

# Lessons Learned From a Neighborhood-Based Collaboration to Increase Parent Engagement

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## Abstract

In general, youth whose parents are involved in their schooling experience better academic outcomes. Yet some parents, especially those with few resources in low-income urban communities, face barriers to becoming engaged in school and community. This report from the field describes the “Neighboring Project Parent Empowerment and Volunteer Readiness Program” (Neighboring Project), which was a collaborative effort between a Project GRAD site and the local public housing authority. The Neighboring Project took engagement efforts to the neighborhoods of lower-income, urban parents. The primary aim was to help parents increase their engagement in their children’s schooling and neighborhoods by providing them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to do so. To date, the Neighboring Project has been conducted at three housing sites. This paper describes the development of the Neighboring Project, including recruitment efforts and its format and curriculum. Findings from focus groups and anecdotal information reveal the Neighboring Project had lasting impact on participants and led to increased involvement in school and neighborhood. Implications for future practice and research are discussed, including the need for active outreach to parents focused on increasing their skills, knowledge, and sense of self-efficacy, as well as tapping their innate strengths and resources.

**Key Words:** community programs, parents, parental engagement, involvement, schools, urban, low-income, outreach, collaboration, self-efficacy, public housing authority, Project GRAD, neighborhood

## Introduction

A number of studies have documented that there is a positive relationship between parent involvement in their children's schooling and youth academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005, 2007; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). Findings from a study by Barnard (2004) suggest that parent involvement in children's early schooling can have lasting effects by decreasing rates of dropping out in high school and increasing the rates of school completion. Furthermore, the evidence to date suggests that efforts by schools to increase parental involvement can be successful (Jeynes, 2005, 2007, 2013; Klimes-Dougan, Lopez, Nelson, & Adelman, 1992; McDonald et al., 2006; Seitsinger, Felner, Brand, & Burns, 2008). However, many parents experience barriers to becoming involved in their children's schooling (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Klimes-Dougan et al., 1992; Mannan & Blackwell, 1992). These barriers include the lack of material resources (e.g., childcare, transportation), the time crunch experienced by many today, and parents feeling intimidated or unprepared to talk with teachers and school administrators or to help their children with schoolwork at home. Such barriers may be especially pronounced among low-income parents who must daily cope with environmental stressors.

Although low-income parents may experience barriers to participation, they also have strengths and resources that may be left untapped, perhaps due to the unwitting and unintended adoption of a "deficit approach" by school and other professionals toward lower-income parents (Lawson, 2003; Lightfoot, 2004). Moreover, the communities and neighborhoods within which parents and schools exist can either reinforce or impede parental involvement in youth schooling, including parents' attitudes toward schools and school professionals' attitudes toward parents (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Lawson (2003) interviewed parents and teachers in a low-income and ethnically diverse urban neighborhood about their understanding of parent involvement. Parents reported a community-focused perception of parent involvement and wanted schools to offer more services to enhance the community, whereas teacher perceptions of parent involvement were more traditional. Parents thought "the school should become a hub for community programs and supports" that could increase parent and family skills and capabilities (Lawson, 2003, p. 102).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework would suggest that partnerships between families and schools occur in the larger context of the neighborhoods in which they are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, attention to neighborhood factors is important to consider in efforts to increase the engagement of lower-income parents in their children's schooling. The neighborhood in which parents live can affect the supports available to them. How long one

has lived in a neighborhood is correlated with one's sense of attachment and belongingness to that community, as well as social support ties in the neighborhood (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Sampson, 1988; Turney & Harknett, 2010). Residential stability can facilitate a sense of community and provide ties to others that parents and families can turn to for instrumental support. Increased mobility can lead to a reduction of family ties and increased social isolation among families (Boisjoly, Duncan, & Hofferth, 1995). Moreover, geographic mobility, especially at an early age, can be a risk factor for poor academic achievement (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckertling, 1989).

