

# Parental Involvement in a Rural Consolidated School District

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**Abstract.** The rural consolidated school district of Ingleside in South Central Kansas faces unique challenges in managing communication and providing opportunities for parental involvement and shared decision making. The lack of attachment to the school district was a deterrent for families as they held on to the identity of their home community. As students transition from the five elementary or K-8 schools in their diverse communities, into one consolidated high school, there have been unaddressed and emerging needs. The research team studied how the Ingleside District could better understand the needs and perceptions of parents and students as related to their involvement and to the overall decision-making processes. The researchers found that the Ingleside District has challenges in truly helping parents, teachers, and students join together as a unified consolidated school district. These challenges include developing transparent mechanisms and processes for engaging and inviting parents to participate. Through a new sense of unity, the school district and the community can create the capacity to face hard decisions still ahead of them.

## 1. Introduction

Rural consolidated school districts, like Ingleside, face unique challenges in managing communication and creating opportunities for parents to become and remain involved in school activities and decision making. This study has assisted a rural district in defining parental involvement and engagement. Secondly, this study identified perceptions of the Ingleside District parents from among the district's diverse communities. The study identified barriers to parental involvement as well as solicited strategies to improve involvement and facilitate collaborative decision making.

The Ingleside School District is comprised of several communities consisting of multiple religious, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. Students transition from the community elementary and middle schools into one consolidated high school. In this transition, Ingleside District leaders have seen a decrease in parent participation and speculate that

parents fear a loss of identity with their hometown. Ingleside District parents may feel a lack of involvement due to but are not limited to: 1) Recent and previous consolidation efforts of the district; 2) Lack of communication among the individual communities in the district; 3) Lack of connectedness between the smaller communities of the district; and 4) Questions as to whether input is truly valued by decision makers.

Barriers to parental involvement become increasingly complex as students become more independent; as transportation issues override the interest or ability to participate in activities; and as parent's emotional distance begins to match the district's geographical distance.

## 2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Information was gathered from district leaders, school staff, and parents. The methodology for the research was predominately qualitative. Strategies for data collection included interviews, focus groups, archival document review, individual surveys, and observations. Random sampling was used to identify participants and the data collection processes were sensitive to cultural differences and community attachment issues. The study used an overarching framework of parental involvement developed by Epstein (1995), that identified parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community as the main features of understanding parental involvement. By joining community attachment theory (Boyd & Bright, 2007) to Epstein's thinking, the research team was able to broaden the scope of the framework to address the issues at hand. The three questions that emerged to guide the information gathering and the research process include the following: 1) What are the explicit and implicit expectations that district leaders have for parents? 2) What role does attachment to the school district, as a community, play in parental involvement? 3) How does the process of decision making in the district affect parent attitudes and perceptions?

*Results.* The research team found that the Ingleside District leadership has communication challenges with the flow between the school and the separate communities and in developing an awareness of the need to make special accommodations to reach all district members. An example of this challenge is email communication between the school district and parents. The schools in the district send out a daily email bulletin to parents. However, the district has no knowledge, at this time, as to which parents receive email and which do not. At this time, there is not a bi-directionality in the information flow between the district and the parents. Secondly, the researchers found that although the district is consolidated with regard to the high school, the parents do not share the notion of a single identity with that school; they still see themselves as members of their individual communities.

*Discussion.* Parental involvement in schools is a topic that is frequently discussed in the K-12 education world. Research has shown that indeed parent and family involvement typically declines as students transition to high school (Dornbush & Glasgow, 1996; Simon, 2004). However, in the Ingleside District, leaders believe the decline is more than typical. Our research has shown that the district, parents, and teachers all have their own perceptions of how to define parental involvement as well as in identifying the best practices of engaging parents from diverse communities. Overall, the population in each community is declining and continues to do so. This is coupled with a fear of identity-loss to the home community by the parents if they join into one district identity. This dynamic, more than parental involvement per se, is what the district must address. There is a need for the district to build unity through symbolic activities, ongoing decision making which intentionally includes parents, through stronger communication efforts that support and appreciate the diverse communities. For example, in the past, the district has used innovative team building decision-making activities using the Implication Wheel process. This kind of activity could mark the beginning of an ongoing dialogue rather than a one-time event. The ultimate challenge will be for the district to give voice to individuals in the communities; to empower groups to create dialogue; and share decision making from the onset of issues.

*Significance.* While parental involvement has been a focus of much discussion, the impact on rural communities receives less attention in educational research. The interactions that exist between the parents and the school must be positive and empowering

building levels of accountability and trust (Epstein, 2008). This study demonstrates that the district needs to work to create a sense of district unity; to improve communication channels; to strengthen bi-directional information flow; and to build connections among the parents from different communities. The pressing issue that the district must face is the declining population and the resultant economic pressures this causes. By facing the issues collaboratively at the onset, the researchers believe that the district and community can unite with creative and novel solutions to their challenges. This not only assists the district of study, but also carries implications for other rural districts regarding their parental involvement policies and practices.

### 3. Conclusions

This research sought to examine the parental involvement level of one rural school district and assist in the development of transparent processes for parents to become more involved in district activities and decision making. Going beyond the acknowledgement of differences of the barriers, the district and parents will begin to honor its diversity and create accommodations that maximize the communities' strongest resources-their people.

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