ENGAGING LOW-INCOME PARENTS IN SCHOOLS: BEYOND THE PTA MEETING

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Engaging Low-Income Parents in Schools: Beyond the PTA Meeting

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Considerable literature on K-12 education has lauded parental engagement, suggesting that student academic success increases when parents are included in the educational process of their children. Yet research results suggest that low-income parents fail to engage in their children’s academic life. Consequently, K-12 schools struggle with the question of how to effectively involve and engage low-income parent populations. The struggle for schools to engage low-income parents is due in part to the lack of research on the ways low-income parents engage in schools and the overreliance of traditional typologies of parental engagement that are heavily based on Epstein’s Framework of Parental Involvement (1996). Through a case study of The LEAP Academy University Charter School in Camden, New Jersey, this study focuses on examining the ideas of Epstein to determine if they are valid in the case of an urban charter school serving low-income families. This qualitative study explores how low-income parents engage in the academic lives of their children, examines how the economic and social implications of traditional typologies of parental engagement affect engagement levels of low-income parents in public charter schools, and details innovative strategies used by a charter school to garner high levels of engagement from its low-income parent population. Using literature on parental engagement, school reform, and
theories of social capital, the study examines the creation of social capital in the form of education-related social networks among the LEAP Academy low-income parent population. This inquiry seeks to provide new findings and policy implications for schools that struggle with engaging their low-income parent populations, underscores a need for the augmentation of traditional definitions of parental engagement, provides evidence for the role community-based urban schools can play in the community development process, and identifies suggestions for future research.

**Key Words:** Parental engagement, social capital, urban schools, charter schools, low-income, innovation, capacity building.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my father, the late Chief Darlington Ifeanyi Okuzu, who passed away during the course of my doctoral studies. Thank you for being my guardian angel. I love you.
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The saying goes to whom much is given, much is required. I could not think of a better phrase to illustrate my doctoral journey. I have given so much of myself to achieve this tremendous milestone. However, it is the people who have supported me through this process that I owe both my gratitude and unwavering appreciation. I am fortunate to have had the love, support, and encouragement of my family, friends, and committee members, and blessed to have had the guidance of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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This dissertation has been shaped by what I learned from members of LEAP Academy and the Community Leadership Center. It is also the culmination of many ideas
sparked by the work of scholars and discussions with faculty, educators, administrators, parents, family, and friends over the years. I have learned much through the research for this dissertation and I am a better person because of the doctoral experience. My hope is that we as a society no longer have an “us” versus “them” mentality, but instead move forth with implementing policies that effectuate positive change for all children and families regardless of race, color, or socioeconomic status. Our children need us today more than ever. It is my hope that this study helps to improve educational experiences and outcomes for all children and their families.

To myself, this work is a testament that with God and hard work anything is possible. Do not ever doubt yourself. In the beginning, you asked yourself, “What if I fail?” and the universe responded, “Oh, but my darling what if you fly?” And fly you did. Now go out and conquer the world. This is just the beginning. You did it!
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Chapter 1
Introduction

In a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day address hosted by the National Action Network, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan advanced, “education is the civil rights issue of our generation” and “if we want our young people to have a chance to enter the mainstream of society and pursue the American Dream, they can only do that through education” (Ballasy, 2011, para. 2). In America, schools are essential vehicles that equip citizens with skills and are perceived by the populace as a tool that extols the virtues of civic responsibility (Dahl, 1998; Tyack, 2003). Education provides a means by which to level the achievement playing field and mitigate educational inequalities (Ravitch, 2000). Dewey (1897) viewed education as, “the fundamental method of social progress and reform” (p. 9). Gutmann (1987) advanced that our educational institutions cultivate “democratic ideals” and nurture the “conscious social reproduction or ways in which citizens are or should be empowered to influence the education that in turn shapes the political values, attitudes, and modes of behavior” (p. 14). Through education, schools provide means to make the American Dream not only possible, but attainable (Noguera, 2003; Ravitch, 2000). Furthermore, not only does education provide a vehicle that promotes individual success, education also provides an avenue to both revitalize and develop our nation’s most impoverished communities (Noguera, 2003). However, in order for all students to attain this goal, a comprehensive and systemic approach to academic success is needed.

A popular Nigerian proverb asserts, “It takes a village to raise a child.” When it comes to parental engagement, this statement could not be more appropriate. It is well
established that parental school involvement has a positive influence on school-related outcomes for children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Consistently, cross-sectional (e.g., Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994) and longitudinal (e.g., Miedel & Reynolds, 1999) studies have demonstrated an association between higher levels of parental school involvement and greater academic success for children and adolescents. Parental involvement has been identified as one of the key supports that help to launch students toward successful school and life trajectories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Comer, 1986, 1996; Comer & Hayes, 1991; Comer et al., 1996; Epstein, 1996, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002, 2007). Students with parents who are engaged in their education have been known to perform better academically (Epstein, 1991; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Van Voorhis, 2003; Sheldon, 2003), have better attendance (Sanders, 2008), and experience greater success socially (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). For young children, parental school involvement is associated with early school success, including attainment of academic and language skills and social competence (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hill, 2001; Hill & Craft, 2003). Researchers have contended that student achievement and success is essential because it helps to define a student’s future social mobility and status in society (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1996; Coleman, 1988; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Jencks, 1972; Kozol, 1991; Lin, 2000).

Educational research shows that traditional avenues to engagement in schools are not open to every parent (Bermudez & Marquez, 1996; Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998; Osterling, Violand-Sanchez, & von Vacano, 1999). Barriers are created because traditional forms of engagement require time, awareness, and resources that are often not available to all parent groups (Van Voorhis, 2003). While nontraditional forms of
engagement are available and have helped families to come together to build relationships between schools and parents, these nontraditional forms of engagement are often not accounted for or recognized by schools and administrators (Clark, 1983).

**Background of the Problem**

Decades of research have revealed the need for and benefit of parental engagement in the educational lives of children and young adults. Aside from improving student test scores and grades, parental engagement has been proven to have positive effects on student behavior (Smith & Wohlsetter, 2009). According to Delgado-Gaitan (1991), when congruency exists between home and school, students have a greater chance of academic success. Thus, parents who are “in-tune” with their child’s school and educational needs are in the position to be better advocates for their child. In-tune parents are typically connected with key players within the school who have the ability to supply their child with resources such as tutoring or extra help if requested by the parent (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). When parents are aware of the happenings within their child’s school and classroom, congruency between home and school occurs (Smith & Wohlsetter, 2009). This congruency becomes synonymous with parental engagement and leads to parent-school collaboration. Level of congruency and ability to aid in children’s developmental and school success is often stymied when it comes to schools that serve low-income populations, as parents may lack the social capital and knowledge required to gain access to school administrators (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). As a result, low-income parents have been categorized as having low or non-existent parent engagement levels (Bermudez & Marquez, 1996; Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998; Osterling, Violand-Sanchez, & von Vacano, 1999). Furthermore, various barriers and hindrances confront
efforts to involve low-income parent populations in home and school collaborative efforts (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). Challenges to home and school collaboration include divergent goals and motivations between parents and educators (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) and varying capacities of parents to understand schools and interface with them (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). In addition, some parents lack the time to be actively involved (Swap, 1990), and cultural and class barriers (Lareau & Horvat, 1999) may deter low-income parent populations from participation.

Feldman (2003) asserted that if parents do not show any interest in how their children are doing, if they ignore messages that teachers send home, or if they fail to come to conferences, teachers are likely to feel helpless. Teachers may fear that talking about the role parents need to play in their children’s education will sound like they are passing the buck. But the fact is, parents’ contribution to the education of their children is essential. Parents are their children’s first and, in many ways, their most valuable teachers.

Further, scholars such as Lareau (2000) and Brantlinger (2003) have noted that parental involvement approaches are often based on middle-class paradigms of how parents should interface with schools, making it more comfortable for middle- and upper-class parents to interact with schools than low-income parents who lack access and social capital. These authors suggested that schools are structured around middle- and upper-class understandings and expectations. For example, middle- and upper-class parents understand how schools function, are more at ease in interfacing with school personnel, and have the ability to secure information that can help them support their children (Brantlinger, 2003). Impediments to inclusion of all parent voices hinder attempts to
mobilize low-income parents and thus deter the full engagement of parents from underrepresented groups (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Statement of the Problem

Given the importance and benefits of parent-school engagement and the often-noted lack of such engagement among low-income parents, K-12 schools that serve low-income communities need to employ a framework that cultivates and encourages parent engagement. However, research and current literature on parental engagement suggests that parents of low-income students fail to engage in the academic lives of their children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

Hansen (1988) and Lareau (1989) held that social class differences in the way parents relate to schools result from different values held by middle-class families compared to their low-income counterparts. Furthermore, in defining parental engagement, current literature mainly captures engagement practices that are reflective of parents who have higher levels of social capital and are from the middle class (Hansen, 1988; Lareau, 1989). As a result, barriers arise that preclude low-income families from school engagement. Urban families living in poor socioeconomic situations are faced with isolation from school culture that often leads to miscommunication and alienation from the school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

Based on Lightfoot’s (2004) views, it would be fair to conclude that a parental engagement framework that cultivates, encourages, and recognizes parental engagement within low-income parent populations is absent from schools that alienate their low-income families. The absence of a parental engagement framework that is both inclusive and reflective of low-income parents and their needs is said to be attributed to the
traditional underpinnings and characteristics that are disproportionately used in broad strokes to define parental engagement (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Research shows that a parent-engagement framework that is both inclusive and reflective of low-income parents would promote increased avenues of participation if implemented in urban charter schools (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2009; Linick, 2009). In this environment, parental engagement can offer innovative solutions and frameworks for school administrators and speak directly to the needs of low-income parents (Linick, 2009).

The rise of the charter school movement has created an opportunity for low-income parents to play a vital role in the education of their children through increased avenues of parental engagement (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2009). An early study of charter schools compared charter school engagement to that of traditional public schools within the same neighborhood and reported that higher levels of parental engagement were found within charter schools (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2009). Using nine measures, including volunteering and attendance at school events, Becker, Nakagawa, and Corwin (1997) found that across the board, parents spent more time at charter schools filling a variety of roles. Furthermore, when low-income parents were represented in the governance of a school, parental engagement was shown to increase (Becker, Nakagawa, & Corwin, 1997). When a two-way relationship between parents and school administrators is formed and traditional typologies of parental involvement are not implemented, the result is a better cultural understanding between school staff and parents and an increase in parental involvement (Marshall, 2006).

Given the evidence regarding the limitations of current parental engagement practices and the opportunities for innovations in charter schools, new practices are
needed that incorporate the needs of low-income parents and the awareness of differences in social class and social capital when designing and implementing parental engagement strategies. Bower and Griffin (2011) indicated that such practices should include components of relationship-building, advocacy, and parental efficacy, as these have been shown to be effective in working with low-income populations.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study examines the parental experiences and engagement activities of low-income parents whose children attend LEAP Academy University Charter School in Camden, New Jersey. Using the Epstein Framework of Parent Involvement as the theoretical framework for research, this study will also examine the ideas of Epstein and her assertions (1982, 1996, 2002) to determine if those assertions are valid in the context of parental engagement in low-income parent populations. This case study examines how class shapes parental engagement in child learning in order to add to the current literature on parental engagement and analyze how institutional arrangements can either facilitate or block the particular forms of engagement found among low-income parents. Using theories of social capital, the study examines the formation of social networks between LEAP Academy parents and the subsequent creation of social capital among LEAP’s low-income parent population. This study contributes to our knowledge about schools and poverty to account for the influence of class and social capital on parental engagement and to advance needed reforms in K-12 institutional design. The study defines and provides a framework for how low-income parents engage in the academic lives of their children within the school and at home and provides a framework for effective parent-engagement strategies within schools that serve low-income parent
populations. Using LEAP Academy University Charter School as a lab for observation, this study provides increased avenues for research that go beyond traditional classifications of parental engagement and provide evidence for the role community-based urban schools can play in the community development process.

**Research Questions**

Low-income parents as a group are an understudied population in the United States. This unique group possesses its own organizational problems and needs. In considering the way low-income parents are traditionally categorized to engage in their children’s education and the assertions set forth by Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement, the researcher undertook the following research questions:

1. In what way(s) do low-income parents engage in the academic lives of their child(ren) within the school and home environment in Camden, New Jersey?

2. Given the opportunity for innovation in the charter school landscape, what innovative strategies does LEAP Academy University Charter School utilize to garner high levels of parental engagement from their low-income parents?

3. How should the definition of parental engagement be modified to take into account variant levels of social capital and social class differences in engagement to advance reform in institutional design?

In addition, using Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement as a guidepost, this research observes and identifies the similarities and differences between Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement and the LEAP Family Engagement Model.
Theoretical Framework

While a clear definition for parental engagement remains mixed, a preponderance of scholars and researchers settle on the definition set forth by Dr. Joyce Epstein, a research professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University School of Education. Dr. Epstein established the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNP). The NNP is a network that provides professional development to enable schools, districts, and state leaders to develop research-based programs of family and community engagement (Epstein, 1992). Epstein and her colleagues at the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, have developed a framework based on six categories of parental involvement. This framework illustrates how schools should categorize and define parental involvement. For the purposes of this study, the Epstein Framework of Parent Involvement will be employed as the baseline and marker that will define traditional typologies of parental involvement.

The Epstein Framework of Parent Involvement sets forth a structure of family-school-community partnerships based on the theory of overlapping spheres of home, school, and community influences that shape children’s learning and development. Partitioned into six distinct categories, this framework centers upon parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaboration (Epstein, 1992).

Parenting is the first category found within the Epstein framework. Included in this category are ways that schools and social service organizations can assist parents and families to establish home environments that support children as students (Epstein, 1992). Through parenting skills and family support resources, parents help schools to understand
their family background (Epstein, 1992). This verbal congruency between parents and schools speaks to the second category of Epstein’s framework, which is communicating.

Communication between parent and school is to be designed to promote effective communication about school programs and the academic progress of the child (Epstein, 1992). The desired level of communication should create a two-way channel of communication between the home and the school.

The third category in Epstein’s framework is volunteering. Parents should volunteer their time to assist in school and classroom activities. Moreover, teachers should have access to parents in order to recruit and organize parent volunteers (Epstein, 1992). In an effort to foster parent participation, Epstein’s framework encourages teachers to have access to parents for the designation of a room parent and to ensure that parents attend school and classroom meetings.

Learning at home and the ability for parents to help students with homework is the fourth pillar of Epstein’s framework. Teachers are encouraged to provide information and ideas to parents on how they can translate learning activities from the classroom into the home. Students are to be given homework that encourages discourse and learning in the home environment (Epstein, 1992).

The fifth type of engagement noted in the Epstein framework is decision-making. Schools are encouraged to develop parents as leaders and include parents in the school decision-making process (Epstein, 1992). Parents having an active role in parent-teacher associations and parent-teacher organizations (with PTAs being the formal membership organization and PTOs representing the thousands of parent groups that choose to remain independent of the PTA) and serving as advisory council members are all listed as
examples of parent leadership and participation. As active participants in the decision-making process, parents are encouraged to lobby for school reform and improvements.

The final category in Epstein’s framework is collaborating with the community. Resources and services from the community should be identified to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning environments (Epstein, 1992). Collaborations among school, parents, and the community are set to provide an added bonus to both the school and the students as this level of collaboration is perceived to be a cornerstone of building community within the school.

The Epstein Framework of Parent Involvement continues to be the most widely referenced and implemented framework for parental engagement administered nationwide in K-12 schools. Epstein’s framework encompasses the traditional definition of parental engagement and recognizes the role of parents in the home, including supporting educational efforts and providing an environment where educational activities are encouraged (Bower and Griffin, 2011). While the Epstein framework recognizes the importance of parent involvement both in and outside the home, limitations do exist in Epstein’s framework. These limitations will be addressed in Chapter 4 of this study.

Research Design

A comprehensive description of the research method and procedures for this study is presented in Chapter 3. This section provides an overview.

This research used a mixed methods approach to uncover the research findings. Six specific methods were employed: review of LEAP Academy archival documents, informal interviews with members of the LEAP Academy community, formal interviews with seven founding board members of LEAP Academy, participant observation at LEAP
Academy, and the use of descriptive analysis to investigate responses from a 2015 LEAP Academy Parent Survey that was created and administered by the CLC Rutgers Management Consultant group on behalf of LEAP Academy. Overall, there were 19 formal and informal interview participants and 189 survey respondents.

**Research Significance**

This research contributes to theory and practice by examining the ideas and assertions of Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement to identify its applicability to low-income parent populations. Through a single case study of LEAP Academy University Charter School, this study contributes to our knowledge about schools and poverty by accounting for the influence of class on parental engagement. The study also advances proposals for needed reforms in institutional design. Low-income parents as a group are isolated from mainstream society and may be overlooked as an important group of parents who care deeply about their children. The promotion of parental involvement to increase academic success raises issues of equity, since rates of perceived parental involvement are significantly higher among middle- and upper-class parents than in low-income families (de Carvalho, 2001). This study provides a framework to evaluate and understand how low-income parents think about their children, interact with their children and their children’s school, and organize and empower themselves to be advocates for their children and for themselves.

A majority of research in K-12 education is based primarily on middle-class, Eurocentric models of parental behavior, thus leading us to know very little about how low-income parents engage in their children’s education. The researcher defines “Eurocentric” as referring to the values and ideals held by individuals coming from
European backgrounds. Class and social capital determine the resources available to parents and families and, as a result, shape capacities and styles of parental engagement (de Carvalho, 2001). Reflective of the impact that class and social capital have on families, in dominant school-to-family engagement frameworks, lower-class families are, by default, defined as deviant and deficient, which biases evaluations of student performance among low-income children (de Carvalho, 2001).

This inquiry also expands the parental engagement dialogue to represent the lived experiences of low-income parents. Furthermore, the research explores opportunities to extend to schools a new framework of parental engagement that is more inclusive and reflective of low-income parent populations. Finally, based on the research findings from this study, recommendations are offered for future practice for educators and policy makers. Expanded ideas and strategies are identified for schools and educators on how to effectively engage low-income parents in the academic life of their children.

A relatively small number of researchers have investigated the challenges that surround and limit low-income parent engagement, and a few have provided a number of recommendations for enhancing engagement within low-income families (Comer, Ben-Avie, Haynes, & Joyner, 1999). These researchers have called for further research regarding low-income parent engagement. While interest in low-income parent engagement is growing, writings that examine how class shapes low-income parent engagement remain scarce. The researcher helps close this gap with an eye towards contributing to the scholarly literature, but more importantly with an eye towards contributing to the broader conversation about solutions. This case study has been
conducted in an attempt to answer calls for further knowledge and understanding of parental engagement among low-income parents and families.

**Limitations and Challenges**

This research is not immune to the potential shortcomings of qualitative methodology. The research presents a single case study, with only one school observed and parents in only one small city (Camden, New Jersey) being part of the research. Thus, the research does not provide enough cases for broad generalizations to other schools and communities. However, findings from the study may provide examples for similarly situated school environments. Thus, the study has wider relevance due to its potential transferability to other like schools and communities. The potential for the findings of this research to be replicated and scaled can be found in Chapter 5 of this study.

Other limitations of the study involved the inability of the researcher to include the experiences of parents who never came to the school and did not participate in school activities. Failed attempts to identify and interview those individuals made it difficult to garner the perspectives of parents who might be disgruntled or negative about the school or who might lack understanding of the value of being an involved parent.

Challenges of the research involved the researcher’s unfulfilled initial desire to conduct more interviews as well as focus groups. The number of interviews was limited because a large portion of the interviews were scheduled during the winter months, and inclement weather often hindered the planned schedule. Several times participants had to cancel appointments for interviews due to the weather and it was often challenging to reschedule, as some interviewees did not respond to reschedule requests. In addition, the
initial plan was to also have focus groups with parents. However, it was found that parents were less likely to respond to group interviews but were more willing to have one-on-one sessions with the researcher.

Definition of Key Terms

**Parental involvement and parental engagement.** These terms are used interchangeably in the literature (Smith & Wohlsetter, 2009). This study used “parental engagement” to describe the interaction between the parent and the child both at home and at school. The researchers’ decision to use the term “engagement” is due to the fact that by definition, engagement denotes a deeper interaction between the school and home environment and is specifically relevant to the impact on the child’s education (Smith & Wohlsetter, 2009; Hansen, 1988, Laureu, 1989). A deeper discussion can be found in Chapter 4 delineating the differences between “involvement” and “engagement”.

**Low-income parents.** This term refers to those parents whose children qualify for or are enrolled in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Qualification for NSLP is based on family income. As this study was conducted at LEAP Academy, a school situated in New Jersey, the study used the 2015-2016 income guideline for the state of New Jersey (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services, 2016).