Although not all parent involvement efforts need to take place in the school setting, there remains a gap in the literature on community-based efforts to increase parent engagement. This paper addresses that gap by describing the development and implementation of a neighborhood-based collaboration designed to increase parent engagement in schools and communities. The "Neighboring Project Parent Empowerment and Volunteer Readiness Program" (Neighboring Project) is a coordinated effort between a Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams) site and the local public housing authority in one city of a southeastern state. The sites for the Neighboring Project meetings were the neighborhoods in which the parents lived. Project GRAD staff realized that some parents weren't engaged in the schools, so they decided to begin engagement efforts in parents' neighborhoods. The purpose of this neighborhood-based program was to increase parent preparedness to participate in the school and neighborhood and to become more involved in their children's schooling.

In this article, the Neighboring Project is described, and information obtained from focus groups with participants about its benefits is provided. The focus groups were conducted at the end of each series of Neighboring Project meetings. Their purpose was to learn participants' perceptions of the Neighboring Project, including the benefits, if any, they realized from participation, as well as what they liked about the Neighboring Project and their suggestions for what might make the Neighboring Project more beneficial or appealing. In the first section, the two collaborating agencies—Project GRAD and the local housing authority—are briefly described. The aims of the Neighboring Project and the demographics of the participants are provided, as well as a description of the planning and recruiting efforts. The curriculum is briefly described, and an example of an agenda for one meeting is provided. The second section provides findings from the focus groups about how the Neighboring Project was perceived by participants and whether and how it increased parents' knowledge and skills in relation to school and neighborhood involvement. Anecdotal

information also illustrates its impact on several of the participants. Next, a follow-up and transition program, the “Neighboring Project Moving Forward” is described. Finally, the implications of these efforts for future practice and research are discussed.

## **The Neighboring Project**

The Neighboring Project is a coordinated effort between one Project GRAD site and the local housing authority. The primary purpose of Project GRAD is to improve academic success, increase graduation rates, and increase college access and a college-going culture among students in schools located in lower-income, urban communities. Project GRAD serves students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade and provides extended support services for postsecondary education for students that have received a scholarship through the program. Project GRAD reaches out to students, their families, and their teachers by providing academic support, social services, and classroom management. It also aims to increase parents’ engagement in their children’s education. Project GRAD in this city supports 14 schools, and all of the schools have students residing in housing authority developments. At the onset of Project GRAD 10 years ago, the 14 schools had the lowest graduation rates in the state.

The housing authority administers the city’s public housing and rental assistance programs. The Community Service and Self-Sufficiency Requirement (CSSR) is a HUD requirement that adult residents of public housing contribute eight community service hours per month or engage in an economic self-sufficiency program for eight hours each month. Employed residents are exempt from this requirement, and other exemptions exist as well (e.g., 62 years of age or older, disability). Residents of public housing who do not adhere to the CSSR requirement are at risk of not having their lease renewed.

Both of the collaborating agencies work directly with families who are underresourced; their common client group and similarity of agency mission and values formed a base to come together and develop the Neighboring Project. The planning process began with the notion that strong neighborhoods are a primary driving force in supporting and encouraging strong families and productive schools.

The primary purposes of the Neighboring Project were to: (1) increase engagement between school and home to strengthen children’s learning experiences; (2) build opportunities for school volunteering; and (3) increase knowledge about how to connect with school and neighborhood resources. The Family and Community Engagement Coordinator for Project GRAD initiated the Neighboring Project and the subsequent collaboration with the

housing authority. As noted, many of the families of students enrolled in Project GRAD schools live in public housing; hence, it was logical for the two entities to cooperate together in bringing this project to the neighborhoods where the families live. Parents were able to count their attendance at the Neighboring Project meetings as hours to meet the CSSR requirement. The Neighboring Project planners also wanted to help parents increase their awareness of volunteer opportunities in the schools and elsewhere in the neighborhood. The Neighboring Project was developed and conducted within the purview and roles of the Family and Community Engagement Coordinator and housing authority staff; additional staff or funding were not required. However, community support was sought for contributions of gift cards and materials for the Neighboring Store, which is discussed below under Curriculum.

