

Parent Involvement or Parent Engagement?

By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) on May 19, 2009

Editor's note: This is the second in a series of guest blogs on how teachers view parent engagement and involvement in public schools. Yesterday, Renee Moore offered [her perspective](#) on how much parent involvement educators really want. Today, Larry Ferlazzo shares his thoughts on the difference between parent involvement and parent engagement.



“When it comes to a breakfast of ham and eggs, the chicken is involved but the pig is committed.”

This old saying is roughly analogous to the issue facing schools today as they consider the kind of relationships they want to build with the parents of their students. I would characterize it as a difference between parent involvement (the chicken) and parent engagement (the pig). I first became aware of this contrast through a study of organizing work by the Industrial Areas Foundation in Texas schools. Boston College professor Dennis Shirley wrote about the IAF’s decades-long efforts in his 1997 book *Community Organizing For Urban School Reform*.

Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines *involvement* as “to enfold or envelop.” It defines *engagement* as “to interlock with; to mesh.” Those definitions get to the crux of the difference. When schools *involve* parents they are leading with their institutional self-interest and desires – school staff are leading with their *mouths*. When schools *engage* parents they are leading with the parents’ self-interests (their wants and dreams) in an effort to develop a genuine partnership. In this instance, school staff are leading with their *ears*.

What are the important differences between the two? Here are a few key points to keep in mind:

Whose Energy Drives It? Who Initiates It?

When we’re *involving* parents, ideas and energy tends to come from the schools and from government mandates. We tend to *sell* ideas. School staff might feel they know what the problems are and how to fix them (and generally are well-intentioned).

When we’re *engaging* parents, ideas tend to be elicited from parents by school staff in the context of developing trusting relationships. More parent energy drives the efforts because they emerge from parent/community needs and priorities. At Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, we began an internationally recognized family literacy project to provide computers and home Internet access to immigrant families AFTER parents suggested the idea, organized other parents, and worked with teachers to develop an implementation plan.

What Is the Invitation?

When we’re *involving* parents, we might be *irritating* them – pushing them to do something about what we as staff might perceive as important. We may be asking them to do things without necessarily having a trusting and reciprocal relationship with school staff. Perhaps their only previous conversations with teachers have been when their child has been in trouble.

When we’re *engaging* parents, they are challenged to do something about what *they* feel is important to them. Staff learn what parents believe is important through developing a relationship, often through home visits. The work of the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project in Sacramento, and the Industrial Areas Foundation in Texas and around the United States, always begins with home visits to initiate conversations and learn about parent hopes and dreams. The IAF contrasts this “conversation” approach – which is two-way – with the typical “communication” approach schools take – which is one-way.

What Are the Roles Of Parents and School Staff?

When we're *involving* parents, the parent is generally directed towards completing tasks selected by the school staff – or the parent may be a *client* who receives services and information.

When we're *engaging* parents, the parent is considered a leader or a potential leader who is integral to identifying a vision and goals. He/she encourages others to contribute their own vision to that big picture and helps perform the tasks that need to be achieved in order to reach those goals. Parents in the city of West Sacramento reached out to hundreds of other parents, organizing multiple community gardens at school sites that provided food to families, supplementary ingredients for school lunches, and opportunities for science instruction.

When we're *involving* parents, school staff can fall into the role of a social worker who does things for parents, or who tends to tell them what they should be doing with their child.

When we're *engaging* parents, school staffs act more as community organizers who help parents do things for themselves, and who elicit from parents ideas about what parents and school staff could be doing to better help their child and their community.

What Is the Purpose?

When we're *involving* parents, schools tend to focus on supporting students by strengthening and assisting school programs and priorities.

When we're *engaging* parents, schools support students by developing parent relationships and often working with parents to improve their local communities. Richard Rothstein and others have documented how schools on their own might be able to *narrow* the achievement gap, but without adequate affordable housing, accessible health care, and the availability of good jobs, it will be impossible to *eliminate* it. Schools in Texas and Los Angeles have worked with the Industrial Areas Foundation and member institutions that connect to parents of their students (e.g., religious congregations, labor unions, community groups) to gain neighborhood, city-wide, and state-wide improvements in these areas.

It's All Good – But Engagement Is Best

I am not saying parent *involvement* is bad. Most studies have shown that just about any kind of increased connection between schools and parents is beneficial for the student. What I am saying is that parent *engagement* is better, and offers opportunities for transformational beneficial change – for the school, for the community, for the family and for the student.

I am also not saying that the distinctions are always so clear-cut. The question is not: Are you are always one side or the other? It is: Which side does your work with parents and families *tend* to be on?

Larry Ferlazzo teaches English and Social Studies to English Language Learners and mainstream students at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, California. His book Building Parent Engagement In Schools (written with Lorie Hammond) will be published by Linworth Publishing this summer. He also writes a popular blog on teaching English Language Learners called [Larry Ferlazzo's Websites of The Day](#) and recently became a member of the Teacher Leaders Network Forum. Prior to becoming a high school teacher five years ago, Larry spent 19 years working as a community organizer. He also writes for [In Practice](#), a group blog populated by teachers in low-income communities from across the United States.

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