

# **Collaborating for High School Student Success: A Case Study of Parent Engagement at Boston Arts Academy**

*Monique Y. Ouimette, Jay Feldman, and Rosann Tung*

## **Abstract**

While the literature on parent involvement cites many examples of challenges to parent involvement and suggestions to overcome them, few models of extensive parent involvement in urban, public high schools have been described. The Boston Arts Academy is an example of a school in such a setting. It engages a vast majority of its parents in school-based activities through multiple entry points, a welcoming school environment, and frequent communication among staff and parents. By focusing on building a diverse, inclusive culture and encouraging parents to take part in the school community, BAA engages parents with varied prior experiences and dispositions toward involvement. This case study's findings suggest several key approaches other schools may adopt.

Key Words: parent involvement, family-school collaboration, small schools, autonomy, urban, high school, public school

## **Introduction**

It is important that parents feel and know their input is as welcome as their presence in our school. We cannot be successful in educating students without them. (Boston Arts Academy Family Coordinator, 2002)

### **Why Study Parent Involvement?**

Parent involvement in education is widely regarded as a way to help students succeed in school. It is defined by researchers as including both home- and

school-based activities, such as talking with their children, setting boundaries, helping with homework, communicating with teachers, volunteering in classrooms, and attending school-sponsored events (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Ho & Willms, 1996; Mapp, 2003; Swap, 1993). High parental involvement has been linked to increases in student achievement and engagement in school (Fuller & Olsen, 1998; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Moore, 1992; Swap, 1993). As a result, efforts to increase parent involvement in education, both in and out of school, have been included in many school improvement and reform efforts over the last two decades (Johnson, 1997; Moles, 1993).

Many schools with large populations of low-income students or students of color report difficulty in engaging high numbers of their parents in the school community. These difficulties have been attributed to several reasons, including parents not having many opportunities to be involved or not feeling welcomed (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Moles, 1993) and miscommunication about what schools and parents believe is the appropriate form of parent involvement in their children's education, often due to social and cultural differences among parents and teachers (Griffith, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey & O'Connor, 2002; Lareau, 1987; Mapp, 2003; Moles, 1993; Swap, 1993; Terrell, 2002).

A report by the Family and Community Engagement Task Force of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) confirms that many of the barriers to parent involvement cited above exist in Boston's schools (Boston Public Schools, 2000), a district with a student population that is predominantly low income and persons of color. Within BPS, however, there are examples of schools that engage parents at a high level. One elementary school, in particular, had success in creating a welcoming culture of mutual respect and communication and actively promoting relationships between parents and the school (Mapp, 2003).

While parent involvement has an impact throughout a student's educational career (Henderson & Berla, 1994), involvement diminishes as students move from elementary to secondary school (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; NCES, 1998). Parents of adolescents often reduce their involvement as they give their children more independence. High schools also provide fewer involvement opportunities and communicate less about them than do elementary schools (Vaden-Kiernan & Chandler, 1996). However, schools that support and facilitate many kinds of parent involvement create partnerships among school staff, students, and parents that lead to higher levels of involvement at all grade levels (Epstein, 1995; Sanders, Epstein, & Connors-Tadros, 1999; Swap, 1993).

This study focuses on parent involvement at one urban public high school, the Boston Arts Academy. It was chosen as a case study school because it enrolls a diverse population, its students perform well on a variety of indicators of student engagement and achievement, and parent attendance at school-based events in recent years has been consistently high.

## Background Information on the Boston Arts Academy

Boston Arts Academy (BAA) opened its doors to 160 freshman and sophomores in September 1998 then added one grade per year. Of the 381 students enrolled in grades 9-12 in 2002-03, there were 50% African American, 24% Caucasian, 25% Latino, and 1% Asian students; 56% were eligible for free/reduced lunch. This racial and socioeconomic distribution is similar to the total population in Boston public high schools; in 2002-03, Boston public high schools enrolled 48% African American, 18% Caucasian, 23% Latino, and 11% Asian students, with 61% of all students eligible for free/reduced lunch (Center for Collaborative Education [CCE], 2003).

Boston Public Schools are schools of choice. Twelve of the 28 high schools, including BAA, have a special admissions process. The other schools fill their seats according to students' listed preferences.<sup>1</sup> BAA is also a Pilot School of BPS. Created in 1994, Boston Pilot Schools were designed to improve the quality of education and to promote increased choice options within the Boston Public School District. Each Pilot School has control over its budget, staffing, curriculum, governance, and time, which means that members of the school community have authority for many decisions that have traditionally been made by the district. These autonomies, along with small size and their vision-driven nature, give Pilot Schools greater flexibility, which they use to create environments where students are well known to their teachers (CCE, 2001).

Any teen living in Boston may apply to BAA. Since the school seeks to enroll students who are representative of the larger district, it employs a Community Outreach Coordinator who visits all Boston public middle schools to tell students that BAA is an option for them. To gain admission, students must submit an application and audition in their choice of (up to two) arts discipline(s). In a process that is academic blind (i.e., students are not screened for prior academic achievement levels), students are accepted based on their potential and interest in the arts demonstrated during auditions. Many students seek to attend BAA; in 2001-2003, approximately one in four applicants gained admission. Research examining why students choose BAA has found that the arts curriculum is the most significant draw, while challenging academics and career preparation are also very important (Doyle & Feldman, 2006).

BAA provides both a college preparatory academic curriculum *and* a full arts curriculum to all students to prepare them to have a full range of choices after graduation. According to its mission statement, BAA "...is committed to a rigorous academic and arts education for students who are eager to think creatively and independently, to question and take risks within a college preparatory program." At BAA, assessment in both academics and arts is primarily

through portfolios and exhibitions. Students show proficiency through performances and work involving connections to life outside school. Members of the larger community, including parents, help evaluate student work.