To date, the Neighboring Project has been held at three housing sites. A different public housing site was chosen each year, and each Neighboring Project set of meetings was conducted once at each of the sites. The first set of Neighboring Project meetings was held during the 2008–2009 school year; the second Neighboring Project was held in the spring semester of 2010; and the third Neighboring Project was held in the spring semester of 2011. During the 2008–2009 school year, 30 meetings were held, and 18 and 16 meetings were held in the spring semester of 2010 and 2011, respectively. The reduction in the duration was in part due to the time intensity and the fact that staff at both agencies also had other job responsibilities. At the outset of the Neighboring Project at their site, most participants were behind in their CSSR an average of 40 to 60 hours. Across the three Neighboring Project sites, there were 71 participants who attended at least once. Of these 71, 93% ( $n = 66$ ) were female and 83% ( $n = 59$ ) were single. All of the participants were of low income. During the 2008–2009 year, 17 of the participants were African American and four were Caucasian. In 2010, 19 were Caucasian, and 16 were African American. During the spring of 2011, 12 were African American and three were Caucasian. Program completion ranged from 40% to 52% across the three sites, with an overall completion rate of 45%; completion was defined as attending over half of the sessions.

### **Planning and Recruiting**

Input was sought from the residents of the neighborhoods in which the project was to be implemented. Residents were invited for a round table discussion held in their neighborhood (in a community room at the public housing site) to ascertain the challenges to living in as well as the opportunities available within their neighborhoods. Input was sought on topics to be covered, as well as the best days and times to conduct the meetings. We thought it crucial to

help residents take ownership of the program and to assist in the recruitment of other residents. After obtaining initial “buy-in” from those who attended the initial planning meetings, the project was introduced to the neighborhood. Efforts were made to target those who were at risk of losing their housing because they had not completed the CSSR; however, program participation was open to any resident with children enrolled in school. Several strategies were used to communicate with the residents. These included going door to door to talk with residents and leaving information about the project, mailing letters to the residents, sending notes from school home with children or grandchildren, phone contacts, and posters in the neighborhood. At the first site, a colorful tent with streamers and balloons was set up in the housing complex prior to the start of the school year. Information about the Neighboring Project was available, and residents who indicated an interest were asked to provide their names and contact information. Some school supplies were provided at no cost to those who stopped by, and refreshments were available.

After this initial planning and recruitment phase, the primary recruitment effort was knocking door to door by Project GRAD and housing authority staff to personally invite residents to the Neighboring Project meetings. On the day prior to the meetings, the staff and volunteer residents canvassed the neighborhood, knocking on the doors of residents who had participated or indicated an interest in doing so. Written reminders were left in the doors of residents who were not home. Another source of recruitment of new members was found in the residents who attended and found benefit; they would pass the word to neighbors, friends, or relatives about the project.

In addition to gaining input from residents, it was also important to inform the school principals and have them on board with the project. Principals were informed of the purpose and implementation of the Neighboring Project, and they, in turn, supported the effort in several ways. Principals allotted time for their Project GRAD campus manager to attend each Neighboring Project session, and they also agreed to send weekly reminders about the meetings home with students. Principals invited participants to the school for a day, providing a tour of the school and speaking with participants about volunteering, as well as providing information about current school activities and answering participant questions. Project GRAD staff also worked with teachers and principals in developing the Neighboring Project meetings.

Formal childcare was not provided due to lack of resources. The fact that meetings were held during school hours reduced to some extent the need for childcare; still, some participants had infants or toddlers. They were not discouraged from bringing their children with them—at any one meeting there were never more than two or three children in need of care. The sites had

children's books and toys available, and facilitators also would bring items appropriate for the children in attendance. There were always at least two staff in attendance at the meetings, so if need be, a staff member was available to assist as needed with childcare, such as holding an infant or redirecting a toddler.

### Curriculum

The curriculum was developed by the Family and Community Engagement Coordinator and was designed to address the needs of the participants based on the prior round table discussions and input from school and agency staff. The curriculum is divided into three units: (1) building the community; (2) building self-esteem; and (3) building engagement and volunteerism. Examples of some topics covered include how to facilitate a learning environment at home, appropriate dress for a job interview, how to advocate for your child, connecting math between school and home, how to clean a cluttered house, what to do if your child is bullied, setting goals, and activities and discussion related to self-worth and values. Each unit has approximately six 2-hour sessions. Sessions were primarily facilitated by the Family and Community Engagement Coordinator, but guest speakers were also invited. In addition, participants were encouraged to attend various school and community activities, and transportation was provided to some of these. A Neighboring Pledge was developed, and each participant was asked to sign the pledge. The pledge focuses on the parents (or grandparent or other adult who is the child's caretaker) making a commitment to help their children achieve their goals.

