needed to successfully educate all students (Crowson & Boyd, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Heath & McLaughlin, 1987; Kirst & McLaughlin, 1990; Melville, 1998; Waddock, 1995).

**Culturally Responsive Leadership.** Khalifa et al. (2016) described behaviors of culturally responsive leaders who influence their schools and address the cultural needs of their students, parents, and teachers. As a critical component of their leadership, culturally responsive leaders forge and maintain relationships with their communities and ensure that teachers are culturally responsive in their curricular implementation. Moreover, these school leaders create a school climate that welcomes diverse learners. Based on these perspectives and premises, in this study, we explored the use of student services through the theoretical lens of OSI and culturally responsive leadership in a school comprised of 100% low-income and 98% African American/Black students.

## **Methods**

To conduct the study, we followed a case study design to explore the experiences and perspectives of school personnel and community partners regarding the nature of organizational and implementation elements around the inquiry of interest (Stake, 2006). We use pseudonyms throughout the manuscript in replace of names of individuals and places. It is also important to note that this study was one component of a larger set of data from a National Science Foundation (NSF) funded grant project (see: Fletcher & Moore, 2021; Fletcher & Haynes, 2020; Fletcher & Hernandez-Gantes, 2020;

Fletcher et al., 2019).

**Research Design.** The case study approach allowed us to document thick and rich descriptive information about the setting in which a STEAM-themed high school academy was implemented for the purpose of identifying both factors and detractors (e.g., interpersonal and inter-organizational features). According to Stake (2006), “qualitative case researchers focus on relationships connecting ordinary practice in natural habitats to a few factors and concerns of the academic disciplines” (p. 10). Thus, in this project we studied a STEAM academy (the case) operating within unique contexts (i.e., community and school district). We utilized an intrinsic case study as we focused on the case itself because the school presents a unique approach to supporting Black students who are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**The Case: Johnson Academy.** Johnson Academy is a STEAM-themed high school that focuses on promoting students’ college and career readiness through college visits and work-based learning activities (job shadowing and internships). The academy also has an extensive university and corporate partnerships as well as a high level of funding (over \$1 million) from local and national corporate sponsors. Johnson Academy is located in an urban area within a Midwestern state. The academy has a small student population comprised of approximately 700 learners, and the school district has a student population of approximately 2,600 individuals. The ethnic and racial backgrounds of students at Johnson Academy are 98% African American/Black. The socioeconomic status of the student population is 100% low-income. The gender makeup is 48% female. Johnson Academy had a 95% graduation rate (within four years) for the 2017 to 2018 academic year. The ethnic and racial backgrounds of the entire school leadership team were African American/Black females led by an African American/Black male superintendent who was raised within the city of Johnson.

The school received funding from a state grant as they qualified as a “trauma-informed school” based on their 100% low-income status. This designation allowed the school to focus on meeting basic student needs to ensure readiness for learning in the classroom. Thereby, Johnson Academy sought to meet students’ emotional, physical, and mental needs through free services, including: a health-based clinic with a pediatrician, mental health counselors, and social workers to assist with behavioral, mental health, and truancy issues as well as birth control, immunizations, and physicals; two homeless shelters and food pantries within the community; two Hope Houses for students with housing needs; breakfast, lunch, and dinner for six days of the week; uniforms for students that are unable to afford them; laundry facilities. However, the school district did not provide transportation to students.

We collected data through a five-day site visit. The academy principal agreed to provide access to the school and assist with coordinating interviews with district and school administrators, school board members, STEAM and core academic teachers, school counselors, parents, staff, postsecondary partners, business and industry partners, and community partners.

**Participant Selection and Data Sources.** We used a purposive sampling procedure to identify key stakeholders who supported the academy and its students within it (Stake, 2006). More specifically, we relied on the knowledge of two insider informants – the principal and superintendent – to provide us with a list of participants to interview during our five-day site visit. The stakeholders (participants) served in a variety of capacities within the school, and we selected them based on their contributions according to our insider informants. All participants received \$25 gift cards as an incentive for participation. It is important to note that this study was a component of a larger grant research project. During the first year of the project, we focused on the perspectives of key stakeholders and their contributions to the implementation of the career academy. During the second year of the project, we focused on students' engagement and experiences. The focus of this manuscript was on the perspectives of key stakeholders.