Students at BAA major in one of four arts: theater, dance, visual arts, or music. Each major has its own curriculum and requirements for graduation. All BAA students are required to take math, science, and humanities courses. Students also take an advisory class that meets four times a week throughout the year. Advisories provide opportunities for students to work on writing, research, and interdisciplinary projects, and on developing effective work habits. They are co-led by two teachers known as advisors. All academic and arts teachers serve as advisors; students' advisors during their junior and senior years are teachers from their arts major. In addition to teaching, advisors conduct fall parent conferences and follow-up on student progress in all classes.

BAA has an extensive student support services program that contributes to the culture of student engagement. It includes: academic help in a learning center and after-school tutoring programs/homework help; support in selecting/applying to college and securing financial aid; counseling (including individual, group, and family counseling and referrals to outside organizations); and issue-based and enrichment student groups, including a girls' vocalist group, martial arts group, Latina girls' group, and chess group. According to one staff member, "all 400 students...are being touched by student support services."

Students at BAA perform near the top levels of Boston's high schools in student engagement indicators such as attendance, fewest suspensions, and fewest numbers of transfers out of the school (CCE, 2003). In addition, BAA students score near the top of Boston high schools on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests in English/Language Arts and in Mathematics (CCE, 2003). A high percentage of their graduates go directly to college, including 94% of 2002 graduates and 96% of 2003 graduates (BAA, 2002, 2003).

## **Research Questions and Methods**

This case study of parent involvement focused on the following question: What made Boston Arts Academy successful in engaging a majority of parents who have varied prior school experiences and levels of engagement?

The focus of the study emerged from an earlier study of parent involvement practices across the Pilot Schools Network (Ouimette, Feldman, & Tung, 2002). The researchers, employed by the Center for Collaborative Education, the coordinating agency for the Boston Pilot Schools Network, utilized a broad conception of parent involvement, encompassing both school-based parent interactions and home-based parent support of their children's education

(Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Ho & Willms, 1996; Mapp, 2003; Swap, 1993). For simplicity, “parent” refers to students’ primary adult caretaker and includes legal guardians and adult family members/friends who have primary responsibility for the student.

## Interviews

### *School Staff*

Researchers conducted interviews lasting 45-90 minutes each with one administrator, the student support services director, the community outreach coordinator, three teachers, and the family coordinator. The interviews covered communication with parents, staff views of the role of parents, experiences with parents in the school, and, for all but the family coordinator, the impact of the family coordinator on facilitating parent involvement in the school. Staff interviewees were chosen based on their roles in the school. Both of the school’s administrators were founders of the school and share a common vision for parent engagement; the administrator with more direct responsibility over family engagement was interviewed. There was a goal of interviewing 3-5 of BAA’s 40 teachers. Each teacher at the school was sent an e-mail asking him/her to participate in an interview. Three teachers, representing both academics and the arts, volunteered and were interviewed. The formal interview with the family coordinator was supplemented by several informal conversations.

### *Parents*

Researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews ranging in length from 30-75 minutes with 23 parents, representing 26 students. Questions focused on reasons for choosing BAA, involvement in their children’s lives at home and at school, expectations for involvement in their children’s education, changes in their involvement levels over time, overall feelings about the school, comfort level at the school, and hopes for their children’s futures.

Parents were selected for interviews in two ways. In order to interview parents with a range of involvement levels, school event attendance records from four events during the fall of 2002, including two required events, were used to generate two groups: high involvement parents who attended more than the two required events, and medium involvement parents who attended the two required events or fewer. Parents were chosen at random from each group to participate in an interview. Members of the school’s Parent Council were then randomly selected to be interviewed. It is important to note that the high and medium involvement group designations are based solely on school-based involvement activities, which are not necessarily correlated with parents’ participation in their children’s learning outside of school.

Initial plans called for a “low involvement” group consisting of parents who had not attended any of the four events during fall 2002. Though attempting to contact 21 parents from this group, researchers were only able to complete one interview. Parents in this group represent roughly 10% of the total student population for BAA, while parents in the high and medium involvement groups represent roughly 20% and 70%, respectively.

For the purposes of this analysis, members of the Parent Council are included in the high involvement group. Overall, 11 parents from the high involvement group and 12 parents from the medium involvement group were interviewed. All of the high involvement group were interviewed in person, while 10 out of the 12 in the medium involvement group were interviewed over the phone.

### *Students*

The parents that we interviewed represented 26 students at BAA. We separately interviewed 24 of these students. Student interviews were semi-structured and lasted from 20-40 minutes. Interviews were conducted at the school during lunch time. Students were asked about the ways that their parents were involved in their lives both in school and out of school, changes in their parents’ involvement over time, their feelings about their parents’ level of involvement, their future goals, and their parents’ influence on their future goals.

### *Demographics of the Sample*

The demographic backgrounds of the parents and students are important to understand, as they influence perceptions of school and the role of family involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & O’Connor, 2002; Lareau, 1987; Mapp, 2003). During the 2002-03 school year, the racial composition of BAA students was 50% African American, 24% Caucasian, 25% Latino, and 1% Asian; 56% of students qualified for free/reduced lunch. Our overall sample<sup>2</sup> is 42% African American, 31% Caucasian, and 23% Latino, with 38% of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch. Therefore, our sample slightly under-represents African American students and slightly over-represents White students. It also over-represents students who do not qualify for free/reduced lunch.<sup>3</sup>

### **Observations, Documentation, and Methods**

Researchers observed 10 parent/family events over two school years at the Boston Arts Academy, including orientation, parent council meetings, student assessments, and performances. Observations provided opportunities for the researchers to see parent involvement in action and triangulate findings. Researchers also reviewed documents including school publications, parent attendance data, and meeting announcements for 2001-02 and 2002-03.

Sign-in sheets were gathered from each event that parents were asked to attend during fall 2002. Attendance at an event was noted in an Excel spreadsheet

containing the names of all students enrolled at BAA. The proportion of parents attending each event was obtained by dividing the number of students represented at an event by the number of students in the school.