**Urban school.** For the purpose of this study, urban schools are defined as Pre-K-12 academic institutions with 70% of students enrolled in NSLP. These schools are located in urban epicenters with a relatively high rate of poverty as measured by NSLP. Over 50% of students who attend these schools are students of color, and over 50% of
families whose children are enrolled in these schools are non-native English speakers (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services, 2016).

**Charter school.** A charter school is a school that receives government funding but operates independently of the established public school system in which it is located. While current legislation exists that create variations in charter schools (e.g., Renaissance schools), this study looks specifically at traditional charter schools that are operated by independent charter organizations.

**Organization of the Study**

This research is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 of the study presents the introduction, background of the problem, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, research design, significance of the study, limitations of the study, definition of key terms, and organization of the study.

Chapter 2 presents the review of the literature. The review includes an introduction to parental involvement, an historical overview of parental involvement, education theory as it pertains to parent involvement and student academic achievement, social capital as it relates to parent involvement, barriers to parent involvement, solutions to overcoming barriers to parent involvement, a discussion of the charter school movement, an examination of charter schools as innovative environments, and the conclusion.

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive description of the research methodology used for this study. The chapter has five sections covering an overview of the research design, the rationale for qualitative research, trustworthiness, data collection, and data analysis.
Chapter 4 describes the findings of the study as told in narrative form. The chapter includes results and analysis from the documents review process, the parent engagement survey, observations, and participant interviews.

Chapter 5 provides discussion of the findings, answers the three research questions, discusses both theoretical and practical implications, and makes suggestions for future research.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

The subject of low-income parental engagement is best informed through theories of social and cultural capital, creation of social networks, and an examination of institutional arrangements that are avenues for innovation. This literature review presents the related scholarly work and theoretical perspectives that provide support for this study.

Historical Overview of Parental Engagement

The ways in which families and schools work together have changed considerably since the advent of formal schooling (Epstein & Sanders, 2002). In the beginning, the locus of control over schooling rested with families as they controlled teacher hiring and family business apprenticeships. Education was perceived as being a private, rather than a public matter (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2003), with parents taking on the main responsibility for teaching their children the basic academic skills of reading and writing. Education was primarily a prerogative of the upper and elite classes, who often sent their children to tutorial and preparatory schools.

While home and church were main contributors to the education of children and primary education was largely restricted to families of the wealthy in the early 1800s (Cutler, 2000), advocates for school reform initiatives began, in around 1820, to argue for extending primary school to all children (Church, 1976). Middle-class parents advocated for exclusive opportunities to set their children apart from everyone else (Church, 1976; Reese & Rury, 2008). At around the same time, educators started making known their view that the education of children was their domain (Church, 1976; Cutler, 2000; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2003). By mid-century, schooling had expanded and the home-
school relationship had evolved away from parents being their children’s main educator (Cutler, 2000; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2003). Teachers were taking increased responsibility and control of children’s education (Cutler, 2000).

The control of children’s education by educators continued through the later 1800s into the 20th Century. By mid-century, a strict role separation between families and schools had been established, with schools being responsible for academics and families responsible for moral, cultural, and religious education. Families did retain responsibility for preparing their young children for entry into the school system by teaching them necessary skills; however, after entry, schools took over, with minor family input. Some change in this division of roles occurred in the 1960s, with the federal government requiring schools to take measures to involve parents in their children’s education (Russakoff, 2009). Today, in an environment emphasizing greater accountability for children’s achievement, schools and families often form partnerships in which they share responsibilities for children’s education. This change is reflected in a section of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that instructs schools to take steps to help parents become effective partners in the education of their children (Russakoff, 2009).

**Parental Engagement**

Researchers have studied parental engagement extensively with the result that both substantive and methodological literature is widely available on the topic (Bower & Griffin, 2011). In the field of general education, strong empirical evidence exists that links parent engagement to student achievement. The literature indicates a strong causal relationship between student academic success and parental engagement. However,
researchers continue to seek evidence about the reasons why some parents engage in the academic lives of their children while other parents do not. As researchers consistently point to demographic factors that affect parental engagement in children’s education, the argument continues as to why certain demographics are less likely to engage in the academic lives of their children. With causal evidence underscoring the importance of parental engagement for fostering student academic achievement, the success of the nation’s children relies upon the continued evolution of this inquiry.

A voluminous body of literature exists that concerns itself with parental engagement and the manner in which parents act as agents and advocates on behalf of their children in schools (Barnard, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; McNeal, 1999; McWayne et al., 2004; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). The literature on parental engagement in child and adolescent education conveys a clear affirmation that parents’ engagement benefits children’s learning (Chavin, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1989, 1994; Hess & Holloway, 1984; Hobbs, Dokecki, Hoover-Dempsey, Moroney, Shayne, & Weeks, 1984; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). While there are a number of studies concerning the benefits of parental engagement, the definition of parental engagement remains mixed. Parental school involvement is largely defined as consisting of the following activities: volunteering at school; communicating with teachers and other school personnel; assisting in academic activities at home; and attending school events, meetings of parent-teacher associations (PTAs), and parent-teacher conferences (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). In an attempt to offer some clarity, the literature typically defines parental engagement as parents supporting students’ academic achievement or participating in school-initiated functions (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).
Clark (1983) contended that parental engagement was composed of distinctive parent-child interactions consisting of helping students with homework, expressing expectations of school performance, and creating emotionally supportive learning environments at home. McNeal (1999) defined parental engagement as participation in parent-teacher organizations, monitoring, and providing educational support measures. Parental engagement can be situated in home contexts, which can include helping with homework, discussing the child’s school work and experiences at school, and structuring home activities (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

**Education Theory: Parental Engagement and Student Academic Success**

In a seminal work, Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla (1994) reviewed 66 studies, reports, analyses, and books on parental engagement, student achievement, and school- or community-based programs and interventions. Henderson and Berla’s (1994) report contributed insights into the supports families need from schools and community sources, the difficulties faced by families from diverse cultural backgrounds, and what low-income families face when their children are enrolled in schools that are designed for white, middle-class children. Taken together, the studies strongly suggested that when parents are involved in their children’s education at home, the children do better in school. Furthermore, a synthesizing of studies indicated that when parents are involved at school, the schools the children attend become better. The studies summarized in the report strongly suggested that the whole child benefits when schools (a) support families to create a home environment that encourages learning, (b) express high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children’s achievement and future careers, and (c) become involved in their children’s education at school and in the community. Benefits
include higher grades and test scores, better attendance, more homework completion, fewer placements in special education, more positive attitudes and behavior, higher graduation rates, and greater enrollment in postsecondary education (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Research consistently shows a strong positive correlation between the level and nature of parental engagement and better student outcomes. When implemented effectively, parental engagement has a positive effect on the student and the student’s family (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Parents are able to develop more confidence in the school; in return, the teachers they work with have higher opinions of them as parents and higher expectations of their children (Henderson & Berla, 1994). As a result, parents develop more confidence about helping their children learn at home and about themselves as parents. When parents are able to increase their academic confidence, this can also serve as a motivator to continue their own education and advance their schooling (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Schools also profit from parental engagement. Schools that work well with parents benefit from improved teacher morale, higher ratings of teachers by parents, more support from families, higher student achievement, and better reputations in the community (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Based on Henderson and Berla’s (1994) review, the importance of parental engagement is clear. When parents are involved in their children’s education at home, their children do better in school. When parents are involved at school, their children preform at higher levels academically, and in return the schools the students attend are better (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Furthermore, the negative effects of poverty on student achievement can be partially alleviated when parents engage in learning activities
with their children and communicate effectively with teachers (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2010).

Irvine (1979) conducted an analysis to determine whether the performance of four-year-old children on three measures of cognitive achievement was related to the amount of time their parents were engaged with their children’s education in an experimental program. Controls were introduced to measure whether the engagement was actually related to achievement rather than other factors such as levels of family education and income or children’s age and previous performance. Parental engagement was measured by visits to the school, home visits by school personnel, incidental contacts, meetings, and employment in the program. Five levels of engagement were determined according to the number of hours the parents were involved over the school year (0, 50, 100, 150, or 200 hours) (Irvine, 1979). In addition, three kinds of cognitive development were examined: (a) general reasoning, measured by the Walker Readiness Test for Disadvantaged Children (Walker, 1969); (b) school-related knowledge and skills, measured by the Cooperative Preschool Inventory (Educational Testing Services, 1970); and (c) knowledge of verbal concepts, measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn, 1965).

As measured by the Walker Readiness Test for Disadvantaged Children, Irvine (1979) found that parental engagement had a “highly significant effect” (p. 18). Children’s scores on the test varied directly with the number of hours their parents were engaged, controlling for all other factors (Irvine, 1979). The more time parents were involved in the academic life of their child, the higher the child scored on the Walker Readiness Test. A percentile score of 44 on the Walker Readiness Test was typically
obtained by children whose parents did not participate in their academic lives at all, while children whose parents were engaged for 50 hours during the year scored at the 47th percentile (Irvine, 1979). The percentile score for children whose parents participated for 200, 150 and 100 hours were 58, 55, and 50, respectively (Irvine, 1979). Thus, a child whose parents were engaged for 100 hours scored on the average six percentile points higher on the Walker Readiness Test than a child whose parents had zero hours of engagement. A similar increase was seen in parents who were involved for 200 hours as they scored on average eight percentile points higher than a child whose parents were involved for 100 hours (Irvine, 1979).

For school-related knowledge and skills, as measured by the Cooperative Preschool Inventory, Irvine (1979) found that parental engagement had a highly significant effect, while controlling for other factors. For knowledge of verbal concepts, as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, there was a highly significant relationship between parental engagement and achievement. In addition, Irvine (1979) found that the children who tended to score the highest on three measures of cognitive development were those whose parents spent the most time participating in activities related to the program or the school. The researcher also found that parental engagement affected general reasoning and school-based-related knowledge and skills regardless of the child’s age, mother’s education, family income, or level of performance at the beginning of pre-kindergarten.

In another study, Cochran and Henderson (1986) conducted an intensive, family-oriented, early-childhood intervention program—the Family Matters Program—that was offered to 160 families in 10 different Syracuse, New York, neighborhoods. Another 116
families in the same area served as controls. The program was designed as an alternative to the “deficit model” (p. 20) characterizing most social programs in American society. Each family had a three-year-old child. Paraprofessionals were trained to administer parent-child learning activities in a series of home visits and were made available to families across the spectrum to provide child, family, and community-related information through home visits and group meetings (Cochran & Henderson, 1986). These trainings were designed to enforce the parents’ feelings of importance and effectiveness in the academic life of their children. Families participated in the trainings and group meetings with other participants for 24 months, until their children entered school. After the children began school, follow-up data on student performance were collected, based on report cards and teacher evaluations (Cochran, Moncrieff, & Henderson, 1986). Five assumptions had a discernable impact upon the goals and design of the Family Matters Program: (a) all families have some strengths; (b) the most valid and useful knowledge about the rearing of children is held by people; (c) a variety of family forms are not only in operation, but also are legitimate, and could promote the development of healthy children and adults; (d) fathers as well as mothers can contribute to the strength of the family unit; (e) cultural differences are both valid and valuable (Cochran & Henderson, 1986).

The researchers employed a stratified random sampling procedure at the levels of neighborhoods and of families (Cochran & Henderson, 1986). Using three income levels and four ethnic/race levels, the researchers randomly selected neighborhoods within the 12 subclasses, giving a total of 18 main study neighborhoods. Data collection was conducted through a social network interview (measuring amount and kinds of social
support), child caregiver activities interview (yielding data bearing on the actual behavior of parents with their children), the stresses and support interview (identifying sources of environmental stress and support experienced by each parent), and the home-school interview (assessing the relationship between the school and the home, including communication between parent and teacher) (Cochran & Henderson, 1986). The choice of domains was based on free responses of parents to open-ended interviews. The analysis process looked at fully specified models with both continuous and categorical variables in both the examination of mean differences and the regressions involving continuous variables (Cochran & Henderson, 1986).

The findings from Cochran and Henderson’s (1986) study were subjected to an analysis based on income, race, family structure, education, parent perceptions of effectiveness, type of communication with the school, parent-child activities, and development of a family-support network. All these factors were compared to match those of a control group. Although the results varied based upon each factor, engagement in the program for all categories of families resulted in better performance of their children in school. On average, due to the role of parental engagement in the lives of each child, low-income children in the program performed as well as children with middle-class, married parents (Cochran & Henderson, 1986). Out of the 81 primary variables analyzed in the final models, 37 differed significantly at the .01 level or below. Across the entire range of school outcomes, there was at least a trend for program regressions to differ from control regressions, with many significant at the .05 level or better. In the absence of any intervention, greater income is associated with better performance by the child in school. However, the data from the Cochran study suggested that for families
receiving the Family Matters Program, the intervention buffered the negative consequences of low incomes (Cochran & Henderson, 1986).

The regression differences were stronger in certain race and marital status groups for particular cluster or outcomes (Cochran & Henderson, 1986). While the two-parent white sample had a greater range of family income than other groupings, the regressions for that group, when estimated only over the same range of values as existed for the other groups, were essentially unchanged (Cochran, Moncrieff, & Henderson, 1986). The authors concluded that empowerment results from making clear to parents that they are indeed valuable allies in the educational process of their children and that with the engagement of parents in the educational process, a positive impact will occur in their child’s academic life (Cochran, Moncrieff, & Henderson, 1986).

Researchers Fehrmann, Keith, and Reimers (1987) analyzed responses from 28,051 high school seniors in their 1980 High School and Beyond longitudinal study. The study’s overall purpose was to determine what variables, subject to control by teachers, parents, and students, have the greatest effect on student grades. Using path analysis, the researchers also attempted to determine the direct effects of parental engagement on grades and to determine the extent of indirect effects through measuring homework completion and time watching television. The path analysis examined the primary variables of parental engagement, grades, homework, and television along with several background variables (intellectual ability, ethnicity, family background, and gender) (Fehrmann, Keith, & Reimers, 1987). The authors concluded from their findings that parental engagement does have an important direct effect on student academic success (Fehrmann, Keith, & Reimers, 1987).
Epstein (1991) conducted a study of student achievement involving 14 elementary school teachers and 293 third- and fifth-grade students in Baltimore, Maryland. The students took the California Achievement Test in the fall and then again in the spring of the 1980-1981 school year. The research focused on the causal effect on student achievement of the frequency and application of parental engagement strategies used by teachers within their classroom. Epstein (1991) controlled for differences in teacher quality and approaches by taking into account principals’ ratings of teacher skills, including teachers’ preparation of lesson plans, knowledge of subject, classroom discipline, and creativity. The researcher then focused on the effects of teacher practices for increasing parental engagement and not on overall teacher quality. Of the students who took the test, their teachers were classified into three categories: (a) those who reported frequent use of parental engagement strategies in learning activities at home, (b) those who were infrequent users of parental engagement strategies, and (c) confirmed nonusers of parental engagement strategies (Epstein, 1991).

Epstein (1991) investigated the relative effects of student and family background (sex, race, parent education, and fall test scores), teacher quality and leadership in parental engagement, student effort, and quality of homework assignments. Multiple regression analysis was used to identify the important independent effects of the above variables on gains in reading and math achievement. Epstein used residual gain scores as the measure of growth or change over the school year. She was particularly interested in whether teacher practices of engaging parents affect reading and math achievement after the other potentially influential variables were taken into account.
Comparing the students’ spring scores to their scores in the fall, Epstein (1991) found that parental engagement in learning activities at home positively and significantly influenced change in reading achievement (Epstein, 1991). Furthermore, those parents who reported that as a result of improved communication with the teacher, they learned more during the year than they previously knew about their child’s instructional program, were found to have a positive influence on their children’s reading achievement (Epstein, 1991). Thus, the study found that gains come from parents regularly assisting their children and that such assistance can be increased by teachers encouraging the parents, suggesting the efficacy of school and parent collaboration for parental engagement.

Epstein’s (1991) found that involving parents in working with their children makes a strong positive contribution to reading achievement even after teacher quality, students’ fall scores, parent education, parent understanding of school program, and the quality of student homework are taken into account. However, what the Epstein study failed to address is the role of class and how it shapes parental engagement in child learning. Epstein (1991) did not address why middle-class parents are perceived to engage in the academic lives of their children at higher levels than their low-income counterparts. Furthermore, Epstein failed to address how low-income parents engage in the academic lives of their children.

**Class, Social Capital, and Parental Engagement**

Research has shown that class plays a critical role in the education of low-income students and the engagement of their families (Bower & Griffin, 2011). Not all parents are involved in the academic lives of their children, and some parents are more involved than others in their child’s education (Brantlinger, 2003; Epstein, 2001; Lareau, 2000;
Major differences in parental engagement styles and techniques depend on socioeconomic status. The literature tells us that the role of class obscures different modes of engagement when middle-class models are defined as normative. For example, traditional definitions indicate that parental engagement requires investments of time and money from parents, and those who may not be able to provide these resources are deemed uninvolved (Bower & Griffin, 2011). The general consensus is that middle- and upper-class parents participate to a greater extent than many low-income parents because they understand how to interact with school personnel and how to navigate school environments (Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, 2000; Mc-Namara Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau 2002). Some have argued that the structure of schools perpetuates stratification because schools’ programming and approaches are based on middle-class paradigms (Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, 2000; Fine, 1993). Fine (1993) and Reay (1998) suggested that observed associations between parental participation and children’s educational performance are really artifacts of the class and racial advantages that involved parents bring to the table. These advantages often privilege students and parents from middle- and upper-class strata and leave out students and parents from underrepresented groups such as low-income populations. The literature therefore supports the need for this study to identify whether low-income parental engagement in schools requires different types of investment when it comes to time, resources, and effort.

A useful concept for understanding how social class affects family engagement is the concept of social capital, which refers to the benefits individuals receive from their participation in social networks and groups (Arefi, 2010; Bourdieu, 1986; Freire, 1970; Noguera, 2004; Sampson, 1998). Aspects of social networks include the norms they
embody and the expectations and obligations of members of the network (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1996; Coleman, 1988). A main feature of social networks is that they vary in their capacity to provide social capital because different groups may encompass people who have different degrees of advantage and disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1996; Brantlinger, 2003; Lin, 2000). In K-12 education, these differences in social capital may lead to differences in the experiences of low-income parents, compared to middle- and higher-income parents, as they navigate the school environment and interact with teachers and administrators in the school community. Research suggests that there are similarities in the experiences of low-income groups as they interface with educational institutions and educators.

A main expositor of the concept of social capital was Bourdieu (1977, 1986). Bourdieu (1977) held that social capital consists of a lasting network of social relations along with the resources available to group members in virtue of their membership in the group. A social network consists of more or less institutionalized relationships of acquaintance that confer to members actual or potential resources that are collectively owned by the group. Individuals join social networks to develop relationships that can be used for their benefit when needed. Social capital is connected to cultural capital, which consists of a person’s cultivated dispositions; exposure to art, books, and other cultural artifacts; and exposure to institutionalized culture. Cultural capital may differ among classes and may affect one’s social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). Access to groups is based on shared characteristics with people who have similar dispositions, behaviors, or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

According to Bourdieu (1986), institutional culture is dominated by certain
intellectual classes and transmitted intergenerationally to produce a stratified society that privileges the intellectual classes. Bourdieu contended that institutions (such as schools) perpetuate and reinforce certain behaviors and dispositions that are reflective of the majority class. He further noted that institutional cultural practices mirror these dispositions and thereby enable social inequalities. To elaborate on this idea as it relates to parental involvement in schools, Bourdieu’s (1986) views suggest that certain groups (intellectuals and middle-class groups) have established ways for interacting with school staff, gaining access to information, and securing advantages for children (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2000). These behaviors become the natural way of conducting business in schools and are carried from generation to generation, being transmitted through social networks and interactions with family members. Low-income families, since they are not a part of these networks and do not enjoy the benefits of social capital from these groups, often do not have the knowledge about how they are expected to interact with schools (Brantlinger, 1993; Lareau, 2000, 2001; Brantlinger, 1993).

Freire (1970) proposed new and innovative approaches to meaningful engagement with the oppressed segment of a community. Freire shunned what he called traditional pedagogy between teacher and student because it treats the student as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge. Instead, Freire argued for a model in which the student as learner is treated as a co-creator of knowledge instead of an empty vessel (Freire, 1970). The approach to the learner as a co-creator includes the view that we are able to learn from each other regardless of our position in society. Freire (1970) advanced that poor people have a role in their own liberation as active participants and co-creators. The
model set forth by Freire lends credence to the notion that low-income parents may engage differently through their desired choice and style of parent engagement; however, this difference does not amount to a lack of engagement but rather illuminates societal difference in engagement styles. More importantly, there is something to be learned from the way low-income parents engage. Traditional typologies of parental engagement could be viewed as flawed, as traditional notions do not take into account non-traditional forms of engagement because historically, low-income parents have not been allowed or invited to be co-creators in the creation of engagement strategies.