Meetings were scheduled weekly throughout the school year at the first site and weekly for one semester at the other two sites. Meetings were held in a community room at the housing site within walking distance for all residents. The meetings were structured in a manner that encouraged participant involvement. To this end, the participants and facilitator sat in a circle, which more easily allows for open dialogue and relationship building. Hands-on activities were a part of each meeting. Each meeting concluded with a segment called "Fair Cup," during which each participant's name was placed on a popsicle stick, the stick was placed in a cup, and names were pulled randomly, with that person asked to provide feedback about the session. (Note: The "Fair Cup" is a Project GRAD School Climate Component practiced in the public school classroom at Project GRAD sites.) The aim of active involvement by the participants was to build ownership of the program and to build the skills to continue to be involved in school and neighborhood after the end of the program. In each session, it was emphasized to the participants that they are key stakeholders in making a difference in their neighborhood, school, and home. Figure 1 provides an example of one of the lessons from the unit on building



the community (more information on the curriculum can be obtained from the first author upon request).

Participants are awarded for participation throughout the sessions with points to be used in the Neighboring Store or with small giveaways. The Neighboring Store is stocked primarily with household cleaning supplies, paper products, and personal hygiene items. The items are set up at various times in the program (minimum twice a school semester). Participants use the points to cash in on the items. The focus of the Neighboring Store is to provide a resource for families and an incentive to participate in the program.

### **Agenda**

Purpose: To provide practical strategies and steps to enhance community and build connections between school and family.

#### **Unit: Building the Community**

#### **Lesson: Strengthening Community Connection**

##### **I. Welcome/Introductions/Making the Pledge**

Outline of the session is covered. Members introduce themselves. First time participants of the Neighboring Project are recognized. At the end of the session, new participants review the Do You Believe segment and sign the Neighboring Pledge.

##### **II. Putting the Pieces Together...Charting the Route to Community, School, & Family Relations**

1<sup>st</sup> Group Exercise: How would you define a Neighborhood or Community?

- The participants are divided into small groups (various methods are used to divide participants (i.e., count off by numbers, chairs have various pictures and they have to find similar and/or differences, etc.)
- Each group is provided a large flip chart sheet, tape, and markers.
- On one table in the room are various cut outs of buildings (churches, schools, houses, apartments, stores, libraries, etc.)
- Each group defines a neighborhood by selecting the cut outs and arranging them on the large flip chart sheet.
- At the end of the time, each group reports on their community design; the flip charts are posted around the wall and remain up to the end of the 6-week Unit. The formal and social definition of neighborhood is reviewed, but the focus is to compare and identify the core areas that everyone placed in their design of the community. The objective is that every neighborhood may not look the same, but there are some essentials that support families; these are divided between school, home, community, relationships.

2<sup>nd</sup> Group Exercise: Welcome to the Dream Factory (The ProjectGRAD Vision Statement leads into the next activity.)

*Figure 1 continued next page*



<p><u>Vision Statement</u></p> <p>We see a world of hope, where there are no limits on potential, the greatness in every child is inspired and celebrated, and dreams are realized through opportunities and education.</p> <p>Open Discussion (1<sup>st</sup> Part): Charting Your Route...Dream Factory in Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open Discussion – What is in your neighborhood or community?</li> </ul> <p>Group Exercise or Open Discussion (Based on session time): What are the Road Blocks?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>3 questions are discussed</u> (The feedback from the questions below are listed on chart paper and posted on the walls.) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Why are parents often hesitant to establish partnerships with members of the community/school?</li> <li>2. What are the weaknesses you see in your community?</li> <li>3. What are the strengths that you see in your community?</li> </ol> <p>The key principle in this exercise is to begin to focus on the strengths within their own community, how they make positive impacts in their community, and get beyond the barriers in connecting school, community, and family.</p> </li> </ul> <p>III. Fair Cup...Making the Connection (see text for an explanation of the Fair Cup)</p> <p>IV. Remarks/Closing/Announcements</p>
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Figure 1. An Example of a Lesson From the Unit “Building the Community”