Researchers read transcripts of all interviews, noted general themes, and generated a list of codes including: home involvement, school involvement, home-school communication, comfort level, choice, expectations, future goals, likes, and concerns. Transcripts were then coded using *HyperRESEARCH*, a qualitative analysis computer software program. Once the transcripts were coded, researchers used the software to aggregate source material by code. The researchers then reviewed and analyzed all source material and narrowed down the focus codes to the most frequent and the most pertinent.

## Findings

The findings are organized as follows: The first section describes BAA's vision of parent involvement. The second section describes strategies for moving towards that vision, including staffing for enhanced parent involvement and providing multiple entry points and opportunities for involvement. The third section provides evidence that those strategies are successful because parents express feeling welcomed and well-informed about their children's education.

### The Vision of Parent Involvement at Boston Arts Academy

Parents have been an integral part of the BAA community since the school opened in 1998. Its founders, who still head the school, deliberately chose to start a small school where it would be easier to know students and their families on an individual basis and, therefore, create a greater sense of community than would be possible in a large school. They believe that parent support is a key component of student success. With this vision in mind, a school was designed offering parents many ways to support their children's education.

We wanted to give different entry points to parents. So those who never used to come to anything, those are the ones we wanted to reach out to. We have the parent newsletter. We have room parents that reach out, as well...And then for those parents that will come to everything, and want to dial up about the bigger picture, we have things like the parent coffees...to have conversations about education in general, not just for their child. I think that we're providing a variety of opportunities for parents to be involved at different levels. (BAA Administrator)

In designing the range of opportunities for involvement, staff tried to understand different parent dispositions toward engagement with the school. Parents' attitudes toward school and their roles are formed by many factors, such as their cultures, their previous experiences, and their available time.

Parents who have paid [private school tuition] before usually feel it's their right to question. And I think parents from public education usually don't feel empowered, or feel like they're being intrusive....Families in most Latin American countries, the teachers are like your priests, and doctors....You don't question [whether] the teacher knows what he or she is doing. Your kids are supposed to respect the teacher just like you respect your parents....So I think those parents are less likely to challenge what the teacher does, or anything that they might feel not quite right about. When you ask them what would they change, it's like they're not to say, not to question the experts. (BAA Administrator)

By developing various entry points around parent dispositions, the school tries to welcome all parents and encourage them to participate in the school community in ways in which they feel comfortable.

### **BAA Strategies for Achieving Their Parent Involvement Vision**

#### *Building Community Around a Parent Involvement Vision: Staff Buy-In*

BAA staff recognize that parents have had diverse experiences with regard to schooling. They have designed their parent involvement program to help all parents feel welcome and comfortable participating in school activities and voicing their opinions to staff. BAA hires teachers and staff who are committed to the school's mission and to the idea of parents as partners in education.

The staff feel that parents are one part of a three-part team that will lead to students' success. As observed at parent events, in particular orientation, and in the school's handbook, staff at BAA reinforce the idea that parents are as important as staff in ensuring that children succeed. The goal of family involvement is to maintain open communication among the team of staff, students, and parents, which creates a "safety net" through which students cannot fall.

The parents in our school are integral to the operation and the success of our students. I'm a big believer that education happens not only in schools, but it's a daily process and it happens from day one to forever. Students learn from their families, their communities, the larger world. But parent involvement is definitely, definitely a key to all the success that our students see here. We introduced student conferences and parent phone calls, and making sure the students' parents stay involved in the process, and we've seen much higher success rates. (BAA Teacher)

#### *Building Community Around a Parent Involvement Vision: Parent Buy-In*

At the beginning of each year, students and parents are asked to sign a contract saying that they understand the rules and responsibilities that students must uphold and that as parents they "commit to support the students by attending certain conferences, meetings, and other events, as described in the

Community Handbook.” While the school gives parents a range of opportunities for involvement and does not expect all parents to attend all events, it does expect parents to at least attend the orientation and two parent-teacher-student narrative conferences. In addition to school-based involvement, BAA expects parents to “stay involved in their student’s education and to communicate regularly with Arts Academy faculty members” and “read and regularly review [the] handbook” (BAA Student Handbook, 2002-03, p. 10).

If parents cannot attend the required events, the school will cite the contract when it calls the parents either to reschedule a conference or to have a phone conversation. The school will also mail any materials that the parents have missed to their homes. Due to a variety of circumstances, there are a few parents who cannot or will not attend these events or do not respond to the school’s repeated attempts to contact them. In those cases, the school will work to provide the support that the student needs without parental assistance.

#### *Specialized Staffing for Parent Involvement at BAA*

A major way that the school ensures open communication is through creative staffing. Using its budget and staffing autonomy, the school has created two staff positions to welcome parents into the school community and support their involvement. The Community Outreach Coordinator ensures that students and their parents know that the school is an option for them and provides assistance with the application, if necessary. Once students are accepted to the school, the Family Coordinator becomes parents’ link to information and resources at BAA. The Family Coordinator, a full-time staff member and parent at the school, keeps parents well informed and encourages engagement in the school community, as described in the following section.

The Family Coordinator serves two main roles at BAA: liaison between parents and the school, working with parents throughout a child’s enrollment; and parent representative on school teams, providing a parents’ perspective on decision-making committees. The Family Coordinator’s contact with parents includes the following activities: communication on school policy; coordination of events at the school, such as family conferences and performances; liaison between parents and the school faculty; mediator of situations arising between parents and school faculty; and convener of the Parent Council Board, the executive committee of the Parent Council.

The Family Coordinator facilitates connections between parents and staff members. While parents can always contact the Family Coordinator, they are encouraged to directly contact individual staff members with specific concerns. BAA staff members view the Family Coordinator position as being essential to the success of the school’s parent involvement program, and mentioned that she makes it easier to contact parents and to field inquiries about the school.

Staff also expressed appreciation for the ways that the Family Coordinator facilitates parent involvement, especially for her work in scheduling parents for conferences and for her ability to “bridge” parents and teachers.