During the site visit, we engaged in six classroom observations to understand the instructional environments, teaching and learning processes, and types and levels of assessments administered in the academy. We used a protocol to document our observations. In addition, we conducted five off-site visits (tours and individual interviews) with business and industry partners and conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with 33 stakeholders. The interviews were with district ( $n = 2$ ) and school administrators ( $n = 4$ ), school board members ( $n = 2$ ), STEAM and core academic teachers ( $n = 9$ ), school counselors ( $n = 1$ ), parents ( $n = 4$ ), staff ( $n = 1$ ), university partners ( $n = 2$ ), business and industry partners ( $n = 7$ ), and community partners ( $n = 1$ ). Individual interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes in duration. Questions from the individual interviews related to the academy mission, school culture, curriculum and instruction, internal and external supports. In addition, we conducted two 120-minute focus group interviews with STEAM and core academic teachers ( $n = 3$  in each group).

**Data Analysis.** All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All data (curricular documents, classroom observations, and individual interviews) were analyzed using the descriptive framework provided by the research questions. As such, interview data were collected to explore the premises for focusing on providing student services and the nature of related supports. The goal of the analysis was to make meaning of collected data and describe how the school approached the adoption and implementation of wraparound-like services. For this purpose, we used content analysis to capture contextual factors underlying program implementation (Boyatzis, 1998). We identified major areas of agreement (themes) by reading the transcripts in their entirety to seize a sense of the whole in terms of how participants talked about the school. This was followed by another reading round of the transcribed interviews to do the following: (a) identify transitions in meaning in the content of the text utilizing the lens of research questions, (b) reflecting on the meaning units to examine revelatory research content gained within each transcript as well as across participants' experiences, and (c)

synthesizing the themes into statements that accurately represent the perspectives of the interview participants (Wertz, 2005). In arriving at a theme, the entire research team first read every transcript individually. We then individually re-read each transcript to search for patterns/codes related to the stakeholders' approach to supporting students. We met as a research team to discuss the codes that emerged. We then went back to the transcripts to select quotes that matched the codes—those that accurately depicted the stakeholders' approach. We finally were able to discuss and agree on possible phrases/statements that represent the codes, which became our themes. We relied on analytical triangulation by engaging in the collective reading and analyses of transcripts.

## Findings

The academy is located in a community with a population of approximately 15,000 residents who are predominantly Black (90%), and a median age of 33 years. The median household income in the community is about \$32,000, representing \$23,000 less than the median income in the U.S. and \$18,000 below the state's median income. Further, the poverty rate in the community is approximately 25%. As noted previously, the academy qualified as a “trauma-informed” school for serving a student population of 100% of low-income students. Johnson Academy operates in a community with limited resources and lingering economic and social issues. Ms. Johnson, a School Board Member, summarized the community context:

I would say that the biggest challenge is poverty. People, they are living in poverty. They weren't able to provide basic needs – lot of the basic needs for their children. Therefore, their children weren't coming to school the way they needed to. They didn't make their appointments to the doctor the way they needed to make their appointments. They didn't have clean clothing; kids become embarrassed when they don't have all the same clothing as everybody else.

Against this contextual community backdrop, we found the following emerging themes: (a) the adoption and use of student services; (b) the types of services for students and their families; (c) removing excuses for student success; and (d) a lack of transportation.

**Adoption and Use of Student Services.** As a trauma-informed school, the school's approach was to identify and provide supports for its students and families within the school and the broader community. Living in an economically depressed area with routine dramatic events (e.g., crime, homelessness, single parenting, low-income) creates traumatic stress for youth and families. Thus, in a trauma-informed school, there is a recognition of the school's underlying needs and the surrounding community. As such, the goal was to provide supports and services to help students within the school and adults within the community cope with stressful events, while understanding and respecting their underlying circumstances (Blodgett & Dorado, 2016). These supports are integral to the functioning of community schools and serves as a hub for community learning (Peebles-Wilkins, 2004; Valli et al., 2016).