## Focus Groups

Focus groups were held at each of the three sites to gather participants’ perceptions of and satisfaction with the Neighboring Project and to ascertain whether and how it had impacted their involvement in their children’s education and in their neighborhoods. The focus groups were facilitated by a faculty member from the local university who had not attended the meetings but was aware of the project and had attended the early information meetings. At two of the focus groups, a second facilitator was available. The second facilitator was a doctoral candidate in Educational Psychology and Research who had been involved with Project GRAD. The focus group questions and probes focused on how the participants became involved with and the benefits they received from the Neighboring Project, as well as their suggestions for what could be done differently. The focus groups were open to all participants of the Neighboring Project. Focus group participants were recruited by extending an invitation at several of the Neighboring Project meetings held prior to the scheduled date for the focus group. Focus groups were held at the same locations where the Neighboring Project meetings had been conducted. Twenty-two participated in the focus groups; nine at the first site (2008–2009 school year), seven at the second site (Spring 2010), and six at the third site (Spring 2011). Of the nine focus group participants at the first site, eight were female, and seven were African American. At the second site, all seven were female, and two were African

American. Of the six at the third site, all six were African American, and five were female.

Ideally, the focus groups would have been taped and transcribed, but resources did not permit this. There were two facilitators at two of the focus groups. The primary facilitator took the lead in asking the prepared questions, whereas the second facilitator was primarily responsible for taking notes. These roles were not rigid in that the primary facilitator also took notes, and the second facilitator asked follow-up questions. Immediately after the focus groups each facilitator looked at her notes and indicated the primary themes that emerged in the answers and discussion of each question. They then met to compare and discuss these. There was agreement between the facilitators on the primary themes that emerged in the answers to each question. This was likely due to the fact that the facilitators met right after the focus groups, as well as the straightforward nature of the questions and the high uniformity among the participants in their perceptions of the Neighboring Project. For the focus group with only one facilitator, the facilitator took notes during the group and also wrote key phrases that would jog her memory when she reviewed her notes after the group. Immediately after the focus group, the facilitator expanded upon the notes in more detail; this was done prior to leaving the site so what the participants said was still fresh. Prior to ending each focus group, the facilitator(s) summarized back to participants the main points that had been discussed and asked for clarification, as well as providing a final opportunity to bring up other issues or concerns. These validity checks were important to ensure the facilitator(s) accurately understood and interpreted the participants' responses and discussion and were especially important given that the sessions were not audiorecorded.

## Findings

The findings from the focus groups are presented by the primary questions asked during the focus groups: (1) how participants initially became involved and how they sustained involvement; (2) benefits from participating; and (3) suggestions for improvement or what they did not like about the Neighboring Project.

### *Involvement*

Two paths to involvement emerged across all three groups. One was the door-to-door canvassing noted above. This was especially important in the early stages. One participant noted that early on in the recruitment, a small gift was left with a note "you're awesome," and how meaningful that was to her

and how it motivated her to attend. The second way that participants initially became involved was being invited by a neighbor, friend, or family member.

Some participants noted ambivalence about first attending. For example, one stated she was “dragged” by a friend, and several others stated they initially began only as a way to earn CSSR hours. (Interestingly, none of the participants noted as a benefit earning CSSR hours.) However, their participation evolved into enjoying it and wanting to attend. Participants continued their involvement because the meetings were helpful, they developed friendships, and they learned new skills and information. Although questions were not specifically asked about the Neighboring Project facilitators, it became clear that the attitude of the staff was pivotal to the success of the Neighboring Project. Participants noted the staff were “personable and professional,” “friendly,” “genuinely cared” about them, and were not there “just because it was their job.”