She’s a neutral party, particularly when a parent feels he or she is not getting the answers they want...Then I think what [the Family Coordinator] does is to advocate putting it into perspective. And, if indeed the parent was treated unfairly...or was misunderstood, then she would call us on it and say, “I would have handled that differently,” and to help us mend that bridge again...sometimes I use her as prevention. If I know that a parent wants to be confrontational, I’ll say, “This parent might not be willing to hear what I have to say, and maybe you could sit with us and neutralize the [situation] here.” (BAA Administrator)

The family coordinator extends her advocacy role by representing parent interests on an institutional level as a member of the following committees: Student Support Team, Leadership Team, Governing Board, and Foundation Board.

Of the 16 parents who talked about the Family Coordinator role in their interviews, many discussed the key role that she plays in facilitating contact, dialogue, and problem solving among parents, students, and school staff. The Family Coordinator can build bridges which lead to more responsive, open communication about student needs and issues. Examples include compiling homework from all teachers for a student’s extended sick leave, relaying messages between teachers and parents when they are having trouble getting in contact, filling in details for a parent about a student’s behavior or performance when the student is not communicating, and providing information about upcoming events. Her accessibility and prompt responsiveness allow her to build relationships with individual parents, which encourage trust both in her and in the school. As one parent described: “When you can’t reach anybody else, you can reach her...And she gets back to you. She really is truly a parent advocate. She’s that one voice when you can’t get anybody else. Just call her.” (Parent 7)

#### *Multiple Entry Points for Parent Involvement at BAA*

The school community offers many different opportunities for parent involvement. As at the other Pilot high schools, involvement activities are classified into three categories: events, membership, and communication. Opportunities include parent-teacher-student (narrative) conferences, orientations, student performances, reviews of student work, workshops on the college admissions process, volunteer opportunities (e.g., providing support at performances), and membership in school groups (e.g., the Parent Council Board). This variety allows parents with different interests, schedules, and constraints to get involved to a degree that feels appropriate to them (Ouimette et al, 2002; further description of each of these opportunities is available from the authors).

Table 1. BAA Families Attending Events During Fall 2001 and Fall 2002

Event	2001	2002
Orientation Meetings	69%	60%
Community Night	12%	17%
Open House	22%	18%
Family Narrative Conferences	82%	80%

Table 1 lists BAA parent attendance figures from selected first semester school events for the 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 school years. The two events with the highest attendance levels, orientation and family narrative conferences, are “required” events. Further description of these two events, along with parent and student perspectives, will be presented in the next section.

**Parents and Students Experience of Involvement Opportunities**

According to interviews with parents, all parents participate in events or activities directly related to their own children’s school work, such as parent-teacher-student narratives, performances, and exhibitions. There is little difference between the rates at which high involvement parents and medium involvement parents are involved in terms of events related to student work.

*School-Based Parent Involvement Related to Student Work*

The first family event of the year, orientation, occurs on two evenings just before the start of the school year. At each orientation, parents and students from two grades (9-10 and 11-12) convene in a large group for introductions and an overview of the school and handbook, and then break into smaller groups according to students’ advisories. One of two events required by the BAA parent contract, attendance at orientation varies by grade, but is generally high, with approximately two-thirds of all parents participating each year.

At orientation, parents and students have the opportunity to meet teachers, including their advisors. They also learn about the school’s expectations and regulations in terms of students’ academic and arts performance. An important point that is made during orientation is that academics and arts are equally valued at BAA. Medium involvement parents talked about orientation more than high involvement parents. Parents describe the orientation as informative.

I went to the orientation and found out more about the academics of the school, the structure of the school, the fact that the performing arts were not going to override the academics....I just got a good feeling once we went and received more information. (Parent 13)

According to six children of medium involvement parents, they are more likely to attend orientation during the freshman year. A few of these students said they did not know that you had to attend orientation in the other years.

Family narratives are the parent-teacher-student conferences that are held twice a year. Parents and students meet for half-hour scheduled appointments with the student's advisory teacher, who has collected written assessments of the student's work from each of his/her teachers. Attendance at these conferences is very high; at least 80% of parents attend each year. For parents who cannot attend, alternate arrangements are made. Including these arrangements, more than 90% of families participate in the narratives. For those parents that cannot participate, teachers will conduct the meeting directly with the student.

High involvement parents express high satisfaction with these narratives. They are able to experience firsthand how the close relationships between teachers and students translate into a deep knowledge about students' learning and needs. They also appreciate that teachers' praise, concerns, and expectations are conveyed to the student directly, rather than through the parents.

The teachers know the kids. They really know them. It's almost like a family....They know their likes, their dislikes, their moods. They know their weaknesses, and they know their strong points. And they tell them. I've never been to a parent conference in the nine years of school before BAA where a teacher has told me in front of [my child], "..., you know you really [need improvement] at this, but you're capable of doing that." They tell them right out. Like I would....They spend so much time together. They know the kids. They care about the kids. (Parent 3)

When medium involvement parents discussed the narratives, they gave more details about the logistical aspects. According to them, the conferences are generally convenient and staff will make alternative arrangements to suit a parent's schedule; this was especially important to parents who had inflexible work schedules. Overall, parents were satisfied with the communication through the narrative conferences.

All of the students said that their parents attended at least one narrative. There were not many differences in the way that children of high and medium involvement parents talked about the narratives. However, in contrast to their parents, children of medium involvement parents talked more about the content of the conferences than did children of high involvement parents.

Students generally said that they liked the narratives at BAA, including seven students who said that they liked the structure better than the parent-teacher conferences at their previous schools. Aspects of the narratives that students like include: students are involved in the process, narratives are mandatory and well-organized, discussion focuses on positives as well as areas that need improvement, and the conferences help to keep them on track by giving them an opportunity to reflect on their work and develop a plan to improve their school performance. Student participation helps to improve communication among

families and teachers and helps students to set action steps to stay accountable. Many students expressed feeling positive about their participation. For example, one said “if the parent, teacher, and the student are together, you can solve the problem better” (Student A). Others mentioned the following:

I like the meetings because you have the aspect of yourself, and you have the aspect of the teacher, and then you have your parents. So it’s like you have a big triangle....So there’s some way you have to internalize it and change what needs to be fixed, and take pride in what you do well. (Student B)

I like the narratives more here because it’s not like you’re just sitting here and they’re saying, “He got this because of this, that because of that.” The teachers, yourself, and your parents come up with ways to make things work better or if you’re doing good, how can you excel more. How can you do this to change this. (Student C)

BAA staff members agree that the parent-student-teacher narratives are valuable for sharing information about a student’s work as well as creating plans to address concerns. Staff emphasized the value of narratives for enhancing student accountability.