All district and school staff had roots within the community, and were fully aware of the lingering challenges of their students. Being in a historically low-income African American community, all stakeholders (administrators, teachers, and parents) recognized the role that poverty and social issues play in providing a quality education for all students, which is a critical condition noted in the literature (Mellaville et al., 2006; Blodgett, & Dorado, 2016; Darling-Hammond, & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Fries et al., 2012; Levin et al., 2007; Smrekar & Bentley, 2011). In this case, everyone we interviewed recognized that their students (living in poverty) were not able to meet their basic needs, and their children were often absent from school or not ready to learn when attending. Students had basic needs such as healthcare, clean clothing, and food. In addition, single parenthood was prevalent in the community, with mothers struggling to provide for their children and heavy reliance on extended family for support.

To provide students with the best chance to succeed, the previous superintendent challenged the status quo of a school being reflective of its community. Mr. Craig Sanders, a math teacher, shared that “a community could be reflective of its school.” That philosophy appeared to spearhead a cultural shift in the district and school. Recognizing the needs, Dr. Ray Henderson, the current Superintendent, garnered local partnerships with various agencies to provide wraparound-like services. Dr. Henderson articulated:

I went on TV and I said, ‘We’re gonna’ [sic] feed you free breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and put kiosks out,’ like Domino’s [Pizza] now does. We did that with Operation Food Search. They did it all, and I just advertised it. Kids started coming out in droves for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, on weekends too, from June, July, and August, up to the start of school. Then, of course, when school starts, you get that, too. That’s been for three years straight.

From the stakeholders’ perspectives, the cultural shift moved from viewing economic and social issues as someone else’s problems to working as a community to ensure student success. School staff at Johnson Academy believed that the school should serve as a central place of support for students and the community. As shared by teachers in a focus group, the academy “is not just a place where you come to school. We want this to be a place that becomes your community.” Dr. Rasheeda Williams, the School Principal, confirmed that students and parents now “see [the school] as a community center.” She further clarified:

I think it’s more family-oriented. The politics are very close. The mayor’s son goes here. School board members’ kids may go here. You play those local politics that are very real here. I think that’s what you see in a small school. Also, too, when you said “the community,” this is like the hub of the community. Believe it or not, when kids get put out of their homes or when kids have fights with family, guess where the first place they come? Here.

In this community, the vision for providing wraparound services was to address the basic needs of local families, but also to recognize that this was necessary for ensuring student success in school. Stakeholders also saw the need to turn the school into a family-oriented community center where supports were available for a variety of



purposes. This approach also required viewing the community as an extended partnership to help meet the needs of students. For that to happen, the school district had to be proactive in building partnerships, engaging in fundraising, and securing grants to fund an array of wraparound services in a community with very limited economic resources. Dr. Jones elaborated on the value and role of partners:

I feel like the partners can alleviate some of the pressure of asking our staff to do more, but also meet the needs of our students, because it's really about students.

Dr. Henderson, School Superintendent, reinforced perspectives on the value and role of partnerships:

If you're in an urban poor district or a rural poor district, it should be a no brainer. Raise private money, so that you could do private things, so that you could pay light bills, pay food, start shelters, pantries. It stretches further and engages the full community. My advice would be to reach out and know those corporations that are there so that you can really help them in their R&D by giving some of your time, student talent pipeline to them, and then they give you in return some of their pipeline of experts, and some of their treasure.

To be sure, even in a community with longstanding economic woes, the idea of wraparound-like services was challenging. It began with the previous school superintendent, lobbying from school board members, and aggressive fundraising and partnership development by the current superintendent. Ms. Davis, a school board member, recalled that when she proposed the idea of breakfast for all students, the local newspaper reported that "breakfast is momma's job," in addition to costing money. Today, everyone is on the same page, and all students eat free in Johnson Academy, and an array of other wraparound services are available as well. This is particularly important given the need to provide low-income, African American youth and their families with needed services to retain them and promote graduation from high school (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Fries et al., 2012; Penn & Osher, 2007; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Sather & Bruns, 2016). Findings from research on the OSI theory emphasize that partnerships among families, schools, and community contribute to motivating students to succeed and are key determinants of positive student outcomes (Epstein, 1987, 1990). Hence, because Johnson Academy created programs that support families and the community, and aligned these efforts with their mission, students at Johnson benefitted from learning communities focused on caring (Epstein, 1995).