Lareau (1989) and Horvat et al. (2003) pointed out that the interactions that parents have with members of various institutions, including schools, seem to contribute to class divisions. Lareau (1989) suggested that students can experience moments of inclusion when parents are successful at intervening on matters of education for their children, and moments of exclusion, when parents are unsuccessful. Drawing from Bourdieu (1986), Lareau suggested that these moments are influenced by the extent of a parent’s experience and knowledge of how to operate in an educational setting and by the parent’s capacity to access and utilize social capital (Lareau, 2003; Horvat et al., 2003).

According to Lareau (1989), middle-class culture and social networks build connections between home and school, reinforcing teachers’ positive attitudes. Working-class culture results in separation between home and school, reducing the opportunities for collaboration and lowering teachers’ expectations for children (Lareau, 1989). As Comer (1986) points out, children learn from people they bond to. If children know that their parents and teachers understand and respect each other, share similar expectations, and stay in touch, children feel comfortable with who they are as individuals and are
more likely to reconcile their experiences at home and school (Comer, 1986). These considerations strongly suggest that there are considerable differences in low-income parental engagement when compared to parental engagement from middle-class parents.

Putnam (1993, 2001, 2003) was another main expositor of social capital. Putnam (1993) defined social capital as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). He offered an argument similar to that urged by Lareau (2003) and Horvat et al. (2003), noting that class inequities in social capital rival those of financial and human capital that differ among classes and that a person’s well-being is affected not only by his or her social resources but by the social group he or she belongs to (Putnam, 2003).

Putnam (2003) held that individuals are able to get more out of life through social connections and social networks. By providing benefits both to individuals and collectively to groups of people, social capital can be considered both a public and a private good (p. 20). Putnam (2003) further maintained that social capital matters for children’s successful development and educational outcomes, basing his claim on an analysis of social capital across the United States that found social capital to have a positive relationship to children’s well-being. From that research, he developed a social capital index to measure social capital in various states. After comparing results from this index to indexes of child welfare, Putnam (2003) concluded that the most substantial impacts on students’ lives were poverty, social capital, and demographics, in that order.

Putnam (2001) held that parental involvement and student school performance vary directly with the social connections and civic involvement of communities. When parental involvement is high, student behavior problems and dropout rates decrease and
student motivation increases. Specifically, Putnam (2001, p. 305) claimed that “kids of parents who attend programs at their kids’ schools, help with homework, and monitor their kids’ behavior outside school are likely to have higher grade point averages, to be more engaged in the classroom and to shun drugs and delinquent activity.”

Putnam’s perspective was consistent with Coleman’s (1988) findings in a comparison of public and Catholic high school students. Coleman found high school dropout rates lower in the Catholic schools than in public schools, which he attributed to the social capital of students whose parents attended the same church and had social relationships with parents of the students’ school friends. Overall, Coleman (1988) concluded that social capital in families and communities helps students succeed, contributing to the development of human capital in terms of students’ educational skills and capacities.

Coleman (1988) discussed three forms of social capital: obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. Social capital generated from obligations and expectations facilitates actions and is fostered by trust. As social capital is exchanged through actions, obligations are accumulated. Doers of actions trust that when the accumulated social capital is needed, it will be reciprocated. Social capital in the form of information sharing becomes useful in virtue of providing information that may facilitate action. The third kind of social capital, social norms, helps guide social behavior (Coleman, 1988). An example of how such norms might differentially affect parental involvement in schools would be norms of a social network that promote certain parent-school interactions (such as requesting a certain teacher for one’s child). These norms eventually could become common practices in the school community among those in the
social network. However, parents without access to the social capital of the group of informed parents and without knowledge of this information would be at a disadvantage in terms of advocating for their children in this particular way.

Anyon (1997) held that there can be social distances between individuals from various socio-cultural classes and backgrounds that “impair communication, trust and joint action” (p. 21), characteristics known to facilitate strong school communities. The variability in a family’s ability to leverage social and cultural capital in schools further compounds societal inequalities and keeps low-income families from negotiating the educational terrain to support student achievement like middle-class families can (Lareau, 2003; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Many middle-class families are comfortable with the school climate and can distinguish the cues and codes of the educational environment (Lareau, 2000, 2001; Brantlinger, 2003; Heymann & Earle, 2000). Because middle-class families are familiar with a school’s structure and dispositions, they are comfortable functioning in schools and can capitalize on interactions with school staff that provide benefits for their children (Lareau, 2000, 2001). On the other hand, working-class families often are not familiar with the structure and dispositions that are embraced by the school and the middle class and are reluctant about facilitating relationships between educators and themselves (Lareau, 2000, 2001).

Parental engagement serves parents differently depending on their social class (Bourdieu, 1986; Brantlinger, 1993; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). Upper-middle-class parents, especially White upper-middle-class parents, tend to have more success making their voices heard in schools because they have political power and because they carry an implicit threat of flight from public schools (Kohn, 1998). Furthermore, upper-
middle-class parents, acting principally through mothers, tend to be more involved than others in the management of their children’s school careers (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Useem, 1992). Mothers in higher social strata are more likely to select college preparatory classes for their children and have their children placed in higher academic tracks (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Useem, 1992). These parents are more likely than less-educated and working-class parents to understand the ramifications of placements in college preparatory tracks for their children’s later educational and economic opportunities (Kohn, 1998). Furthermore, researchers have found substantial differences in the approaches upper-middle-class parents, compared to working-class parents, take toward schools (Lareau, 1989; Useem, 1992). An example that crystallizes this notion is that professional-class parents and working-class parents tend to form very different social networks (Fine, 1993). Professional-class parents are more likely to network through other parents in the school; whereas, working-class parents are more likely to network within families and neighborhoods (Lareau, 1989). The social networks that upper-middle-class parents form through schools help them to gain crucial knowledge about the workings of the schools, allow them to make influential social contacts, and provide their children with added resources not readily available to working-class parents unless inquired about. Unlike their high-income counterparts, low-income parents, who are often the focus of parent-engagement plans, are likely to be at a disadvantage in their dealings with educators and often find themselves used as pawns in the traditional school system (Fine, 1993).

According to Lin (2000), many parents belong to resource-poor networks that lack the ties to social capital that provide educational advantages for their children. Low-
income and minority parents often do not have the reservoirs or the “drawing fund of social capital available in a time of need” (Coleman, 1988, p. S117) to rely on when they are called upon to advocate for their children. Further, according to Lin (2000), these groups have minimal access to both information and influence. For example, members of low-income and minority groups often have limited knowledge of how to maneuver through school systems (Brantlinger, 2003). They may have limited relationships with well-networked parents and educators and may live in neighborhoods where they have limited resources and proximity to neighbors with which to build relationships and benefit from networks of social capital (Lin, 2000; Brantlinger, 2003).

In today’s school climate, the law requires districts receiving more than $500,000 a year in Title I funds—which support the education of low-income children—to spend one percent of those funds engaging parents (Russakoff, 2009). However, the law requires little oversight of how tens of thousands of schools spend their parent-involvement money, and most schools are minimally meeting requirements and utilizing traditional methods for engagement (Russakoff, 2009). Overreliance on traditional engagement efforts alienates a population of parents who are less knowledgeable about ways to navigate the school system and thus creates barriers that stymie engagement from low-income parent populations (Russakoff, 2009). An evaluation of 41 parent-involvement studies that was published in 2002 in the *Review of Educational Research* found that few schools took into account the families’ social class (Russakoff, 2009).

Based on the considerations reviewed in this section, it appears that unless low-income parents have increased opportunities to engage and non-traditional typologies of engagement are acknowledged, these parents will continue to be alienated from engaging
in the academic life of their children. Moreover, schools who serve low-income parents might benefit from creating innovative avenues and practices to engage their parent population.

**School Reform as a Catalyst**

Schools don’t exist in isolation but are reflections of the environment around them. Anyon (1997) noted that school reform without reform in the larger community cannot be effective. She maintained that “the lack of a will to cooperate (lack of social impact) is perhaps the biggest problem we face in revitalizing cities and city schools” (Anyon, 1997, p. 18). Changes in society have an impact on schools, which may need to make adjustments to survive. As the ways parents engage in the lives of their children evolve, schools must take note of this evolution and create engagement practices that speak to changes in parental involvement. All members of the school bring with them values, beliefs, and behaviors from their places in society. Schools serve to develop a sense of fraternity and community while carrying out their educational and social functions. The school community becomes an extended family that helps to educate students to function as citizens.

A key strategy that has been identified by researchers and practitioners for school and community partnership and school reform has been the independent school movement that gave birth to charter schools. For the purposes of this study, the researcher did not evaluate charter schools across the range of issues covered in the charter school literature. Rather, the primary concern for the researcher has been to examine how charter schools are avenues for innovation and how parental engagement fits into the overall context of charter schools.
Historical Background: The Charter School Movement

The charter school movement emerged in blatant opposition to the inequality seen and experienced in traditional public schools. Over 20 years ago, Albert Shanker originally conceived of charter schools as an opportunity for talented principals and teachers to free themselves from the rigidity of central office bureaucracy and directly run their own schools (Richmond, 2014). He envisioned charters as laboratories of innovation, where a district’s most vulnerable students would get individual attention and where teachers would be free to try new methods. He expected these fresh ideas to rub off on traditionally run schools and yield results that would inspire lasting change (Richmond, 2014). The early charter school movement also drew on early rounds of small school experiments initiated by teachers and community activists, often as alternatives to large, struggling, comprehensive high schools (Richmond, 2014).

Beginning with Minnesota in 1991, Governor Arne Carlson became the first to sign charter schools into law; in 1992, California’s Governor Pete Wilson followed suit. States began to pass laws to promote the formation of charters, partly as a model of reform and partly to build a parallel system outside the reach of teachers, unions and, in some cases, the federal and state requirements to serve and accept all students as the public system must do (Erats & Roch, 2012). As public schools, charter schools are held accountable for performance standards specified in a contract with the charter authorizer; at the same time, they are given greater flexibility than regular public schools in how to meet those standards (Erats & Roch, 2012). Charter schools operate under a performance contract, or “charter,” that frees them from many of the regulations created for traditional public schools while holding them accountable for academic and financial results.
Charter schools have more autonomy than traditional public schools and determine their own budgets, class and school sizes, staffing levels, curriculum choices, and length of the school day and year. In exchange for their added flexibility, charter schools are accountable for producing specified results, with their charters being regularly reviewed, then renewed or revoked, by their authorizing agency. Examples of organizations that can grant charters include local school districts, state educational agencies, institutions of higher education, municipal governments, and special chartering boards (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009; Crane & Edwards, 2007; Florida Department of Education, n.d.; O'Brien & Devarics, 2010; Zimmer et al., 2008). Since state laws do not require charter schools to follow a particular program or instructional approach, the missions and educational philosophies of charter schools vary, as do the types of students and communities they serve. Charter laws are different in each state, but in general, charter schools are publicly funded but privately run schools.

Gradually, the charter movement attracted the attention of political and financial interests who saw the public school system as a government monopoly ripe for market reform. In the past decade, the character of the charter school movement has changed dramatically. Despite the limitless opportunities of charter schools for innovative ideas and practices, not everyone supported or believed in their benefits and the market-based decentralized approach. Both state and federal agencies wished to maintain some component of hierarchical control, while insisting upon school performance accountability. These political tensions led to charter school failures in several municipalities (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). Charter schools have been transformed from community-based, educator-initiated local efforts designed to provide alternative
approaches for a small number of students into nationally funded efforts by foundations, investors, and educational management companies to create a parallel, more privatized school system. These schools, unlike regular public schools, retain students through choice. Charter school policies are based on underlying assumptions about school improvement. A key assumption of the theory of charter schools is that schools will better serve students if they are both autonomous and publicly accountable. An additional assumption is that those closest to the schools, including parents and teachers, know how to serve students best. Taken together, the above assumptions underscore how educators can implement innovative ideas and practices in the classroom (Finnigan, 2007).

Today, charter schools are the fastest-growing option in U.S. public education. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2015), student enrollment in charter schools has grown 62% since the early 1990s, with charter schools being located in 43 states and the District of Columbia and serving more than 2.9 million students. Fifty-six percent of charter school students participate in the free and reduced lunch program, 85% of charter schools are managed by non-profit organizations, and 57% are located in urban geographic locations (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015). Beyond the raw numbers, the rapid growth of charter schools across the nation has been linked to the ability of charter schools to provide innovative solutions and strategies to problems that have historically confounded low-income parents and children (Lake, 2008).

**Charter Schools and Innovation**

A core component of the basic argument in support of charter schools is the idea that they are able to be more innovative than traditional public schools because they exist
outside the traditional state regulatory structure that is often criticized for its one-size-fits-all approach to K-12 education (Lubienski, 2009). Advocates of charter schools also maintain that successful innovations will spread from charter schools to traditional public schools, and that traditional public schools will try to compete with charter schools by becoming more innovative, thereby improving the public education system as a whole (Preston, Goldring, Berends, & Cannata, 2012). State policies explicitly presuppose that charter schools will be innovative. A 2003 summary of charter innovation research reported that 29 state laws (representing 79% of all state charter laws) explicitly mention that charters should foster innovation or serve as laboratories of research and development (Lubienski, 2003).

Researchers on innovation in charter schools vary in how they define, characterize, and measure innovation. There is a lack of consensus among researchers and practitioners alike about how to evaluate charter-school innovation and how innovation in charter schools measures up to innovation in traditional public schools (Lubienski, 2009). At the basic level, charter schools are innovative because they operate outside of traditional public school systems. Beyond their organizational structure, innovation in charter schools has been defined in terms of their implementation of administrative and instructional practices that are not used at traditional public schools (Lubienski, 2003). Examples of administrative practices different from those in traditional public schools are the use of merit-based pay for teachers and direct community and parent involvement within the school (Preston, Goldring, Berends, & Cannata, 2012). A comprehensive review of the literature on innovation reveals that some studies designate a charter school as innovative only if the strategies being used by the
school are not in use at traditional public schools in the charter’s own district, while others define innovation as a practice that is new relative to the entire public school sector nationwide (Lake, 2008). For the purpose of this study, innovation within a charter school is defined as a practice that is used by a charter school that produces new results not seen in traditional public schools.

Research on charter schools and innovation is for the most part limited to older studies undertaken five to 10 years after the first charter schools were opened (Linick, 2013). A meta-analysis of these studies conducted by Lubienski (2003) is considered the most comprehensive summary of the charter school literature to date. In his seminal work, Lubienski (2003) analyzed 56 previous studies of innovation at charter schools in several states, including but not limited to Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin. It is important to note that the study included charter schools in New Jersey, the state where the LEAP Academy case study takes place as the focus of the researcher’s study. The studies Lubienski analyzed used different definitions of innovation and different methods to gather data and evaluate charter schools’ practices. These methodologies included interviews and surveys of teachers, school administrators, parents, or students; classroom observations; and self-reported practices from charter school authorizers. Before including the studies in his summary, Lubienski vetted them for methodological rigor and for bias for or against charter schooling or specific innovations. After narrowing the sample from 190 studies, he evaluated 56 studies to determine if the charter school practices reported in the studies were innovative or not.
Lubienski (2003) assessed the presence of innovation by comparing the reported practices with those in the public school sector as a whole, practices in place in the same state, and practices in other schools in the same districts as the charters. A practice was categorized as innovative if it existed nowhere else in the sector, state, or district; or if it existed in other schools in the district but originated in the charter school. According to the summary’s findings, there is evidence that many charters have implemented administrative and organizational innovations in the states studied, including the following: pay raises based on teachers’ performance in the classroom; unique teacher licensure and hiring practices; marketing, advertising, and targeting particular populations of students; extended classes and/or school day; mixed-age student groupings; smaller class size; asking parents to sign contracts pledging to be involved in their children’s schooling; and student uniforms. Curricular innovations included online technology in the classroom; virtual learning; and thematic focuses on subjects such as the arts, entrepreneurship, and environmental education. Lubienksi credited these innovative administrative and organizational practices to the charter schools’ more autonomous governance structure and ability to create strategies that include all parents (Lubienski, 2003).

Subsequent studies have largely corroborated Lubienski’s (2003) analysis. Many researchers agree that charters are innovative in their administrative practices. A 2008 analysis of previous studies by the Center for Reinventing Public Education—a research and analysis organization associated with the University of Washington, Bothell, that focuses on innovative schools of choice—found evidence that charters were successfully innovating in organizational and administrative ways, with unique approaches to staffing,
scheduling, and accountability (Lake, 2008). Other recent research has noted that charter schools are using innovative marketing practices and are often very adept at targeting and attracting particular populations of students (Ellison, 2009).

A 2004 report by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Innovation and Improvement detailed visits to eight top-performing and innovative charter schools. The eight schools were located across the country and were representative of a variety of grade levels, student demographics, curricular approaches, and types of authorizers and operators. All of the schools had one unifying aspect: a clearly defined mission that drove all aspects of the school’s curriculum, which in turn hinged on the school’s freedom to experiment with practices that weren’t offered within the school district’s traditional public schools. Innovative practices for each charter school centered upon professional development, hiring additional staff (part-time teachers and staff specialists) that met the school’s needs, personalized education plans, parental involvement, strong behavioral expectations, and use of the school’s flexible structure to adapt to changing circumstances and particular needs of students (U.S. Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2004).

A majority of parents and school staff receive little training on how to work with one another, and an overwhelming majority of low-income parent’s report that they do not know how to assist their children’s academic learning (Moles, 1999). Answering this call for change in engagement practices, charter schools have been able to bridge the gap between parents and schools through the creation and implementation of innovative parent-engagement strategies. Research indicates that one of the most innovative strategies undertaken by charter schools to date is evidenced in their parental engagement
practices (Lake, 2008; Lubienski, 2003; Preston et al., 2012; U.S. Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement, n.d.). Through innovative strategies created by charter schools, schools have been able to create non-traditional strategies that encourage engagement from low-income parents to be effective participants in the academic lives of their children.

**Charter Schools and Parental Engagement**

Hoxby (1999) provided evidence that in metropolitan areas with more school districts (and thus greater choice among schools), parents are more likely to immerse themselves in school decision-making. Brandl (1998) argued that when parents are able to choose among small, autonomous schools, they are more likely to participate in school activities, and Hill, Pierce, and Guthrie (1997) held that parents who have chosen their school are more committed to supporting its activities. Schneider et al. (1997) provided evidence that school choice stimulates parents to become more involved in a range of school-related activities, and Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (2000) suggested that increased participation in productive activity not only helps to improve service quality but can also develop a better-informed citizenry, foster trust among citizens, and enhance public confidence in government. Charter school programs provide a good test case for the argument that institutional arrangements can either block or enhance parental engagement. Charter school programs are specifically designed to provide a decentralized alternative to the centralized and bureaucratic delivery of education services and to provide parents the opportunity to choose their schools (Lake, 2008). Therefore, an examination of parental engagement in charter schools can provide insights into the role of institutional arrangements in the parental engagement process.
In a seminal work, Bifulco and Ladd (2005) collected data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, to examine various explanations for differences in the extent of parental engagement in charter and traditional public schools. The SASS is the largest, most extensive survey of schools in the United States today and asks similar questions of respondents in both traditional public and charter schools. The data collected were based on SASS results from 1998-2000 and reflected a 90.6% response rate from public school principals and a 90.2% response rate from charter school principals. The research found that charter schools exhibited higher levels of parental engagement than observationally similar traditional public schools and that part of this difference is attributable to the institutional and organizational characteristics of charter schools. These attributes induce parents to become more involved in their children’s school and the academic life of their children. Five key factors were found to account for the differences between parental engagement levels at charter versus public schools: school size, autonomy, parent-school match, competition, and school location (Bifulco & Ladd, 2005).

When it comes to school size, Bifulco and Ladd (2005) posited that due to the relatively small size of a majority of charter schools, face-to-face familiarity breaks down social and psychological barriers to participation, inducing greater involvement because individual parents believe their actions will have a greater impact on the school than would be the case in larger schools. In regard to autonomy, the greater discretion allowed at the school level allows parents to feel they can exert greater influence over the programs and policies that matter most to them. Thus, parents perceive greater returns from their involvement, which induces more parents to devote the time and effort that
engagement requires. Furthermore, when a school has more discretion over how to handle individual student issues, parents feel they have more to gain from participating in individual parent-teacher conferences. In regard to the factor of parent-school match, Bifulco and Ladd (2005) found that parents who have specifically chosen a school have, in essence, conducted a form of self-selection; they are, therefore, more likely to be comfortable interacting with school personnel and to have policy and program preferences that match those of the school staff than is the case for parents whose children are simply assigned a public school. Thus, the mere fact that parents choose charter schools could well increase the likelihood of parents becoming engaged (p. 556).