It’s helpful because you see the kid from a variety of different vantage points...and then you can get a kid to say why these things are happening, and what they’re going to do to prevent it. You can get the parent on board with that, often, so you all as a group turn to the kid. (BAA Staff Member)

For students, there are usually no surprises in terms of the topics of discussion at narratives. This is a reflection of the high level of communication between teachers and students. It also supports the idea that the narratives help to increase student accountability. Students know that if their performance is not up to expectations, they will have to discuss it with both their parents and teachers. Students said that this prospect helps to keep them on track.

If I know I did something wrong, it scares me straight. So I don’t want to go into the narrative knowing that I’m going to get in trouble. So I make sure I have everything, I’m on top of everything, my grades are good, my behavior’s good. (Student H)

In addition to the orientation and narratives, parents talked about enjoying the high quality student arts performances. One parent said she even went to performances of other students because they were so entertaining. Parents all want to see their own children perform and will try to attend all performances that do not conflict with work schedules and other home obligations.

Students like that their parents attend performances and most accept the fact that their parents cannot attend all performances because of other obligations. Of 24 students, 18 talked about their parents attending performances. The number of performances that parents attended varied from one to every performance.

Exhibitions in humanities, science, and math occur several times a year at BAA, providing opportunities for parents to learn more about students' academic work. Exhibitions encompass presentations and demonstrations of student work, usually in project form. In certain cases, parents, along with other community members, use rubrics to evaluate students' projects. Parents appreciate this opportunity to see and evaluate their own child's work along with the work of other students and to meet other students and parents. Students benefit by receiving feedback from people other than their own teachers and parents.

We're given a metric to use and we grade them on presentation, and how many resources they used, and whether they addressed this or that issue. So we actually go around to other kids' exhibits and talk to them about it...the kids get feedback from people other than their parents and... teachers...It's more like the real world. A little less sheltered. (Parent 1)

I think [exhibitions are] excellent...I think it gets parents involved and asking questions, and seeing their child's work within the spectrum of other students' work. (Parent 21)

#### *School-Based Parent Involvement Not Related to Student Work*

The Parent Council at BAA is open to all parents. Of the 11 high involvement parents interviewed, 8 are Parent Council Board members. Members of the Council believe strongly in having a voice in school decisions. Medium involvement parents were less likely to attend Parent Council meetings; 8 high and 3 medium involvement parents reported attending. Many view the meetings as valuable and necessary; "you have to participate in order to know what's going on" (Parent 16). Others see room for improvement in the Council:

I think the Parent Council should exist. But I think it needs to be clearer about what its mission is. And I think it should really be the voice of parents. I've never had a parent call me up and say, "Would you represent this view?" I've never been asked to write a report to parents as to what's going on...I'm trying to create an empowered situation. (Parent 8)

A few of the students of the high involvement parents talked about the Parent Council. Students felt their parents worked on important decisions in the council. However, students varied in whether they and their parents discussed the issues that arose in the Parent Council.

In addition to the Parent Council, there are many opportunities for parents to volunteer their time and services at BAA. Examples mentioned by parents

included being a room parent; helping with auditions, performances, and fund-raising events; assisting with teacher appreciation events; providing food for rehearsals; and serving as a translator. Both high and medium involvement parents talked about their willingness to volunteer for these activities. However, medium involvement parents were more vocal about constraints. Two parents noted that they had indicated their willingness to volunteer in writing, but felt out of the loop because they had not been contacted. Others refrained from volunteering due to time constraints; they did not want to make a commitment they could not keep. As one parent mentioned, "I wouldn't want to do something that I could not give what it deserved, in terms of my time. I don't believe in that. If you commit to something, do it" (Parent 13).

*Student Reflections of Their Parents' Overall School-Based Involvement*

Students generally appreciate that their parents are involved in the school community. A few children of high involvement parents said that their parents attend everything at the school, which could be excessive at times.

It's crazy. I mean, everything I do that involves school, they're like, up here, talking to the teachers. Sometimes it gets a little aggravating, because they're always here at the school. If they come up to the school, everybody knows my parents. It's almost like that with everybody, because your parents are always up at the school. (Student I)

At the same time, two children of high involvement parents are very happy with the fact that their parents are frequently at the school.

Children of medium involvement parents feel that it is not necessary for their parents to attend all of the events at the school. While students want their parents to attend events that are related to their work, they understand that their parents have many obligations and do not feel bad that their parents do not participate in school-based activities that are not related to their work.

Q: How would you like your mom to be involved in your education?  
Anything else?

A: She's fine the way she is.

Q: And how do you feel about her involvement level here?

A: I think she does the best she can. (Student H)

As stated by one child of a medium involvement parent, there are different conceptions of involvement; what is most important is that children feel supported by their parents. Support does not necessarily mean that parents attend events at the school. "[Parent involvement is] not only coming to parent council meetings, it's not only that, being president of god-knows-what, it's not only that, it's moral support. They give me that security." (Student J)

*Home Parent Involvement*

Both high and medium involvement parents are actively engaged in their children's education outside school. Two ways of being involved at home are (a) talking about education during times the family spends together, and (b) providing homework support.

Parents find many opportunities to talk with their adolescents about school, the purpose of education, and working toward future goals. These conversations may occur at home, after performances, at church, in the car, or during dinner. The talk is not necessarily about schoolwork; it also includes social interactions, peer relations, academic expectations, books they read, and life skills. Some parents, predominantly medium involvement parents, talked about the importance of knowing their children's whereabouts for safety reasons.