**Providing Services for Students and Their Families.** The designation of a trauma-informed school required a purposeful approach to providing support and services to students in the school and adults in the community (Blodgett & Dorado, 2016; Fries et al., 2012; Levin et al., 2007). At Johnson Academy, the approach was to integrate and coordinate support services around students and adults in the community using healing-centered practices to promote resilience in and beyond the school. On this note, the district and school emphasized the idea of healing-centered practices rather than highlighting underlying trauma and stressful situations. This was an important

distinction to remove negative and deficit-oriented connotations associated with wraparound services in communities. Dr. Henderson made sure to emphasize this point noting that, “it’s all about healing versus just talking about the trauma.” Thus, at Johnson Academy, we identified two distinct strands of wraparound services, one represented by in-school supports for students and the other designed to help families in the community. We also identified the critical role of an outreach liaison in brokering supports for students and adults in the community.

Regarding student services, the school provided a wide array of support, including academic, health, social, and other services to ensure the general well-being of students. These integrated services in collaboration with community partners are indeed classic features of community schools (Daniel & Snyder, 2015). At Johnson Academy, it was obvious that student success was at the core of providing total wraparound services, beginning with meeting the basic needs of students by ensuring everyone has breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In this regard, meals are also available on Saturdays and during the summertime. As Ms. Lane, the instructional coach, noted, “We know that there are times where they just don’t have the food that they would need in their homes and so we provide them with those needs.” In turn, the school provided basic health and counseling services through an onsite clinic with the assistance of a pediatrician, counselors, and social workers. Also, the school partnered with local hospitals to arrange for periodic visits of dental and eye care mobiles to provide free related care to students. Students using related services, from a simple vaccination shot to counseling for anger issues, were treated confidentially and at no cost. Ms. Lane provided an account of such services:

We have a great deal of things that we can provide them with, but I like to start with the spot clinic. The spot clinic provides them with their healthcare needs. They have doctors on staff that will provide them with any clinical needs that they may have whether it may be just regular seasonal type cold type things or if it’s mental health as well. There are also social workers, psychologists...that provide our students with any kind of health need that they may have.

In the case of academy students who were homeless, the district operated a hope house managed by a “house mother” who cooked, cleaned, provided emotional support and transportation to students. The school also met other basic needs of students, such as providing uniforms, coats during the winter, and counseling/social services for various issues (e.g., pregnancy education and support). In turn, the school offered academic services through a tutoring program where students could access after school. Then, students were provided dinner after their tutoring sessions. In addition, when students attended internships in the summer, the school provided students with a stipend, transportation, and food. Ms. Lane, the instructional coach at the academy, confirmed the nature of related support:

We provide transportation to and from the corporations. Also, financially they do get paid for their internships but, as you know, even when you go into a natural job you’re not paid right away. You work those hours and it’s like it may be two or three weeks before you get that first pay check...Our kids don’t have the money they need to be able to eat lunch. We have to be able to

provide them with their lunches, that type of thing, until they can actually be given their first paycheck and maybe they can purchase their food on the corporation's campus.

Further, Johnson Academy offered other activities, programs, and services for students' families, including training, adult industry certification classes, and GED preparation, among other services. These are essential services offered in community schools (Mellavile et al., 2006; Harris & Hoover, 2003; Blank et al., 2012).

Overall, it was evident to us the school provided health, social, and academic-related services to ensure the well-being and success of students. In many ways, the provision of student services was also viewed as family/community service to ensure that parents and guardians did not need to leave work to transport their children to the various work-based learning opportunities. Ms. Harper, the family outreach liaison, explained:

I think one of the biggest successes that we have is putting that spot clinic in place. That services students with behavior issues, mental health issues, truancy, birth control, and shots. Say for instance a student need a TB shot and parents don't have the means of transportation to take them. They can receive those shots here in school. The biggest issue we were having at one point, before we had the spot clinic, was that parents can't get off of work to take them and not having the money to take them. Some parents work and say, "I cannot miss these days." Now, they [students] don't have to go anywhere else but down the hall to meet every need they have here at this high school.