Regarding the factor of competition, Bifulco and Ladd (2005) cited bargaining theory in claiming that the notion that schools have to compete for students creates incentives that promote parental engagement. To the extent that parental engagement provides direct consumption benefits to parents, charter schools create incentives that include parent-education workshops and parent-geared courses to provide more opportunities for parents to get involved as a means to attract more students. Furthermore, activities in which parents participate provide a mechanism for school officials to collect information about parental needs and preferences, which helps them to ensure that their product is attractive to their target market. School officials use such activities to enlist parents to assist in efforts to market the school to recruit additional students (Bifulco & Ladd, 2005). Lastly, Bifulco and Ladd (2005) pointed to school location as the final factor that positions charter schools to be more innovative in their parental engagement programs. Due to their location, charter schools have the ability to attract children whose parents are native to the area. These parents tend to be more active
in their children’s school than parents of traditional public schools, which usually serve the population of a broader geographic area. This familiarity with the geographic landscape tends to increase participation from the school’s parent population.

**Literature Review Conclusion**

The review of the literature has uncovered the historical underpinnings of parental engagement and examined education theory as it pertains to parents’ engagement and students’ achievement. The literature illustrates the importance of parental engagement and points to the fact that traditional typologies of parental engagement are blind to class differences and levels of social capital. Therefore, they mischaracterize low-income parents as absent and contributing little to the academic lives of their children. However, the literature explains how institutional arrangements can facilitate parental engagement. Specifically, due to their organizational structure and autonomy, there are various ways that charter schools are distinctively positioned to create innovative parental engagement programs and provide services for low-income parents.

While a number of studies have examined the various ways low-income parents engage in the lives of their child (Howard & Reynolds, 2008), few studies, if any, address the questions of how charter schools are able to engage their low-income parent populations or what are the key differences between the parental engagement model seen in a charter school compared to the Epstein Framework of Parent Involvement. This study provides answers for these questions.
Chapter 3
Methodology

This chapter elaborates on the methodology used for this research. As introduced in Chapter 1, this study is a qualitative inquiry into low-income parental engagement within a charter school. The study identifies and investigates an important phenomenon in literature and our society. The significance of parental engagement in student academic achievement, the perceived lack of engagement in low-income parent populations, and the innovative bandwidth of parent programs in charter schools are all intrinsically woven through this study. Within the past decade, research investigating parental engagement has used qualitative methods (Dempsey 2001; Keeler, 1995; Pena, 2000; Edwards & Warin, 2010; Maton & Salem, 1995) and mixed methods (Fan & Chen, 2001) to examine critical areas of parental engagement, student achievement, and parent-school collaboration.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

To examine the phenomena described above and to respond to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1, a qualitative research methodology that utilized a single-case study method to organize the research enterprise was selected for this study. Qualitative research advances that knowledge and reality are “socially constructed” and qualitative inquiry endeavors to answer “how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 8). Further, qualitative research recognizes that there is an intimate relationship between the researcher and what is researched (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and acknowledges that the researcher is an instrument and must gain entry into the world of the researched to study, understand, and interpret multifaceted meanings.
and varied experiences in the context of participants’ experiences and perceptions 
(Glesne, 1999). Additionally, qualitative research advances that situational constraints 
shape inquiry. Case study method allows the researcher to achieve high levels of 
conceptual validity by identifying and measuring the indicators that best represent the 
theoretical concepts the researcher intends to measure (Bennett & George, 2004).

Within the framework of a qualitative study, this research used collective case 
study strategies to capture the experiences of low-income parents affiliated with LEAP 
Academy University Charter School. Specific data collection procedures included formal 
and informal interviews, participant observations, survey analysis, and document analysis 
in order to gather information about the case study school.

Since this study sought to identify the lived experiences (Denzin, 1988) of low-
income parents in relation to their children’s schooling and to understand how a charter 
school engages low-income parents, a qualitative methodology was identified as the most 
appropriate method for inquiry. Glesne (1999) suggested that “qualitative studies are best 
at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes (p. 24). 
A qualitative study provides the tools necessary to provide an in-depth exploration of the 
topic (Glesne, 1999) as this research examines the engagement of low-income parents in 
a charter school. Furthermore, case study method was chosen as the researcher wanted to 
answer how and why questions and contextualize the relationship between LEAP 
Academy parents and the school.

A qualitative research study offers an opportunity for researchers to forge paths of 
in-depth study into a situated activity that locates the observer in the world (Denzin & 
Lincoln, 2000). This qualitative study occurs in a natural setting (Creswell, 2003) where
the researcher observes individuals, groups, and places in their own context and within
their own culture (Glesne, 1999).

Glesne (1999) noted that the researcher, in seeking data, serves as the primary
mode for making inquiry or the “main research instrument as he/she observes, asks
questions, and interacts with [the researched or other] participants” (p. 5). Stake (2000)
further suggested that in making inquiry,

...enduring meanings come from encounter, and are modified and reinforced by
repeated encounter [and that] ....in life itself, this occurs seldom to the individual
alone but in the presence of others. In a social process, together they bend, spin,
consolidate, and enrich their understandings. We come to know what has
happened partly in terms of what others reveal as their experience” (p. 442).

The single-case study was used to form the basis for a deviant case. By deviant,
the researcher is referring to the use of LEAP Academy University Charter School as the
research site. While LEAP Academy could be perceived as heuristic due to the school’s
robust parent-engagement model, it provides significance to the broader objectives of the
investigator’s research. The research site being heuristic further lends to the
appropriateness of utilizing a single-case study method, as case studies have powerful
advantages in the heuristic identification of new variables and hypotheses through the
study of deviant or outlier cases (Bennett & George, 2004). Another rationale for the
researcher’s use of a single-case study is that single-case study allows the researcher to
represent a critical case in testing a well formulated theory as is the case with Epstein’s
Framework of Parent Involvement. Lastly, this is a revelatory case, which lends credence
to the single-case study method as the phenomenon being explored has not previously
been subjected to scientific investigation and is revealed through the findings of this
study (Schell, 1992).
Trustworthiness

Golafshani (2003) asserted that in qualitative research, reliability and validity are replaced by the idea of trustworthiness, which the researcher should be mindful of while designing research and during the data-collection phase of research (Glesne, 1999). Trustworthiness in research lends itself to examining,

are these findings significantly authentic (isomorphic to some reality, trustworthy, related to the way others construct their social worlds) that I may trust myself in acting on their implications? More to the point, would I feel sufficiently secure about these findings to construct social policy or legislation based on them? (Guba & Lincoln, 2000, p. 178).

In this study, trustworthiness was accomplished through the use of several methods to verify the accuracy and credibility of study findings. To confirm the trustworthiness of study findings and in order to strengthen their accuracy, several strategies advanced by scholars (Creswell, 2003; Geertz, 1973; Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Glesne, 1999; Peshkin, 1998) were used, including triangulation of data sources, defined by Glesne (1999) as the use of multiple data methods and sources; an examination of researcher subjectivity (Peshkin, 1998); thick description (Geertz, 1973); and attention to multiple voicing (Gergen & Gergen, 2000).

To confirm and strengthen the trustworthiness and credibility of a study, it is recommended that researchers use multiple research techniques. Glesne (1999) suggested that the use of varied approaches to data collection can lead to more authentic and comprehensive conclusions from the data. Consequently, the varied approaches to data collection, such as group and individual interviews, observations, and document collection, consist of a combination of venues providing rich data and multiple voices from which patterns can materialize. In this research, triangulation of data was employed
during the data-analysis process. This triangulation facilitated validation of the data collected through cross-verification and the convergence of three techniques taken from distinct points in the data collection process.

To ensure the credibility of a qualitative study, the subjectivity of the researcher must to be acknowledged. If researchers are mindful of their subjectivity, the credibility of the research is increased because the researcher is aware of how her or his personal perspective can blur the study analysis (Glesne, 1998; Peshkin, 1988). During this study, the researcher remained constantly conscious of the subjective lens and perspectives that she brought to the study. This approach guarded against imposing personal viewpoints onto the research. Field notes were used to log and document any personal feelings or biases.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected through formal and informal interviews, documents review and analysis of archival documents, participant observation, and survey analysis. Data from these collection methods were gathered from LEAP Academy University Charter School in Camden, New Jersey. During the data-collection phase of the research, a search was made to identify how parents engage with the school and how the school staff and administrators engage with parents. In addition, connections between traditional typologies of parental engagement and the development of non-traditional typologies as an avenue for low-income parents to participate in school activities were examined when analyzing the data. Inquiry was also made to identify opportunities and differences at the school that help foster parental engagement regardless of socioeconomic status. Further, parental engagement at LEAP Academy Charter School was examined to see how closely
aligned and/or drastically different the school’s engagement framework is compared to Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement.

Through the collection of rich data from varied sources and the resulting analysis that follows in Chapter 4, an effort was made in the research to discern the impact of class on parental engagement activities and avenues of innovation at LEAP Academy University Charter School as informed by Bourdieu (1997, 1986, 1996), Lareau (2001, 2003), Linick (2013) and Lubienski (2003, 2009). Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, received on August 11, 2015, ensured that this research minimized risk to human subjects. The data collected in this study produced revealing findings that responded to these and other pertinent questions.

**Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews and open-ended questioning techniques were used to gain thorough and detailed interview responses from study participants. This approach was consistent with the quest for thick description in the research data (Geertz, 1973). Interviews were used to identify “opinions, perceptions and attitudes” (Glesne, 1999, p. 69) and to gain greater understanding of the various experiences and perspectives of the stakeholders at LEAP Academy, including parents, teachers, and administrators.

Interviews were conducted among the LEAP Academy founding board members and stakeholders that inspired the work for LEAP Academy to come to fruition. The interview list included the Founder of LEAP Academy, the Assistant Director of the Community Leadership Center, LEAP Academy Parent Council members, LEAP Academy Board members, LEAP Academy Parent Program participants, LEAP Academy parents, and historical figures from the planning phase of LEAP Academy. A
total of 19 interviews were conducted over a five-month period. Of the 19, eight interviews were held with parents, grandparents, or guardians of LEAP Academy students, seven were with members of the LEAP Academy founding board, and four were with LEAP Academy administrators.

Informal and formal interviews were conducted to collect data. Formal interviews lasted an average 45 minutes with an additional 20 minutes of follow-up questions. Informal interviews averaged 15 minutes in length. Both formal and informal interviews were employed to further expand on information observed in various settings, information collected during the documents review, and survey analysis. Interviews were used to provide rich data and to aid respondents’ recall information and specific events and to stimulate embellished descriptions of events and ideas (Fontana & Frey, 2000).

Informal conversations happened while the researcher was on-site. An example of an informal conversation occurred while the researcher was visiting the Family Support Center located within the school. The researcher began to converse with the LEAP parents who were at the Family Support Center. The researcher asked questions about the parents’ experience as it related to participation in parent workshops and trainings, the parents’ relationship with the school, and what they believed was the greatest attribute of LEAP Academy’s parent programs. Informal conversations took place at the Early Learning Research Center, LEAP Family Support Center, and Community Leadership Center. These informal interviews were documented in the researcher’s field notes. For engagements between the researcher and members of the LEAP Academy community that did not rise to the level of a formal interview, the researcher drew upon her field notes.
An overview of the research was provided for all interview participants. Consent protocol was read to all interviewees, and they were informed that participation was completely voluntary. Formal interviews were taped by the researcher and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Interview questions were anchored in the theoretical framework of the research and were directly aligned to Epstein’s six typologies of parental involvement. Stakeholder groups were created based upon each individual’s position and years of affiliation with LEAP Academy. Interview questions were created for each stakeholder group. The stakeholder groups were created as follows: LEAP Founder, LEAP Employee, LEAP Parent, and LEAP Parent involved in school governance. In some cases, an interviewee was a member of more than one of these groups. For the sake of confidentiality, in reporting interview responses in Chapter 4, interviewees will not be identified by name but only by their membership in one or more of the stakeholder groups. Interview questions can be found in Appendix B. In the interview settings with study informants, robust information was gathered that further informed the study. This information will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Observations

Varied observation strategies were integrated into the research methods, including observation of participants in their “natural setting” (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000, p. 673). Participants were observed in their school and in the larger Camden, New Jersey, community in order to gain a more detailed understanding of the experiences of LEAP Academy’s parent population. An effort was made to continually reflect on similarities and differences between observation and interview data to gain greater insights and understandings of the data (Glesne, 1999). The observations included observations of
parent meetings, workshops and trainings, collaboration and interaction between parents and LEAP Academy teachers and administrators, interactions of Academy parents with other LEAP Academy parents, and the participation of parents at events.

Comprehensive field logs and detailed field notes were collected to capture the full context of the study. These research logs became a “place for ideas, reflections, hunches and notes about patterns that seem to be emerging” (Glesne, p. 49). Further, research logs were used as a place to record researcher biases and subjectivity that could infringe on the research (Peshkin, 1988). During the course of the study, the researcher frequently visited the school and the Camden community. The school and community visits provided rich observations for the researcher to contextualize the relationship between the school and the parents and to gain a deeper understanding of how parental engagement programs are designed, implemented, and received. Observations took place at LEAP ribbon-cutting ceremonies, the Early Learning Research Academy (ELRA), LEAP Academy, and the Community Leadership Center. All observations took place in Camden, New Jersey.

**Surveys**

A survey was used to gather demographic information about LEAP Academy parents, how LEAP Academy develops parental-engagement activities, the strategies used to facilitate a relationship between the school and parents, and the level of intentionality in developing parent programs. The survey instrument employed was a cross-sectional web questionnaire. Cross-sectional questionnaires are utilized to ask about a particular topic at one point in time (Sincero, 2012). The questionnaire, entitled “LEAP Academy Parent Engagement Survey,” asked about parent engagement at LEAP
Academy Charter School for the academic year 2015-2016.

The LEAP Academy Parent Engagement Survey (2015) was created by the CLC Rutgers Management Consultant group and was administered by the CLC Management Consultant group on behalf of LEAP Academy. The survey was made available to parents beginning September, 25, 2015, and was administered by the web-based company Survey Monkey. The survey did not have an end date as parents were given the opportunity to take the survey at any time during the 2015-2016 academic year.

The survey consisted of a total of 50 questions. Of those questions, 10 asked demographic information about survey respondents (age, sex, race, etc.), eight asked parents about the method by which they would like to receive communication, including items about internet accessibility and language preference. Four questions asked parents about direct involvement and interaction with the school as they relate to meeting with school administrators and principals within the 2015-2016 academic year. Six questions asked participants about school quality and overall satisfaction with LEAP Academy. Ten questions asked participants about how they currently engage in the academic life of their children, and seven questions gave participants the opportunity to provide insight into parental engagement activities they would like to see the school implement. Two questions asked participants about their concerns about the academic development of LEAP Academy children, and three asked participants open-ended questions about the 2016-2017 academic year (LEAP Academy Parent Engagement Survey, 2015). One hundred and eighty-nine participants completed the survey. The researcher utilized descriptive analysis to analyze the survey responses.
Documents Review

Relevant documents regarding the creation, implementation, and development of parent engagement at LEAP Academy and continuous parent engagement improvement data were collected. In addition, information on how and why low-income parents engage at LEAP Academy and types of innovative strategies to garner parent engagement from low-income parent populations was obtained. Access to secure and archival materials was arranged based on the parameters of the research schedule, school calendar, and researcher availability. The researcher was granted access to confidential documents by the LEAP Academy Board of Trustees. Confidential documents reviewed included the LEAP Academy Annual Report from academic years 2008 to 2016, school audits, the LEAP Academy charter renewal applications from 2006 to present, the Parent Academy final reports from 2000 and 2002 submitted to the William Penn Foundation, and the Consolidated Charter Report submitted to the Acting Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Education, Executive County Superintendent for Camden County Office of Education, Superintendent for Camden City Schools, and the Office of Charter Schools for the Department of Education.

Other reviewed documents included LEAP program reports and handouts regarding school improvement, strategic reports, grant proposals, planning documents, memoranda, past and present parent surveys, archival photographs from parent focus groups during the planning phase of Project LEAP, and charter applications provided by school administrators. Copies of parent handbooks, flyers for parent training and workshops, brochures for the family support center, and parent council meeting minutes were collected from the school. School-level documentation such as the LEAP Academy
parent compact, school newsletters, board minutes, and school continuous plans were collected from school administrators and from online sources by the researcher. Newspaper articles about the academy from various local and regional newspapers were collected from the LEAP archival depository located in the Community Leadership Center in Camden, New Jersey.

The documents collected for the research were used to examine how parental engagement works at an urban charter school that services low-income parents and in what ways (both past and present) LEAP Academy either facilitates or hinders engagement from its low-income parent population.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this qualitative study involved continuous analysis and coding of interviews, documents, and observations (Charmaz, 2000; Glesne, 1999). The data-analysis process included a search for common themes that emerged during the course of the data-collection process. The analysis phase occurred throughout the data-collection process and included the development and examination of field notes, experiences, transcripts, quotations, and other data collected (Glesne, 1999). Preliminary coding categories and schemes were developed during the early data-collection phase to document patterns that emerged in the study of low-income parents at LEAP Academy. Preliminary coding was followed by a more extensive, detailed coding system. A series of codes was used to investigate the three research questions. Key components of the interview transcripts were initially reviewed and underlined for significant comments. The underlined portions were imported into the Excel software program, and codes were attached to segments of the transcripts. The coded sections were then sorted to search for
patterns. A coding scheme using the Excel database software to identify emerging codes and patterns was selected as the coding method. The coding scheme that was identified for the research can be found in Appendix D.
Chapter 4
Findings and Analysis

Our nation’s school system is a direct reflection of the citizens that make up our society, necessitating strategies and programmatic efforts that are reflective and inclusive of each citizen. The study of low-income parental engagement and the quest for innovation in charter schools is in direct response to the continual shifts and changes in our constantly evolving society. Drawing on the theory that guided this inquiry and the rich data collected through interviews, observations, a survey, and documents, this chapter presents findings from intense inquiry into how a charter school engages its low-income parent population. A discussion of the interplay between innovative strategies and low-income parental engagement includes perspectives on innovation, stakeholder buy-in, and parent engagement as informed by Bower and Griffin, (2011), Lubienski, (2003, 2009), and McLaughlin (1987). Theoretical concepts on defining and identifying parental engagement in light of Epstein’s (1996, 2001) model of effective parental involvement at school and at home are considered in this chapter as the research seeks evidence of effective parental engagement strategies for low-income populations. In this chapter, the researcher also elaborates on the liberation of poor individuals (Freire, 1970), the development of social networks and norms (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986), parental access to certain forms of capital (Lin, 2000), and parental development of bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000, 2003).

Geographic Context

The neighborhood where the study took place is a clearly defined geographic area known as Camden, New Jersey. The neighborhood is an island of concentrated poverty
that is slightly less than 11 miles long and is composed of more than 20 contiguous
neighborhoods (City of Camden, 2015). The city is isolated, being cut off from
Philadelphia, which is situated across the Delaware River. Living in this neighborhood
are hundreds of extremely poor families coping with an array of challenges: extreme
poverty rates, a preponderance of single-family households, high unemployment rates,
low educational attainment, teen pregnancy, high rates of violent crime, and a lack of
resources and services (City of Camden, 2015).

Over the span of a few decades, a dramatic change in urban demographics
occurred and the middle class vacated urban centers like Camden in what is often referred
to as white flight (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). By 1990, approximately 86% of Camden’s
residents were racial minorities. With the loss of the middle class, small business, and
major manufacturing companies, Camden experienced a sudden and significant shift,
resulting in tremendous environmental pressure on the city’s stability and ability to
successfully function (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). Today, roughly 77,344 people call
Camden home. Of that population, 16,912 are families, 95% are African American or
Hispanic, 45% live in poverty, 27% depend upon public assistance, one-third of infants
receive routine prenatal care, more than two-thirds of households are single-parent
households, homicide is the number one cause of death for people ages 15 to 24, and 49%
of residents experience food insecurity (City of Camden, 2015).

