

Running Head: SCREAMING FROM THE SIDELINE

SCREAMING FROM THE SIDELINE?: PARENTAL VOICE AND CLASS IN THE AGE
OF ACCOUNTABILITY

By

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Abstract

Lack of parental involvement in schools is often correlated with the persistent academic underperformance of K-12 students (Jeynes, 2012; Topor, Keane, Shelton, & Calkins, 2010). This line of reasoning is pushed by a various groups of professional educators who decry limited parental involvement as a factor inhibiting their ability to effectively reach students (Reiter, 2009). The conventional thinking in education is that partnering with parents is beneficial to the education of students—academic and behavioral benefits alike are to be gained from such involvement. Parental involvement as demonstrated through attendance at school events and setting high expectations at home are two manifestations of this concept. However, moving beyond these more cursory means of engagement is necessary in order to forge authentic school-community power-sharing partnerships.

With roots in Bloom's (1992) empowerment model for parental involvement, this study explored the methods employed by parents and parent groups to influence school and district-level decisions. Drawing on research literature on parental involvement, parental involvement in school reform, and models of parent organizations, a multiple case-study inquiry was conducted in two New Jersey communities of disparate wealth. Through semi-structured interviews with parents and educators, observations of parent groups and school board meetings, and document reviews from parent groups and school board meetings, an understanding of individual and group perceptions and practices around advocacy were discerned .

Results indicate that parental advocacy efforts vary in communities of disparate income. While the low-income community tended to advocate almost exclusively through direct contact with educators, higher income communities advocated for shared decision-making in more varied ways including through strategic use of social media and periodicals. Inhibitors to greater

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parental involvement in both communities tended to center around work and work-related issues such as commute time in addition to the extant cultures in each community. Additionally, standard pathways for parental involvement such as parent teacher groups and public comment periods at school board meetings were not found to be consistent sites of parental advocacy.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement in the schools their children attend is considered to be a hallmark of both good parents and good schools. Thus, the work of parent organizations is particularly critical given their place as the formal mechanism through which parents are expected to exercise involvement in their children's schools. Many public school districts have parent organizations in each building in their district to serve as a venue for parents to come together, voice diverse opinions, and facilitate quality school-community partnerships. Parents in higher-wealth communities, where dual-parent households are more prevalent and parents are more likely to have white-collar jobs, may exercise greater control over the social, political, and economic institutions of their community given their social standing. These parents may feel more entitled to high-quality public schools given their personal expectations around school quality as well as their financial investment in local schools through property tax payments.

Other means of parent involvement including insistence on extracurricular activity participation and enforcing specific sleep habits are believed to positively influence student outcomes though the ultimate level of parental involvement includes parents in the democratic process over their community's resources, both fiscal and human, as school and district policy-making partners. Public school districts often have budgets, payrolls, and workforces larger than the cities and towns which they are located in. They exercise tremendous influence on businesses and individuals alike when considering whether they may thrive in a particular community. Nevertheless, differences in parental involvement along class lines may be keeping low-income parents from exercising their collective voice to ensure educational quality in ways that their higher-income peers currently practice. Given the paucity of research on parents engaging in this heightened level of educational involvement, this study aims to help fill this gap in the literature

and influence practice in this direction (Anderson, 1998; Epstein & Sanders, 2009; Delgado-Gaitan, 2012).

Since their genesis, public schools in the United States of America have been intended to be beholden to the needs and wants of local communities. Boston Latin School, the very first public school in the United States, was founded in 1635 at the behest of local Puritans eager to replicate the European Latin School Model and provide students with instruction in religion, Latin, and classic literature (Jeynes, 2007). In the nearly 400 years since its founding, the school has maintained a reputation of excellence from its place as one of the primary feeder schools to Harvard where dozens of graduates enroll annually to its perennial ranking in the top 1% of high schools in the nation (U.S. News and World Report, 2016). Throughout all, it has remained a part of the Boston Public School system and thus is ultimately overseen by the seven-member Boston School Committee—locals who include multiple current Boston Public School parents overseeing a system with 8,500 teachers and staff, 54,000 students, and a budget of nearly \$1.2 billion (Boston Public Schools, 2016).

However, from their very inception public schools in the United States have been sites of inequity and exclusion. Over 300 years after its founding the school had critically low numbers of Black students or female members (Daniels, 1985). At that, these males were overwhelmingly the far and away elite of the time and region—the “Boston Brahmins” so-named by the coiner of the term, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., for their position atop New England social, political, financial, and educational life (Holmes, 1860). Even today students at Boston Latin School are more economically privileged than their peers throughout the rest of the Boston Public School system with only 15% of their students identified as economically disadvantaged as compared to

the district-wide rate of 50% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016).

Public education in New Jersey has antecedents that were somewhat more equitable. In New Jersey, the state legislature enacted a law that allowed local communities to raise taxes to support the education of poor students as early as 1820 (Murray & United States, 1899). These public schools provided children throughout the state with a free option for the pursuit of education as a variety of private and parochial schools were already spread throughout the state servicing New Jersey's more affluent families. An 1829 law called for the creation of local, elected committees to oversee the administration of schools within their townships and districts including overseeing school construction and determining the length of the school year (ibid.) As codified in New Jersey's 1844 constitution and re-iterated in the amended 1873 constitution, the providence of a "thorough and efficient" system of free public schools was the responsibility of the state (ibid.). Nearly 150 years later, this language regarding the responsibility of the state to its students is still regularly referenced by New Jersey's politicians and the subject of persistent litigation in New Jersey's courts.

Today, New Jersey has some of the most inequitable student outcomes in the nation between its more affluent, predominantly White and Asian communities and its poorer, predominantly Black and Latino communities. On the most recent statewide language arts assessments in third grade, 74% of Asian students and 58% of White students were deemed proficient while just 31% of Latino students and 30% of Black students were deemed proficient (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016a). At Camden High School where 88% of students qualify for free or reduced price meals and 99% of students are Black or Latino, the average SAT score is 1046 on the 2400-point scale placing the average student at the 7th percentile nationally

(New Jersey Department of Education, 2016b). Roughly ten miles away at neighboring Cherry Hill East High School, 13% of students qualify for free or reduced price meals, 86% of students are White or Asian, and the average SAT score is 1716 placing the average student at about the 75th percentile nationally (ibid.).

When considering these grossly disparate educational realities, the voices of parents cannot be overlooked. While approximately 16% of adults in Camden or 8,365 residents voted in the most recent gubernatorial election, 19,984 residents of Cherry Hill voted—approximately 37% of adults despite Cherry Hill having several thousand fewer residents than Camden; and Cherry Hill’s preferred candidate won (New Jersey Department of State, 2014a). Politically tenable considering this disparate support, more recently Governor Christie has proposed a radical change to how public school districts are funded by giving each district the same amount per pupil, regardless of need and local tax levies (Clark, 2016). High-poverty, majority Black and Latino cities such as Trenton, Paterson, and Newark where Christie lost by 50, 58, and 63 percentage points, respectively, would see decreases in state educational aid of \$157 million, \$240 million, and \$493 million crippling each district and leading to massive employee layoffs and school closings (New Jersey Department of State, 2014b; New Jersey Department of Education, 2016c). How shall parents respond to this potentially devastating change in public education, if they respond at all?

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the private and public mores of parents, teachers, and educational leaders with regards to parental involvement in general and parental advocacy in particular. Drawing on research literature on parental involvement, parental involvement in

school reform, and models of parent organizations, a multiple case-study inquiry was conducted in two communities of disparate wealth in Central New Jersey—a low-income municipality and a high-income township. Through semi-structured interviews with parents, school personnel, and district leaders; participant observations of school board meetings; and document reviews of parent group founding documents and school board minutes, an understanding of individual and group practices meant to influence policy was discerned and the similarities and differences among the two communities and the various interviewed stakeholders in each were revealed.

Developing more genuinely democratic power-sharing relationships between influential local educators and diverse parent constituencies remains a daunting challenge for many schools and districts today. Perhaps no lines draw as distinct a barrier between diverse groups as that of class and despite various measures that show New Jersey's system of public education to be among the highest-performing in the nation, New Jersey's socioeconomic achievement gap is one of the largest of any state. Closely related to class is the issue of race and as is the case elsewhere, New Jersey's higher-income, higher-performing schools tend to be overwhelmingly concentrated in White and Asian communities while the state's lower-income and lower-performing schools tend to be concentrated in Black and Latino communities. Given these realities and the expansive body of research attesting to the value of including parents in the educational work of schools and school systems, facilitating and strengthening pathways for this inclusion is critical. Thus, exploring the unique role of parental advocacy in school and district decision-making can strengthen our resolve to continuously pursue locally responsive community institutions in this Age of Reform.

Research Questions and Definitions

The central research question and sub-questions of this study are as follows:

What is the role of parental advocacy in school and district decision-making across communities of disparate income?

- a. How does parental advocacy vary between communities of disparate income?
- b. What factors impact the degree of parental advocacy in communities of disparate income?
- c. Which parental advocacy strategies are perceived to be most effective in impacting school and district decision-making across communities of disparate income?

For this study, “income” will be measured by a community’s median household income. The two, disparate communities of focus in this study are what may be considered a “high”-income community and a “low”-income community. The high-income community has a median household income more than 2.5 times higher than the national average while the low-income community’s median household income is roughly three-fifths of the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). “Communities” are meant to refer to a municipality or township as oppose to a more nebulous combination of people or geographic neighborhood(s).

“Parental involvement”, as distinct from “parental advocacy”, will be the generic term used to describe all levels of parent-school/district interaction. Bloom gives us numerous forms of parental involvement the reflect varying levels of power that are useful in differentiating between varieties of parental involvement as part of her empowerment model (1992). The lowest is basic communication where parents and educators simply share information back and forth through things like school newsletters or email. The next, heightened level is home improvement which entails strategies given by the school to parents to improve parenting skills and support learning at home such as workshops on home reading strategies. The third level is volunteering which often brings parents into the school as collaborators for situations such as field trips or for

sports team booster clubs. Finally, the highest level for Bloom is advocacy where parents participate in local groups that influence policy at the local level or beyond such as parents participating in their school's parent-teacher group or speaking at school board meetings. Parental advocacy will be used to describe this final, specific brand of parental involvement that is meant to directly influence the decisions and practices of school and district personnel.

In contrasting the experiences of parents, teachers, and educational leaders in high-income and low-income communities, I will illuminate how much more progress is needed until “one day, all children” have high-quality schools to attend per Teach for America (TFA) founder Wendy Kopp's chronicles of envisioning the teacher placement organization while at Princeton. I will take note of the “savage inequalities”—to borrow a term from educational author Jonathan Kozol partially given his research in Camden and Cherry Hill—that make up the chasm between poverty and affluence throughout the state. More than three decades after the landmark initial *Abbott vs. Burke* ruling from the New Jersey Supreme Court in downtown Trenton which sought a financial remedy to the disparate educational opportunities of New Jersey's children, a “thorough and efficient” education per the New Jersey Constitution is still ardently sought by untold numbers of hopeful, patient parents.

Setting the Scene: Differences Beyond the Classroom

The research undertaken in the course of this study brought me into starkly different educational settings. Picture one such setting where each school and office building has a spacious, ungated parking lot and ample green grass in front. Security is scarce and it seems as though the sole morning task of the security guard that you encounter is to greet visitors and ensure that they sign the visitor's log. The buildings are well-lit and appear to be recent

constructions of the past 10-15 years with carpet extending throughout the foyers, offices, and often hallways. The overwhelming majority of students—over 85%—are White and Asian and most students are driven to school; every parent, teacher, and leader you speak to is either White or Asian as well (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016b). At the high school, students driving themselves to school is not uncommon as evidenced by the numerous students you parked next to and entered the school building alongside.

The teachers and leaders that you speak to also reflect differences between the districts. The teachers are well-seasoned with an average of 14 years of experience—on the higher side for the county—and a base salary of \$75,000 while administrators have approximately 14 years of experience on average and salaries around \$136,000 (O’Dea, 2016). Each conversation is relaxed and occurs in an office or private conference room with few interruptions. The day is structured centrally by the school district so that you can complete all of your interviews in a single morning with a collaboratively-determined itinerary that is emailed to you prior to your visit. Parents, teachers, and leaders reference the types of professional work that parents take part in and their advanced educations that make parents especially intrigued in local decision-making—such as the parent who references her master’s degree in public policy. The school’s “unwritten” curriculum tells students that *you will be* successful, you should choose a career of your personal liking, and you have value. School and district leaders worry about competition with private schools in the area for these students. This is a “J” district—the most advantaged in New Jersey with the highest rates of adult education and income and the lowest rates of unemployment and poverty (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004).

You experience a markedly different reality 20 minutes away in another district. At two of the three school and office buildings on-street parking is the norm since there is limited or no

parking lot present to accompany the minimal green grass in front. Each building you visit has one or two security guards present at the entrance along with metal detectors and in addition to welcoming visitors and ensuring that they sign the visitor's log, student belongings are searched upon entering the building. The buildings are poorly lit and appear to be several decades old with mostly cement floors extending throughout the foyers, offices, and hallways. The overwhelming majority of students—over 97% at each school—are Black and Latino and most students seem to walk to the schools as they are located on residential streets in their neighborhoods; all but one parent, teacher, and leader you speak to is Black or Latino (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016b).