In this regard, school administrators viewed wraparound services as family- and community- oriented. They provided a food pantry, offered access to laundry machines, and presented other miscellaneous supports on a case-by-case basis. For example, some parents provided accounts of miscellaneous support, such as paying for the funeral service of a student, while others received help to pay a gas bill. In general, it was clear to us that whenever possible, the district and school removed burdens from parents and guardians as part of a total approach to wrapping services around students and their families.

While the superintendent and school administrators provided the vision for implementation and sustainability, we also identified the role of communication and outreach as critical to bridging school and community support. The school followed a systematic approach to communication with parents in the community to keep them abreast of available services and support. For example, they created a kick-off celebration at the beginning of the school year. During the celebration, the school and district made the school community aware of the range of services available to them. Ms. Westmoreland, a parent, noted:

From time to time, they'll have different meetings. The style of meeting they have, I've never experienced before in a school district. Sometimes, they'll have a parent meeting, and they'll actually hold it like a dinner almost. They'll have a little dinner for you and the kids or whatever and then have the meeting or vice versa...I know they have a lot of information sessions that they may invite the parents to come to. There's a lot of community events that tie in with the school

that the family as a whole is invited to...I do see that it seems like this community is very family-oriented, and I like that.

As we talked to parents from the community, it was evident they were all aware of the variety of support services available through the district and school, and the role communication played in bridging school and community. In turn, we also realized the critical role of identifying and brokering support for students and adults in the community. Johnson Academy hired an outreach family liaison, Ms. Harper, who followed a systematic approach to identify students in need, connect with parents in the community, and facilitate access to relevant services. For example, when a student was absent for a few days, an automatic call to the parents would be generated by the school. If there was no response from parents, Ms. Harper would travel to the student's home with a resource officer for a wellness check and determine if assistance was needed. Wellness checks triggered different responses, from the identification of specific services to referrals to family court. Ms. Harper elaborated:

Sometimes I may call the kid up if they're here and say, "Why you wasn't at school certain amount of days?" "I didn't have any uniforms" or "we didn't have any gas" or "didn't have means of washing the uniforms." We do have a home economics room here where families can come and wash their clothes as well...Sometimes they don't want to share...After the student is absent ten days, unexcused absences, we do a referral to family court.

The key to bridging school and community, as Ms. Harper pointed out, was the trust she built with parents to reach out to her and share what their needs were.

In terms of the approach and nature of support services, it was evident this low-income, African American school was fulfilling the designation of a trauma-informed school and was aligned with a purposeful approach to providing wraparound services to students and adults in the community (Blodgett & Dorado, 2016; Fries et al., 2012; Levin et al., 2007). At Johnson Academy, we encountered consistent evidence of services provided to students and their families using a family-oriented approach. It is important to highlight that school stakeholders understood the need to depart from negative connotations of providing wraparound services as handouts or charity, but to emphasize related supports as part of a community healing process.

**No More Excuses for Student Success.** As teachers, administrators, and parents noted, a philosophy of removing obstacles for students, garnering commitment from all stakeholders, and focusing on student success were contributors to the effectiveness of Johnson Academy's wraparound services initiatives. According to the literature, this philosophy is needed to ensure the efficacy of implementation by school and community stakeholders (Epstein, 2001; Blodgett & Dorado, 2016). As mentioned previously, school leaders shifted away from utilizing the term "trauma-based" to "healing-centered." As such, Dr. Henderson promoted a rebranding of this approach to convey a more positive connotation to the work of stakeholders in the academy. Further, stakeholders at Johnson Academy actively removed excuses for success. This perspective emerged as we talked to administrators, teachers, parents, and business partners. For example, Ms. Lane indicated:

I would say that of course our students have a great deal of barriers that would likely prevent them from being able to succeed, but we here at the district have determined some ways in which we can fill those gaps for them; [we] provide them with their necessary needs, whether it be just what I think about is just making them whole so that they can be successful in the school...so that their home life doesn't necessarily have to affect what takes place here at school, and they can be as successful as they need to be as long as we help them meet those needs.