Camden’s public education system has also faced its share of woes. In 2000, the
average amount of money spent on additional educational supports for classrooms in
Camden was $82 per student, with the average extracurricular expenditure being $74 per
a student. Comparable figures for schools in the county were $127 and $238 per student
(Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). Furthermore, at the time of the study, only half of all Camden residents age 25 and older had a high school education, and only seven percent had a college degree or higher (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). In Camden, repeated failures, lack of encouragement and support, and lack of future opportunities have strengthened negative sentiments towards education and fostered a culture condoning educational discontinuance (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). These varied factors have established roadblocks towards attempts to improve education within the city.

**School Context**

Today, the LEAP (Leadership, Education, and Partnership) Academy University Charter School is a kindergarten through 12th-grade (K-12) public charter school that serves residents of Camden City with one core principle: all children and families deserve access to a quality public education (LEAP Academy Annual Report, 2009). LEAP Academy charter school was one of the first 13 charter schools that opened in New Jersey in 1997 and the first in the city of Camden (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). LEAP Academy is a comprehensive public charter school serving 1,705 students from Pre-K through 12th grade (LEAP Academy Annual Report, 2003).

The school provides a college preparatory education with an emphasis on the content areas of science, technology, education, and mathematics, as well as specialized career academies in business, liberal studies, and social sciences at the high school level (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). There are currently a combined 1,705 students enrolled in LEAP Academy and the subsidiary Early Learning Research Academy (ELRA), which caters to students from the age of eight weeks to five years. Females account for 55.1% of students, with males accounting for 49.9%. In the LEAP Academy PreK-12 program,
89.6% of students are eligible for free and reduced breakfast and lunch, and 90% of students are eligible for free and reduced breakfast and lunch at ELRA (LEAP Academy Annual Report, 2015). The majority of students at LEAP are of Latino or African American ethnicity. A racial/ethnic demographic breakdown of students can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial/Ethnic Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Other</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Project LEAP Academy and Stakeholder Buy-In

In the early 1990s, when Dr. Gloria Bonilla-Santiago, the founder of LEAP Academy University Charter School, created a strategic plan for the Project LEAP community school to begin, the first step in the planning agenda was the identification of stakeholders and creation of a partnership that would have the widest possible
representation and participation of community interests (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). Born out of the community’s dissatisfaction with the Camden school system and the desire to provide all children with quality education, Project LEAP was created to reform not only the Camden school system, but also the larger Camden community. Anyon (1997) advanced that schools serve to develop a sense of fraternity and community while carrying out their educational and social functions, and the stated goal of Project LEAP was to create a model reflective of that notion. Participation in the creation of Project LEAP included Camden residents; Rutgers University administrators, faculty, and students; Camden public school superintendents, board members, central administrators, principals, teachers, parents, and students; the Camden mayor’s office and social service agencies; public and private community organizations; members of the Camden clergy; the Camden business community; and the Delaware River Port Authority (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). According to an article in the Courier Post (Hoh, 1993), Project LEAP was created under the premise that to run a successful urban school, educators first must acknowledge “We can’t do it alone. There were even nurses to help us design a health clinic and architects to help us design a facility. We wanted everyone to own a piece of the policy” (p. 125). According to a September 9, 1993, article in the Courier Post by Kevin Riordan, what distinguishes Project LEAP is its holistic approach to eliminating poverty. Rutgers University President Francis L. Lawrence declared that the community was uniting its forces to empower “our” urban families and children for years to come (Riordan, 1993, p. 5A).

When Dr. Santiago presented the Project LEAP proposal to the top Rutgers University administration in New Brunswick and received $1.5 million to underwrite the
project, the administration believed that she was just going to do a research project and then would possibly write a book about the project (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). However, she has asserted that in her heart, she was doing things not just to advance her academic career but for the greater good of society (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014).

...by creating a new community school, that will be totally different for kids and that would be liberating, that will have new values, that will have a whole new culture and climate that would look very different than anything else that I had seen, I need to begin with parents. And the reason that I wanted to begin with parents was because they were the consumers, they were the people that Camden City forgot about (interview, LEAP Founder, February 18, 2016).

The participation and role of Rutgers University gave Project LEAP credibility. It indicated that the study would be conducted in accordance with the highest academic standards of research and would be free of any political influence that surrounded Camden City Schools during that time (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). The involvement of Rutgers University also reflected a desire for the Rutgers-Camden campus to increase its involvement with the greater Camden community after years of perceived neglect and ill feelings between the school and city residents (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014).

Rutgers used to have a sign in the 80s that said community is not permitted to walk through here. So people took it like we’re not welcome here ... universities can be either anchors or they can be the community’s worst enemy. And in the 80s they were the worst enemy to the community, they were unfriendly to people. People came here to teach and to learn, and to work, but it was a bubble, it was outside of the community ... no one cared about the residents and the city. The residents knew that ... they [residents] sensed the rejection and they also felt the alienation (interview, LEAP Founder, February 18, 2016).

Rutgers began to channel more university resources to the people of Camden. Faculty members from seven fields of interest—health, human services, law, civic service, business public policy, parental involvement, and leadership development—were drawn to the project (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). In 1993, Provost Gordon of Rutgers-
Camden reported that the campus’s major academic units stood ready to address local urban problems across a broad spectrum of concerns and would work closely with the residents of north Camden (Project LEAP Planning Document, 1993). Faculty members and students involved in the project represented the Rutgers Camden School of Law, School of Business, Social Work Department, several departments in the College of Arts and Sciences, the Center for Strategic Urban Community Leadership, and the Nursing Department (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014).

In 1993, the Rutgers/LEAP initiative was launched and the LEAP working group was formed to guide the strategic development of LEAP Academy University Charter School (LEAP Academy Annual Report, 2008). Dr. Santiago led the strategic planning efforts and enlisted the support of Rutgers University as a founding partner of LEAP Academy (LEAP Academy Annual Report, 2008).

**Planting the Seeds of Liberation**

Dr. Santiago began organizing local parents to support the creation of an alternative community school even before Project LEAP got started. After receiving funding from the Delaware River Port Authority (DRPA), Dr. Santiago immediately hired two Camden parents to go door-to-door in the poorest Camden neighborhoods to solicit involvement from parents with school-age children. The parents who were recruited were mostly women, many of whom were unemployed and receiving public assistance. Only a few had formal education or had graduated from high school (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014).

When Project LEAP began, I was one of the two parents who went door to door. I would knock on the doors in my community and let people know about the project…. What I realized [after talking to many parents] is parents wanted to get involved, they just did not know how to be engaged. Project LEAP trained us on
how to be engaged and to be advocates for our children and ourselves (interview, LEAP Employee and LEAP Grandmother, February 5, 2016).

According to Bonilla-Santiago (2014), these parents were not asking for anything themselves but wanted a better school and better education for their children and an opportunity for their children to escape the poverty and violence that gripped their lives in Camden. One thing that separated these parents from their middle-class counterparts was that they had previously lacked the opportunity to be heard. According to an April 6, 2001 Rutgers Focus article by Michael Sepanic and Caroline Yount, Project LEAP parents and low-income parents in general are often unsure how to become involved in the educational endeavors of their children. These parents want to make a difference in the educational lives of their children, but they do not have the voice, skills, or social capital to do so (Spanic & Yount, 2001). Project LEAP was an acknowledgement of this desire of low-income parents to do better for their kids and an attempt to provide them with the tools to become not only advocates for their children, but advocates for themselves (Spanic & Yount, 2001).

According to 1997 LEAP Academy Memoranda, Camden parents were being reminded of their vital position in guiding their children to success. The memoranda noted that LEAP parents were immersed in efforts designed to help them better understand their own abilities, communicate more effectively with adults and children alike, and realize how to become more engaged in the decision-making processes that affect their children’s education.

Equipped with the belief that low-income parents are able participants in the academic life of their children but lack the training needed to be effective advocates, Dr. Santiago obtained a $75,000 grant from Prudential Foundation to develop a LEAP parent
training program to educate parents on their responsibilities for involvement in the school (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). In the planning process of LEAP, Dr. Santiago maintained that she heard terrible stories about getting parents involved, but found them to be untrue (interview, LEAP Founder, February 18, 2016). Heavily influenced by Freire’s (1970) writings, Dr. Santiago believed that in order for low-income parents to begin on a trajectory of engagement, they had to take part and be a part of their own liberation. Freire held:

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the “practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Freire, 1970).

In line with Freire’s (1970) assertions on liberation, Project LEAP parents were offered training on what it takes to make a community school run properly, lessons in civic engagement, and tactics of civil protest. Parents were taught how to lobby lawmakers, how to protest, dress for success, and speak in public, as well as when to make noise and when to be quiet (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). Parents were enrolled in a training institute that had a curriculum centered on advocacy, self-awareness, and pride in their community. Dr. Santiago utilized the Saul Alinsky (1960) method of empowering parents to organize around a new school that would provide them with a community school model. The training institute ran in cohorts of 50 people. The training institute built capacity by graduating leaders. When parents graduated from the program, these parents then trained a new group of parents. According to an October 27, 1994 Courier Post article by David Gilmore,
Camden parents have always suffered from breakdown in communication.... by giving parents the tools and trainings they need to communicate [LEAP] is changing the whole paradigm for parental involvement in the city’s education. The Parent Leader-to-Leader Institute program not only trained leaders, but also created new parent leaders to transform community and school. Low-income parents who for the most part have been told all their lives what to do and what they need, these parents now have the opportunity to teach other parents the importance of getting involved in their children’s education. This new ability is because of the skills provided to them by Project LEAP (Gilmore, October 27, 1994).

Using their newfound advocacy skills, one of the first things parents advocated for was to not have Project LEAP taken over by the then-corrupt Camden school system (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). The parents who had been recruited and organized to support Project LEAP Academy were adamantly opposed to the shared governance option and threatened to withdraw from the initiative if “their” new school was given back to the failed Camden school system they were desperately trying to get away from (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). This was an early sign that LEAP had not only mobilized parents, but had effectively built capacity with their parents. Parents who at one point felt hopeless and powerless were banding together in opposition of an entire school system—the Camden school system. Parents, most of whom had no formal education and some of whom barely spoke English, were now becoming empowered.

Parents talk about the school as if it were something belonging to them, and indeed it does.... LEAP lets parents help make decisions, and they are an integral part of what the school stands for (interview, LEAP Employee February 18, 2016).

It was because of these parents and their opposition to the Camden school system that Project LEAP decided to pursue a charter school option. During this time, the charter school bill was going through the legislature, but according to Bonilla-Santiago (2014), that did not deter or silence the voice of Project LEAP parents. The parents, as key
stakeholders, felt they had nothing to lose. They wanted a better school for their children and worked diligently to see that dream come to fruition. A subcommittee for parents was formed to help support the charter school bill. Dr. Santiago bussed Camden parents to all the important meetings and hearings in Trenton, New Jersey, and elsewhere (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). Parents were prepped with testimonies and talking points to use when lobbying lawmakers. Parents would pack the hearing rooms and fill galleries in the legislative chambers and walk the hallways to promote their cause. The parents were the engines that kept Project LEAP going forward (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014).

We [parents] came together as one because we knew if we wanted to see a change in the school we would have to band together and take a stand…. We never stood up for ourselves, but we felt empowered because of LEAP. We had a voice and we knew we wanted good schools for our children…. People never thought that a group of poor parents would make a difference, but we did. People wanted us to go to PTA meetings, but we had better things to do—we don’t need the PTA meeting we needed to lobby for better schools for our children. So instead of a PTA meeting we went to Trenton (interview, LEAP Parent, February 5, 2016).

A final version of the Charter School Program Act was in position for a vote in both houses of the legislature by October, 1995, and in 1997 the charter school law was passed and a certificate was presented to Dr. Santiago. The presence of parents had proved effective in moving the legislation to enactment. The intentionality of including parents in the planning stage of Project LEAP and in their own liberation paid off. By the time LEAP Academy Charter School opened its doors on September 5, 1997, more than 500 parents, the foot soldiers in the early planning and school reform battle, had been organized, trained, and fully equipped with the tools and competencies needed to effectively engage in the academic lives of their children and were in line to enroll their children into LEAP Academy University Charter School (Bonilla-Santiago, 2014). The innovative first step of mobilizing parents and letting them take ownership of their own
liberation laid the groundwork for the LEAP Family Engagement Model and serves as a precursor for how the model is implemented within the school today.

**The Creation of Social Networks and Development of Social Capital**

Through the holistic design of Project LEAP, a strong desire to improve K-12 education in Camden was created and shared among low-income parents in the community. This shared interest served as the foundation for the creation of a social network among Project LEAP parents and led to the creation of social networks for present-day LEAP Academy parents.

In an effort to remain committed to the needs and wants of its audience, LEAP Academy provides parents with training opportunities, family activities, and workshops. According to a November 16, 2000, article in the *Inquirer* by Maureen Fitzgerald, in the city of Camden, families are fragile and they need more support than a traditional school can provide for children to succeed. These supports include providing families with law clinics, health clinics, healthy meals, counseling, tutoring for parents and students, trainings, and constant support. Outside of the traditional typologies of parental engagement identified by Epstein (1996), LEAP families are given the opportunity to participate in activities with their children and other LEAP families as a form of parental engagement and capacity building. Table 2 list the major activities available to families during the 2013-2014 school year (LEAP Academy Annual Report, 2013). These activities afford parents the opportunity to form a relationship with other families to co-create a community of LEAP parents and create a social network.
Table 2

*Major Activities/Events Conducted by Parents to Further the School’s Mission*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity/Event</th>
<th>Time Allocated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anti-bullying Bill of Rights Workshop</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and Learning, Community Engagement</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Environment, Morale in the School Community</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NJCAP Bullying Prevention Workshop for Parents</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition workshops</td>
<td>12 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walkathon and Health Fair</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less TV Workshop</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NJ ASK Parent Prep</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholastic Family Nights, 2 nights</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Literacy &amp; Math Nights, 2 nights</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NJ-ASK Family Night</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family &amp; Classroom Libraries Book Giveaway at all parent workshops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother/Daughter Health Party</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eighth Grade Parent Meeting—Academies discussion offered for rising ninth graders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six nutrition classes/cooking demos</td>
<td>2 hours each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colon Cancer Awareness and Prevention Workshop</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six weeks Parents as Partners parenting classes</td>
<td>4 hours/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine Communities of Learning for Urban Environments and Science (CLUES) workshops</td>
<td>2 hours each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLUES events sponsored by the Franklin Institute, Philadelphia Zoo, NJ Academy for Aquatic Science, and Academy of Natural Sciences including trips to Philadelphia Zoo, Bronx Zoo, and Philadelphia Science Festival.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Through the programs and activities at LEAP Academy, bonding social capital (Lin, 2000) was formed, leading to the co-creation of a social network of LEAP parents. Before Camden residents came to LEAP Academy, many of them felt isolated and alone. Once residents enrolled their children in LEAP, they realized that they had a common interest of creating a better future for their children and were committed to working together to change the K-12 educational landscape. This shared and like-minded (Putnam & Goss, 2002) reinforcement of homogeneity created a sense of family and belonging for LEAP’s low-income parent population. It reinforced the parents’ desire to be better advocates for their children and inspired and invited them to engage in the academic life of their children despite having been alienated by past K-12 institutions. This group engagement of the low-income parents at LEAP aided in the development of norms and reciprocity (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986) not only among LEAP families, but also between families and the school. This development is evidenced by support and ties that exist between members of the school, the formation of social clubs formed by parents, and camaraderie observed between parents at the Family Support Center (field notes, February 18, 2016). According to a December 30, 2000, Courier Post article by Al Schell, the mission of LEAP Academy is not only to provide seven hours of academic
programming to students. The additional idea is that families will see the school not only as a place where they pick up and drop off their kids, but as a place they consider home.

Parent engagement to me means getting involved in the school that our children are in. And it doesn’t have to be my children because I consider LEAP to be my home—LEAP is my family and all the kids at LEAP are my kids. Even when my last child graduates four years from now, I think I'm still going to stay engaged in the school because of the community, the kids that come here … parent engagement to me is, us getting involved and making sure that the school is going to do the right thing. To make sure that the school is teaching. To make sure that our kids are not, I guess, wasting their time (interview, LEAP Parent, February 8, 2016).

Social capital at LEAP Academy is not about the individual, but an attribute of the collective community. When LEAP planted the seeds of liberation, LEAP empowered parents to become advocates in changing the academic landscape for their children. Despite the socioeconomic status of the parents, LEAP wanted those parents to be involved in the design, creation, and development of the school (LEAP memorandum, 2003). Allowing low-income parents to play a role in their liberation (Freire, 1970) created social ties and networks among LEAP parents (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986), thereby increasing their social capital (Lin, 1999). The creation of social networks and social capital served as the catalyst for LEAP parents to understand the importance of becoming engaged in the academic life of their children. This holistic approach to engagement has welcomed parents to be a part of the decision-making process of the school and has supported and encouraged engagement from LEAP parents since the founding of LEAP Academy in 1993 (interview, LEAP Board Member, February 18, 2016). Departing from traditional notions of parent engagement (Epstein, 1996), LEAP utilizes a variety of strategies and techniques to engage its low-income parent populations.

Using the Engine of Innovation to Engage Parents
A core component of the basic argument in support of charter schools is the idea that they are able to be more innovative than traditional public schools by existing outside the traditional state regulatory structure, which is often criticized for its one-size-fits-all approach to K-12 education (Lubienski, 2009). LEAP has pushed these boundaries by including parents and families in the mission of the school. The collective mission statement of LEAP Academy is to enhance opportunities for children and families of Camden through the collaborative design, implementation, and integration of education, health and human services, professional development, and community development (LEAP Academy Memoranda, 2016). To this end, LEAP offers parents numerous means of support through various programming, workshops, skills assessments, training classes, parent university programs, board membership, and various other avenues and platforms (field notes, February 18, 2016). Examples of some of these programs and services include a College Access Center, Wellness Center, Health Clinic, Law Clinic, Parent Training Center, and Family Support Center, as well as numerous workshops and training programs. Based on a holistic approach to serving urban families, LEAP parents and families are integrated into all facets of the school. According to the LEAP Consolidated Charter (2000), LEAP parents are to be engaged as partners and full participants in all aspects of the school’s operations and governance, as measured by levels of parent volunteerism, levels of parent participation, and quantity and quality of training and adult education programs.

Utilizing innovative bandwidth (Lake, 2008; Lubienski, 2003; Preston, Goldring, Berends, & Cannata, 2012; U.S. Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2004), LEAP Academy employs three key strategies to engage its families.
The first of these strategies is the use of a Parent Compact. As seen in Appendix F, the LEAP Academy Parent Compact outlines how the parents and the entire school staff share the responsibility for improved student academic achievement and summarizes the means by which the school and parents will build and develop a partnership that will help children achieve the state’s high standards (LEAP Academy Parent Compact, 2016). Once parents enroll their child into LEAP Academy, they receive this compact outlining the school’s responsibilities, which includes providing parents with “an open door policy,” “mid-marking and quarterly reports on children,” and “high quality curriculum” just to name a few of these responsibilities (LEAP Academy Parent Compact, 2016, p.2). The compact then goes on to outline the expected responsibilities for the parents to the school and their child. A few of the responsibilities listed are volunteering and participating in “40 hours of classroom activities and extracurricular,” “completion of the Parents as Partners for Educational Change parent training program,” and contributing “as a member of the school community” (LEAP Academy Parent Compact, 2016, p. 4).

The relationship between school and parent extends beyond the compact, as parents go through a training course entitled the “Parents as Partners for Educational Change” (PPEC) program that teaches parents successful parenting techniques (LEAP Academy Parent Compact, 2016). This training course is the second strategy that LEAP uses to engage its low-income parent population. The innovative nature of the course lies in its being both reflective and inclusive of low-income parents. The PPEC course trains parents on what it means to be engaged and to be an advocate not just for themselves, but in the lives of their children (field notes, February 18, 2016).

There are a series of parenting classes. When we opened LEAP we realized that parents needed advocacy skills and need to learn how to be involved. Parents did
not know how to use their voice and power. They were coming from Camden City School System, which was very disempowering. So, we started the Parents Institute for Educational Change. We had a series of parenting classes that involved advocacy as well. And then, different concepts about leadership—what leadership is, what does leadership look like. Some of our parents are leaders, but they don’t know they can be leaders—it’s all about how you channel that, so they can learn how to be a leader at home, they can learn how to be a leader in the community (interview, LEAP Employee, February 5, 2016).