The teachers are a bit less experienced in the county with an average of 12 years of experience though their average base salary is a bit higher at \$75,500 while administrators have an average of 14 years of experience and salaries around \$127,000 (O'Dea, 2016). Conversations are somewhat or outright hurried and occur in a variety of settings from offices to public parks to restaurants with varying noise levels and interruptions. Direction from the school district is non-existent despite numerous inquiries, potentially due to the district contact person's impending resignation at the end of the school year. Parents, teachers, and leaders reference the social, economic, and legal inhibitors to parental involvement from single-parenthood to statuses as undocumented immigrants. The school's "unwritten" curriculum tells students that *we hope you will be* successful and you should choose a career that provides for your family and you. School and district leaders worry about competition with charter schools in the area for these students. This is an "A" district—the most disadvantaged in New Jersey with the lowest rates of adult education and income and the highest rates of unemployment and poverty (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004).

Why Parental Advocacy?

Parental advocacy is an especially compelling topic of study given a variety of both enduring and timely issues and themes in education today. The first and most critical issue at play with this research topic is that of empowerment. It has been nearly 50 years since the initial publication of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and many of Freire's beliefs about empowering historically marginalized groups remain relevant today. Through educative practices that heighten the consciousness of these communities to impact their personal and social reality it was hoped that more equitable power-sharing would occur (Freire, 1970). In low-income communities, this marginalization is readily apparent in local public school systems that have all but given up on critically engaging most parents in school and district decisions by acquiescing to a belief in their lethargy and disinterest. Whereas parents in charter schools, parochial schools, and private schools can essentially always pull their students out of those environments and place them in local public schools, this omnipresent reality does not work in reverse as public school parents who aim to transfer their children to one of the aforementioned school types are not ensured placement or admission.

Empowerment also comes into play regarding the immense fiscal, human, and physical resources that public school systems have at their disposal. The two public school districts explored in this study have a combined annual budget of nearly \$490 million—more than six times the size of the New Jersey Department of Education's budget (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016d; New Jersey Department of the Treasury, 2016). Additionally, the 2,000 certificated staff are as many as the faculties at Princeton University and The College of New Jersey combined (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016d; Princeton University, 2017; The College of New Jersey, 2016). These resources are in addition to the dozens of buildings,

thousands of technological devices, and millions of square feet owned by each school district that hold billions of dollars of value. Empowering parents to have a say in how these various resources are used to benefit their children is critical for genuine parent-school partnerships where each party values the contributory potential of the other.

A second issue at play in this study is democracy. Democracy requires rule by the people in order to have the wants and needs of the population satisfied by elected officials. While most school boards in New Jersey are elected, some are appointed by the city or town's mayor; in this study, one district has an elected school board while the other has an appointed school board. Despite how board members enter their positions, they are intended to be beholden to the local community whether directly as elected officials or indirectly if appointed at the behest of a popularly elected mayor. Much of Governor Christie's rhetoric in opposition to urban public school systems in New Jersey revolves around parents "voting with their feet" to charter schools or taking up residence in suburban townships to escape "failed" public schools (Christie, 2016). While parents do have the ability to exercise their opinions through these more drastic means, particular democratic processes are already in place to allow for ongoing participatory engagement.

A third issue embedded in this study is that of community. Public schools in the U.S. today may be the primary sites of widespread local congregation. Whereas neighboring parents may work in different settings, attend different religious services, and spend their leisure time on divergent activities, the local school can serve as a place where children and adults alike find community given their frequent presence and the likelihood of interactions with other locals, especially as seen in community schools (Blank, Melaville & Shah, 2003; Capers & Shah, 2015). As relationships are created and strengthened between parents and school personnel, power-

sharing will become essential for long-term harmony to transform school leadership from opaque oligarchies to transparent democracies. Bringing together communities of parents and teachers to pursue their shared interest in the growth and development of local students provides a consistent opportunity for this power-sharing.

A fourth issue in this work is that of the “reform” movement, especially in the current “era of accountability” since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001. As battles rage daily over what students will learn, how they will be assessed on their learning, how to determine if teachers have taught content well, what types of schools should be in which communities and more, the voices of parents are often of tertiary concern after professional educators and policymakers’ interests are satiated. Too often, educational decisions are made *for* parents in marginalized communities at the local, state, and federal levels. Formal attempts to garner parental input on policy and practice decisions through public forums such as district board meetings and state board meetings often are poorly attended by parents for a variety of reasons—perhaps chiefly from low publicity of the meeting times and locations through periodicals or websites that parents do not regularly access. The continued power of parents in school reform is recognized by charter school leaders, however, as a variety of charter schools and charter school networks now employ full-time personnel charged solely with family and community engagement, often to advocate for policies and politicians that are favorable to charter schools. This same power can and should be utilized by traditional public school parents.

The final issue that this study concerns is that of education as a human right. Article 26 of the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to an education and, at least at the elementary and fundamental stages, this education should be free and compulsory (The United Nations, 1948). However, Section 3 of Article 26 takes this

indelible right a step further by stating that parents have a right to choose the type of education that they want for their child (ibid.). For New Jersey's highest poverty students and families, quality educational options tend to be scarce. The advent of charter schools has been largely aimed at delivering a free, local option to parents who lack choice in selecting the types of schools that their students attend. Ideally, substandard public schools will improve rapidly eliminating the need for charter schools in New Jersey's urban centers which have a mixed record of performance (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016b). Still, while thousands of students remain on waiting lists for New Jersey's better-performing charter schools, many parents are essentially denied their human right of school choice while also being denied a place at the decision-making table for those schools already in existence in their community.

Personal Interest in Topic

My personal interest in this topic comes from my own upbringing in a low-income community in New Jersey and the importance of education instilled in my siblings and I from a vigorously engaged single mother. While the federal threshold for a high-poverty school is a school where 40% or more students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, each of the schools I attended in my hometown district presently have over 85% of their students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016b). I attended an elementary school that had bullet holes through a first floor window that was not replaced for over a decade after a neighborhood shootout. I attended a middle school where different nationality-based gangs controlled different steps in front of the school and vigorously enforced territory. I attended a high school that I entered with nearly 900 other first-year students though graduated as part of a class of fewer than 340. From my mother's driveway I can throw a rock and hit the

maximum security, block-long New Jersey state prison just across the street from my childhood home. The realities of our circumstances were omnipresent.

Generally speaking, my mother did not have to advocate much given the paucity of explicit educational roadblocks that my siblings and I faced. Still, there was the district administrator my mother had to convince that my older sister was born in the United States given my sister's name and accent after we spent a year in Nigeria when I was a newborn, the school administrator who attempted to not promote me to the next grade level given my hundreds of tardies in a particular school year of high school, and the counselor who tried to convince my younger brother that he was unworthy of attending The Lawrenceville School, where he graduated from in 2009. These instances coupled with my experiences as an educator in Massachusetts, Mississippi, Arkansas, and elsewhere have convinced me of the immense promise that harnessing and wielding parental power holds for improving schools and benefitting students' lives. Despite the frustration that I hear regularly from teachers and leaders about the paucity of engaged parents at their schools through the current work that I do for the New Jersey Department of Education, I recognize that parents want what's best for their kids and deserve inclusion in deciding what that is based on the resources available to their local public schools.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Research from three bodies of literature will inform my understanding of parental advocacy as well as the design of my research plan. Firstly, literature on parental involvement in the work of schools will be looked at on a broad level as well as with specific attention to research on parental involvement in communities with various levels of income. Secondly, research on parental involvement in school reform efforts specifically will be discussed with special treatment given to these efforts in urban schools. Finally, various models of parent organizations will be covered to demonstrate the variety of means through which parents take collective action to influence school and district decision-making. In each of these bodies of literature, parental involvement has a variety of meanings to researchers though they generally can be described as actions that improve students' readiness for learning and learning itself initiated by parents, at home or school (Young, Austin, & Growe, 2013).

Parents Supporting the Work of the School

An active partnership between schools and parents is considered to be a critical part of contemporary school and district leadership. Research on the link between parental involvement and positive student outcomes often cites the gains in academic achievement, attendance, and positive orientations towards education that come with increased parental involvement (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2011; Hayes, 2012; Froiland, Peterson, & Davison, 2013). This involvement manifests itself in a variety of ways that include both home-based methods and school-based methods. Home-based methods of parent involvement include strategies such as parent check-ins with students regarding their academic progress, homework help as needed, or setting times for

television consumption or sleep to maximize students' abilities to perform well in school (Froiland, Peterson, & Davison, 2013). School-based methods may include check-ins with school teachers and administrators; attendance at school-related athletic, artistic, or scholastic events; or participation in parent groups such as booster clubs (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2011; Bui & Rush, 2016). However, in addition to these methods of parental involvement, active participation in a school's parent-teacher association (PTA), advisory council, or similar organizational mediums provide the most direct means through which school and district policy can be impacted and parental advocacy actualized.

Low-income communities present particular challenges to facilitating parental involvement in schools (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010; Auerbach, 2010; Olivos, 2006). Parents in these settings may struggle with unfavorable work hours that inhibit their ability to consistently and effectively monitor their children's school work or engage with the school in their child's development (Lewis & Forman, 2002; Haley-Lock & Posey-Maddox, 2016). Parents who live in poverty may also be less comfortable than more affluent parents in pushing school and district officials for educational changes and rely on chance or natural growth for their children's success (Lareau, 2003; Olivos, 2006; Koonce & Harper, 2005; Fine, 1993). Intimidation based on limited education, English language fluency, or other factors may contribute to these parents acquiescing to the decisions of educators and policymakers regarding their children and local schools (Lareau, 2003; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008). Finally, low-levels of parental education that are often closely associated with poverty may contribute to parents maintaining a negative association with schools as well as an inability to effectively digest the written literature and policy that is presented to them (Lacour & Tissington,

2011; Koonce & Harper, 2005; Prater, 2002). These factors require creative solutions in order for consistent school-parent power-sharing to occur in low-income communities today.

At the other end of the spectrum, middle or high-income communities sometimes struggle with an overabundance of parental involvement (Lareau & Muñoz, 2012; Lightfoot, 2004; Lewis & Forman, 2002; Posey, 2012; Posey-Maddox, 2013). One reason for this is the greater prevalence of two-parent households which allow for multiple parents to engage in both work and school, potentially lessening the burden faced by parents in tackling each (Kahlenberg, 2001). For example, 74% of the households in the high-income community in this study are made up of married couples while only 28% of households in the low-income community in this study are made up of married couples (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Additionally, parents in higher-income communities may have more time to interact with schools if they are able to remain a homemaker as their spouse fulfills the role of breadwinner (Auerbach, 2010; Kahlenberg, 2001; Epstein, 1995). Research has shown that higher income parents are more likely to engage in concerted cultivation in order to facilitate academic and life success for their children in concert with the work of schools (Lareau, 2003). Finally, greater levels of parental agency regarding involvement may be prevalent in communities of higher income given their higher levels of education and greater familiarity with means through which to redress discontent with their local school system (Auerbach, 2007; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Lewis & Foreman, 2002; Kahlenberg, 2001).

Historically, school boards have been the traditional body through which parents attempted to participate in school and district decision-making. School boards are meant to be bodies that bring together local stakeholders to make policy decisions, hire and evaluate senior district leaders, and oversee expenditures for their district (Hess, 2002; Danzberger, 1994; Land

& Educational Resources Information Center, 2002). As local institutions, school boards draw their members from individuals in the local community who either have decided to run for their school board in an election or who have been appointed by a city or town's mayor (Allen & Plank, 2005). Having parents of current or former students on the school board is a common practice as parents lend a level of authenticity to school boards as institutions responsive to local wants and contexts (Darden & Cavendish, 2011; Buendia & Humbert-Fisk, 2015). Nevertheless, school boards have also been deemed inadequate at times at genuinely being representative of the interests of parents in the communities they operate in, especially in situations where school board members differ demographically or ideologically from parents (Schultz & McGinn, 2012; Williams, 2013; Devlin-Scherer & Devlin-Scherer, 1994).

Parental Involvement in School Reform

While parent engagement of the type that has already been described is the foundational level of incorporating parents into the educational work of schools, advancing to the level of parental advocacy is what is rarely seen in the school reform process (Delgado-Gaitan, 2012; Bloom, 1992; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Here, parental involvement holds particular relevance to the essence of the school choice movement. The role of school choice has varying dimensions in communities of disparate income (Fowler, 2002; Anderson, 1998; Sugarman, 2004). In more affluent communities, school choice gives parents multiple private and public school options including parochial schools, charter schools, and alternative schools. New Jersey's Princeton Township, for instance, has a median household income more than twice the national average and Princeton parents can pick from a range of schools (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). These choices include private options such as Stuart Country Day School and Princeton Day School,

public options such as Princeton High School and Princeton Charter School, and alternative options such as The Lewis School and Princeton Montessori School. Educational settings such as these that feature intense competition for students are ones where incorporating parents into school affairs is critical if quality school-parent relationships are to be maintained (Posey-Maddox, 2016).

In contrast, school choice in less affluent communities is framed around giving parents whose children are “trapped” or “locked” in failing traditional public schools schooling options that include vouchers for private or parochial schools and more charter schools (Viteritti, 1999; Sugarman, 2004; Christie, 2011). A large percentage of charter schools have been set up in high-poverty communities as four out of every five charter schools in New Jersey are located in former Abbott Districts (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2016b). As the main charter-granting body in most states, state governments tend to prefer charter schools exist in communities that have a high concentration of low-performing schools. In an attempt to give local communities more voice regarding charter school authorization, organizations such as Save Our Schools NJ have pushed for requiring local school board approval of charter schools prior to a charter being granted. By exercising the collective voice of parents, these organizations have developed the organizational capacity to push for favorable education policy decisions not only at a school and district level, but at the state level as well.

Additionally, school closings throughout the nation that have been a last resort for school reformers are often conducted over the cacophony of community and parent opposition, as demonstrated in the case of Chicago’s record 50 school closings following the 2012-2013 school year (Berger, 1983; Pappas, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2013). Most of the schools being closed were located in the city’s disproportionately Black and poor South and West Sides. In New Jersey,

recent school closures in cities such as Camden and Newark have led to the development of a bill to require local school board approval prior to a forced school closing (McGlone, 2014).