Hence, part of the shared understanding was the idea of removing obstacles systematically to enable student engagement in academic learning. We also learned that this outlook was not undergirded by sympathy or viewing students and their families as victims of historical socioeconomic oppression. Instead, it was a collective desire to provide all students with an equal opportunity regardless of their backgrounds or life circumstances. Dr. Williams explained:

I don't want you to have sympathy for students. Know that they deserve a safe place. They deserve a clean place. They deserve well-rounded, educated educators, and they deserve committed educators. You must see every child, no matter what, as successful leaving your doors. No matter how their success look—'cause [sic] all our success looks different—they must leave here more than they came with. Yeah. ..Make sure when they leave here, they're able to maintain some type of employment to take care of themselves or families, whatever they need to do. That must be a mission and a thought. I know it may seem like the impossible, but you have to make the impossible possible. You have to. It's all about changing attitudes.

And with changing attitudes, another essential component of the approach to wraparound services was a commitment from all stakeholders to help promote a culture of support for students and their families. In fact, sustaining a comprehensive approach to support services was a point of pride within the school and the broader community. To that end, Dr. Henderson shared:

In general, in the past five years, I've seen the demeanor and the confidence of students go from burying down, oppressed, like when they go away for three months in the summer, you can see when they come back to school, this burden like they haven't eaten, like they haven't slept, and like they're angry at the world for doing this to me – that was five years ago. Even three years ago, you could see some stress. Two years ago was my first year where kids came back in the same tone, emotional stability, well fed, well loved, well nurtured environment consistently, even during the summertime. I've seen trauma drip away, and I've seen healing at a student level. I've seen the community transition, and now I see them having pride, saying, "Yeah, we're the best. We're the talented tenth of urban communities.

The school's turnaround in the community has informed and reinforced the approach to removing barriers to student engagement in school in a systematic way. When excuses for student learning were removed, students and school stakeholders came together as a community for collective celebration. Mr. Robertson, a marketing teacher, articulated:

The things we do communicates in volumes that we care about every student in our building. When they see that and they feel that's genuine and not you just giving some fluff, they respond different. They'll respect you. They'll buy-in to your programs especially when their needs are being met.

In this regard, teacher commitment was evident in the school as teachers consistently discussed a culture of respect, caring, and "doing what it takes" to ensure student success. In turn, parents reported using support services and giving back through volunteer work by chaperoning events, washing clothes, delivering pantry baskets, and driving students to appointments. Further, business partners provided paid internships for students. In this community, it was obvious that providing wraparound services was beyond isolated support and service and the work of a few people. It was part of the total culture involving the active participation of everyone. As such, the district and school are mindful of the need to recruit responsive teachers and work with business partners who are culturally competent. For example, Dr. Williams acknowledged:

If you're gonna' [sic] come to this type of environment, be prepared to give it your all. You're gonna' [sic] deal with kids' pregnancies. You're gonna' [sic] deal with kids with mental issues. You're gonna' [sic] deal with kids that don't have clothes. You're gonna' [sic] deal with kids who are not ready to learn. You have to get them prepared to learn. I think that's the reality we have to teach urban teachers. Some of you have to be really in it and be ready not to get paid for it.

To ensure student success, we learned that excuses become barriers and support was needed from all stakeholders in the community. Dr. Jones, recapped this community understanding:

I'm a part of this community. I grew up right around the corner. I can go door to door and I can talk to the parents and they see that you really care. That comes out of the majority of our staff and that makes a huge difference with the kids. If they feel like you have their best interest at heart and you're pushing for them to be successful and everyone's needs are being met, teachers are being treated respectfully, administrators are given the authority to do things they need, and support from the teachers and resources they need. The kids' needs are being met, the barriers to learning and being successful are being removed and they are given an opportunity to learn and grow within their own level of ability, then...it's a healthy organism.

Mr. Sanders concurred. He stated:

It's just become our way of doin' [sic] things to meet the needs of our kids. We meet them where they are and try to bring them to where they need to be, emotionally, physically, mentally, all of those things allow for us to give these opportunities to our students. To prepare them for what is put before them...so I think that has just become our natural way of doin' [sic] things...if we didn't have some of the things that we have in place currently, which is the spot clinic and all of those types of things...They may not know what to do with it but now that we've given them some avenues to take care of themselves, their well-being, make sure they're okay and make sure they're well fed. These

things are met and it allows them to better take on that opportunity and know what to do with it.