### *Benefits*

Participants were queried about the benefits from participating, with probes built in to learn about their involvement in Project GRAD and school activities, helping children at home with school work and school-related issues, and involvement with and awareness of neighborhood resources. School-related benefits included meeting the Project GRAD staff and teachers at their children’s school. Several participants indicated they had not known about Project GRAD prior to the Neighboring Project. They learned the names of staff at their children’s school and “in what order” to contact them (e.g., start with the teacher prior to going to the principal). Participants said they gained the self-esteem and skills to initiate conversations with their children’s teachers. As an example of this, a participant told of her child complaining that her teacher didn’t like her and that her child was upset because the teacher showed one of her papers to the class. The parent was encouraged by the project facilitators to talk with the child’s teacher. She did so and was able to resolve the situation. Initiating discussion with the teacher was a new behavior for her.

Participants provided examples of some of the school-related activities they had participated in as a result of the Neighboring Project. These included attendance at the Project GRAD Conference and Celebration dinner, helping to judge classroom doors at the school (teachers decorated their doors with information about the college they attended/college relevant material), volunteering in the classroom, and helping at the school carnival. One participant stated she had not known there were so many ways to become involved at school. Another reported she helped with her child’s field day and had not previously volunteered for this type of activity. Participants noted the Neighboring Project gave them the confidence to become more involved and made them feel like they had something to contribute.

The Neighboring Project also provided information that helped parents help their children at home. A participant stated she now set a specific time for homework in the evening, and others chimed in that they now realized the importance of a daily routine for their children. Participants also indicated they began to encourage their children to stay in school and emphasized the importance of school. An immigrant parent noted she had not realized college was competitive and that it had to be paid for. She learned her children needed to start early preparing for college.

Participants also increased their involvement in neighborhood activities. At two of the three sites the participants told of starting and maintaining a residents' association. (At each site 5 of the participants from the Neighboring Project are standing officers for the residents' association, which focuses on building connection and communication between residents and housing management. It is recognized as an avenue to assist in coordinating resources and identifying needs for the housing neighborhood.) At one of these sites the participants also began a Neighborhood Watch, noting how they now look out for each other and communicate with one another more. This same group talked about how coming together as a group enabled them to learn about one another, join forces, and "get things done."

Participants learned about a number of neighborhood resources as they took field trips to some of them, as well as appropriate behavior in seeking jobs and volunteer opportunities. Specifically, a participant talked about the Literacy Imperative, which provides free books to children and offers free drawing lessons. She was not aware of this resource prior to the Neighboring Project. Another participant stated she learned how to apply for a job and gave the example that she stopped taking her children with her to job interviews. In addition to learning about volunteer opportunities, they learned what they needed to do to volunteer (e.g., how to make the contact, how to dress and present themselves).

An unanticipated but very real benefit was the sense of community built and the development of new friendships. Across groups, participants stated they met neighbors they had not known previously. One described the Neighboring Project group as first being friends, and now they are a "family." One participant summed up her assessment by saying, "it's the best thing that ever happened to me."

### *Suggestions*

Participants had a difficult time stating their least favorite thing or offering suggestions for improvement. Uniformly, participants wanted the Neighboring Project to continue or to offer periodic follow-up sessions. One group suggested that information for what parents of seniors should expect in terms of

graduation fees could be provided. Another group suggested workshops to help parents “parent” and talked of increased behavioral problems among youth. Topics suggested included domestic violence, teen dating violence, drug/alcohol use among youth, and gangs. They said it was sometimes hard to talk to a professional and that information/workshops provided in their own neighborhood would be one way to help parents.

### **Anecdotal Evidence**

In addition to the focus groups, staff became aware of how participants were impacted by the Neighboring Project. One example is especially poignant. A participant called the Family and Community Engagement Coordinator two years after she completed the Neighboring Project to report that her granddaughter was graduating from high school. This was her first grandchild to graduate from high school. She called to say thank you, stating that if it wasn’t for the program, she would not have known how to get the help her granddaughter needed or had the confidence to seek out resources. She was still practicing what she had learned and believed her participation in the Neighboring Project was the reason her granddaughter was graduating. Another illustration of how the project exposed some of the participants to new experiences is when, at a celebration lunch, a mother stated, “I’ve always wondered what it’s like to eat out with other women.” This statement points out how the experiences of some low-resource parents and families may differ significantly from those of the professionals with whom they interact.