Instances such as these reflect the lack of parental voice in such impactful policy decisions, especially in high-poverty communities. It should be noted that charter schools are not inherently negative for communities given the demonstrated ability of some of them to produce abnormally positive student outcomes, particularly with students who are difficult to educate in high-poverty communities (CREDO, 2013). However, as with all schools, ensuring that parents are involved in their ongoing operation is critical to their legitimacy if they are to challenge the dominant brands of long-established local public and private schools.

Much of the early theory around charter schools also represented a nascent attempt to give parents in local communities a consistent, genuine voice in school reform through the establishment of a parallel, competitive free school option. Charter schools have been described as wellsprings of “community rebirth” and places where disgruntled parents can collaboratively work with teachers and leaders to develop the type of educational community that, at least theoretically, each group did not find in local public schools (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000; O’Sullivan, Nagle, & Spence, 2000; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000). In particular states such as Texas, charter schools were specifically intended to serve at-risk students and thus occupy a somewhat paradoxical space as schools that are free from many state and federal regulations though are highly beholden to state and federal fiscal and academic standards, especially the performance of their at-risk students on statewide assessments (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000; Clark, 2000). As charter schools maintain national favor in the eyes of sizable groups of reform-minded parents and policymakers alike, they will continue to be

congregating venues for parents who have given up on reforming local schools altogether and withdrawn their students from those settings.

Advocacy groups

A variety of parent organization models exist as vehicles through which parents can involve themselves in schools from the participatory level through that of advocacy (Hornby, 1990). The most conventional model may be the parent-teacher association (PTA) or parent-teacher organization (PTO). These bodies exist in many schools and organize a range of activities from fundraising and school spirit undertakings to policy briefs and public position statements (Posey-Maddox, 2013; Lareau & Muñoz, 2012). Additionally, they may serve as a forum for dialogue between parents and parents, parents and school personnel, and even school personnel and school leaders (Rasinski & Fredericks, 1989; Bloom, 1992). PTAs and PTOs represent school-level bodies that some parents view as requirements to participate in in order to stave off social exclusion and to be regarded as an active, involved parent (Posey, 2012). This position makes them the most prevalent of parent organizations in addition to being the one that parents feel most compelled to regularly participate in.

The National Parent Teacher Association has a history dating back 120 years to 1897 as the National Congress of Mothers (National PTA, 2016). As the nation's largest volunteer parental advocacy organization, the National PTA cites various K-12 developments of the past century such as kindergarten classes, hot school meals, and mandatory student immunizations as issues that they championed that have become mainstays in domestic school policy today (ibid.). While macro-level decision-making through active lobbying at the state and federal level is a hallmark of the National PTA, much more consistent change is encouraged at the local and even

classroom level. Research on parental involvement through PTAs for what may be considered home improvement has explored how parents can support home reading strategies with their children (Padak & Rasinski, 2010). For low-income families, this variety of parent advocacy may be especially pertinent as students from low-income families are less likely to read on grade level than their more affluent peers making them more susceptible to a range of educational, economic, and criminal calamities (Shippen, Houchins, Crites, Derzis, & Patterson, 2010).

A second manifestation of parent organizations is that of the community-based advisory organization. While holding no official power, these groups publicly address matters of importance to the school or district and are drawn from the community of parents whose students attend local schools (Rooney, 2004; Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2010). San Francisco Public Schools features a Parent Advisory Council (PAC) that is a formal means through which parents can provide input on decision-making at the district level (San Francisco Unified School District, 2017). The Austin Independent School District in Texas maintains a District Advisory Council (DAC) that features local business leaders, teachers, and students in addition to parents (Austin Independent School District, 2017). The DAC represents the shared, collaborative voice of stakeholders and provides feedback to the Superintendent and Board of Trustees. Here in New Jersey, Newark Public Schools maintains an advisory board that reviews district programs and operations and gives community members a forum to publicly dialogue with district administrators (Newark Public Schools, 2017). Despite the board still lacking full, formal power since the state takeover of Newark Public Schools in 1995, as representatives of parents who maintain a key and formal advisory role, school and district leaders may feel obligated to closely consider the suggestions of these boards.

A particularly novel arrangement involving community-based advisory groups comes from the case of school advisory councils in Florida. These councils have been established at every school in every local school district at the behest of the Florida legislature and are empowered to perform a variety of functions including the development of annual school improvement plans and the allocation of the school-based budget (Florida House of Representatives, 2011; Greenlee, 2007). Additionally, per state law a majority of members on each school advisory council must be local parents and the groups must be proportionally representative of the local population's diversity (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). Whereas purely parent-constituted boards may have to contend with their members being unaccustomed to the inner-workings of schools, school advisory councils also consist of teachers, school support personnel, and the school principal who can weigh in on educational wants and needs as insiders.

In a specific district, Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) in Maryland provides another example of how a school system has made an effort to consistently engage parents in decisions of local pertinence. Since 1972 BCPS has worked with an advisory council to strengthen the relationship between school and district leaders and community members through the council's advising of the school board on issues impacting the quality of local education (Baltimore County Public Schools, 2017). In addition to a more general area education advisory council located in each of the five geographic areas of Baltimore County, specialized advisory councils exist to advise the school board on issues such as career and technical education, gifted education, and special education (*ibid.*). In addition to the myriad local PTAs at each school in Baltimore County, these venues provide another forum for local parents to address concerns of

importance to them and their children and take public stances to influence policymakers in their decision-making.

Similarly, other parent organizations maintain a more nuanced aim of advocating for policy decisions that they support, often based on specific interests related to their children. While sometimes not structurally led by parents, these organizations act at the direction of parents on their behalf and their efforts may serve to mitigate some of the bureaucratic, cultural, or linguistic barriers faced by parents of marginalized populations when pushing for educational changes and services (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2010; Lightfoot, 2004). The Immigrant Students' Rights Project of Advocates for Children of New York (AFC) partners with New York City parents to help enroll their children in effective English Language Learner (ELL) programming and assists older students in finding appropriate placement (Advocates for Children of New York, 2014). One case study by Matthews, Giorgades, & Smith (2011) documented the successful efforts of parents of gifted students in a Florida school district to organize and advocate for their children's full support and enrichment by the local public school system. In Trenton, the Trenton Special Parent Advocacy Group functions to educate parents of special needs students on their rights, improve parental communication with Child Study Teams (CSTs) and the Special Education Office of Trenton Public Schools, and connect parents to beneficial local services (Trenton Special Parent Advocacy Group, 2017).

In the current age of accountability, perhaps no other issue has served as a point of convergence or contention to larger numbers of parents, educators, and policymakers alike than standardized testing (Donegan & Trepanier-Street, 1998; Osburn, Stegman, Suitt, & Ritter, 2004; Mitra, Mann, and Hlavacik, 2016). Most recently with the advent of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness of College and Career (PARCC) consortium assessments, some parents

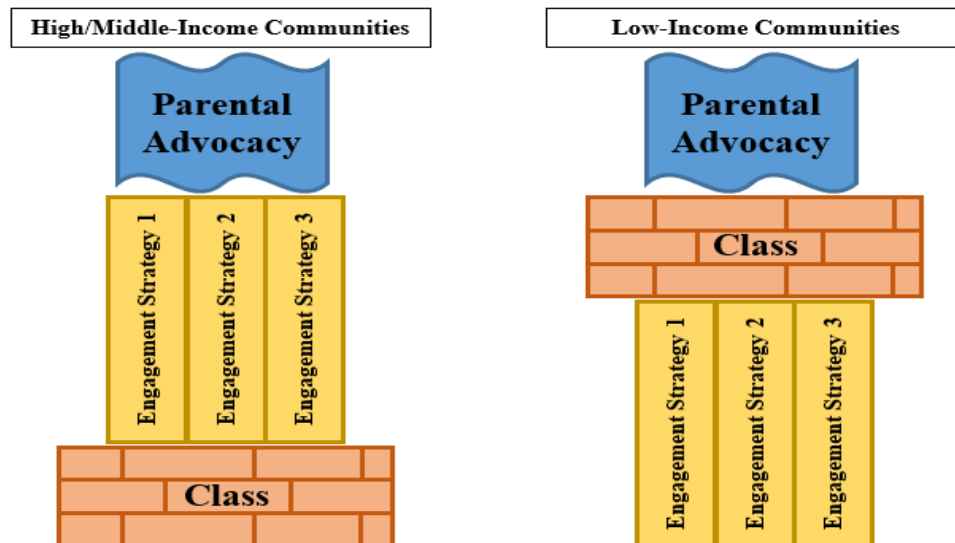
have diligently labored to eliminate the tests altogether, get their own students exempted from the testing, or to have passage of the tests not be a current or future requirement for high school graduation (Rinde, 2016). New Jersey has been an especially contentious battleground for these issues with organizations such as NJ Kids and Families and Save Our Schools staging rallies, maintaining a significant online presence, and launching advertising campaigns in concert with the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA)—the state’s most powerful lobbying organization and the teacher’s union for public schools teachers—against standardized testing and its uses (ibid.). While organizations such as NJ Kids and Families and Save Our Schools have nebulous leadership and membership with websites devoid of names of leaders, officers, or members, their self-portrayal as a voice of parents garners them some level of political and media cache and attention to their cause.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the extant literature reviewed for the purposes of this study, the following conceptual framework underpins this exploration. School and district personnel often have a range of parental engagement initiatives in place as outreach mechanisms. However, these initiatives are often not monitored for their effectiveness nor replaced with research-based or non-standard outreach efforts such as those that require school and district personnel to leave their work settings. These initiatives rarely rise to the advocacy level where decision-making power is shared by the school and district with parents. Still yet, the effects of poverty make parental involvement for lower income parents a challenge given the greater likelihood that low-income parents are the sole primary caregiver for their children, are not fluent in English, and are less accustomed to traversing pathways for opinion-sharing with well-educated professionals

(Bloom, 1992). The following diagram illustrates these points where the aim of the highest level of parental involvement—parental advocacy—is either supported or stifled by the weight and power that comes with one’s income and, thus, class:

In conceptualizing this study, it is a conscious decision to utilize class as my unit of analysis as opposed to race and engage in categorical analysis along class lines (Lareau, 2003). One reason for this decision is that the school districts in this study are more racially diverse than socioeconomically diverse thus muddling the influence of race at a school or district level. In the high-income setting, 62% of the students in the district are Asian while 27% are White, 6% are Black, and 5% are Hispanic (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016c). In the low-income setting, 54% of the students in the district are Black while 43% are Hispanic, 1% are White, and 1% are Asian (ibid.). This diversity contrasts with the stark homogeneity of each district’s students socioeconomically. While only 5% of students in the high-income district qualify for free or reduced-price meals based on their household’s size and income, 89% of students in the



low-income district qualify for free or reduced-price meals (ibid.). Thus, 95% of students in the high-income district and nearly 90% of students in the low-income district may be deemed as

socioeconomically comparable. This homogeneity substantiates class-based claims more readily than race-based claims since selecting four parents at random in either district is more likely to produce four parents of the same class than four parents of the same race (Lareau, 2003).

Additionally, research supports class as a more pertinent, impactful, and useful unit of analysis than race when considering educational settings. For one, seminal sociological research has suggested a decline in the significance of race on the life outcomes of Blacks in the United States of America since the end of World War II (Wilson, 1978). Considering the two districts of focus, this research would support the belief that students in each district will be more likely to have comparable outcomes to their peers within the district who are of the same class rather than their peers in the opposing district based if of the same race. Other research in sociology has used class to frame discussions on race and described racism within a structure of class differentiation and exploitation (Miles, 1989). Without said differentiation by class as would be found in both socioeconomically homogenous communities, race is less significant a factor.

A final note on utilizing class as a unit of analysis comes from the work of Bourdieu (1987) who emphasized the homogenizing effect of members of a particular class occupying the same social space and being subject to similar conditions. This socialization works to strengthen the resemblance of one member of the class to other members substantiating what can be argued as a theoretical construct—class itself—as a practical one with real world implications. Social and geographic spaces are referenced as particular settings where the realities of class, power dynamics, and various types of capital are played out (Bourdieu, 1989). Perceptions of cultural or social capital in particular are seen as differentiating and have the effect of agents in those spaces taking on the role they perceive themselves to have based on their class as what Bourdieu calls “habitus”--social norms of thought and action--are made routine (ibid.). Witnessing this

play out in spaces such as school board meetings leads one to believe that those who feel empowered with social capital will seek to play an active, central role in those settings while those who feel impotent will not. When taken from the individual to the group level, class is thus an appropriate unit of analysis as theory around group actions suggests that class will play a central role in influencing individual and collective actions.

CHAPTER 3: DATA AND METHODS

A qualitative multiple case study model was employed in my research. By employing a qualitative approach, I was able to capture descriptive, first-person details that explicated my research questions' answers. Employing a multiple case study model also allowed for sites to be compared and contrasted illuminating differences and similarities therein. A second benefit of case studies was their suitability for looking at complex processes (Merriam & Merriam, 1998). My particular interest in the ways in which parents either act individually or organize collectively through parental advocacy to push for change made case study research an attractive option. It also allowed for the empowerment of individual voices from various income groups to shine through by utilizing direct quotations drawn from their experience (Creswell, 2007).

Despite these benefits, limitations with the case study model existed as well. One such limitation was the inability to generalize results to other settings or the general landscape. A second limitation is the role that my lens played as the researcher and the possibility of bias being introduced to my research. More attention will be given to my positional role as a researcher and policy professional below.