The PPEC program provided parents with leadership and advocacy skills. At the same time, LEAP Academy was aware that many of their families came to the school in “crisis” and with their own personal needs (interview, LEAP Parent, February 18, 2016). The approach used by LEAP was to provide parents with supports and services to address these needs, so that the parents could then focus on the needs of their children and provide them with the appropriate amount of support. LEAP Academy meets and accepts parents at their level in order to build capacity and engagement (interview, LEAP Employee, February 18, 2016). This local process of engagement helps the Academy to both welcome and understand its low-income parent population. According to a September 8, 1993, article in the Courier Post by Kevin Riordan, LEAP Academy would serve as a laboratory for curricula programs to address the special needs of inner-city students and offer empowerment programs for the families of those students. These empowerment programs work with low-income parents to help them understand the importance of engagement as well as provide them with techniques on how to be engaged in the lives of their children. Epstein (1996), through her parental involvement framework, offers ways for schools to measure parental engagement, but one key difference between Epstein’s framework and that of LEAP is that Epstein’s framework does not provide considerations for how to educate parents on how to be engaged, nor
does Epstein’s framework include capacity and advocacy building for parents who lack social capital.

Once parents build their advocacy skills and increase their capacity, LEAP creates various avenues for parents to engage. While LEAP offers parents traditional avenues of engagement (e.g., volunteering, attending school functions, and participating in training workshops), LEAP also offers parents the opportunity to engage in unique ways. One example of this is parents having the opportunity to be included in the hiring process of LEAP teachers and administrators.

LEAP has provided us [parents] with many opportunities to engage…. If someone is not engaged, it is because they simply do not want to. LEAP has days where parents can come into the class and read to students. I am not the best reader so I could not participate. But this did not deter me because LEAP told me I could use my talents in whatever way I decided to help the school. So, since I am a good seamstress, I sewed all the costumes for the school play. LEAP really goes out of its way to make sure that everyone feels welcome and everyone has a role in the school (interview, LEAP Parent, February 5, 2016).

It is also important to note that LEAP utilizes a sibling system in conjunction with its admission process and lists this process as one of its unique ways to engage families. The sibling system makes concessions for families when one child from a household gets into LEAP Academy, allowing the child’s siblings to also enroll in the school (field notes, February 18, 2016). This is done in an effort to keep families together and to keep parents fully engaged in one school as opposed to having to divide their time, attention, schedule, and overall engagement between multiple schools. This is another original approach used by LEAP Academy that is not seen in traditional public schools.

The third innovative strategy that LEAP Academy utilizes to engage its low-income parent population is including parents at all levels of the decision-making process. According to a May 2, 1995, article in the Courier Post by Pamela Frederick, the
founder of LEAP Academy stated that parent involvement is crucial to the school’s success. To that end, she wanted a parents’ association that would not just be a PTA, because she had found that former PTA groups did not work well for urban parents. Instead, it must be a parents’ group that feels they do have a vested interest in LEAP. Reflective of this notion, LEAP Academy has a Parents Council that meets monthly to discuss the current happenings at LEAP Academy and pass on recommendations to the school. In addition, LEAP Academy reserves four seats for LEAP Academy parents on the Board of Trustees (LEAP Academy Annual Report, 2010). This innovative approach to governance allows for parents to be both engaged and empowered even at the school’s highest level of decision-making.

Reflective of including parents in the school’s decision-making process, LEAP Academy administers an annual Parent Engagement Survey to LEAP parents. LEAP administered its latest Parent Engagement Survey in the fall of 2015. Demographic items on the LEAP Parent Engagement Survey included questions about gender, age, ethnicity, education, living arrangements, and employment. Among the 183 parents who reported their gender, 90.7% were females and 9.3% were males. Ages of the 177 respondents who reported their age ranged from 16 to 60, with 74.6% being from 21 to 40. Ethnicity was reported by 177 of the parents, with 90% reporting either Latino/Hispanic ethnicity (53.7%) or Black/African American ethnicity (36.7%). Of the 176 respondents who reported their highest level of education, the largest percentage (47.2%) reported earning a community college or trade school degree, while 31.3% reported earning a high school diploma or GED, and 10.2% reported earning a four-year college degree. Of 178 respondents reporting their living arrangements, 35.4% owned their own home, 56.7%
rented, and 7.9% lived with a relative. Parents were asked how long they have been a LEAP Academy parent. The greatest number responded with three to five years (35.8%), 26.7% reported more than five years, 21.9% indicated one to two years, and 15.5% reported less than one year. The LEAP school their children attended was reported by 179 parents, with 48.6% indicating the elementary school, 30.7% upper elementary, 23.5% middle high school, and 23.5% senior high school. Table 3 summarizes demographic and school attendance information from the latest survey. Percentages total more than 100% as some parents had more than one child attending LEAP Academy.

Bifulco and Ladd (2005) asserted that activities in which parents participate provide a mechanism for school officials to collect information about parental needs and preferences, which helps the officials to ensure that their product is attractive to their target market and allows them to use preferred activities to enlist parents to assist in efforts to market the school. The LEAP Parent Engagement Survey measured parent satisfaction with the school and its programs and workshops, and it solicited parents’ recommendations for new programs and workshops (LEAP Academy Parent Engagement Survey, 2015). The Parent Engagement Survey spoke to the level of intentionality and consideration put forth by LEAP to create parental engagement strategies and contextualizes the relationship between parents and the school. Item 14 of the survey asked parents if they had visited the school to meet with teachers. Of the 189 respondents, 64% reported that they had visited their child’s teacher. This question reflected LEAP’s innovative approach to engaging parents, as the question did not speak to whether a parent had attended a PTA meeting, but rather spoke to the individual relationship between parent and teacher. Furthermore, the item reflected the open-door
policy LEAP offers its families (LEAP Academy Parent Compact, 2016). Survey Item 31 asked parents what programs or services they would like the school to offer. In urban

Table 3

Demographic and School Attendance Information for Parents Taking Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item (# reporting)</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (183)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>90.7</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (177)</td>
<td>Under 21</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (177)</td>
<td>Latino/Hispanic</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other ethnicity</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest education (176)</td>
<td>Comm college/trade school degree</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High school/GED degree</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Four-year college degree</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Higher degree</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No high school degree</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living arrangements (178)</td>
<td>Own home</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rent home</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Live with relatives</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time a LEAP parent (187)</td>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One to two three years</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Three to five years</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than five years</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School children attend (179)</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upper elementary</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle high school</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
settings, schools often shun the opinion of parents as they believe low-income parents are incapable of making good decisions for themselves or their children (Anyon, 1997); however, in the case of LEAP Academy, we see the school directly seeking the opinion of parents and working in collaboration with them to create programs and workshops. Item 47 asked parents what time (day or evening) they would prefer to have programs. The wording of this item was contrary to the assertions of Epstein (1996), as she explicitly stated that schools should host programs at 5:30 pm since this is the time that parents are available after work. LEAP is aware that often, low-income parents do not have 9 am to 5 pm work schedules similar to that of their middle-class counterparts. The efforts made by LEAP to garner data on time preference for programs and workshops indicates intentionality to engage their parent population in a meaningful way. Item 19 asked parents to indicate their level of involvement with LEAP Academy. Over two-thirds (68.8%) reported that they were very or somewhat involved. In a February 28, 1997, article in the Philadelphia Inquirer by Dwight Ott, a parent was quoted as saying,

> In public schools, parents send their kids to school all day long and don’t get involved—public school is like daycare, but not at LEAP. What I like most about LEAP Academy is more parental involvement…. you can’t find this type of involvement anywhere else (p. B3).

**Beyond School Doors: Urban Community Development**

Lubienski (2003) noted that innovation does not happen in a vacuum; rather, it is the sum of both the school culture and the people who call the school home. Public schools are intimately linked with communities. They serve as centers of learning, they employ residents, and they connect neighbors with one another. As place-based
institutions, they are part of a neighborhood’s physical fabric, impacting local housing markets and influencing the aesthetic character of a community (Lubienski, 2003). In the case of LEAP Academy, innovation goes beyond the four walls of the school. LEAP Academy provides evidence for the role a community-based urban school can play in the community development process. In a *Rutgers Focus* article by Barbara Leap (April 15, 1994), Former Rutgers University President Francis L. Lawrence called LEAP Academy an “imaginative new venture that has the potential to link university, state, and community.” According to a May 4, 1995, article in *Black Issues in Higher Education* by Roberto Rodriguez, Dr. Gloria Bonilla-Santiago, LEAP founder, stated that her goal for creating LEAP was to be able to “train leaders from the Camden community who not only represent themselves, but who represent America…. these residents will work to solve the problems they live with and return these new found skills to their communities” (p. 20).

LEAP was created to change the educational trajectories of K-12 urban youth; but more importantly, LEAP wanted to change the way we as a society view urban epicenters and the individuals who inhabit these spaces. True to that mission, in May 2016 LEAP Academy announced its latest initiative to be an adult learning institute that will allow LEAP Academy parents to gain their associates degree or bachelor’s degree from Rowan University (Platoff, 2016). This program is designed to help charter school parents to enter or reenter higher education. Parents enrolled in the program will be able to change the trajectory of their lives and the lives of their family. The opportunity for low-income families to achieve upward economic mobility impacts the aesthetic character of a neighborhood and has the ability to transform the entire Camden community.
Furthermore, while some parents who are enrolled in the program have stated that they aspire to improve their career prospects by going on to college, many have said they also enrolled in the program to be better role models for their children (Platoff, 2016). Thus, the Parents Institute is another unconventional example of how low-income parents can engage in the academic lives of their children. The goal of building advocacy, increasing social capital, and creating social networks is a direct response to the marginalized nature of urban communities. In the same way that education evens the playing field for students, low-income parents gaining increased skills and awareness of societal norms has the potential to even the playing field between the low-income parents and their middle-class counterparts. Due to the innovative nature of charter schools (Lubienski, 2003), LEAP has been able to create a community of learners in both their student and adult populations (LEAP Academy Annual Report, 2014). While Camden students were receiving K-12 education at LEAP, their families were also being educated through the adult trainings and workshops offered by LEAP Academy. Whether LEAP family members were attending GED classes, financial literacy workshops, or voter registration drives, they were changing their lives and augmenting their social capital by attending a LEAP sponsored program (LEAP Academy Annual Report, 2009).

On a curricula note, LEAP Academy has managed to design projects that take the classroom into the larger Camden community. LEAP Academy has organized a wide variety of programs from neighborhood clean-ups to tree plantings, design projects, tutoring programs, and technical assistance help for local residents (LEAP Academy Annual Report, 2009). These projects benefit the Camden community at large; enrich the
educational experience of students, families, and school staff; and foster a sense of neighborhood pride.

LEAP Academy utilizes the community school model which has an integrated focus on academics, health, social services, youth, and families to improve student academic success, build community, and foster community engagement (Coalition for Community Schools, 2016). Through this model, LEAP brings together a range of supports and opportunities for students and families to actively engage students academically and build a relationship between the school and LEAP families.

That is why we created a different model at LEAP to address their [parents’] needs and be inclusive of the urban family phenomena. LEAP believes in engaging parents in finding real solutions along with the school and building community. LEAP parents’ program addresses the social disparities and isolation concerns by giving parents a role; they are true partners of the school community. They governed and monitor the parents’ practices to ensure that the school is a community hub for their families. They are empowered and they are policy makers. LEAP is more than a school, LEAP is more than a family, LEAP is a community (interview, LEAP Employee, February 18, 2016).

In sum, through the holistic approach of parent engagement, LEAP Academy has worked to not only cultivate an innovative K-12 charter school, but also to play a role in the community development process in Camden, New Jersey, and the residents who call the city home.

Emergent Themes in the Research

Analysis of the data collected in this research reveals several main themes related to parent engagement as reflected in the data. There are seven separate themes related to parent engagement and one theme related to LEAP Academy’s educational mission. The themes identified are the following:

- There are many ways parents engage with LEAP.
LEAP meets parents at their level.
LEAP is intentional in its efforts to engage parents.
LEAP empowers families.
Parents govern the school.
Parents sign a compact detailing their responsibilities.
Communication is a priority.
LEAP is successful in its educational mission.

A discussion of each theme follows.

**There are many ways parents engage with LEAP.** The results of each data-collection technique indicated multiple ways parents are engaged at LEAP Academy. These ways include signing a contract stating parent responsibilities, working or volunteering at LEAP, engaging directly in their children’s education by attending parent-teacher conferences, sitting in classrooms and talking to teachers, lobbying and advocating for new charter school laws, helping with homework, serving as a mentor to other parents, providing family stability and financial support to their family, modeling appropriate behavior, ensuring the health and wellness of their family, serving on various parent advisory boards and attending board meetings, and attending school events on and off campus (field notes, February 18, 2016; interviews, February 5, 2016; interviews, February 18, 2016; Jennings; 2002; LEAP Academy Annual Report, 2009, 2010, 2012). Parent engagement was also defined as attending leadership programs and adult classes such as nutrition, exercise, and cooking classes, and using health center services.

**LEAP meets parents at their level.** Data collected emphasized that LEAP meets parents at their level in the sense of recognizing and taking into account that families
have hardships and difficulties of various kinds. To engage such families in the life of the school it is important to work with families, given the conditions they are facing, and to make some effort to help alleviate those conditions (field notes, February 18, 2016; interviews, February 5, 2016; interviews, February 18, 2016; Jennings; 2002; LEAP Academy Annual Report, 2009, 2010, 2012). By engaging families where they are at, LEAP may make it more likely that parents will become engaged with the school because they see it as caring not only about their child but also about the family. In addition, the school may provide tangible support such as helping the family procure needed resources. This can help stabilize the home life of a child, which can foster student academic success (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

**LEAP is intentional in its efforts to engage parents.** This theme speaks to the formation and creation of Project LEAP and continues on to include the way the school engages parents with annual surveys, its hiring of LEAP parents as staff members, and the open-door policy referenced in the Parent Compact (field notes, February 18, 2016; interviews, February 5, 2016; interviews, February 18, 2016; LEAP Academy Parent Compact, 2016). At LEAP, parents are not seen as an extension of the school, but rather the engine that allows the school to function properly (interview, LEAP Employee February 18, 2016). Engagement of parents is not ancillary but rather a core component of the LEAP mission and vision. Parents provide recommendations to school administrators on what they want incorporated and or removed from the school; and in a collaborative manner, the school and parents work together to create a shared vision for the entire LEAP community (field notes, February 18, 2016).
**LEAP empowers families.** This theme is reflected through the numerous opportunities for parents to affect decisions on school direction and to provide leadership for the school. These opportunities increase the parents’ empowerment within LEAP (interview, LEAP Parent, February 5, 2016). In addition, this theme is closely related to the theme that LEAP meets parent at their level because engaging parents and families at their level requires recognizing that families may feel un-empowered, and it is important to change that mentality. One interviewee, a LEAP parent, revealed that in the early days of LEAP, there were efforts to increase parents’ self-esteem and empower parents. It seems clear that that effort has continued. One example of how LEAP empowers families is that LEAP provides families who are suffering hardship with tangible support that may help stabilize the family (interview, LEAP Employee, February 18, 2016). Empowering families also includes offering them classes in areas that can help them better manage their lives. These include areas such as advocacy, leadership programs, self-awareness, serving on boards, helping their kids with homework, exercise, nutrition, and cooking. Empowering families also includes programs teaching leadership and advocacy. Another parent stated during an interview that “parents have more power than they think they do. Making them realize this power is one of the objectives of LEAP Academy” (interview, LEAP Parent, February 5, 2016). The founder of LEAP Academy believed that if you give parents knowledge, you empower them. In her explanation of the relation between the community and Rutgers University, it was clear that she was working toward changing the beliefs of the parents in the community to view themselves as having rights in relation to the university. In this way, she was working to empower them. One could conclude from the interviews that LEAP’s philosophy is that creating a good school goes
hand-in-hand with empowering families and developing a sense of community (interview, LEAP Founder, February 18, 2016).

**Parents govern the school.** One of the main ways that LEAP Academy empowers parents is through providing opportunities to help govern the school. Based on the data collected, the LEAP philosophy is that to fully engage parents in the school, they must be given leadership and decision-making capabilities (LEAP Academy Strategic Plan, 2008). Documents revealed that parents are members of or make up entirely a number of boards and committees (LEAP Annual Report, 2008). These include the Parents Council, the Board of Directors, and the Board of Trustees (LEAP Annual Report, 2008). A parent interviewee revealed that parents have the opportunity to participate in the Parents as Leaders six-week program where they are taught advocacy skills, methods of community organizing, and techniques to illuminate individual leadership skills (interview, LEAP Parent, February 5, 2016). Parents who do not serve on any boards are often encouraged to participate in decision-making by attending meetings and expressing their views. In this way, they are able to provide input into decisions made by the boards (field notes, February 18, 2016). LEAP clearly encourages parents being engaged in helping determine the directions of the school. Parents are able to have input on teacher hiring decisions. The emphasis on helping govern the school is much different than what is normally seen or experienced in other Camden public schools (interview, LEAP Employee, February 18, 2016). According to a May 2, 1995, article in the *Courier Post* by Pamela Frederic, the founder of the school affirmed that the PTA model was not wanted for LEAP; what was wanted was a model in which parents work in partnership with the school in determining solutions, thereby helping to build community.
Parents sign a compact detailing their responsibilities. All interview participants and LEAP strategic documents mentioned the Parent Compact that is signed by parents (field notes, February 18, 2016; interviews, February 5, 2016; interviews, February 18, 2016; LEAP Academy Strategic Plan, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). The parent compact specifies how parents are expected to contribute to their child’s education and to LEAP Academy’s efforts. One interviewee who was a LEAP Academy employee saw the parent contract as a strategy the school used to help ensure parent engagement (interview, LEAP Employee, February 5, 2016). Another interviewee who was a LEAP Academy parent viewed the contract as informing parents that their responsibilities in educating their child went beyond minimum responsibilities such as simply getting the child ready for school (interview, LEAP Parent, February 18, 2016). The compact explicitly explains further responsibilities. While at the Family Support Center at LEAP Academy, the researcher overheard parents discussing the compact, and they stated that they viewed the contract as being between the parent and the school and believed it implied that if the parent fulfilled her or his responsibilities, then the school would fulfill its responsibility to educate the child and see him or her through to graduation (field notes, February 18, 2016). The implication of the conversation was that if the parent fulfilled the contract by fulfilling her or his responsibilities, then the parent had the right to expect that the school would fulfill its responsibility.

Communication is a priority. The LEAP Academy parents that were interviewed all spoke positively of the school’s communication efforts (interviews, February 5, 2016; interviews, February 18, 2016). One parent, in the interview on February 5, 2016, noted that having an “open avenue of communications” is a main
aspect of parent engagement. “This openness in communication involves parents feeling comfortable about coming to the school to talk to teachers or the principal … the open-door policy at LEAP is an added bonus.” She contrasted the open-door policy with the policies of other schools in which parents are not engaged. In such schools, appointments are needed to see school personnel. Teacher communication at LEAP is encouraged and is part of the teacher’s evaluation. Another parent noted that LEAP communicates with parents in different ways, including voice, text, handouts for students to bring home, and social media. The parent mentioned that messages are in both English and Spanish (interview, LEAP Parent, February 18, 2016). A LEAP employee agreed that teachers are encouraged to communicate with parents daily and in many forms. She listed alternative communication forms as including calendars, memos, and posters (interview, LEAP Employee, February 5, 2016). Another LEAP parent agreed that communication of the school to parents is good and involves multiple ways of communicating, including handwritten notes, emails, phone calls, and post on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, while another parent concurred that there is a variety of communication forms used by the school (interviews, February 5, 2016; interviews, February 18, 2016).

**LEAP is successful in its educational mission.** The responses of all of the interviewees, the LEAP Parent Engagement survey responses, and all documents reviewed indicate that LEAP is doing a good job educating students (field notes, February 18, 2016; interviews, February 5, 2016; interviews, February 18, 2016; LEAP Academy Parent Compact, 2016). A parent who had two children who had graduated from LEAP Academy remarked on how kids at LEAP grow greatly from preschool to
seniors and said that the transformation was “amazing” (interview, LEAP Parent, February 5, 2016). A LEAP employee commented that LEAP is a safe school with a “good track record” and that parents trust the school to fulfill its promise of educating their children (interview, LEAP Employee, February 18, 2016). Another LEAP employee did not specifically mention the school’s success in educating children, but she spoke positively about LEAP’s parent engagement, communication, and home-visit initiatives (interview, LEAP Employee, February 18, 2016). A LEAP parent with a total of six children who had either graduated from or were currently enrolled in LEAP made positive remarks about LEAP initiatives and saw LEAP Academy as part of an expanding educational vision (interview, LEAP Parent, February 18, 2016). Another LEAP parent, with a total of five children—one who had graduated from LEAP and three currently attending—had positive things to say about LEAP, remarking that it was like “family” in its relationship to parents (interview, LEAP Parent, February 18, 2016). A LEAP Board member with two children who had graduated from LEAP and one currently attending the school talked about the idea of college being “embedded” in students at LEAP and characterized LEAP as being “amazing” and “awesome” (interview, LEAP Board Member, February 5, 2016). The founder of LEAP also spoke favorably about LEAP Academy. She remarked that other Camden schools are in need of improvement because they use a top-down approach and that LEAP is an exception because it uses a ground-up approach (interview, LEAP Founder, February 18, 2016). Her remarks strongly suggest that she believed LEAP Academy is fulfilling its educational mission. Given many other comments made by the interviewees, seen in the review of documents and found in the researcher’s field notes, it seems likely that the school’s philosophy of parental
engagement is a main factor in helping fulfill the school’s educational mission. Parental engagement may create a climate in which education and home life are more integrated, making schooling a larger and more meaningful aspect of the student’s daily life (field notes, February 18, 2016).