Several who participated in the Neighboring Project attended Project GRAD’s annual parent conference without transportation assistance; this was a new behavior for these participants. A number of the participants teamed with Project GRAD and the housing authority staff to conduct a presentation to the housing authority’s Board of Commissioners. This presentation was also recorded and aired on the local community cable channel. As a result of feedback from participants, the Neighboring Project Moving Forward was established, and, as of this writing, has been implemented once. The next section briefly describes the Neighboring Project Moving Forward and includes additional anecdotes related to its impact.

### **Neighboring Project Moving Forward**

The Neighboring Project Moving Forward is a transitional and follow-up program to the Neighboring Project. Participants were selected from those who successfully completed the Neighboring Project at any of the three sites and expressed an interest in learning more about leadership skills. The objective of

the follow-up program was to build skills and provide tools to better equip participants to become more involved in their neighborhoods and schools. The Neighboring Project Moving Forward sessions were held in a separate location away from the housing sites, such as the housing authority board room and Project GRAD's training room. This allowed participants to be exposed to different meeting settings. Participants were responsible for securing their own transportation to the meeting site. This was to strengthen their sense of independence and self-efficacy and learn to problem-solve and begin to function as a leader. Information was provided on how to secure bus passes as well as the names of others in the area who were participating and might be available to car pool or come together. Participants were required to keep a journal of their experiences participating in the follow-up program and working with outside groups (e.g., attending residents' association meetings, PTA/PTO meetings, etc.). They were required to attend PTA and residents' association meetings.

Sessions were held monthly for two hours. During the sessions, the participants discussed and processed their experiences. Information was provided on what it means to be a parent leader, how to establish meeting agendas, identifying community resources to help support their meetings and how to establish collaboration with these, group dynamics and functioning, and how to develop a newsletter. Twelve residents participated in the Neighboring Project Moving Forward.

One of the participants who completed both programs is president of her residents' association and has completed and will be graduating from the year-long community action leadership program. Another participant asked to be on Project GRAD's parent board and introduced the guest speaker at the annual parent conference, attended by approximately 600 people. Another has become a regular volunteer in her child's school, was recognized by the school for her volunteer work, and was asked to speak at a community volunteer luncheon at her school.

## Discussion

In general, the participants were very positive about the Neighboring Project, voiced benefits from participating, and expressed disappointment that it had come to an end. Although the Neighboring Project was beneficial to those who completed the program, little is known about why those who attended some sessions did not attend consistently enough to complete the program. Resources did not exist to allow a follow-up with those who started but did not continue with the project. More information about the differences in characteristics and needs between those who attended and completed and those who

attended some sessions but did not complete would provide information that could lead to improvements and adaptations in the program. Attention will need to be paid to the balance between reaching out and wanting to learn more from parents and their right to not attend and not participate in the program. However, it should be noted that the attrition rate for the Neighboring Project is similar to other social service programs (Littell, Alexander, & Reynolds, 2001).

The lack of pre and post data on parents' involvement in their children's schooling (at home or school) and their neighborhood volunteer activities limits what is known about the program outcomes. A challenge to collecting more data from parents early on in the process is the ambivalence that some initially had about participating in the project; collection of data from parents or asking for an informed consent to contact the schools may only increase this ambivalence. One idea for the future is to enlist parents who have successfully completed the Neighboring Project as interviewers to help in data collection. Data were collected on the number of participants who maintained housing. This was an important outcome since many of the participants were behind in their CSSR and at risk of eviction, especially since research suggests that housing stability is important for building community and social support (Turney & Harknett, 2010). Of the 32 residents who successfully completed the Neighboring Project, all except three were able to maintain stable housing. Of the three who did not maintain their housing, one was evicted because she failed to meet the CSSR, one voluntarily admitted herself to drug and alcohol treatment, and one secured employment and no longer qualified for public housing. The participant who obtained employment informed staff that the Neighboring Project helped him to learn about resources for job hunting. Whereas 91% of those who completed the Neighboring Project were able to retain their housing, only 44% of those who attended at least once but did not complete the Neighboring Project retained their housing  $\chi^2 (1, n = 71) = 17.15, p = .001$ . Although this is encouraging, no causal links can be made between the Neighboring Project and maintaining housing.