Research Sites

The two locations where my study was carried out are a high-income, suburban township and a low-income, urban municipality in Central New Jersey. The high-income community has a population of approximately 27,000 and a median household income of approximately \$162,000—nearly three times higher than the nationwide median income of \$49,445 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The township is approximately half White, one-third Asian, and less than 10% Black and Latino. Of the township's population that is 25 years-old or older, 98% are high

school graduates and 44% hold a graduate or professional degree. Among the population that is 16 years-old or older, 7% are unemployed while approximately 5% of workers work in service occupations and 70% work in management, business, science, and arts occupations. Finally, 73% of households contain married couples.

The township's public schools serve approximately 10,000 students and are among the highest-performing in the state of New Jersey. Their six elementary schools range from the 88th percentile to the 99th percentile in the state with regards to academic achievement (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016b). As predictors of college success, at their two middle schools roughly 80% of 8th grade students took the Algebra I Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exams and less than 1% of students at the school are chronically absent, missing 10% or more of school days (*ibid.*). At their two high schools, 99% of students take the SAT and of those students about 82% score at a 1550 or above, the score believed to indicate academic readiness for college (*ibid.*). Of their high school graduates, approximately 90% remain enrolled in institutions of higher education 16 months after graduation (*ibid.*).

The low-income community has a population of approximately 84,000 and a median household income of approximately \$34,000—approximately 75% of the median income for households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The city is approximately half Black, one-third Latino, and one-quarter White (*ibid.*). Of the city's population 25 years-old and older, 71% are high school graduates and 4% hold a graduate or professional degree (*ibid.*). Among the population that is 16 years-old or older, 18% are unemployed while approximately 30% of workers work in service occupations and 18% work in management, business, science, and arts occupations. Lastly, 26% of households are made up of married couples.

The city's public schools are among the lowest-performing in the state of New Jersey. Their thirteen elementary schools range from the 1st percentile to the 10th percentile in the state with regard to academic achievement (New Jersey State Department of Education, 2016b). At their four middle schools, roughly 11% of 8th grade students took the Algebra I PARCC exams and about 30% of students are chronically absent (*ibid.*). Between the three high schools in the city, an average of 46% of students take the SAT and of those students 3% score 1550 or above (*ibid.*). Of their high school graduates, approximately 45% remain enrolled in institutions of higher education 16 months after graduation (*ibid.*).

Data Collection

In each of the communities of focus, data was collected from various pertinent sources from January 2016 through August 2016. Over the course of these eight months of data collection, a total of 18 interviews, 10 observations, and 10 document reviews were conducted. Of the 18 interviews, nine were conducted in each district of focus as one district leader, one elementary school principal, one high school principal, one elementary school teacher, one high school teacher, an “involved” elementary parent, an “uninvolved” elementary parent, an “involved” high school parent, and an “uninvolved” high school parent were interviewed in each district. Of the 10 observations, six came from the three board meetings that were purposefully selected for observation in each of the two districts of focus including each district's annual school board meeting on their budget where it was presented to the public. Two school or district events were also observed. The 10 document reviews consisted of the six school board meeting agendas and minutes I attended as well as two school or district handbooks, bylaws, or the foundational documents of parent groups in each district.

Research Question/Sub-Question	Methods
How does parental advocacy vary between communities of disparate income?	School board meeting observations and school/district event observations; district leader, school leader, teacher, and parent interviews; document reviews
What is the role of parental advocacy in school and district decision-making across communities of disparate income?	School board meeting observations; district leader, school leader, teacher, and parent interviews; document reviews
What factors impact the degree of parental advocacy in communities of disparate income?	District leader, school leader, teacher, and parent interviews
Which parental advocacy strategies are perceived to be most effective in impacting school and district decision-making across communities of disparate income?	District leader, school leader, teacher, and parent interviews; document reviews

Table 1. Research Questions to Method

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as a mechanism for data collection that allowed for flexibility and creative adaption in the midst of conducting the interview (Creswell, 2003). Parent interviewees were solicited by school leaders, teachers, and through my personal network and interviewed to determine their beliefs on parental involvement in general, parental advocacy in particular, and parental advocacy in their local setting. The same thoughts were solicited from teachers and school leaders in addition to how parents have influenced their school-based practices, if at all, and what methods they prefer parents utilize to advocate for their students. Finally, district leaders were interviewed to determine how parents have influenced their district-level decision-making, strategies parents have used to incorporate themselves into the educative process, and inhibitors to parent participation in decision-making.

In all, 18 interviews were conducted during data collection through snowball and convenience sampling methods connecting the researcher to the district leader, district leader to school leader/teachers, and school leader/teachers to parents (Goodman, 1961). One “involved”

parent who was identified as being actively engaged in school or district decision-making and one “uninvolved” parent who was not formally involved in this type of advocacy were interviewed at one elementary and one high school in each community. Parents were chosen based on the recommendations of school leaders or teachers, for their positions in parental organizations, as well as from my personal network. One teacher and one school leader in one elementary and one high school in each district of focus was interviewed as well. Finally, a single district leader was interviewed in each district.

Interviews were conducted at a time and location of convenience to both the interviewer and interviewee. In the high-income community, interviews were streamlined centrally by district leaders and all occurred on the same day. These interviews all occurred in offices and conference rooms with little noise or interruptions even though they occurred during the school day. In the low-income community interviews occurred over a two-month period and were individually set up by the researcher. These interviews occurred in a variety of settings from offices to restaurants to public parks and most school and district personnel were interviewed outside of work hours. Interviews were recorded via a digital audio recorder, downloaded to a computer, and transcribed using Express Scribe for entrance into Dedoose for analysis. Interviews ranged in length from five and a half minutes to 23 minutes though most were 10 to 15 minutes in length.

For interviews, participants were shown Bloom’s empowerment model for parental involvement. The first, lowest level was basic communication and centered around school to home and home to school communication. The second lowest level was home improvement which described an increased commitment from parents to their personal development as well as their child’s through improved parenting skills and enhancing home learning, such as through

practicing reading at home with one's child. The next, second highest level was volunteering which involves bringing parents into closer contact with other parents as well as school personnel outside of their home environment. Finally, the highest level was advocacy which included involvement in local, district, or statewide groups that impacted policy and practice decision-making for their children's school. After having time to digest the continuum, interviews commenced.

Methodologically, interviewing district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and parents provided valuable insight into the beliefs that influenced observed norms. District and school leaders set the tone for an inclusive or exclusive decision-making culture through their professional examples. Additionally, each group came with a range of experiences and time spent within the district that allowed for a variety of perspectives on what effective advocacy looked like and how it has or has not been realized within their settings. The invaluable voices of parents were of particular interest when interviewing. Talking with parents who were and who were not perceived by the school leader to be "involved" provided a useful contrast between parents of the same relative income level that showed similarity in thought and behavior among parent advocates, regardless of income.

The interview participants in each community of focus reflected the demographics of the communities they represented. In the high-income community, all participants were White or Asian. While three of the four interviewed parents were Asian, all of the interviewed teachers were White as were the interviewed elementary school principal, high school principal, and district leader. In the low-income community, all but one participant was Black or Latino—the high school principal who was White.

Participants' gender was more heterogeneous in the low-income community. In the low-income community, four males were interviewed including the district leader and high school principal. Three of the four teachers interviewed were females. All parents interviewed in the high-income community were mothers and the only male interviewed in the high-income community was the principal of the high school.

While other demographics about the interview participants were not collected, some were referenced or inferred from the conversations. In the high-income community, parents made references to flexibility with their jobs such as the ability to work from home, having a spouse to share with child-rearing, and their advanced educational level in the midst of the interviews. Of the four parents interviewed, none seemed to be raising their child by themselves. Alternatively, in the low-income community two of the four parents interviewed seemed to have a job. No references to spouses were made outside of the involved elementary parent referencing his split with his son's mother and all parents interviewed seemed to be the primary caretaker of their child.

Below is a chart of the race and sex of each participant that was interviewed, which reflect the local demographics of each community:

High-Income Community		
Role	Race	Sex
Involved Elementary parent, High-income community	Asian	Female
Involved High school parent, High-income community	Asian	Female
Uninvolved Elementary parent, High-income community	Asian	Female
Uninvolved High school parent, High-income community	White	Female
District Leader, High-income community	White	Female
Elementary Principal, High-income community	White	Female
High school Principal, High-income community	White	Male
Elementary Teacher, High-income community	White	Female
High school Teacher, High-income community	White	Female

Low-Income Community		
Role	Race	Gender
Involved Elementary parent, Low-income community	Hispanic	Male
Involved High school parent, Low-income community	Black	Female
Uninvolved Elementary parent, Low-income community	Black	Female
Uninvolved High school parent, Low-income community	Black	Female
District Leader, Low-income community	Hispanic	Male
Elementary Principal, Low-income community	Hispanic	Female
High school Principal, Low-income community	White	Male
Elementary Teacher, Low-income community	Black	Female
High school Teacher, Low-income community	Black	Male

Table 2: Interview Participant Demographics

Observations

To collect data from the sample populations and settings a variety of methods were undertaken. Observations were a primary method of data collection as a systematic method of documenting critical events and behaviors, especially in the natural settings where observed phenomena occur (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Creswell, 2007). A critical site of observation was school board meetings that were held in each of the communities. Special attention was given to public comment periods where parents are allowed to directly address school board members as well as discussion periods where policy decisions were publicly discussed. Additional sites of observations were intended to be parent organization meetings though the infrequency of these meetings in the high-income community and the virtual non-existence of these meetings at the school level in the low-income community made scheduling and attending these sessions challenging. Thus, parent organization meetings were not attended. A final site of observation was parent, school, or district events that served as gathering places for different groups of stakeholders thus one academic event and one arts or athletics-based event was observed in each district.

Each of these observational settings were selected due to their utility in developing a comprehensive understanding of whether formal or informal mechanisms of parental advocacy

were utilized by local parents. School board meetings are the sites where district policy is proposed, discussed, and adopted. Legal requirements for having a public comment period reflect the theoretical importance of decisions not occurring in a vacuum but with input from members of the community that the decision will impact. I paid attention to how these meetings played out, including who was present, who spoke, for how long, and on which topics in order to gain insight into the dynamics of power in each of my communities of focus. Additionally, as the formal, public setting where parents address concerns directly to district leaders, I anticipated school board meeting proving to be the site where parents felt most or least empowered to exercise their voice as their words and actions would be on public display and become a matter of public record. Happenings at school or district events may have also fed into what occurred at school board meetings.

Document review

Lastly, a document review was undertaken to gain an understanding of what changes pushed by parents have been codified in tangible policy as well as what documents underpinned and guided the work of parents locally (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Six school board agendas and minutes served as a critical source for discerning the extent of parent involvement in formal decision-making at the district level. Additionally, the foundational documents, mission statements, bylaws, and other formal documents of districts, schools, and parent groups helped determine how parents were meant to be incorporated into school and district business. Each school's student and/or parent handbooks provided a final source of school policy and were utilized to support claims made by parents, teachers, school leaders, or district leaders on policy that has come about from parent advocacy efforts.

The document review served as the critical element of data triangulation and either substantiated or countered interviewee responses. For instance, if a district leader said that one change that has occurred due to parent advocacy is that students are limited to no more than three Advanced Placement classes per term but this is not captured in the student handbook at a district high school, this could be a policy discrepancy. Alternatively, if an involved parent says that one of the aims of the parent group at their local elementary school is to be a consistent vocal, proponent of student interests' school board minutes may verify this claim if members of the parent group have been documented as giving public comment on important issues in school board meeting minutes. As organizations that employ thousands of personnel and spend hundreds of millions of public dollars annually, these official documentary records were important to understanding what decisions were made around the people and purse strings of the district.

Data Analysis

Data collected from observations was recorded in notebooks during observations and later transferred to Microsoft Word. A separate Microsoft Word file was created for each observation and interview conducted. Microsoft Word files were then uploaded into Dedoose for organization and analysis. Each observational write-up was read once for a general overview and re-read for thematic pertinence until sufficiently digested for further analysis where “lean coding” occurred (Creswell, 2007).

At school board meetings, written notes focused on public comment periods as well as board members' discussions and decisions. During public comment periods, individuals who came forth to speak were coded as either “district parent” or “non-district parent” depending on

whether the public commentator had a child or children presently enrolled in the district of focus. The content of what was said by the public commentator was coded as either “individual” or “shared” depending on whether the comments were regarding an individual, such as a single student, or the comments applied to shared interests among a group of students. Board members’ discussions and decisions were coded as either being “parent-related” or “independent” based on whether a parent or their concerns were referenced directly or alluded to. Overall, coding was also applied regarding whether public comments or board members’ discussions and decisions related to budgetary issues, curriculum, or personnel.

Observational data from school or district events that are attended were coded as “parent-leader” when parents interacted with school or district leaders. Parents who spoke to leaders and spoke at observed school board meetings or participated in parent organizations were coded as “parent-advocates”.

Interviews with each participant were analyzed for coding themes as well. Coding themes were generated from observed trends in interview data with special attention being given to disparities in the existence or methods of parental advocacy between communities of disparate income, the factors mentioned by involved or uninvolved parents regarding their advocacy efforts, and how effective presently practiced strategies are in each community. Demographic and positional data were recorded for each participant creating codes for gender (male or female), race (Black, White, Asian, or Latino), involvement status (involved or uninvolved for parents only), role (parent, teacher, principal, or district leader), community income type (low-income or high-income), and school level (elementary or high school).