And the other thing I tell them is that I'm responsible for them. So if someone asks me what my children are doing and where they are, I need to be able to answer those questions. (Parent 13)

Because they're at...the dangerous age, where I have to be very tough with them...I do life skills with them, teach them what's good and what's bad and what's going on in the streets, what's going on in society. And, you know, once I do that, then they choose the positive and leave the negative alone. But if they do the negative, they get punished. (Parent 19)

For the most part, both medium and high involvement parents talk with their children about directions and decisions in life. Parents described their support as guiding and letting their children make their own choices rather than directing their children in what to do.

I just think at a certain point in a child's life...you have to find out what they want to do...Like with him, he wanted to be in the arts...Well, there's a process to it, there's a program, rules, regulations, understanding, discipline. You know, you let them know how serious it is, because it's their choice...I think he's at that point where he's disciplined enough within himself to do what he has to do. My role, at this point in time right now, is more of an inspirationist (sic). I inspire him as he inspires me. (Parent 16)

Like I say, we just want you to have a profession...Because we are not millionaires, we are not rich, and we cannot, unfortunately, leave you money when we die. But, we would like to leave you a wonderful education where you can support yourself and become a wonderful professional in the future...But, it's up to her...We try to give her ideas so that she can just basically contemplate and think about it...so, we're going to always be there for her and try to give her the best. (Parent 17)

Students especially appreciate this type of support from their parents. All but two of the students said that they talk with their parents about their education. For most of the students, it is the most prominent way that their parents are involved in their lives. Students appreciate the guidance that they receive from their parents and the way that it helps them to set priorities, be responsible, and stay on the path of living a good life.

I wouldn't necessarily say we talk about things that go on in the day...if we're not talking about school, we're always talking about just life in general and why there's some things that I'm not allowed to do, because a lot of times people my age...Sometimes the places they go aren't safe, so he just really tells me, "I understand you want to go here and whatnot, but you really don't need to go, because people who do go to those places all the time, something bad happens, and sometimes it's always the one who is...getting ready to do great things, it's always the one who's like that that something bad happens to." So he tries to just protect me from that and let me know exactly what's going on out in the world. (Student B)

I work with my parents in terms of priorities. I'm still growing. My parents know much more than me. And I know that they would never tell me a lie...So, when they say I should...do this at this time, then you do it. And you learn why later. Always ask questions last when it comes to your elders, and people who know more than you. (Student C)

In addition to talking with their children, many parents mentioned homework support as a way that they are involved in their children's education. Broadly defined, homework help includes talking about topics that came up in class, discussing a homework assignment, and providing assistance with writing and problem solving. Most of the interviewed parents make themselves available, ask questions about it, but do not often help with doing the work.

Outside of school she asks if she needs help with something in terms of homework, math, that kind of thing, instead of our initiating that...as she's getting older. Letting her ask for what she needs. (Parent 6)

There are extremes in terms of involvement with homework. Two high involvement parents do not want to be involved with homework at all and think students should use their own resourcefulness or go to a teacher for help:

I've never been into looking at their homework...They do have to learn how to do it themselves. (Parent 2)

I always discouraged coming to me for help. I went to high school. I did my part. I don't feel I should have to do anybody else's work, too. [laughter] (Parent 10)

On the other hand, one high involvement parent asks to see all the work that the child has each day:

I'm involved in all of the at-home stuff to a fault, in terms of making sure that she knows what she's supposed to do. I want to know up front, "What projects do you have, and how long do you have to do them? What's your homework? Let me see your homework." (Parent 8)

Three parents said that they don't know enough content of the homework to help their children with it. As one parent expressed, "sometimes I try to help [my daughter] out. But it's homework that I myself don't understand" (Parent 20). Finally, almost all parents discussed providing home support in the form of materials and supplies, both for academics and for the arts. They help find, purchase, and/or make supplies, such as costumes, and provide resources in the home including computer access.

Students said that their parents help with homework even more than their parents reported helping with homework. Half of the students said that their parents help them with homework. An additional eight students said that their parents ask them about their homework, but do not usually help with it. Students appreciate the help that they receive with their work:

She always asks me if I've done my homework. And if I need help on something, we talk about it. And I remember when I had this big Humanities debate, and I had a certain subject I had to talk about, I actually brought it to her. And we had a really, really big discussion on it. It was fun. (Student H)

When I need help on something, she knows – such as typing papers and all, or formatting, or which type of information to use, I can ask her for help and I know that she'll understand what she's doing and it comes out all right. I know I can always come to her when I need help. (Student L)

### **Strategies Result in Parents Feeling Well-Informed and Welcomed**

Parents in general want to be involved as much as possible at the school in order to know what is going on with their children. They expressed interest in attending as many events as possible, taking into account job and family responsibilities. Parents are comfortable going into the school and feel known at BAA, which was not always the case at other schools. Several parents said BAA is accessible and provides many ways to be involved. Parents' involvement at the school helps staff to know parents and work together to address concerns.

I get the support on the other end from the teachers and from both principals to encourage him in the same manner that I am. So, it's the unity that I like about it. That I can call [the family coordinator], or I can call

the principal, or I can drop in. Even some teachers were just encouraging me, “Stop in. Whatever we have to do.”...I’m not hearing it second hand...You’re not in the classroom, but it’s like being there because you know what’s going on. (Parent 7)

Overall, parents were happy and satisfied that BAA is doing a good job. There were no significant differences in the responses of parents in both groups in terms of satisfaction with the school.

Every parent talked about his/her communication with teachers. At least five parents described teachers as open to working together on improving student performance, responsive to a dialogue, and accessible by phone, e-mail, or in person. Parents also observed that teachers shared their assessments of student performance directly with the students, not just with parents. Adjectives and phrases used to characterize teachers and communication styles included: open, friendly, communicate with students in an age-appropriate way, understanding, honest, dedicated, hard-working, focused, and empathic with teens.