Under these premises, and after three years of implementation, Johnson Academy realized positive changes. Johnson Academy became an accredited school (in the past, the school was unaccredited), and they reached a 95% graduation rate for the 2016 to 2017 academic year. Dr. Henderson attributed this collective success to the work and support of the entire community, including teaching staff, administrators, parents, students, and business partners.

**Lack of Transportation.** The only lingering issue noted by parents was the lack of transportation. Although the administrators reported not having buses for years and managing without them, parents said it was a challenge to send their children to school during inclement weather because they had to walk, and many feared for the safety of their children. This lingering issue led to high student absenteeism. Ms. Harper discussed the issues associated with the lack of transportation for students. She stated:

We deal with students living the distance...when it gets cold outside, we face challenges. We don't have buses, so we face the challenge of students having transportation issues. Where they live maybe across Highway [5]...so they have to walk. When the weather changes we find the attendance drops drastically...If it rains real hard, if it storms, attendance is down. It's because...they have to walk.

The parents we interviewed also shared their concerns about not having transportation for students, particularly as it relates to safety issues. Ms. Jones, a single parent, noted:

When I moved to this area, I thought that there were gonna' [sic] be school busses. There's no school busses for these children, and as you know there's a lot of children coming up missing. For me, we live pretty far away from the school. If we didn't have transportation, they would have to walk to school and sometimes they do have to walk to school and sometimes they do have to walk home. I don't think that that's safe. I think they should have more security out or even more police out when the children are walking home from school because it's not a next-door thing. You can't just walk out the house and then you're at school, no. You have a nice walk. I think they should try to incorporate some form of transportation for the kids in the area of [Johnson].

Mrs. Jackson, also a parent, concurred and shared:

So far, I've heard a lot of parents talking about it. When we went on a trip to New York, it was two other mothers that were there, and we all were discussing how dangerous it is for our children to walk because sometimes their kids have to walk as well. I don't know if they said anything to the administration, but I did voice my opinion when I first enrolled my kids at the school. That's kinda' [sic] just the way that things are done.

The lack of transportation for students was unexpected for us, as it seems Johnson Academy addressed all other needs and issues for students and their families. This issue

speaks to the limits of providing basic support services involving recurring funding and costly infrastructure requiring periodic updates in a community with limited resources. Nevertheless, this critical issue needed attention. It also was a conflicting issue given their “no excuse” policy and dispositions, and seemed to counter the philosophy undergirded in the academy. When we discussed this with Johnson Academy administrators, they acknowledged it was an issue, but did not seem to be particularly concerned enough to address it.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Our findings support the literature on the role and use of wraparound services to help students succeed in school through a collaborative and intentional focus on providing supports for students, families, and the community. In this regard, findings suggested that culturally relevant leadership provides the conditions for the use of support services to promote equal opportunity to learn and succeed for all students. In this case, the local administrative leadership—rooted in the community—recognized that meeting local needs was an essential condition to provide all students with an equal opportunity to complete high school. As noted in the literature, the problematic nature of some personal, family, and community factors may all intersect making student success difficult (Fries et al., 2012). School administrators acknowledged the extent of poverty in the community, family issues, and the number of low-performing students as the basis for applying for state funding and a designation as a trauma-informed school. As a trauma-informed school, the district and school were able to access resources that may not have been otherwise available. In addition, the superintendent had an entrepreneurial disposition to seek partnerships and resources to sustain wraparound services.