Individual responses to interview questions were coded as well and emerged from elucidated trends in participant responses. Participant responses regarding the ideal level of

parental involvement were coded as “advocacy” if they indicated advocacy to be ideal, “it depends” if they indicated that the ideal level was situational, or “something else” if they indicated that basic communication, home improvement, or volunteering were ideal. The same three categories of response codes were used when participants were asked what level they feel their school(s) most often engages with parents in. Participants were also asked if parents should advocate for shared decision-making in their children’s schools and responses were coded as “yes”, “no”, or “it depends”. When asked how strongly local parents push to reach the advocacy level participant responses were coded as “quite strongly”, “not strongly”, or “it depends”. On the question of the types of strategies that parents employ to advocate responses were coded as “local newspapers”, “online methods” such as Facebook or blogs, “PTAs/PTOs”, “school board meetings”, “talking directly to teachers/school leaders”, or “other” for other methods. When asked about the inhibitors to increased parental involvement factors mentioned by participants were coded as “cultural/racial”, “educational”, “linguistic”, “socioeconomic/financial/job-related”, or “other”. Finally, when asked if they know of changes that have occurred because of parent advocacy responses were coded as “budgetary”, “curricular”, “personnel”, “none/I don’t know”, or “other”.

Document analysis occurred to substantiate what was communicated to school and district leaders via channels such as board agenda minutes as well as what had been codified in policy at the school or district levels. Interview data that included information on budgetary, curricular, or personnel changes that have occurred in each district of focus due to parental advocacy guided document analysis.

Following the analysis of each of the collected data, comparison tables and written narratives were developed to represent the data (Creswell, 2007). Comparison tables juxtaposed

the experiences had in each district of focus to determine how these experiences and strategies differed across district lines as well as the factors that may have contributed to these differences. Narratives attempted to tell the story of each district of focus as it related to their strategies, efficiency, and struggles with parental advocacy.

Validity

Validity was established through numerous means. One method of establishing validity was through the triangulation of collected data across multiple sources (Creswell, 2003). By triangulating observational data with that which was gained from interviews and document reviews a rich picture of parental involvement was better understood. Additionally, activity observed during observations and data discerned from document reviews influenced follow-up questions that augmented the quality of the semi-structured interview protocol.

A second validity method was member checking of participant interviews by participants. Following semi-structured interviews, recordings of the interview as well as the transcript were furnished to the interviewees for technical clarity (Creswell, 2003). Additionally, a draft of the results section was given to interviewees for conceptual clarity (*ibid.*). Member checks provided greater assurance that my interpretations of recorded data were accurate prior to writing the discussion section and implications of my research.

Finally, clarifying researcher bias was a third mechanism to establish validity in this study (Creswell, 2003). From the outset of my dissertation, readers were made aware of my positionality and its potential influence on my study. Readers were also made aware of my attempt to mitigate the influence of my inherent bias through conscious steps during the data collection and data analysis phases of my dissertation process.

Positionality

My familiarity with both communities was an important potential obstacle to overcome. On a personal level, the superintendent of the high-income community's school district is a family friend; he has known my family and I for over 15 years through our shared church attendance. Utilizing the low-income community as a research site presented challenges as well. I was born and raised in the low-income community and attended its public schools for the entirety of my kindergarten through high school education. Immediate family members of mine still reside in the low-income community and I reside along its border. Professionally, my work with the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) over the past four years has put me in frequent, close contact with a range of district and school personnel in the low-income community in an advisory capacity with sometimes contentious political and power dimensions given the "Age of Accountability".

Given this unique positionality numerous steps were undertaken to avoid or mitigate researcher bias when collecting interview data. For one, I only sought to interview district leaders who I did not interface with regularly and school leaders whose schools are not part of my professional caseload. This non-existent or decreased familiarity helped authenticate the researcher-participant relationship as the district and school leaders who I interviewed were more distantly familiar to me than other district and school leaders in the low-income community. Secondly, in interviews I attempted to staunchly position myself as a learner and allow participants to serve as experts (Spradley, 1980). Doing this represented a conscious attempt to de-emphasize my employment position in the interview setting and let participants speak more freely as the dominant voice in the conversation. Finally, I was transparent with participants about the purpose and scope of the research study informing participants that no significant risks

or benefits were associated with their participation in the study or the content of their responses and I gained written consent for each interviewee for their participation (Creswell, 2003). Each of these latter methods were part of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process and helped ensure that participants were not coerced into participating or providing particular responses, despite my employment position.

Other, additional steps were taken in the data collection and data analysis phases of this inquiry that are detailed below (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Some also served as validation strategies to ensure that my representations of the collected data were as accurately interpreted as possible. Firstly, I searched for alternative explanations to my research questions based on the data that I collected. As opposed to simply relying on my preconceived notions surrounding parental advocacy and this study's literature review, this search for alternative explanations may have illuminated true reasons behind participant responses. Secondly, I reviewed my findings with fellow qualitative researchers. I utilized this strategy to help avoid bringing in personal, cultural, or historical experiences I have had that may influence my interpretation of the collected data (Creswell, 2003). Finally, I performed member checking to help ensure that I was not misinterpreting participants and their statements. This served as a final check and balance and employed participants themselves as research partners.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this chapter, I present my results in terms of three key findings. The first key finding is that a range of participant beliefs exist around how parents should be involved in their children's educations. Given this range, educators and parents view the utility and propriety of parental advocacy in school and district happenings situationally more than statically. A second key finding is that various inhibitors exist to heightened levels of parental involvement that parents, school personnel, and district personnel in both communities must contend with. These inhibitors were cultural, job-related, and local and were found to prevent well-meaning parents from increased involvement. Finally, a third key finding was the varied advocacy methods employed by parents in each community as well as the efficacy of these methods. While the standard pathways currently in place to advocate in each community have yielded limited changes in policy and practice, more technologically sophisticated and sundry advocacy methods were employed in the high-income community.

As described above, this study aimed to explore the beliefs of parents, teachers, school leaders, and district leaders on parental advocacy in communities at different ends of the economic spectrum as well as the acts undertaken by parents to advocate. Data collected revealed a diverse array of perspectives and methods related to parental advocacy that range from intensive, consistent power-sharing that influences policy to more casual, periodic endeavors centered around communication. While parents in communities of disparate income tended to advocate to differing degrees and in different ways there were also similarities between advocacy efforts in each community. Thus, while focusing on the differences between the high and low-income communities I also highlight similarities where they are present and pertinent.

“Obviously, it’s Probably a Combination”: Determining Adequate Involvement

The central research question of this study was “What is the role of parental advocacy in school and district decision-making across communities of disparate income?” In the high-income community, participants held diverse views on how strongly parents pushed to reach the advocacy level. For some of these participants, parents push strongly.

...when I first came here 20-some-odd years ago this place was called the “Burger King” district because you can have it your way. Our parents are very comfortable saying “No.” This is a district where taxpayers pay quite a bit and they’re comfortable saying “This is what you need to do.” (High school teacher, high-income community, 4/12/16)

The belief that attributes related to class such as one’s income or their educational level supports their advocacy aspirations was reflected in the comments of other participants as well when speaking on how strongly they advocate, even from an “uninvolved” parent.

Me? I’m above and beyond. You have to understand I’m a history major. I have my master’s in public administration and public policy so I’m really out there. And I like to speak up. Do I feel that that’s the majority of people? No....everyone has their strengths. I can speak in public and I’m ok with that. And I am comfortable also bringing the concerns of others. (Uninvolved high school parent, high-income community, 4/12/16)

Other participants in the high-income community expressed the degree to which parents advocate as being a situational matter. Advocacy most often seemed to come about based on the issues of a single parent and their child as opposed to more general and broadly impactful issues affecting others’ children. For instance, both the high school principal and the elementary school principal in the high-income school district expressed a belief that parent advocacy was situational in this regard. The high school principal discussed parents advocating for things such as honor society recognition for their child, their child being placed in more advanced courses, or for their child being the captain of a sports team. The elementary school principal described instances of parental advocacy where parents came out in force to school board meetings over

budget cuts to programs they deemed important such as an accelerated math program that they wanted their children in.

To give more context to parental advocacy's role in each community, all participants were asked whether parents should advocate for shared decision-making in their children's schools. For district leaders, school leaders, and teachers, their answers to this question could illuminate the cultures that they have helped foster within their school communities as educators. A belief that parents should advocate could be reflected in budget allocation discussions with their school's parent group while not believing in parents advocating could be reflected in simply not attending parent group meetings. For parents, a belief in advocacy could manifest itself in parents taking on an active role in school or district-wide parents groups while a non-belief could reflect cultural norms around the traditional role of parents in relation to the school that their child attends.

In the high-income community, there were a range of views on whether parents should advocate for shared decision-making in their children's school. For some, they felt that parents should be involved in decision-making throughout the school system.

Absolutely—I think parents should be involved in everything. These are their children. Who knows them better than them? I feel like when they have the board meetings and everything anybody is invited. Parents are on the board. I think it's very important and finances too—that's very important. (Elementary teacher, high-income community, 4/12/16)

A closely similar view was expressed by the high school teacher in the high-income community in saying that schools should recommend various options educationally but ultimately it should be the decision of the parent since they are the ones responsible for their child.

While expressing support for general parental involvement, leaders in the high-income community expressed less vigorous support for parental advocacy specifically. The high school principal, elementary principal, and district leader each expressed a belief in parent advocacy

being done only when situationally appropriate. This school of thought was perhaps most poignantly expressed by the district leader.

I do not think parents should advocate for changes within an instructional system. I think parents should be involved in terms of understanding but the one thing that I find what's so fascinating about education—and I'm not a teacher I didn't start as a teacher I started as a layperson here—is that educators know how to educate, they know how to teach, they know how to instruct. Parents should understand that just as you wouldn't go to your doctor and say “no, make the incision over here instead of over here.” (District leader, high-income community, 4/12/16)

Given the specialized educational knowledge that school and district personnel have about teaching, learning, placement, assessment, budgeting, and the like, these leaders felt that parents should entrust the district's personnel with carrying out such work.

The “Malcontents”: Perceptions of Low-Income Parental Advocacy

The perceptions of parental involvement expressed by some participants in the low-income community contrasted with those in the high-income community. Some participants in the low-income community expressed feelings that low-income parents were either intimidated about public speaking given their discomfort directly confronting powerful bodies of leaders or fearful of being accosted or even deported by police at public venues such as school board meetings given their undocumented immigration status. Due in part to this intimidation, parents, teachers, and leaders alike in the low-income community largely felt that parental advocacy was not a regular occurrence within the district. When asked how strongly parents push to be at the advocacy level, of the nine participants from the low-income community only one—the involved high school parent—expressed that she pushed hard to advocate as a parent; most others candidly expressed how much parental advocacy lacked locally.

Very little. That's one of the weaknesses that we have is that our parents don't appear to be—and I don't want to say they're not invested—but I don't think they have the social

capital. I think they're missing social capital. I don't think they understand how strong their vote is. (District leader, low-income community, 8/2/16)

This belief in low-income parents not knowing or acting upon their collective power was echoed by the elementary school principal in the low-income community when referring to parents at her school not attending school board meetings to advocate.

They really don't know that they can do that. And then as a board employee I cannot engage them in that. I can say things but I cannot say "go to the board and talk" because the board is my employer so I cannot go against the board. (Elementary principal, low-income community, 6/10/16)

Other participants from the low-income community such as the high school teacher described parental involvement as almost non-existent. The high school teacher cited numerous salient examples from his professional experience of parents not being involved in advocacy. For one, he stated that for parent-teacher conferences out of roughly 80 students across the various courses that he taught fewer than five parents showed up to speak to him about their child—an issue that thus hampered even basic communication from occurring. Additionally, he relayed a story about the school leadership team which he served on not having a parent on it and that no parent was present when the team made certain critical decisions such as picking their new principal. According to him, parents who advocate were viewed as "malcontents" by local school administrators.

A unique perspective on this issue was lent by the elementary school teacher in the low-income community. Having previously taught in a more affluent community, she contrasted her experiences there with her more recent experiences in the low-income community.

Well, I've worked in urban and suburban areas and I will say when I was in more suburban areas—which was for six years—that advocacy level was very, very high. Parents seemed to be a little bit...more informed about whatever it was that they did for

their child and if I did have to take extra measures to get their support for students those parents still seemed to be more informed about the process whether it was from past children that they've had or just them taking their time to read the literature. (Elementary teacher, low-income community, 7/6/16)

While expressing that her heart is in the low-income community in which she works, it was clear that the teacher wished that more parents were involved after expressing that in her 13 years of teaching low-income students only “one or two” parents truly pushed as advocates.

The importance of parental involvement is also codified by district policy and practice in each district. In the high-income district, district policy around the involvement of parents of Title I students as well as English Language Learners has been in place for over half a decade. The district's policies include a section on the rights of parents and the word “parent” appears 539 times in their 399-page policy manual. At the elementary school in the high-income community, the mission statement of the parent-teacher group contains numerous references to concepts related to advocacy such as its support for speaking out on behalf of children and youth to school, community, and governmental groups as well as around home improvement in assisting parents to develop the skills needed to raise and protect their child. District policy in the low-income school district also supported ongoing parental involvement including explicit sections of their policy manual dedicated to parent organizations, parental rights, and cooperation between parents and schools. Additionally, considerable financial resources have been put towards getting parents involved in school and district happenings from a full-time family and community engagement specialist at the district-level to full-time parent liaisons in each school in the district at the school level.

Despite these efforts, a commonality seen across both districts was that, in general, school board meetings were poorly attended by parents. As a percentage of the total student population in each district, school board meetings generally were attended by fewer than 5% of

students' parents districtwide. However, the number of parents who attended school board meetings and addressed district leaders during public comment periods varied. At the first observed school board meeting in the high-income school district, 23 people spoke on a variety of topics from the sports teams in the schools to the transgender policies of the district regarding bathroom usage. Most speakers were parents. In the low-income school district, no parents spoke at the first observed school board meeting. In the high-income school district, at the second and third school board meetings 16 people spoke and five people spoke, respectively, most of whom seemed to be parents. At the second and third observed school board meetings in the low-income school district, no parents spoke and four parents spoke; the four parents who spoke were part of a litany of public speakers at that particular school board meeting including elected officials and the heads of various employee unions within the district who spoke out against budget cuts due to decreased enrollment and revenue in the district. These data seem to indicate that school board meetings were inconsistently popular sites for organized, parent-led advocacy.