Several lessons were learned from this project. First, efforts to increase school engagement and neighborhood involvement among lower income parents who experience personal and environmental stressors may increase their potential for success if the efforts also address the self-esteem and self-efficacy of the parents. The relationship building that occurred between the staff and participants helped participants realize they are capable of meeting goals and worthy to express their needs to teachers and other professionals. The Neighboring Project and Neighboring Project Moving Forward set reasonable expectations that participants could meet but did not set expectations so high as to set up



participants for failure. The “stepped” approach described here is one way to target increased participation among underresourced parents. It would have been unlikely that parents who participated in the Neighboring Project Moving Forward would have been motivated or had the self-confidence to do so without first participating and succeeding in the Neighboring Project.

Second, it is important to examine assumptions about why some parents may not “come to school” or become as engaged as professionals might like in their children’s schooling. Research has shown that parental self-efficacy is important to parent’s involvement in their children’s schooling, especially involvement in home activities related to school (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Over 15 years ago, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) stressed that interventions to increase parent involvement must address parental self-efficacy as well as how parents perceive their role in relation to their children’s education. Our experiences also suggest that parents’ lack of confidence and knowledge may result in a lack of participation in the school and neighborhood. Moreover, although the lack of resources among the parents included material goods, it was the lack of know-how and self-efficacy in how to assert themselves with school personnel or initiate problem-solving conversations, as well as not knowing of various volunteer opportunities in the schools, that seemed to contribute more to their lack of engagement in the schools. In short, it is not that parents do not care, but that they may not possess the knowledge and skills of how to become involved in their children’s schooling.

Third, it may not be enough to invite parents to school events or encourage their participation through letters and newsletters; rather, active and ongoing outreach efforts to parents in lower-income neighborhoods may be needed to increase their involvement. Going to the parents demonstrated to them that their skills and time as parent volunteers were needed and valued, thus reinforcing the importance and relevance of their participation in their child’s schooling. This may have impacted how parents viewed their role in relation to school involvement; how parents define their role in relation to their children’s schooling is related to their engagement (Green et al., 2007). Some parents may lack the skills and confidence to initiate engagement with teachers and schools or to respond to written invitations; imparting skills and confidence is a first step to increased engagement. Outreach and programs such as the Neighboring Project must involve the parents as collaborators, and engagement efforts must be tailored to the needs of each neighborhood and parent group. To this end, staff persistence and consistency is needed. There were times, especially initially, when only one or two or three residents showed up for sessions. Persistence of the staff resulted from their belief in the relevance and value of the project.

Fourth, the Neighboring Project was much more than a curriculum to be implemented. It became clear in the focus groups that what was important to the participants was the relationship with the facilitators and the perception that the staff genuinely cared about them. This is no different from other helping encounters across different service sectors, such as mental health, child welfare, and substance abuse treatment, where the importance of the relationship has been demonstrated over and over (Castonguay & Beutler, 2006; Marsh, Angell, Andrews, & Curry, 2012; Norcross, 2002). Assigning a staff member not really committed to the concept of taking engagement efforts to the neighborhood to implement the Neighboring Project or another curriculum is not likely to yield positive results.

Fifth, the Neighboring Project would not have been as effective or sustainable without a collaborative partnership with the schools and all agencies involved. This may be especially so since the Neighboring Project was labor intensive, yet it was implemented with no new major funds or staff (as noted earlier, there were some donations by individuals to help support the Neighboring store, etc.). Agency and school staff who want to implement such efforts need administrative support, as well as support from other agencies who can serve as guest speakers and facilitators.

Future efforts might include learning more from those who initiate participation but do not sustain it, as well as incorporating more quantitative measures in the evaluation. At the same time, the effects of the Neighboring Project on participants could not have been told by quantitative measures alone—their stories, as told to staff and in the focus groups, added a more in-depth understanding of their experiences and how the project affected them. The Neighboring Project experience reinforces the importance of reaching out to families in their neighborhoods to increase the skills, knowledge, and confidence of underresourced parents and to highlight their innate strengths and abilities as parents and community members.

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