**Comparing Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement to the LEAP Family Engagement Model**

This section provides an analysis of the key differences and similarities between Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement and the LEAP Family Engagement Model. The figure below provides a graphical representation of the two frameworks and their respective categories.
Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement (1996) has six distinct categories: parenting, communication, decision-making, collaboration with community, learning at home, and volunteering. These six categories are overlapping spheres of school and home and serve as the foundation to both create and identify parental involvement efforts. The LEAP Academy Parent Engagement Model comprises four distinct categories. These categories are informed and collective decision-making; school participation and civic leadership; comprehensive school-based services and support; and training, capacity building, and personal growth. Similar to Epstein’s Framework, LEAP utilizes a model that has overlapping spheres of home and school where parental involvement extends outside the school and is extended into the home life of each student. Another key similarity is that both frameworks share decision-making as a category. Epstein noted the importance of involving parents to the extent possible in the decision-making process of a school, while LEAP also underscores the importance of parents in the decision-making process as evidenced by parents serving on the LEAP Academy Board of Trustees. However, while these two frameworks share similarities, the differences between Epstein’s framework and the LEAP model set the frameworks apart.

Three key characteristics distinguish the Epstein framework from the LEAP model. The first key difference lies in the names of the frameworks. While this difference might appear to be a simple lexical variation, it actually provides insight into differences in how the frameworks approach parental involvement. The Epstein Framework of Parent Involvement includes the term “involvement,” whereas the LEAP Family Engagement Model uses the term “engagement.” As was noted in Chapter 1 of this study, while
“involvement” and “engagement” are often used interchangeably, engagement denotes a deeper relationship between a school and a student’s home and signifies a two-way relationship where both parties (school and home) hold each other accountable for their participation in the academic life of a child (Smith & Wohlsetter, 2009). Furthermore, Epstein’s framework uses the term “parent,” while LEAP’s model uses the term “family.” The use of the term “parent” makes reference to traditional notions of how a household is defined. In middle-class terms, this traditional definition includes a mom and dad in the home. However, because low-income families often have non-traditional households, where an adult—be that a grandmother, aunt, uncle, cousin, or sibling—serves as the guardian of a school-aged child, use of the term “parent” might alienate some low-income families from the parental engagement discourse (Clark, 1983). Contrarily, and reflective of the population they serve, LEAP’s model eschews the term “parent” and instead uses the term “family.” The use of the term “family” is both inclusive and reflective of low-income populations and serves as an invitation for family members to fully participate in the engagement process.

The second key difference between the Epstein framework and the LEAP model is the social capital and capacity-building component that we see in the LEAP model but is absent in Epstein’s framework. When it comes to creating an approach to parental involvement that is both reflective and inclusive of all parent populations, a framework must be void of the assumptions that (a) all parents have the capacity to engage in the academic life of their children and (b) all parents know how to engage in the academic life of their children. Epstein’s framework provides six categories for parental involvement. However, none of those categories include a component that will increase
social capital and build advocacy skills for parents who are not at a school’s desired level of engagement. Instead, Epstein’s (1996) framework makes several assumptions about parents through her discussion of program implementation and programming timing—assumptions that are more aligned to middle-class notions of engagement as they assume that parents know how to participate in PTA meetings. LEAP’s model, however, makes concessions for parents who do not have the social capital or advocacy skills needed to fully engage in the academic lives of their children. Through parent workshops, parent trainings, and school functions, LEAP works directly with families to build their advocacy skills to effectively engage in the academic life of their child and to help families to be advocates for themselves (field notes, February 18, 2016; interviews, February 5, 2016; interviews, February 18, 2016; LEAP Academy Strategic Plan, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010).

The third key difference between Epstein’s framework and the LEAP model are the external services and supports available to families. Although Epstein names “collaborating with the community” as one of her framework’s six categories, the only collaboration she mentions is for a school to look for local resources (Epstein, 1996); whereas, LEAP takes a comprehensive approach to assisting families who are in crisis (field notes, February 18, 2016; interviews, February 5, 2016; interviews, February 18, 2016; LEAP Academy Strategic Plan, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). LEAP’s approach includes offering an on-site health clinic, legal services, college assistance, financial literacy workshops, GED courses, and parent workshops (LEAP Academy Strategic Plan, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). LEAP’s 360-degree approach to families works to stabilize both students and family members in an effort to provide a stable home

From this analysis, it has been concluded that while Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement provides guidelines on how to both define and identify parental involvement, the framework is not reflective and inclusive of low-income populations. Unlike Epstein’s framework, the LEAP Family Engagement Model provides parents with development opportunities that build capacity and civic leadership; meets and accepts parents at their level in order to build capacity and engagement; creates a local process of engagement to understand and welcome all parent populations; and makes parent engagement a part of the LEAP Academy mission. LEAP Academy has a parent process that builds support, follows a plan, and implements multiple ideas to get parent buy-in.

Summary

The data reported and examined in this chapter represent highlights of the parental engagement perspectives and experiences of LEAP Academy parents, families, administrators, teachers, and members of the Camden community. The collaborative relationships and partnerships forged on behalf of strengthening parental engagement are a key ingredient that has been integrated into the LEAP Academy Family Engagement Model and were illuminated by the researcher to contextualize the relationship between the school and the Camden community. The creation of social networks, development of social capital, innovative engagement techniques, and development of community outside the school walls are grounded in the concepts of civic participation and community development and can be viewed as seeds of liberation for families in the community. The
next chapter elaborates on these ideas and their role in empowering parent and family stakeholders for joint leadership to affect school improvement and social change in the greater community.
Chapter 5
Discussion and Recommendations

Introduction

Research on parental engagement in child and adolescent education conveys a strong indication that parents’ engagement benefits children’s learning (Chavin, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1989, 1994; Hess & Holloway, 1984; Hobbs, Dokecki, Hoover-Dempsey, Moroney, Shayne, & Weeks, 1984; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Existing literature offers critical insights into the manner in which parents and schools have attempted to develop a symbiotic relationship that seeks to offer the best education possible to school-age children. However, research points to the notion that low-income parents fail to engage in the academic lives of their children (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Marshall, 2006; Smith & Wohlstetter, 2009). Given the evidence regarding the limitations of current parental engagement practices and the opportunities for innovations in charter schools, new practices are needed that are both inclusive and reflective of low-income parent populations. This research provides evidence for a framework that invites low-income parent engagement.

Summary of the Findings

Parental engagement in the education of students has been both lauded and criticized for decades. While a preponderance of research suggests that parental engagement has a positive effect on the academic achievement of students, researchers continue to question how to account for and adequately measure engagement in low-income parent populations. By examining and observing how an urban charter school garners high levels of parental engagement from its low-income parent population, a
more unified approach and model may become apparent regarding ways to enhance parental engagement and assist low-income families, urban schools, and educators to work together to cultivate and encourage student academic success. Furthermore, this study provides evidence suggesting that while the Epstein Framework of Parent Involvement can be used to measure and define parental involvement, it is neither reflective nor inclusive of low-income parent populations.

The findings presented in Chapter 4 indicate that LEAP Academy Charter School was intentional and deliberate in garnering input from parents during the development and planning phase of the school. This level of intentionality during the planning and development phase created a multiplier effect that remains a part of the current school culture. Parents are the pillars of LEAP Academy. Through comprehensive social services and programs, LEAP Academy is able to empower families, give hope to children and parents, and transform the lives of Camden families. As a result of delivering these benefits to LEAP parents and children, LEAP Academy has managed to achieve high levels of parental engagement from its low-income parent population. The efforts of LEAP Academy have not gone unnoticed from its parent population, as 69% of parents who completed the 2015 LEAP Parent Engagement Survey were satisfied with the parent programs at LEAP Academy, and 72% of parents reported overall satisfaction with the school. Overall, LEAP Academy provides parents with various points for engagement, meets parents at their level, empowers and builds the capacity and social capital of parents through numerous parent-training programs, allows parents the opportunity to be a part of the school’s governance structure, uses various forms of communication, enters into an agreement (parent compact) with parents, and is successful
in its educational mission. The LEAP Family Engagement Model is a holistic model with the parent engaged with the school, the school engaged in the home.

This study challenged the dominant parental involvement paradigm of Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement. What this study uncovered indicates that Epstein’s framework is a lockstep method of parental involvement. Epstein’s framework minimizes individuality and adheres to a one-size-fits-all approach to parenting. This approach alienates low-income parents from the discourse around parental involvement as it does not account for non-traditional ways that low-income parents engage; nor does it account for the need to build social capital and advocacy skills in parents prior to schools asking for low-income parents to engage in the academic lives of their children. The LEAP Family Engagement Model is an interactive model that forges collaboration and communication between the school and parents at all levels. LEAP’s interactive approach to engaging parents gives birth to nontraditional forms of parent engagement, fosters innovative strategies for parental engagement, and lays the groundwork and serves as the impetus to augment the current definition of parental engagement.

**Research question one.** Research question one centered on finding what ways low-income parents engage in the academic lives of their children within the school and the home environments in Camden, New Jersey. The findings of the study showed that low-income parents engage in the lives of their children in diverse ways, including volunteering at school, serving as a member of the governance structure, working as an employee of the school, and helping sew outfits for the school play (interviews, February 5, 2016; interviews, February 18, 2016). Parents were able to engage in all aspects of their children’s lives at school by advocating for the charter school bill, lobbying
lawmakers, being present at school functions, visiting their children’s classrooms, attending parent-training workshops, serving as parent chaperones for LEAP events, participating in social and networking events at LEAP, being a part of the teacher-hiring process, and playing an active role in the Parent Council. At home, parents engaged in the academic lives of their children by serving as tutors, being present at extracurricular activities, helping with homework, purchasing school uniforms, serving as role models for their children, providing a stable home environment, making sure their child was healthy enough to attend school, and assisting in the completion of school projects.

Additionally, parents were given an expanded opportunity to engage in the academic lives of their children through the encouragement and empowerment set forth by LEAP Academy’s parent programs. LEAP provides parents an open-door policy to be a part of the school community, thereby allowing parents to have “on demand” and “at will” engagement opportunities (interviews, February 5, 2016; interviews, February 18, 2016). LEAP recognizes that not every parent has the reading or language skills to volunteer to serves as tutors within the classroom; therefore, LEAP creates engagement opportunities that speak to variable education and language levels. Through the creation of these opportunities, LEAP parents are able to engage in the academic lives of their children in various ways. As stated by the majority of interview participants, LEAP does a great job of meeting parents “at their level.” This openness towards parents both invites and encourages engagement from the school’s low-income parent population.

The ways in which parents engage at LEAP eschew the traditional typologies set forth by Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement. LEAP creates increased avenues for engagement to both reflect and include its low-income parent population. Epstein
(1996) often touted the importance of PTA meetings and school events (e.g., bake sales and car washes), but she failed to make concessions for low-income parents whose lifestyles do not fit into the demographic of traditional participatory notions of engagement. Due to overreliance on the Epstein Framework of Parent Involvement, the ways by which low-income parents engage have traditionally not been accounted for and have been left out of parental engagement conversations. The findings of this study indicate that low-income families do engage in their children’s academic lives in the home environment in multiple ways. Further, given an institutional environment that acknowledges the unique challenges of low-income families and seeks to engage and meet them at their level, low-income parents can and do engage in the academic lives of their children in myriad of ways.

**Research question two.** The second research question mirrored the first in its goal to uncover the “what” in low-income parent engagement, but its focus was more on “how” this engagement is accomplished. In particular, given the opportunity for innovation in the charter school landscape, what innovative strategies does LEAP Academy University Charter School utilize to garner high levels of parental engagement from its low-income parents? This question explored how innovation within a charter school can lead to the creation and implementation of new strategies.

Research question two underscores the key differences between Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement and the LEAP Family Engagement Model. LEAP Academy’s model rests on four categories: school participation and civic leadership; comprehensive school-based services and support; informed and collective decision-making; and training, capacity building, and personal growth. While Epstein’s framework
addresses school participation, school-based services and support, and decision-making, it fails to address advocacy training, the creation of social capital, capacity building, and personal growth. In urban communities, low-income parents and children often enter the school system in “crisis,” lacking necessities and basic skills and being disenchanted with bureaucratic policies and systems. Therefore, if schools desire to engage low-income parents and families, they must first meet them where they are and work with them to build capacity, increase social capital, and provide training for parents to become advocates for themselves and their children. This first step to garnering parental engagement from low-income parents is where Epstein’s framework falls short, as it is void of the initial step that is required to gain trust, understanding, and buy-in from low-income parents.

In the words of the founder of LEAP Academy, “We needed to value them [parents], I needed to empower them and lift them through my work because they were so beat up” (interview, LEAP Founder, February 18, 2016). Dr. Gloria Bonilla-Santiago was able to achieve this empowerment by including parents in the vision and mission of the school. This intentionality created an atmosphere where parents were not just stakeholders, but partners in the educational process of their children’s education. The bottom-up holistic approach to parental engagement continues today at LEAP Academy. While LEAP uses several strategies for engagement, five strategies particularly boost high levels of parent engagement in the school.

First is the creation of a sense of family among LEAP’s low-income population. When parents enroll their children in LEAP, they realize that they have a common interest in creating a better future for their children and changing the K-12 educational
landscape. This shared and like-minded (Putnam & Goss, 2002) reinforcement of homogeneity creates a sense of family and belonging. Through the programs and activities at LEAP Academy, bonding social capital (Lin, 2000) is formed by providing social networks to LEAP parents. The creation of social networks and social capital at LEAP Academy provides parents with the foundation needed to effectively engage in the academic lives of their children.

Second, once parents enroll their child at LEAP, they enter into a parent compact, which states a list of responsibilities for the parents that include attending parent-teacher conferences and parent council meetings, as well as volunteering their time. Third, LEAP Academy trains all of its parents on what it means to be engaged. Through the Parents as Partners for Educational Change Program, parents are taught lessons on advocacy, empowerment, and capacity building. Fourth, LEAP views parents as partners. This unconventional view translates into an open-door policy at the school and parents having meaningful roles and responsibilities within the school.

Fifth, and what I would assert as the most important strategy, LEAP Academy delivers on its academic promise to its students. While LEAP may have its downsides (e.g., some parents voiced concerns with parking and high teacher turnover), the graduation and college-acceptance numbers are a major attraction for families that have viewed their children’s high school graduation and college acceptance as an unattainable feat. In a city like Camden, where despair and distrust are arguably strong among many low-income families, LEAP has been able to remain steadfast in its mission and promise to the community. As one parent put it, “it is a belief from parents that if we do our part [parent engagement], then LEAP will do theirs. Having a child go to college breaks the
chain of poverty and changes the lives of everyone in that family” (interview, LEAP Parent, February 18, 2016). This hope and belief that LEAP can change the entire trajectory of a family serves as the underpinning for why parents engage and why the school continues to have hundreds of families on the admissions waiting list. These innovative strategies and approaches to education garner high levels of parental engagement from LEAP’s low-income parent population.

**Research question three.** Once the researcher identified the ways low-income parents engage and the innovative strategies used to produce high levels of engagement, the next and final question to be answered was, how should the definition of parental engagement be modified to take into account variable levels of social capital and social class differences in engagement to advance reform in institutional design? Parental engagement as it is currently defined focuses on parent-child interaction and the use of investment and resources in the schooling of a child. Based on the data gathered in this study, the definition of parental engagement should be modified to include both a parent’s awareness of and benefit from engagement, as well as the collaboration between the school and the parent. Rather than positing a new definition, the researcher identified five practices that should be incorporated into parental involvement to augment the current definition and present-day practices.

- We must first begin by replacing the word “involvement” with “engagement.”
- All parental engagement strategies should include a component that develops parents as co-creators in the educational endeavor and builds their capacity.
- Schools and parents should work together to co-create a shared vision and a code of conduct.
• Schools should take a comprehensive approach to engagement that includes services to support parents (health center, GED classes, college access, job creation, legal services, health and wellness).

• The goal of the school should be to serve as a community for families.

These practices, unlike the traditional definitions used today, do not assume that parents (a) know how to engage in the academic life of their child, (b) are knowledgeable about their role in the academic life of their child, and (c) are aware that their engagement in their child’s life will be beneficial. When these three assumptions are removed, we are able to take a more holistic and bottom-up approach to parental engagement that would be of benefit to and inclusive of all parents despite socioeconomic status.

One of the biggest flaws in Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement is that it assumes parents know how to engage in the academic lives of their children and assumes that family and home life are stable enough for parents to engage effectively. For low-income parents, this is often not the case. Low-income families face a great deal of instability at home and need to be stabilized before they can be effective co-educators in their children’s lives. These five suggested practices for parental engagement account for the possibility that parents are not aware and do not know the benefit of parental engagement. Furthermore, these practices speak to the creation of social and human capital within the lives of parents. As reflected in the LEAP Parent Engagement Model, these are all elements that are needed to effectively engage low-income parent populations.
Implications for Theory

This study examined the ideas of Epstein and her assertions (1982, 1996, 2002) to determine whether those assertions are valid in the context of parental engagement in low-income parent populations. Based on the findings, this study found that Epstein’s assertions are not valid in the context of low-income parental engagement. In particular, Epstein’s framework does not work with parents who reside in Camden, New Jersey.

The Epstein Framework of Parent Involvement sets forth a structure of family-school-community partnerships based on the theory that overlapping spheres of home, school, and community shape children’s learning and development. Partitioned into six distinct categories, this framework centers upon parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaboration. While the Epstein framework recognizes the importance of parental involvement both in school and at home, the framework has several limitations.

Through its design, the Epstein framework assumes that parents know how to engage in the academic lives of their children and thereby removes low-income parents from the parental engagement discourse. The Epstein framework is void of training classes centered on capacity building and advocacy training—two key components that prepare low-income parents to be active participants in the academic lives of their children. Furthermore, Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement focuses on traditional typologies of parental involvement that include PTA meetings and fundraising efforts. Traditional definitions of parental involvement require investments of time and money from parents, and those who may not be able to provide these resources are deemed uninvolved.
When comparing the LEAP Family Engagement Model to Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement, key characteristics define both models. The strength of the LEAP framework lies in its inclusion of training and building capacity in LEAP parents. Through this strategy, LEAP Academy primes and prepares parents for effective engagement in the academic lives of their children and to be active participants within the school. With respect to low-income parents, the strategic first step made by LEAP Academy is to meet parents at their level and train them to become advocates for their children. This is the distinguishing characteristic that not only separates LEAP Academy’s Family Engagement Model from other frameworks, but also has been the key to garnering high levels of parental engagement from its low-income parent population.

Similar to LEAP’s framework, Epstein includes decision-making and support from the community as important elements for parental engagement. The weakness of Epstein’s framework lies in its inability to include all parents and to appropriately address the needs of low-income parents as it makes the assumption that all parents know how to engage.

In order for Epstein’s framework to work for all families, it should be extended to be more inclusive and reflective of low-income populations. A framework that is more inclusive and reflective of the needs of low-income families will have the following characteristics:

1. Training modules designed for low-income parents in competencies that are related to capacity building, civic leadership, and advocacy and are relevant to creating change in schools that are in need of improvement and are failing families.
2. Comprehensive school-based services and support within the school in areas including health, college access, legal help, professional development, and family support.

3. A collective decision-making structure for parents within the school with governance and social-support systems to meet needs of low-income families in crisis.

4. Job opportunities and leadership roles for parents in the school and surrounding community to ensure improvement of quality of life for the entire family.

5. A sustainable parent culture of engagement that demands mutual respect, resources, opportunities for growth and promotion, and a caring and loving learning climate for families.