District	Observed School Board Meeting	Approximate # of Parents Present	Public Comment Speakers	Parent Speakers on Shared Interests
High-income	1 (Jan. 2016)	10-20	7	4
High-income	2 (Feb. 2016)	40-50	23	15
High-income	3 (Mar. 2016)	30-40	20	14
Low-income	1 (Feb. 2016)	0-10	2	0
Low-income	2 (Mar. 2016)	10-20	7	0
Low-income	3 (Apr. 2016)	30-40	28	4

Table 3. Observations Summary

In contrast to the more varied views in the high-income community on whether or not the proper role of parents was that of a systems advocate, participants in the low-income community universally agreed that parents should advocate for shared decision-making. Each parent, teacher, school leader, and district leader interviewed concurred that parental advocacy should occur within their district. Throughout the 18 interviews conducted, this was the only question that each participant in one of the two communities of focus agreed upon: “Should parents advocate for shared decision-making in their children’s school or district?” Reasons given ranged from sentiments echoed by participants from the high-income community such as parents knowing their children best and the importance of home-school partnerships so that neither side feels that they’re going at it alone to parents ensuring that their child receives the services they deserve as a matter of educational equity, as explained by the elementary school teacher in the low-income community.

Yes, they should advocate for their students...especially because urban areas are usually known for there being a wide achievement gap with minority groups and so there's also usually other issues that go on in urban districts and I will be honest and say that many urban districts do not have parents that advocate for their students and that is why certain things go on that may not necessarily go on in more of a suburban district. For example, special ed services, things of that nature, interventions and those pro-active approaches that all schools are supposed to employ. That lack of advocacy in certain districts, especially in urban districts, could result in children not getting the services that they should because parents are not aware of what their rights are or what services should be for their children, who they should contact, etc. (Elementary teacher, low-income community, 7/6/16)

In the low-income community, the interviewed district leader felt that there was much headway to be made with even the lowest level of parental involvement—basic communication—within the school district.

I really do believe that the first one, basic communication, if we just did that—stop trying to do everything. If we just did one well then the others would become a little bit easier.

(District leader, low-income community, 8/2/16)

At the same time, the district leader felt that parent advocacy was best directed towards external bodies such as the state given that much of the funding for the district comes from state and the level of state intervention within the district at both the school level and the district level.

Bringing out large amounts of parents for public protests such as those that occurred around district budget cuts and layoffs in the spring were where the district leader felt more parents should play the role of advocate.

In the low-income community, educators did not seem to face as intense, concerted pressure from parents as was felt in the high-income community. When asked about how strongly parents push to be involved the high school principal indicated that parents mostly “go with the flow” and cited only two parents as being particularly involved in a variety of decisions that the school makes. The principal of the high school did articulate numerous strategies for

increasing parental involvement as well as what some of the roadblocks to greater parental involvement have been. These factors that inhibit more parents from being involved will be explored in more detail below.

As stated above, in all, parental advocacy in each district seemed to most often play a role in decisions about individual students rather than decisions about groups of students or all students. Parents were most likely to advocate to school and district officials about issues of their own child's treatment. The three major areas in which data on parental advocacy were sought—curriculum choices, personnel hiring and retention, and budgetary expenditures—did not seem to garner widespread, cohesive parent action. Of the three, parental advocacy seemed to most often play a role in budgetary decisions at the school level as numerous school leaders who were interviewed referenced parent input in describing decisions to continue or disband particular programs. Still, by and large, there was generally a sense of “I'm only concerned with what happens to *my* child” that took precedence over more deliberate, systematic group advocacy among parents in either district. In expressing this sentiment, an otherwise largely hands-off parent from the high-income community stated:

I'm their advocate...I don't—when they make broader changes I can't control that. But when they make a change or they do things to affect my own kids then I'm the advocate and I go to their counselor and then I go to their teachers and say “Hey, what's going on? This needs to happen.” Or I need to step in and get a tutor, whatever, to help them be stronger. (Uninvolved elementary parent, high-income community, 4/12/16)

Investing in Excuses?: Factors That Inhibit Parental Advocacy

Despite myriad participants believing in the importance of parental advocacy, numerous inhibitors to parental involvement were found to stifle their efforts. In the high-income community, the primary inhibitors to increased parental involvement seemed to be cultural and linguistic barriers among parents as well as between parents and school or district personnel,

limited time due to demanding work or home schedules, and school and district policy and practice that stymied the efforts of parents to advocate. Alternatively, in the low-income community transportation emerged as a critical barrier to increased parental involvement in addition to cultural and linguistic barriers, the educational level of parents, and the financial responsibilities of parents to work with limited time for consistent involvement in school happenings.

In the high-income community, demographic shifts over the past 10-20 years have made the district a majority-minority one where Asian families form the dominant cultural group. Roughly two out of every three students in the district are Asian as are five of the nine school board members (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016c). In speaking about the cultural barriers to greater parental advocacy, participants in the high-income community spoke to the deep trust that many of the immigrant families placed in the United States in general and the local school system in particular that made parents especially amenable to school and district decisions at times.

I'll speak just for the district—I don't live in this district—but...I think it is a cultural divide in our district. There are groups of parents who don't feel that they can have their voices heard. They don't think that's their role as parents. I believe it is a cultural difference where some parents feel that yes, their voices should always be heard because they're the advocates for their children. Other families think that "I'm bringing my child to the school, you take the child all day, and bring the child back to me at the end of the day. It's not my role." (District leader, high-income community, 4/12/16)

The related feeling that however flawed things are locally they are far better than what some of the families left abroad was expressed by a parent participant.

But I think the inhibitors are tremendous as well as confidence, as well as language, as well as—and I hear this from my own neighborhood that they have come from different countries in which there is so much—I don't know a proper word—where things aren't so bad here. You know what I'm saying? They're always like, "...I come from the Philippines. Or I come from this and this. So I understand a lot of this but it's still much better." (Uninvolved high school parent, high-income community, 4/12/16)

In addition to these perspectives, the reverence given to educators and the educational system in some immigrant groups' cultures makes even establishing basic communication with parents issue-laden, let alone the path to getting parents to move towards advocacy in their practice. Particular immigrant families placing high levels of trust in the local public school system is exacerbated by a sometimes wholly resolute parent perspective that the school and district are always correct with their decisions and that "no news is good news" from the school. In speaking about the inhibitors to greater parental advocacy the high school teacher in the high-income community spoke to this.

The culture barrier as well sometimes. But you communicate when—'cause I've had many Nigerian students and I miss several very dearly and, if I make the phone call home, if I communicate in an email, the parents do respond. I am generally cautious...I try to get a sense of the children's relationship with parents because in some cultures any news from school is bad news. And I don't ever want that to be an issue for a child. So that's something I've learned over the years as well. How to communicate with the parents. But not every teacher is necessarily aware of that. (High school teacher, high-income community, 4/12/16)

These statements in addition to those made by the high school principal about the issues he faces getting the parents of African American and Hispanic students more involved speak to the cultural barriers faced by the high-income community. Whereas non-immigrant families may be more comfortable advocating for the interests of their children, some immigrant families seem to go with the flow more and aim to not rock the boat; this was also expressed by participants in the low-income community regarding their immigrant parents. This should be juxtaposed with the reality that the presidents of both parent-teacher groups at the schools of interests in the high-income community are South Asian immigrant women and that much of the more fervent, public advocacy and unrest has come from Chinese-American parents who were not approved for interview by district leaders. Intriguingly however, both involved parent-group leader parents

stated that the ideal level of parental involvement was volunteering, which lends context to why neither parent group was a particularly potent site of advocacy.

In addition to cultural barriers, linguistic barriers emerged as a roadblock to greater parental advocacy in the high-income community. One such manifestation of this linguistic roadblock was when communication needed to occur between the school and the parent. If this communication relied on the student being the interpreter between personnel at the school and their parent, accuracy of the interpretation may not be consistent—especially if the information being shared does not reflect well on the student interpreter.

...there might be language barriers. And again, that depends. You've got some kids here who, they're—they may be here with one parent. The other parent's either overseas and the one parent who's here does not have very good command of English. It's difficult because the child is being the go-between as far as what's going on at school. It's not always communicated as accurately, perhaps, as it might be. (High school teacher, high-income community, 4/12/16)

By relying on the student as the go-between the teacher felt that some information could get lost in translation and some could be purposely excluded from the conversation at the student's discretion.

The issue of work responsibilities and the scarcity of free time emerged as another major inhibitor to parental advocacy in the high-income community. This was especially highlighted at the elementary school where numerous participants spoke to the struggles that working families faced.

A number of things. I would say the first would be just time. I think some of our families—many of our families—are working families where both parents are working or we have a number of families as well that are single-parent families where they're just trying to stay afloat. So sometimes it makes it difficult for them to be as involved as they would like to be. (Elementary principal, high-income community, 4/12/16)

Responsibilities at work that result from demanding work schedules with, potentially, limited opportunities for time off was highlighted by a veteran teacher at the elementary school as well.

They all work—they work full-time, they've got their full-time schedules, some of them bring home work also. It's not just teachers that do that. They've got the kids doing things. I don't know, I don't know if they can even get a day off. I don't know that level.

(Elementary teacher, high-income community, 4/12/16)

These issues of work responsibilities and time scarcity were not germane to the elementary school environment alone, however. At the high school in the high-income community the same was plainly stated by the involved parent who heads up the school's parent-teacher group in explaining how she could even be at the interview on the Tuesday morning in the spring in which it occurred.

I think first off the work demands today. I'm here today because I'm not working. If I was working I wouldn't be here so bam. (Uninvolved high school parent, high-income community, 4/12/16)

This parent lamented that more involvement was not easily possible given her work responsibilities.

Finally, numerous participants pointed to the extant culture and related practices in the high-income school district as an inhibitor to greater parental advocacy. The high school teacher in the high-income community expressed this in relation to the aforementioned linguistic barriers in the district. The teacher expressed that some of the onus is on the school and district to ensure that linguistic barriers do not prevent consistent, accurate communication from flowing between the school and parents. A comparable sentiment of school culpability was expressed by the elementary principal who explained how particular practices of her school have changed in an effort to better accommodate parents in the hopes of increasing their involvement with the school.

Truthfully, I also think that as a school we could always improve in our way of communicating with parents and welcoming them and inviting them to participate in different activities. So we always look for what are other ways that we can do that? Whether it be that they actually have to come in and give their time or is there another way that we can do that? We look for convenient times. So for instance, last year we had a mix of PTA meetings during the day—we alternated between during the day and at night. (Elementary principal, high-income community, 4/12/16)

These thoughts around how to improve parental involvement were expressed by principals at both the elementary and high school levels in both the high-income and low-income school districts. As high levels of parental involvement are pushed by local leaders, state officials, and federal policy alike, school leaders reacted to feeling these varied levels of pressure by seeking innovative methods to increase parental involvement in their schools.

Beyond the issues of cultural and linguistic barriers, work responsibilities, and school or district norms, other inhibitors to greater parental involvement were put forth as well. Again related to time, the uninvolved high school parent reasoned that issues of commuting limited parents' ability to be more involved. The high-income community is one in which many residents commute to work, especially to New York City approximately an hour away by train. An underlying inhibitor was also expressed by the uninvolved elementary parent in voicing her disillusionment with what she considered half-hearted attempts by the school and district at getting parents more involved.

I feel like they're just not heard. It's like "We're gonna have a town hall and we're gonna talk about it but I'm not gonna take your opinion seriously" or "I'm not gonna say 'you know what, I've heard both sides. So I've decided to make these changes'" and maybe step back a little bit. That's just not the way it is. It used to be that way but now I feel like the mindset is like—is completely different.... (Uninvolved elementary parent, high-income community, 4/12/16)

In the low-income community, an oft-cited inhibitor to greater parental involvement was transportation. The elementary school principal, high school principal, and district leader each

cited transportation as one of the roadblocks that prevents more parents from becoming advocates. As explained by the district leader,

...a really big piece that I think is really impacting everything is transportation. Poverty is one but transportation—you see, sometimes I laugh because it's like we take things for granted. Those of us who drive and who get in our cars, we take everything for granted. It's like "So what's the big deal? We gotta drive over here so we just go." (District leader, low-income community, 8/2/16)

This perspective was buttressed by the high school principal in the low-income community who cited transportation issues getting parents across town as one of the reasons he struggles to achieve higher levels of parental involvement leading to advocacy.

Some of the teachers talked about trying to find a location...or something like that and have the community come to us so we are trying to partner with one of the churches...to see what we can do with maybe setting something up there or do an event or something like that. Kinda volunteer on—some teachers that wanna volunteer and get out there to kinda promote the building and what we have to offer to the students along with a lot of those churches sometimes have vans where maybe they could set something up for some of their members on nights that we have Back to School Night or something like that. Say "Hey, from 5-6 there'll be vans running every 20 minutes. Come on over and then we'll bring you back." You know that's something that we have an idea for it's just we don't have that partnership yet for someone that has the ability to provide that service for us yet. But if it's a way of getting parents here we're gonna try it. (High school principal, low-income community, 7/20/16)

Cultural and linguistic barriers again emerged as a major roadblock to parental advocacy, though in slightly different ways at times. One parent cited a potential inhibitor to increased parental advocacy as being the culture of the urban environment that he and his fellow parents are from and the distractions and traumas that come with residency there.