Sometimes the life of a young person is not so easy. And I see that the teachers...understand what they go through in life. (Parent 20)

...the teachers actually know who we are, and they contact us, and they even have a list and e-mails. I mean, there’s nothing we don’t have. We have their home numbers....We have cell phone numbers....You know, they’re open to speak to us when we need to speak to them. And they’re really honest..., “As far as we’re concerned, your son isn’t doing what he’s supposed to be doing.” And they’re not going to say it behind his back; they will say it to their face. (Parent 15)

Students also talked about their parents communicating with teachers, with the most common ways being over e-mail, over the phone, and in person at the school. Students talked about their parents feeling comfortable with teachers and even building relationships with them.

Yes. Some teachers they talk on the phone to. Some teachers they have a [better] relationship than others. Some teachers, my Spanish teacher, basically the only time they really talk to her is if my grades are not good, just because they don’t have a good relationship with her. But I think my advisor...they talk to him a lot. I know that they do. I think he appreciates how much they advocate for me....

Q: So they talk once a week?

A: Yeah, maybe more. (Student M)

In terms of initiating communication, seven children of medium involvement parents and only one child of a high involvement parent said that teachers usually initiate teacher-parent communication.

The teachers are usually very, on the most part, they seem to be very quick to call home. They don't hesitate to if they need to. So usually it's the school that approaches my parents, as opposed to my parents approaching the school for any information. (Student D)

Students appreciate that teachers call them directly with reminders of things such as when projects are due, as stated by three children of medium involvement parents. "A lot of the times, they just call because of other concerns, or...to bring up something about the assignment. So they seem to be pretty involved in the student's life outside of school" (Student D).

In addition to parent-teacher communication, two children of high involvement parents talked about liking the way that the school keeps their parents informed because it keeps the burden off students to remember all of the events and student projects.

If I forget, like if I'm too overwhelmed with work, and I'm too busy trying to get everything together, then it would probably be at the last minute. But my mother, they send notices home...she'll keep reminding me, "Do you need anything?" (Student A)

Overall, a frequently cited reason for parents liking BAA is the fact that their child likes the school. Three of 11 parents in the high involvement group and 5 of 12 parents in the medium involvement group mentioned this factor. For some students, this was not always the case. As one parent described, "[My child] actually looks forward to going to school where before it was really a struggle every day" (Parent 4).

Our interviews revealed very few concerns about BAA. Though there were no areas of common concern across the parents, particular issues mentioned include: budget cuts in Boston and how those would affect the quality and sustainability of BAA; academic challenge for students who come to the school well prepared; structure of the arts major; and rigidity of some rules and requirements. Even those who expressed concerns with the school are still happy with it overall and will work to supplement opportunities outside of school.

## **Discussion**

### **Providing a Successful Model for High School Parent Involvement**

While there can be many barriers to creating a successful school-based parent involvement program in urban schools, previous studies have demonstrated that parents from diverse backgrounds are involved at higher rates when schools reach out and provide many ways for them to be involved (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Mapp, 2003; Sanders, et al., 1999). BAA provides a model of successful

parent involvement at the high school level. According to parent attendance levels at school events and parent and student interview responses, BAA has been effective in engaging a diverse range of parents in the school community.

This paper distinguishes between two types of parent dispositions toward school involvement: high and medium. By the time their children reach high school, parents have had many years of prior school experiences. These experiences, combined with daily obligations, impact a parent's disposition toward involvement in the school community and in their children's education at home. BAA finds ways to reach out to both high and medium involvement parents and provide them with information and access to the school.

Our data show that at BAA, diverse parents' needs are met. Parents have opportunities to contribute to the overall school community and to support their children. Even parents who have a difficult time attending events due to work and family obligations say they are well informed about the school. Many of these parents state that they are better informed and have better communication with BAA than with their children's previous schools (unpublished data).

Students and parents speak to the success of the program. Students appreciate their parents being involved, the school facilitating involvement, and their parents tapping in at levels that are okay with them. Most of the students that we interviewed were happy with their parents' level of involvement in school-based activities and at home. The few exceptions were generally at the extremes of the spectrum – parents that were always at the school or parents who attended very few events and did not give much educational support at home.

### **What Factors Contribute to BAA's Success in Engaging Parents?**

BAA is successful at engaging families in their children's education because the school is vision-driven, autonomous, and small in size. A central element in BAA's success is a school vision that focuses on the value of a parent-teacher-student team. The leadership believes that parent communication and support are vital to student success. From the school's beginning, BAA's leadership has set high expectations for parent involvement, and, along with other staff members, established a framework to facilitate it. Anticipating that BAA families would come from diverse backgrounds, the leadership designed a program to encourage participation by parents who may not have been active in their previous school communities. These opportunities reach parents who have varying dispositions towards school; all contributions are valued.

The freedom to hire staff who are willing to work on a team with students and parents and who take responsibility for engaging parents is crucial to the strategy. BAA uses its freedom over budget, staffing, and professional development to hire, train, and support staff in effectively working with students and

parents from diverse backgrounds (Feldman, Tung, & Ouimette, 2004). BAA has created a full-time Family Coordinator position to facilitate regular communication with parents. The school also hires teachers, administrators, and other personnel from diverse backgrounds who are committed to maintaining a welcoming climate.

The school's smallness enables the personalization necessary to reach parents of varying dispositions and cultures. Staff know students well, are able to address their individual learning needs, and learn how best to inform and engage their parents. This level of understanding contributes to a school culture that is trusting, receptive, and respectful to all parents. Staff work diligently to understand parents' points of view and make accommodations so that potential barriers, such as not speaking English or working long hours, will not hinder parent involvement at BAA. For parents who have often been under-represented and uncomfortable in schools, developing this relationship is a vital step to encouraging family involvement.

### **How Can Other Schools Adapt BAA's Program for Their Contexts?**

While BAA's Pilot status provides unique advantages for implementing a parent engagement strategy, other schools may learn from the model, even if they do not have autonomy or are not small. Key elements from the BAA model that other schools may adopt include:

- Developing a coherent school vision that focuses on including families of varying dispositions as part of the team;
- Supporting staff commitment to knowing students well and regularly communicating with parents;
- Creating multiple, diverse opportunities for parent involvement and support for parents to avail themselves of these opportunities; and
- Allocating staffing resources toward facilitating parent communication and involvement.