Another critical condition for the apparent success of Johnson Academy and the district approach to support services was the concept of serving as a hub in the community. This social approach aligns with the overlapping spheres of influence theory. That is, providing wraparound services to students and their families was beyond the good intentions of only one person. Instead, the use of support services at Johnson Academy was a concerted effort that built upon a social ecology where school, families, and community interacted (Epstein, 2001; Penn & Osher, 2007). According to Epstein (2001), such concerted efforts represent overlapping spheres of social influence with the well-being of the whole child at the core of the intersection (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). This ecosystem of support was driven by a shared vision recognizing school, families, and community as partners that had an impact on students’ learning (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2005). In this context, research demonstrates that long-term student benefits are reached when schools partner with local agencies and provide access to wraparound services for their students (Fries et al., 2012; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). In this regard, Johnson Academy and the district developed conditions for creating a student- and community-centered approach to offering wraparound- like services highlighted in the literature as a key to effective



implementation (Daniel & Snyder, 2015; Fries et al., 2012; Martin & Halperin, 2004; Penn & Osher, 2007).

In turn, the nature of the school's student- and community-centered approach was consistent with the tenets of overlapping spheres of influence and the community school concept (Daniel & Snyder, 2015; Epstein et al., 2005; Penn & Osher, 2007). Wraparound-like services enabled access for students and families in both the school and the community. The nature of services represented an array of resources designed to meet the basic needs of students and families and was facilitated by more than one person. Although the academy had a Family Outreach/Liaison to broker resources to students and families—reported in the literature as essential to successful implementation, the district and school had an “it-takes-a-village” approach to the facilitation of related services (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). The Family Outreach/Liaison had a direct role in contacting families, and it was evident that all school personnel—administrators, counselors, and teachers—played a role in ensuring outreach of support for all students. Also, consistent with related literature, school personnel followed a systematic approach to identifying students in need of support and facilitating their access to appropriate services (Penn & Osher, 2007; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). Communication played a major role for students and families in the community in terms of understanding what was available and where they could access needed resources.

Further, study findings underscored the essential role of culturally relevant leadership to promote a shift from deficit-oriented thinking about wraparound services (e.g., viewing students as victims of social circumstances) to an understanding that such services are a tool to remove barriers for student success (Khalifa et al., 2016). It also was evident that everyone in the district and school understood that removing personal and family obstacles with wraparound services was essential to promoting student engagement in school. This coherent approach is consistent with related literature suggesting that support services should be viewed as a means to help students bring stability to their lives and allow them to focus on their education (Eber et al., 2008; Fries et al., 2012; Secada, 1999).

Nonetheless, the lack of transportation for students is still a lingering issue for Johnson Academy to address, as this oversight represents both a safety and student achievement issue (i.e., increased absenteeism). Without addressing the issue of transportation, we do not believe Johnson Academy is truly adhering to its mission of no excuses and has not adequately addressed all concerns and needs of its students, family, and community. While we realize the funding and costly infrastructure required to provide their students with transportation, we are convinced this issue can be resolved by collaborating with local community, corporate, and city government representatives to provide the necessary resources.

In conclusion, our study findings suggested that a low-income African American academy within an urban setting provided favorable conditions for the use of support services to help students succeed in school as Johnson Academy aligned its mission with the needs of its parents/guardians, teachers, and families. However, culturally relevant administrative leadership may be as important to address

socioeconomic issues for student success, and for implementing a student- and family-centered approach to wraparound services. Further, we also found that facilitating access to support services is beyond the good intention of one person. It requires the concerted effort of school and community stakeholders. We also noted that it was possible for a charismatic superintendent to rally community support and school personnel to commit to a shared approach to wraparound services. On the flip side, these conditions also point to an issue of sustainability as new leadership may lack the entrepreneurial and culturally relevant understanding to continue rallying support for the provision of wraparound services. In turn, in larger urban communities with residents of various ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds and income levels, the use of support services may be more problematic. Even in a small community, like Johnson, the limited resources can be a barrier to offering basic services such as busing because of their high recurring cost.

Despite the promising findings in the Johnson community, it is important to point out the difficulty in replicating the efficacy of support services without culturally relevant leadership at the district and school levels (Khalifa et al., 2016). School administrators who understand their communities' historical development and social conditions seem to have an advantage in the development, promotion, and commitment of school personnel to wraparound services. Thus, the right combination of community context, administrative leadership, and shared approach to student services highlight the success of the Johnson Academy.

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## FUNDING

This research was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation's ITEST and EHR Core Research programs (Award # 1614707, 2016580, & 2000472).