I don't wanna just be vague and just say our environment because I come from the same environment and I'm involved so I can't even give that as an excuse. Being from the ghetto could possibly—and I hate to say it because I'm not a statistic. I don't want to use that as an excuse for some parents 'cause it shouldn't be. I guess some people could use that as an excuse like "Oh, you know, you're from here. You're not as involved, you don't care as much." You know, the scenery that's going on and there's drugs involved, violence—who knows what's going on that could, you know, deter you from being as involved as you should be. (Involved elementary parent, low-income community, 6/16/16)

In describing this as an inhibitor the parent suggested that there is a mentality in urban environments that the local culture is one in which parental non-involvement in public schools is taken as a norm.

More traditional perspectives were provided by other participants in the low-income community regarding the cultural barriers faced by parents. The elementary school principal in the low-income community offered her take on this issue by explaining how, culturally, many of the parents of her school's students come from nations where challenging public schools is not commonly practiced given both the trust that the community places in public schools and the less proximal decision-making bodies that set educational policy.

I think the parents—especially the Hispanic community—they give their kids to us and they trust that we're doing the best for their kids. Unfortunately, that's not the case in every case. I think they have a high trust of the school system. They think we're gonna do the best for the kids. Their only job is to send their kid to school and make sure they do their homework. Sometimes that's the way they see it. And they might not know about a "board" because in our countries there is no such thing. The principal of the school—you have like the board for the whole country. That's it. You don't have like a small one in each district. We don't even have districts. Just by county. That's it. (Elementary principal, low-income community, 6/10/16)

The issue of the language barrier arose at this principal's school when talking to a teacher there as well. The teacher expressed how language hampers even the lowest level of Bloom's parent empowerment model—basic communication—and is a challenge that she endeavored to overcome with her students' parents in the recently finished school year.

...the language barrier was a factor as it relates to communicating to me as the teacher. I tried to help by having an interpreter on-hand, on stand-by as well as using technology that would translate my words into Spanish because I...used Google and then I would use the Text Now app and whatever my message was I would put it into Google Translate and then the parents would—some parents would speak to me back in Spanish and then I had to get that translated. But what inhibits may be a fear of just the fact that they cannot speak the language that they want. They don't understand the language and they're forced to use their child as the

main translator if I don't have anyone available that can help them. (Elementary teacher, low-income community, 7/6/16)

At the high school level, the principal explained how shifts in his student population have led to shifts in parental involvement along cultural and linguistic lines. In the 2015-2016 school year, approximately 44% of his students were Latino—a significant increase from just five years prior when Latino students made up approximately 15% of students (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016c; New Jersey Department of Education, 2016f). This dramatic, relatively abrupt rise in the Latino student population at his school was largely attributed to the low-income school district making his high school the site of the district's high school bilingual program. While embracing the new students and parents at his school, the principal simultaneously recognized that new bridges needed to be built in order to bring them into the school community as involved partners.

It's been a pretty quick shift here in culture when they brought the bilingual program over. They had kind of had a school that was pretty much...90% of the high school students that were here originally were right here (in the local neighborhood)...and they had five to six years of developing that culture and the community was used to the building and knew where to go, knew who was here, and then that shift happened and it happened very last minute too. It was like an August decision. It was a tough decision and it kinda caught parents off-guard too. So I think they're still getting familiar—some of them don't know where the building is. (High school principal, low-income community, 7/20/16)

The educational level of parents emerged as a third major inhibitor to parental advocacy in the low-income community. As explained by the involved high school parent in the low-income community when describing inhibitors to increased parental advocacy, one's own latent educational insecurities can manifest themselves when attempting to speak with school and district personnel who may be better-educated and more eloquent at expressing their perspective.

Their education level. Their education level or being intimidated by the teacher where they may feel stupid. Or they don't—Ok, I can't get through Algebra for nothing in this world. So I'm trying to—I'm different. I told them "Listen—I don't know." I've been on

my job a long time I don't need to know why X equals a damn thing. I think—not I think, I know—because it's a reason I don't approach some things because you don't know. So some people dropped out in high school or even if they skated through, having a conversation with somebody—just the thought that you have an education intimidates people in conversation. I might know one, long word and can fabricate the rest of the conversation but if it's enough to make you believe I know something—you know what I mean? That's what intimidates them. I know that for sure. (Involved high school parent, low-income community, 7/6/16)

This sentiment was supported by the elementary teacher in the low-income community when she reflected on what may be holding parents back. From their perspective, parents who did not complete high school or did not pursue tertiary education were less likely to advocate for their children given both their discomfort in interfacing with school and district personnel and their non-understanding of how to navigate school and district power channels. In a related way, the district leader in the low-income community frequently referenced a lack of social capital among parents in his school district as being an inhibitor to increased parental advocacy.

A final theme regarding why parents in the low-income community were not able to be more involved in advocacy relates to the financial responsibilities and time constraints that parents regularly contended. Again, the elementary principal, high school principal, and district leader alike made references to economic hardships, multiple jobs, and the like as being obstacles faced by parents in their district. In expressing this sentiment, the high school principal stated how multiple jobs and the time constraints that come with it have presented scheduling challenges between parents and his school.

Some of the kids are 18 or 19 years-old—especially my bilingual students. I have quite a few that are emancipated—that are here in the country on their own so they're living with someone that is an “uncle” or something like that so it's that—like I said, kids or parents or guardians are working—especially I've found with the bilingual parents a lot of them are working second or third shift jobs. So they will come in usually in the morning—if you ask them to come in a meeting in the morning from 8-10 it's usually not a problem. It's more of when the school evening events. (High school principal, low-income community, 7/20/16)

As was found in the high-income community, limited time and the need to work presented challenges that parents must creatively address at times.

Other reasons for parents in the low-income school district not being more involved in advocacy included their status as undocumented residents, their frustration with previous attempts at advocacy, and their personal choice to not be involved. Regarding their immigration status, the elementary principal expressed how undocumented parents sometimes have a fear of attending official school board meetings or political rallies given their belief that police will be in attendance and they will be accosted, arrested, or even deported if discovered there.

So when it comes to that part...they are afraid for this reason or the other. Talking in public, I have no papers, what about if the police are there? They don't know the system—the educational system in the United States. That's another barrier too.

(Elementary principal, low-income community, 6/10/16)

Previous attempts at advocacy were catalogued when interviewing the uninvolved elementary parent who eventually gave up trying to push for improvement to her son's educational experience. When asked about what inhibited her from more advocacy her frustration was palpable.

Not getting nothing. Not getting nothing in return like I said. I was out here doing—going to the classes, trying to figure out what it is that my son need or what can we do together as a team to help him be successful. If we can't all come together and do this shit then how is—how am I supposed to feel like my child succeeding? You know what I'm saying? (Uninvolved elementary parent, low-income community, 7/8/16)

Said plainly, the high school teacher in the low-income community rebutted this perspective with his take on the foundational reason behind parents not advocating more for their children.

I think it's just plain old being trifling. I think that—I'm gonna be frank here. I think that people invest in excuses, I think that people are happy with thinking that it's somebody else's job and unfortunately I think that's problematic. (High school teacher, low-income community, 6/7/16)

As expressed explicitly with some participants in the high-income community, a feeling of what empowerment level a particular school most often engages with parents in provided context for what inhibits parents from being more involved in either community by lending insight to the perspectives of various members of the school community. Of the participants who directly answered the question “What level does your school or district most often engage with parents in?” the same number of participants in the high-income community felt that their school or district most often engages with parents at the volunteering level as at the basic communication level; no participants expressed that their school most often engages with parents at the advocacy level. In the low-income community, the most common response to this question was basic communication though numerous participants also stated home improvement was the level at which their school or district most often engaged with parents and one participant said it was the advocacy level. The high school teacher in the low-income community again bluntly expressed the sentiment that advocacy was not necessarily welcomed by local school and district officials when responding to how strongly parents in his school push to reach the advocacy level.

Very little—almost miniscule. I mean the parents that do do that are generally looked upon as malcontents. By administrators and by just the public. They're looked at as just people who bitch and complain. Rabble-rousers, bitch and complain, all that stuff. (High school teacher, low-income community, 6/7/16)

“Hold Them Accountable”: Methods Employed by High-Income Parents to Advocate

The methods employed by parents in each district to advocate were somewhat divergent though a wide array of methods was utilized in the high-income community. Parents in the high-income community utilized tools such as the Internet, local newspapers, and attendance at school board meetings to communicate and advance their individual and collective agendas. In the low-income district, as opposed to parent groups it seemed more often that individual parents had the ear and respect of the school and district administration. While the district’s teachers union often attempted to position itself as the voice of the local community and thus its parents, observed instances of parental-union collaboration were scant. As stated above, most often parental advocacy came in the form of individual parents speaking with teachers and school leaders to push for a particular treatment, service, or status afforded to their child in the school.

Use of the Internet was mentioned by numerous interview participants in the high-income school district as a method employed by parents to advocate for their children. Facebook groups and emails in particular were used by parents in communicate freely in private groups with curated membership as well as in public forums open for others to see:

Facebook—I mean they make committees, they make Facebook, they get together. It depends. It depends on what the topic is. (Involved high school parents, high-income community, 4/12/16)

Founded in 2004, Facebook introduced groups halfway through its present lifespan in 2010. These groups can be either “open”, meaning anyone on Facebook can join immediately, or “closed”, requiring approval of a group administrator. The high-income school district has numerous open and closed parent Facebook groups and members within each can post discussion topics, pictures, video, events, and more making them potent forums for developing and

disseminating opinions and information online. Other online advocacy methods mentioned by participants in the high-income school district included the use of blogs and emailing. Emails provide parents with a constant, direct, and private means of communication with any teacher or leader in the district; on the websites for the elementary and high school of interest, many teacher web pages and email addresses are available as oppose to none being available on the low-income elementary and high school websites.

Local newspapers were also referenced by participants in the high-income district as a mechanism for advocacy. The elementary principal referenced parents writing articles in the local newspapers as one of the things she has seen parents do to advocate in the district. Additionally, the uninvolved high school parent saw local newspapers as a viable means through which interested parents could express themselves and help shape the public conversation around topics of interest.

You can do a letter to an editor as well. In a way, my newspaper will write anything. I don't know if that's quite the case in every community so that's why I wouldn't wanna say that that's a way to go. In our community, the letter to an editor can work, to which everyone is likely to have read that paper—plus it's a free paper. There's no restriction on the wording. Now other publications—it has to be less than—they start to do that kind of stuff. So in our case, a newspaper can work. (Uninvolved high school parent, high-income community, 4/12/16)

Finally, attendance at school board meetings was referenced by numerous interview participants as an important way to advocate for the interests of their children. Even in situations where parents seemed unable to regularly attend board meetings they recognized it as an effective means of staying informed on school and district happenings as well as advocating for policies and practices that they favored.

We have meetings every month. But to be frank with you I'm not able to attend all the meetings so it becomes hard so I just get the points from whatever has happened in the meeting. I'm aware of it but I don't go too much deep into it. That's how I am at this

point. Maybe over a period of time I'll get more involved once my kid grows up but at this point it's too much. (Involved elementary parent, high-income community, 4/12/16)

The difficulty of staying well-informed and able to advocate at regular, twice monthly board meetings is also compounded by the existence of numerous school board subcommittees that meet regularly in the high-income school district as well. Public notice is given to subcommittee meetings on administration and facilities, finance, and curriculum with each having meetings every four to six weeks in addition to the roughly bi-weekly general school board meetings.

While important decisions are made at subcommittee meetings, the minutiae of the bureaucratic process such as having over 45 pages of employee-by-employee personnel financial transactions as was seen at a recent school board meeting may deter parents from continued involvement in those processes.

The district leader in the high-income community expressed school board meetings as being a critical site of parent advocacy while touching on the methods of the Internet and local newspapers.

In our district the most that they do is they attend board meetings. We have board meetings—board of education meetings—once or twice a month depending on the schedule and when they object to something or dislike a decision they come out in force at board meetings. We allow anyone who comes to a board meeting to talk so there have been times when you can have 40 or 50 or 60 people lined up to talk at a board meeting to get their point across—and even if they're saying the same things...they also do a lot of emails to board members but mostly it's to public meetings 'cause that's also picked up by the local newspapers—we have three local newspapers around here and they pick up stories here and there about what parents are thinking or wanting to change so that has been their method. (District leader, high-income community, 4/12/16)

Beyond instances of individual advocacy, parent groups that were external to each of the school districts did play a role in school and district decision-making—especially regarding each district's special needs students. In the high-income school district, an organization of parents of special needs students works to ensure that their children's educational needs are consistently met

by the school district. Additionally, due to prior racial tension in the school district an African American parents group exists to support the development of positive self-esteem and the pursuit of educational excellence among the district's African American students. Today, this continued need is reflected in the perspective of the high school leader as well.

I think most of our parents are involved. Unfortunately, I think the students who aren't doing as well—how to get those parents involved. I think one of our biggest faults as a district is particularly with lifting the academic level of our Hispanic, African American, our lower socioeconomic students...getting those kids to be successful. (High school principal, high-income community, 4/12/16)

Participant perspectives on parental advocacy reflected a range of views in the high-income community. Parents and educators alike were accustomed to a more heightened level of parental advocacy than parents and educators in the low-income community. Parents tended to be more active participants at school board meetings and educators within the district felt the influence of parents in their work.

“I’m Only One”: Advocacy Methods in the Low-Income Community

While parents in the high-income community seemed to employ various advocacy methods, parents in the low-income community seemed to almost exclusively advocate by direct communication with school and district personnel. Given the absence of an organized, school-wide body in which parents could collaboratively engage with the school's personnel, it appeared that opportunities for concerted, collective action on topics of shared interest to groups of parents did not occur regularly, leaving parents to their own individual agency to push for what they considered proper treatment of their child.