If schools are willing to reach out to parents who have a variety of dispositions toward involvement and think about parents as valuable teammates, many of BAA's strategies may prove to be useful in helping them to create stronger school communities.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>See <http://boston.k12.ma.us/schools/assign.asp> for more information.

<sup>2</sup>Racial and lunch status demographics are listed by student, rather than by parent. This is more accurate because some families have more than one child in the school and parents and their children may identify with different racial groups.

<sup>3</sup>We do not have the demographic breakdowns for the high and medium involvement groups school-wide; therefore it is difficult to ascertain whether the demographics of the sample groups are the same as the actual demographics of the groups.

## References

- Boston Arts Academy. (2002). *Boston Arts Academy year end report*. Boston: Author.
- Boston Arts Academy. (2003). *Boston Arts Academy year end report*. Boston: Author.
- Boston Public Schools. (2000). *Family and community engagement task force report to the Boston School Committee*. Retrieved January 29, 2004 from the Boston Public Schools Web site: [http://boston.k12.ma.us/info/task\\_force.asp](http://boston.k12.ma.us/info/task_force.asp)
- Center for Collaborative Education. (2001). *How Boston Pilot Schools use freedom over budget, staffing, and scheduling to meet student needs*. Boston: Author.
- Center for Collaborative Education. (2003). *How are the Boston Pilot Schools faring? Student demographics, engagement, and performance 1997-2002*. Boston: Author.
- Chavkin, N. F., & Williams, D. L., Jr. (1993). Minority parents and the elementary school: Attitudes and practices. In N. F. Chavkin (Ed.), *Families and schools in a pluralistic society* (pp. 73-83). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Dauber, S. L., & Epstein, J. L. (1993). Parents' attitudes and practices of involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools. In N. F. Chavkin (Ed.), *Families and schools in a pluralistic society* (pp. 53-71). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Doyle, M. C., & Feldman, J. (2006). Student voice and school choice in the Boston pilot high schools. *Educational Policy*, 20(2), 367-398.
- Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), 701-712.
- Feldman, J., Tung, R. M., and Ouimette, M. Y. (2004, April). *A common intent to understand: How successful urban schools promote conversations about race and culture*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.
- Fuller, M. L., & Olsen, G. (1998). *Home-school relations: Working successfully with parents and families*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Griffith, J. (1998). The relation of school structure and social environment to parent involvement in elementary schools. *The Elementary School Journal*, 99(1), 53-80.
- Henderson, A. T., & Berla, N. (1994). *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education.
- Ho, S. C., & Willms, J. D. (1996). Effects of parental involvement on eighth-grade achievement. *Sociology of Education*, 69(2), 126-141.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & O'Connor, K. J. (2002, April). *Parental involvement in children's education: Exploring the structure and functions of parental role construction*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Johnson, D. (1997). Putting the cart before the horse: Parent involvement in the improving America's Schools Act. *California Law Review*, 85(6), 1757-1801.
- Lareau, A. (1987). Social class differences in family-school relationships: The importance of cultural capital. *Sociology of Education*, 60(2), 73-85.
- Mapp, K. L. (2003). Having their say: Parents describe how and why they are involved in their children's education. *School Community Journal*, 13(1), 35-64.
- Moles, O. C. (1993). Collaboration between schools and disadvantaged parents: Obstacles and openings. In N. F. Chavkin (Ed.), *Families and schools in a pluralistic society* (pp. 21-49). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Moore, D. R. (1992). The case for parent and community involvement. In G. A. Hess, Jr. (Ed.), *Empowering teachers and parents: School restructuring through the eyes of anthropologists* (pp. 131-155). Westport, CT & London: Bergin & Garvey.
- NCES (National Center for Education Statistics). (1998, April). *Factors associated with fathers'*

- and mothers' involvement in their children's schools.* (Issue Brief 98-122). Retrieved April 7, 2003 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98122.pdf>
- Ouimette, M., Feldman, J., & Tung, R. (2002). *Parent involvement in the Boston Pilot Schools: Lessons from a unique urban network.* Paper presented at the meeting of the New England Educational Research Organization, Northampton, MA.
- Sanders, M. G., Epstein, J. L., & Connors-Tadros, L. (1999). *Family partnerships with high schools: The parents' perspective.* (Report No. 32). Retrieved August 7, 2003 from Johns Hopkins University & Howard University, Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk Web site: <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/techReports/Report32.pdf>
- Swap, S. M. (1993). *Developing home-school partnerships: From concepts to practice.* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Terrell, S. R. (2002, April). *Parents speak about parent involvement.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Vaden-Kiernan, N., & Chandler, K. (1996). *Parents' reports of school practices to involve families.* Retrieved April 7, 2003 from the National Center for Education Statistics Web site: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/97327.pdf>

Monique Ouimette is a research associate at the Center for Collaborative Education in Boston. Her research interests include family and community engagement in schools, leadership development, civic education, and urban school reform. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Monique Ouimette, Research Associate, Center for Collaborative Education, 1135 Tremont Street, Suite 490, Boston, MA, 02120, or e-mail [mouimette@ccebos.org](mailto:mouimette@ccebos.org).

Rosann Tung is research director at the Center for Collaborative Education, Boston. She is a former research molecular biologist whose research includes studies of standards-based curriculum implementation, professional learning communities, and small autonomous urban schools in New England.

Jay Feldman is the director of research at the Coalition of Essential Schools, Oakland, California. His research interests include the educative functions of play and age-mixing, school change, and teacher and student understandings of race and diversity.

#### Author's Note

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in San Diego.

The authors would like to note that the Center for Collaborative Education convenes the Boston Pilot Schools Network.

A copy of "Multiple Entry Points" describing Boston Arts Academy's multi-pronged approach to family involvement is available from the authors. It further describes the Parent/Family Events, Membership Opportunities in Parent Groups, and Communication Structures to Keep Parents Informed.