6. A community-development model that incorporates the school as a means for transforming the community.

**Implications for Practice**

The importance of parental engagement in the education of students cannot go unrecognized. As educators across the country continue to strive for academic success for all students, it is particularly beneficial to give attention to strategies that would cultivate and encourage parental engagement across schools in our nation—including the schools located in our most impoverished communities. This study uncovered that low-income parents do engage in the academic lives of their children. When low-income parents enroll their child in a school that does not use inclusive engagement practices, parents fail to engage with the school but instead engage at home. However, the ways by which low-income parents engage in the academic lives of their children in the home environment are not accounted for due to overreliance on Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement.
This study uncovered that the Epstein framework is flawed in its traditional use and needs to be extended to be more inclusive and reflective of low-income parents.

To be more inclusive and reflective of all parent populations, schools should include the term “family” in their engagement frameworks. The use of the term “parent” alienates families who may not resemble the traditional make-up of a two-parent household. Through the incorporation of the term “family,” schools are able to encourage participation from any adult family member that serves as a guardian for the child. Furthermore, the use of the term “involvement” denotes mere participation, whereas “engagement” is a collaboration between school and family that rises to the level of a formal relationship in an effort to provide academic success for students.

It would be beneficial for schools to adopt a parental engagement framework that is both inclusive and reflective of parents’ needs. Specifically, for schools working with low-income parents, a framework must go beyond traditional notions of parental engagement. Low-income parents need a framework that speaks to their needs and can assist them in achieving both their personal and academic goals for their children. One theme that was uncovered in the study is the way LEAP Academy works with parents “at their level.” This is key for working with low-income parent populations. Educators and administrators must be open to working with parents at their level and then working together in a collaborative manner to achieve a shared vision. This collaborative approach to parental engagement will result in building capacity within the parents and in turn will lead to increased parental engagement at home and at school. Too often, low-income parents are made to feel that they do not have the power to make an impact in their child’s academic life. These parents are often isolated, marginalized by society and
schools, and disempowered. They do not know how to go about being involved in a culture where they are not welcome. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that schools serving low-income parents not only educate their students, but also educate the parents on their role in the academic lives of their children. They must change the practices, culture, and model of engaging parents.

The LEAP model can be scaled to and replicated in similar schools and communities by incorporating best practices from LEAP into the school. It is important that schools and districts are receptive to these practices and open to incorporating new ideas. Historically, while low-income parents welcome innovative practices that bolster parental engagement, schools have been reluctant to embrace these strategies (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Bower & Griffin, 2011). In order for the LEAP model to be replicated, it requires the cooperation and openness of both parents and schools. Once parents are educated and equipped with knowledge on how to effectively engage in the lives of their children, they can then become empowered. Once empowered, parents experience personal growth within their lives, and many become civic leaders in the school and the community. This is tremendously helpful to schools that embrace change and welcome parental engagement.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The importance of parental engagement has been recognized at the local, state, and national levels (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Research suggests that parental engagement positively affects student academic achievement and its absence can lead to unsatisfactory academic outcomes (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Fan & Chen, 2001). Creating various opportunities for engagement is a key
factor. Parents come from different cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Being aware of these differences enhances a school’s ability to better cater to its parent populations. Not all parents can read, write, or speak English. Therefore, having nontraditional engagement opportunities for parents is imperative.

As schools and school systems work to improve parental engagement, they may consult with relevant studies to gain a better understanding of what characteristics are needed to develop a framework for their low-income parent populations. To assist with this challenge, research needs to be expanded to broaden the understanding of parental engagement for all families. While this study has contributed to our knowledge about how one charter school accounts for the influence of class on parental engagement, additional research must continue to build upon the work done here. Suggestions for future research include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. This study is limited to data from a single case study of a charter school. The study should be expanded to multiple urban charter schools to gain a broader understanding of low-income parental engagement.

2. This study provides a snapshot of low-income parental engagement from several, but not all, perspectives. A similar study including perceptions of students and teachers would provide a broader understanding of parental engagement in schools.

3. Although this study primarily used qualitative methods, a study that incorporates quantitative approaches to data analysis could provide deeper insight into low-income parental engagement.

4. Future studies should be conducted at urban schools where the school founder is no longer a part of the school. Leadership may have a strong effect on school outcomes.
Conducting research on a school with new leadership could provide additional insights.

5. More research on charter schools as labs for innovation is needed.

Conclusion

This study examined how socioeconomic status and variant levels of social capital shape parental engagement in child learning. Through the study of a single charter school that uses innovative approaches for parental engagement, this study aimed to examine accepted views, add new findings to the current literature on parental engagement, and analyze how institutional arrangements can either facilitate or block engagement among low-income parents. Conclusions to this study lead us to question the effectiveness and appropriateness of the Epstein Framework of Parent Involvement for supporting low-income parental engagement. Further, the findings of this study indicate that low-income parents engage in the academic lives of their children when schools implement a parental engagement framework that trains, fosters, cultivates, motivates, facilitates, and encourages myriad ways of engaging. This scholarship deepens our understanding of critically responsive parental engagement practices in a K-12 school that has demonstrated success with working with families from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds and offers models for schools dedicated to building two-way relationships with their low-income parent populations. Furthermore, through innovative practices, we see how a school can play a vital role in the community-development process in one of our nation’s most distressed cities. Therefore, schools with substantial populations of students from low-income families should work towards creating robust relationships and partnerships with parents and community members. When these authentic relationships
are formed between schools and parents, they aid in the development of effective parent-education training programs, inclusive engagement practices and strategies, increased communication between the home environment and school, and increased student academic success. As affirmed by a LEAP Academy parent, “When a participatory process is sincere and inclusive, parents believe they are listened to and respected. You will have gone a long way in building parent ownership, support, and legitimacy” (interview, LEAP Parent, February 18, 2016).

As a nation, we can no longer use a one-size-fits-all method to engage our parents in their children’s education. We must begin to change the narrative of how we define effective parental engagement strategies or risk alienating our most vulnerable parent groups. Until we, as a nation, discontinue our overreliance on Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement, we will continue to alienate and fail our low-income parents whose desire is to be treated with the same respect and dignity as everyone else. In maintaining that “education is the civil rights issue of our generation” (Ballasy, 2011, para. 2), Secretary of Education Arne Duncan referred to quality education as essential to providing youth—all youth, including those at lower socioeconomic levels—the opportunity to pursue the American dream. If parental engagement is a key to enabling such quality education, then it is paramount for our K-12 schools serving areas with low-income populations to identify and enact innovative strategies to help and encourage those families to become actively engaged partners with their schools in the education of their children.
## APPENDIX A: EPSTEIN FRAMEWORK OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Involvement</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PARENTING</strong></td>
<td>Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMMUNICATING</strong></td>
<td>Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children’s progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VOLUNTEERING</strong></td>
<td>Recruit and organize parent help and support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LEARNING AT HOME</strong></td>
<td>Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DECISION MAKING</strong></td>
<td>Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY</strong></td>
<td>Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

LEAP Founder/ Employee Interview Questions

Please state your name

1. What is your past and/or current affiliation with LEAP Academy?
2. Could you discuss your role as it relates to working with parents?
3. What does parent engagement mean to you?
4. Could you give examples of ways LEAP parents are engaged?
5. How would you describe the “LEAP Academy Parent Engagement Model”?
6. What attributes makes this model different from other engagement models?
7. What impact does the LEAP Academy parent engagement model have on the lives of parents?
8. What strategies has LEAP Academy employed to garner parent engagement?
9. What strategies have worked in the past? What has not worked?
10. What is the philosophy around communicating with parents? Is there a certain approach?
11. How often are teachers encouraged to communicate with parents?
12. What mechanism is used to inform parents of programs and activities?
13. To what extent are parents involved in the decision-making of the school? Examples?
14. What is the approach to cultivating parent leaders?
15. How does LEAP work with the surrounding community?
16. Anything additional you would like to add or let me know about?
LEAP Parent and Member of LEAP Governance Interview Questions:

Please state your name

1. What is your past and/or current affiliation with LEAP Academy?
2. Could you discuss your role as it relates to working with parents?
3. What does parent engagement mean to you?
4. Could you give examples of ways LEAP parents are engaged?
5. How would you describe the “LEAP Academy Parent Engagement Model”?
6. What attributes makes this model different from other engagement models?
7. What impact does the LEAP Academy parent engagement model have on the lives of parents?
8. Can you describe the relationship between the school and parents?
9. How would you describe communication between the two parties?
10. What does decision-making at the parent level look like?
11. Why is decision-making so important?
12. There are many members that comprise a board, as a parent what impact have you been able to make due to your role that others could not have made? (inside knowledge)
13. What is the relationship between LEAP and the Camden community?
14. How if at all has being a part of the governance structure impacted your life?
15. What does it mean for a school to empower its parents? Do you feel empowered?
16. Anything additional you would like to add or let me know about?
LEAP Parent Interview Questions:

Please state your name

1. What is your past and/or current affiliation with LEAP Academy?
2. Does LEAP Academy offer parent education courses (GED, Financial literacy), if so, could you talk about the courses you attended at what you found to be most beneficial?
3. Does LEAP Academy offer family support programs (health, nutrition?), if so, could you talk about the courses you attended at what you found to be most beneficial?
4. How about programs that speak to your culture?
5. How often did you speak to your child’s teacher?
6. Was it an open door policy? Did you feel comfortable contacting school leadership?
7. How would you define parent engagement?
8. In what ways did you engage as a parent with the school?
9. In what ways did you engage as a parent at home?
10. On a scale of 1-10 how important is volunteerism?
11. What role do parents play in the planning process of LEAP Academy?
12. Do you feel empowered? If so can you give examples of how you were made to feel this way?
13. Do you feel connected to the school?
14. Would you recommend the school to other parents? Like the most/ like the least
15. What strategy do you think has the greatest impact in creating parent engagement?
16. Anything additional you would like to add or let me know about?
APPENDIX C: LEAP ACADEMY PARENT ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

(Survey instrument was created and administered by the CLC Rutgers Management Consultant group on behalf of LEAP Academy Charter School.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Number</th>
<th>Survey Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How do you identify yourself by race and/or ethnicity?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>What is the highest level of education that you have completed?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tell us us about your home. Do you Own? Rent?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Employment Status?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>How long have you been a LEAP Parent?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Why did you choose to enroll your children at LEAP Academy?</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>How often do you use the Internet?</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>What is the best way to communicate with you to send information?</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Would you prefer to receive information in Spanish?</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>How often do you use the school's website to check your child's progress at LEAP Academy?</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>In the past year, how often have you visited your child's school?</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Have you visited the school's Facebook page?</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>How often do you visit the school's Facebook Page?</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Which LEAP School do your children attend? Check all that apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Please indicate the number of students you have attending this school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Rate your level of involvement with school activities:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Have you met with your building principal?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Which Principal?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Overall, how satisfied are you with LEAP Academy?</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Overall, are you very satisfied, satisfied, neutral, dissatisfied, very dissatisfied with the school program your children attend?</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>How would you rate the quality of education at LEAP charter school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>How satisfied are you with the following features of this school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>How satisfied are you with the following programs and services offered at LEAP?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>What after school enrichment programs would you like to see implemented?</td>
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<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>In general, how concerned are you about each of the following issues pertaining to your child or children?</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>What issues prevent you from participating at the school?</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>How often do you do the following activities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Indicate how interested you are in the following services, activities, and opportunities for parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>On a daily basis, which of these subjects are most concerning to you when it comes to helping your child with homework?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>What other types of opportunities for parents would you like to see at LEAP?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Do you have any younger children that will need pre-school or child care services next year?</td>
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<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>If so, would you be interested in bringing your child to the ELRA Pre-School or Infant/Toddler Program?</td>
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<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Do you have a family doctor or pediatrician?</td>
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<td>37</td>
<td>Do you have health insurance?</td>
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<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>If you do not have health insurance, are your children insured through NJ Family Care?</td>
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<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Do you currently use or have you previously used the services of the LEAP HEALTH Center?</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>If you do not use the LEAP Health Center, are you interested in learning more about the services?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>If you use or have used the LEAP Health Center, how do you rate the services?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Which of the following health programs are you interested in, if any?</td>
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<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Would you be interested in taking a cooking class?</td>
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<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Would you like to take a course in jewelry making, soap making or a similar craft?</td>
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<td>45</td>
<td>Would you be committed to finishing a whole course?</td>
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<td>46</td>
<td>Would you be interested in any of the following classes/programs?</td>
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<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Would you be interested in daytime or evening classes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>What improvements (if any), would you like to see at LEAP Academy</td>
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<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Would you recommend LEAP Academy to other families?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Any additional comments?</td>
</tr>
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</table>
APPENDIX D: EMERGING CODES FOR DATA COLLECTION BASED ON RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research Questions

Research Question One: In what way(s) do low-income parents engage in the academic lives of their child(ren) within the school and home environment in Camden, New Jersey?

• Parent engagement opportunities (PEO)
• Parents engaged at all level (PEAL)
• Parent engagement is restricted (PER)
• Parent engagement is open (PEO)
• Parents are part of their own liberation (PPOL)

Research Question Two: Given the opportunity for innovation in the charter school landscape, what innovative strategies does LEAP Academy University Charter School utilize to garner high levels of parental engagement from their low-income parents?

• Role of LEAP in life of family (RLLF)
• Treat parents as equals (TPQ)
• Parent compact (PC)
• Parent governance (PG)
• LEAP welcomes parents unconditionally (LWPU)
• Educational mission of school (EMS)

Research Question Three: How should the definition of parental engagement be modified to take into account variant levels of social capital and social class differences in engagement to advance reform in institutional design?

• School is a home for families (SHFF)
• Creation of social networks (CSN)
• Creation of social capital (CSC)
• LEAP welcomes parents unconditionally (LWPU)
• Parents are empowered (PE)
• School does not turn parents away (SDTPA)

Research Sub-Question

What are the similarities and differences between Epstein’s Framework of Parent Involvement and the LEAP Academy Framework of Family Engagement?

• LEAP welcomes parents unconditionally (LWPU)
• Traditional typologies of engagement (TTE)
• Innovative strategies of engagement (ISE)
• Parents self-identification of engagement (PSE)
## APPENDIX E: CODING MATRIX

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Source</th>
<th>Research Participant</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>Code</th>
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SCHOOL-PARENT COMPACT

The LEAP Academy University Charter School, and the parents of the students participating in activities, services, and programs funded by Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), agree that this compact outlines how the parents and the entire school staff will share the responsibility for improved student academic achievement and the means by which the school and parents will build and develop a partnership that will help children achieve the State’s high standards.

This school-parent compact is in effect during school year 2015-2016.

School Responsibilities

The LEAP Academy University Charter school will:

1. Provide high-quality curriculum and instruction in a supportive and effective learning environment that enables the participating children to meet the State’s student academic achievement standards as follows:

   LEAP Academy faculty are highly qualified and experienced, all with a minimum of a Bachelor’s degree and with more than 38% holding an advanced academic degree. All faculty and staff are encouraged to improve their skills through professional development and are fully supported in their pursuits of graduate degrees.

   Our faculty and staff are expected to continually demonstrate knowledge of the learner, including students from diverse backgrounds and with diverse learning needs; knowledge of the learning process, including how children and adults learn; knowledge of pedagogy, including the use of research-based strategies to accelerate the performance of students with learning problems; knowledge of the subject matter in which they teach, including the effective use of technology; engagement in sponsored action research; demonstrate leadership in and out of the classroom; model appropriate behaviors at all times; design and implement events that benefit the student and the entire school community; and contribute meaningfully in the improvement of the School’s instructional program.
2. Hold parent-teacher conferences throughout the year where this compact will be discussed as it relates to the individual child’s achievement.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>1st Marking Period</th>
<th>2nd Marking Period</th>
<th>3rd Marking Period</th>
<th>4th Marking Period</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent/Teacher Conf.</td>
<td>TBD</td>
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3. Provide parents with mid-marking and quarterly reports on their children’s progress. The school will provide these reports as follows:

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<tr>
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<th>1st Marking Period</th>
<th>2nd Marking Period</th>
<th>3rd Marking Period</th>
<th>4th Marking Period</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Marking Period</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>TBD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mailed</td>
<td>TBD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Report Cards</td>
<td>TBD</td>
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4. Parents will have reasonable access to staff. Staff will be available for consultation with parents through the following methods:

   Staff will be available for parents through the *Immediate Response system* at the School. Therefore parents can immediately set up dates and times to meet with staff. The school provides an *Open Door Policy* for all parents who would want to meet with any administrator, teacher or staff. Parents can also communicate with teachers through Power School.

5. Provide parents opportunities to volunteer and participate in their child’s class, and to observe classroom activities, as follows:

   All parents are encouraged to volunteer and participate in 40 hours of classroom activities, extra-curricular activities, parent events and parent/teacher/student conferences.

**Parent Responsibilities**

We, as parents, agree to abide by the following: Whereas, I have made a personal decision to enroll my child at the LEAP Academy University Charter School (LEAP) in order to provide him/her with unique educational opportunity; Whereas, my desire and decision to enroll my child at LEAP is based upon my desire to become an active partner in the education of my child. I agree:
• to support the LEAP Academy curriculum that consists of preparing my child for college and focuses on math, science and technology.
• to give permission for my child to have access to counseling and medical services offered by the school.
• to support and abide by all the rules and regulations adopted by the LEAP Board of Trustees as outlined in the LEAP Academy Parent/Student Handbook including and especially the school discipline code, the uniform and dress code and the attendance and tardiness policy.
• to support and abide by the procedures put forth by the LEAP Academy. In terms of day to day routines such as early pickups due to illness and doctor’s appointments, breakfast and lunch programs, drop off and pick up.
• to attend all parent/teacher conferences that are scheduled three times a year and to attend any other required conference that may be scheduled with a social worker, child study team, nurse, disciplinarian, principal, chief school administrator, etc.
• to participate in the LEAP Parent Academy by completing the “Parents as Partners for Educational Change” a parenting training course and by attending other educational workshops and activities offered.
• to participate in the Parent Partnership Hours Program and to do my best to complete a minimum of 40 Parent Partnership Hours a year.
• to take seriously my partnership with LEAP Academy to educate my child and understand through my presence in the school and participation I the LEAP Parents Academy I can make a positive difference in my child’s education. However, I understand that if I do not finish my 40 hours of Parent Partnership Hours, it will not affect my child’s continued enrollment in the LEAP Academy.
• to contribute as a member of the school community not necessarily directly to my child.
• to understand that it is my responsibility to record my Parent Partnership Hours with the coordinator of Parental Involvement.
• to be an active member of the LEAP Parent Council and attend monthly meetings and activities.
• to recognize and embrace my role as having the primary responsibility for my child’s education. In order to enhance my child’s academic growth, I agree to do the following: (a) To check my child’s homework folder/agenda nightly or check the On-Course Homework site through the school website at www.leapacademycharter.org to read and utilized information sent home by the school; (b) To encourage my child to reach his or her academic level with deep commitment and enthusiasm for learning.

The LEAP Academy University Charter School will:

1. Engage and encourage parents in the planning, review, and improvement of the school’s parental involvement policy, in an organized, ongoing, and timely way.
2. Engage and encourage parents in the joint development of any school-wide program plan, in an organized, ongoing, and timely way.

3. Hold an annual meeting to inform parents of the school’s participation in Title I, Part A programs, and to explain the Title I, Part A requirements, and the right of parents to be involved in Title I, Part A programs. The school will convene the meeting at a convenient time to parents, and will offer a flexible number of additional parental involvement meetings, such as in the morning or evening, so that as many parents of children participating in Title I, Part A programs and will encourage them to attend.

4. Provide communication to parents of participating students in an understandable and uniform format, including alternative formats upon the request of parents with disabilities, and, to the extent practicable, in a language that parents can understand.

5. Provide to parents of participating children information in a timely manner about Title I, Part A programs that includes a description and explanation of the school’s curriculum, the forms of academic assessment used to measure children’s progress, and the proficiency levels students are expected to meet.

6. On the request of parents, provide opportunities for regular meetings for parents to formulate suggestions, and to participate, as appropriate, in decisions about the education of their children. The school will respond to any such suggestions as soon as practicably possible.

7. Provide to each parent an individual student report about the performance of their child on the State assessment in at least math, language arts and reading.

8. Provide each parent timely notice when their child has been assigned or has been taught for four (4) or more consecutive weeks by a teacher who is not highly qualified within the meaning of the term in section 200.56 of the Title I Final Regulations (67 Fed. Reg. 71710, December 2, 2002).
REFERENCES


innovation/


Steedman, P., Cummins, C., & Ricciardelli, B. S. (2014). Examples of innovations in
traditional public schools that are influenced by competition from charter schools: Charter schools, their impact on traditional public districts and the role of district leadership (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from http://dlib.bc.edu/islandora/object/bc-ir:101291