It ain't been no changes. I'm glad my son out the school now. They have not changed anything. He's leaving that school. So I feel sorry for the kids that's 'bout to enter that school. 'Cause, you know, if their parents is not as vocal as I am in trying to advocate something for them, I don't know where they gone—they gonna be lost. You know what

I'm saying? They gonna fall through the cracks like the rest of these kids. It's sad. (Uninvolved elementary parent, low-income community, 7/8/16)

Other instances of parents approaching school and district personnel on behalf of their children were common as well. One such instance of a parent approaching school personnel regarded a dispute between a parent and teacher on whether or not the parent should employ corporal punishment with her son to stem his negative in-school behavior.

And I remember having to go to the school...like "Well, we don't condone..." I was like "You can call whoever you wanna call. 'Cause he can tell you right now when we get home I'm gonna tear him down." And if he was right here he could tell you I didn't say no different—call whoever you wanna call. If you wanna be proactive instead of reactive—he gon' get it. (Involved high school parent, low-income community, 7/6/16)

The frustration of parents who attempt to be involved as best they know how was made palpable by one of the parents in the low-income community who expressed how prior efforts to be an advocate for her son by going to his school and speaking to school officials were not fruitful.

I go to the school. I'm showing up in person. I'm asking "Is there anything I can do to help my child get to where he need to be?" But if they're not offering me nothing it's like I'm feeling helpless. You know what I'm saying? I keep reaching out like "My son need help. He need a little bit more extra attention," but if I'm only one and it's 25 other kids in the class and I'm the only parent stressing this they like "Oh, well she'll be alright." You know what I'm saying? I'm the one that fall through the crack. That's messed up. (Uninvolved elementary parent, low-income community, 7/8/16)

Whereas eventual frustration led to this uninvolved parent acquiescing to the school's preferences for her son, the more involved elementary school parent demonstrated persistence in his advocacy efforts by maintaining electronic communication with his son's teacher and making sure that he played a role in decision-making in light of his son's behavior and academic state.

I'm constantly emailing his teacher...I'm constantly in her email asking "How was he today? How is he coming along?" Because, I mean, he's great academically. It could be for the fact that he's bored—when he's not being challenged academically he likes to act out. I'm always trying to email trying to figure out what could be the next step? How can we help? How can we get him challenged more? And she's great with that—his teacher right now—she's awesome. I'm beyond excited. She great. (Involved elementary parent, low-income community, 6/16/16)

Other methods of advocacy mentioned by participants in the low-income school district were mass rallies such as one which occurred at the New Jersey State House to protest continued decreases in school funding, general communication, parent group and meeting attendance, and presence.

Being present. Just being present. Being on the school leadership teams, attending school board meetings, being on school leadership teams, really just making sure that they're present and to the decision-making skills of the school system.

That's definitely an organ for school advocacy as well as PTAs. I think the...PTA has like two parents—at the high school. I think the guy who's at the head of it has really been able to be an advocate—particularly with the unions. (High school teacher, low-income community, 6/7/16)

In the low-income school district, non school-based parental advocacy groups also exist. There is a parent advocacy group for special needs students in the district that has been in operation for over five years. This group is founded and headed by a parent of a special needs student who found that her child was being poorly serviced by the low-income school district. Her organization's advocacy work includes regularly attending school board meetings and speaking up for the interests of special needs students throughout the district as well as advising the district's special education department on their policy as the recognized, collective voice of special needs students' parents.

In both communities parents advocated most consistently for the individual interests of their child, in part because that is where they felt their locus of influence lied. In exerting this influence high-income parents explored more varied means than low-income parents to specifically connect about school and district issues, including through online means and the written word. Still, an interest in advocacy was expressed by both uninvolved and involved parents in each community that was inhibited by various issues. These issues will be explored further below.

“I’m a Beast. Everybody Know That on all Levels”: Effective Parental Advocacy Strategies in the High-Income Community

Given the stated opinions of school and district leaders on parental advocacy, the inhibitors to increased advocacy, and the variety of strategies that parents employed, determining which strategies were perceived as being effective was a final crucial element to illuminating the work of parental advocacy. While parents in the high-income community seemed to utilize a more diverse array of strategies to advocate, parents in the low-income community almost solely employed a direct approach of speaking to school and district leaders. During the course of this study, determining how parents influenced the policy and practices of schools was challenging given the inability to fully isolate parental pushes as the reason behind particular decisions without interviewing all recent and former school and district leaders. However, a sense of the changes that have been brought about by parents was garnered by asking interview participants the question “What specific budgetary, curricular, or personnel decisions have resulted from local parent advocacy, if any?”

In the high-income community, most of the changes that parents have brought about came in the general area of curriculum and resulted from relatively small, unofficial groups of parents pushing for the adoption or continuation of a particular policy. Numerous leaders spoke to the push of groups of parents to ensure that their students receive rigorous academic preparation for college, especially Chinese and South Asian parents in the community who moved to the district in large part due to its reputation for academic rigor. In describing this push, the interviewed district leader cited the range of Advanced Placement courses at the district’s high schools as coming about from parental input.

I think parents are very active in promoting the need for as much—as many different types of courses in high school and they have really been very vocal in adding advanced

placement classes in schools, we have over 30 advanced placement classes in our high schools and they're all taken. So I think they feel that high school is very important and they really advocate to make sure that we work really hard to—make our students ready for college. Because we have about 85-90% a year go on to 4-year colleges. It is a pretty high percentage of students who go on so they really work hard for that. (District leader, high-income community, 4/12/16)

The high school principal communicated the same during his interview regarding parental support in the school as well as district-level board meetings during a program review period. During this review, parents could give input into the district's placement program and parent support for a broad swath of children being eligible for entrance into the advanced program was forcefully voiced.

Parents had opportunities to weigh in in the math program review. We had a small group—a vocal group—of parents who were not happy with what the end-result was for the advanced and accelerated students. Or it's "advanced and enriched", I think it's A&E. So they were coming out to the board meetings and saying "this is wrong" but ultimately I looked at it from the perspective "this doesn't really impact me right now." I saw it as an opportunity rather than labeling kids as "advanced and enriched" or "accelerated and enriched" in fourth grade they wanted to offer opportunities for more kids to be part of it by the time they got to sixth grade. (High school principal, high-income community, 4/12/16)

This was also the case at the elementary school where the principal indicated parent advocacy from concerned parents as being critical in a school decision to offer particular professional development opportunities to teachers, thus demonstrating an instance of parents advocating for a particular budgetary choice.

A more general manifestation of parent influence was offered by the district leader regarding parental oversight being a distinct reason for more careful and deliberate communication on the part of the district. Decisions that previously happened in a vacuum from particular program adoptions to the annual calendar have been influenced by parents to cultivate a more inclusive, collaborative relationship between the district and community.

I think parent advocacy has made the administrators pay a little more attention to how they have to communicate some of those decisions. In the past—when I first started here, if somebody didn't like something or wanted to change something in the administration they just did it. And then they would say to someone "Oh, by the way, we did this." Now, what we do is we open up the conversation and we have a much longer conversation. (District leader, high-income community, 4/12/16)

Regarding personnel matters, the uninvolved high school parent referenced situations where parents went to school board meetings to support retaining particular faculty and staff members slated for non-renewal or termination. In explaining these successful instances of parental advocacy, she acknowledged the potency of parental cohesion and the responsiveness of the district administration to issues—or people—of demonstrated importance to the district.

...there have been times where teachers have been let go and I have really seen this community come forward...and ask them to just take a second. What is the process?

Better understand the process of why.... (Uninvolved high school parent, high-income community, 4/12/16)

In the high-income community, school and district personnel referenced a variety of instances where parents privately advocated for particular treatment for their child, especially around the academic placement of their child. Additionally, contentious issues in the district between particular groups of parents and the superintendent have at times led to negative media attention as well as especially animated school board meetings when parents addressed the school board or superintendent directly. Conversations with each of the educators in the high-income district reflected a reverence for parents though also belied a somewhat tense relationship as the educators knew that insufficiently attending to parents and their perspectives was not acceptable practice within their district.

Despite this reverence for parental voice and various instances of individual advocacy, numerous participants in the high income community were not able to think of any systemic

changes that have occurred as a result of parental advocacy. What's more, two of the three participants who indicated that they could not think of any changes that have occurred in light of parental advocacy in the district were the involved parents who headed up the parent-teacher groups at their respective schools. While, as previously indicated, this may reflect both parents steering the organizations they lead towards volunteering given their stated belief of volunteering being the ideal level of parental involvement, it seemed odd that they could not make reference to other situations where parents pushed for and obtained changes at the school or district level. As the high school teacher in the high-income community indicated, however, her lack of knowledge about what particular policies and practices have resulted from parental advocacy does not mean that parental advocacy has not produced such changes.

“It Ain’t Been no Changes”: Changes Brought About by Advocacy in the Low-Income Community

In the low-income community, effective advocacy strategies seemed much more difficult to come by than in the high-income community. Seven of the nine participants indicated that they could not think of any budgetary, curricular, or personnel changes that have resulted from parent advocacy. When asked about these changes the high school teacher in the low-income community offered up his experience selecting a new principal as part of his school's school leadership team (SLT).

None. When we picked the principal...there was no parent in the room—not one. SLT meetings never had a parent present when I was on the school leadership team. (High school teacher, low-income community, 6/7/16)

The elementary teacher furthered this sentiment in stating that beyond being able to think of any changes that parents have pushed for she did not know of a parent-teacher organization even existing at her school or the school having a parent liaison.

I don't know of anything that parents pushed—I don't recall there being like a PTO or a parent liaison...there may have been one but I don't know--I've never met the person in my one year there. I would say if there's any type of push it was in-house. But as far as parents...no, I don't know of any.... (Elementary teacher, low-income community, 7/6/16)

Each of the interviewed parents also indicated that they were not aware of any situations where parental advocacy was effective in bringing about a change in school or district policy or practice.

Alternatively, leaders at the school and district level had a better sense of how parents have effectively influenced school and district decision-making, including by attendance at particular school meetings such as those around setting the annual school budget. In describing opinions brought to him by the few but dedicated parents in his parent group, the high school principal stated that parent input on budgeting influenced the school's purchase of various pieces of technology.

We actually were able to get some in our equipment line. We're able to get a little more money based on the parent sitting in the meeting and she brought up the add-in which we weren't thinking about because this is gonna be a 9th grade high school eventually. The high school is going to have all of this state of the art new technology—SMART Boards and things of that nature. We need to get this building setup to have the same resources that the (larger) high school is going to have so that the students are accustomed to utilizing those resources. (High school principal, low-income community, 7/20/16)

The elementary principal was also able to think of one instance where a paraprofessional at her school was going to be terminated but the paraprofessional got her son—a standout student at one of the district's high schools—to speak in front of the school board on her behalf and

advocate for his mother to retain her position. While not carried out by a parent, this instance of advocacy reflected a parent's push for a particular personnel decision through her son.

Closely related to curriculum, advocating at board meetings for changes to the district's assessment plan was highlighted by the district leader as being one area in which parents have made their perspective known. The district leader believes that this type of advocacy may embolden parents to recognize their power and continue to seek to have their voices heard in district decisions as opposed to currently largely avoiding those topics when addressing the school board.

...curricular-wise I don't think you—when you go to a board meeting you don't hear them speaking too much about instruction, academics, and all that. Now with the PARCC exam coming out you had some parents who became a little bit more vocal in terms of “we're doing too much testing.” We've heard that. There's so much testing. And we've changed our assessment plan to drop some of those other assessments. (District leader, low-income community, 8/2/16)

In light of this, returning to the three major themes of my results is pertinent. The first major theme concerns the beliefs around the ways in which parents should be involved in their children's educations. Educators and parents had a wide range of views on whether or not and how parents should be involved in school and district happenings though most supported parental input in decisions relating to a parent's individual child, at least, if not groups of children or all children. The second major theme regarded the inhibitors to more parental involvement that parents, school personnel, and district personnel contend with. Interviews conducted with these groups of participants revealed that myriad cultural, job-related, and local inhibitors prevented often well-meaning parents from increased involvement. Finally, a third major theme was around the advocacy methods employed by parents and the efficacy of those methods. A revelation here was that standard pathways currently in place that are meant to facilitate parental involvement and parental advocacy in each community from public comment

periods at school board meetings to parent-teacher groups within schools have yielded few known, educationally impactful changes in policy or practice.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The results of this study reflect the differences between attempted theory and experienced reality regarding parental advocacy among each group of stakeholders in the education of students. Educators tend to want parents to support the work of the school but often struggle to facilitate their involvement in decision-making, perhaps partially due to feelings of that not being the proper role of parents. On the other hand, parents tend to want to be more involved than they are but face various barriers to their involvement. These barriers must be overcome through novel outreach efforts if schools and districts are going to forge genuine decision-making partnerships with the parents of their students. Whereas class-related issues such as access to transportation, limited understandings of English, and non-familiarity with the decision-making bodies at play inhibited parents in the low-income community from greater involvement, class-related privileges such as access to knowledge of governance bodies, advanced educations, and even wide access to written and online material supported the advocacy efforts of parents in the high-income community.

The focus on improving the high-quality public educational options for all parents by improving the educational outcomes of all public school students that launched the Age of Accountability through No Child Left Behind has been continued with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). While containing far fewer mentions of “parent” than NCLB with 311, one of the aims of the law has remained providing parents with information to make informed decisions about the education of their children (Civic Impulse, 2017). Efforts to these ends in New Jersey such as The Sunshine Law that requires advanced public notice prior to meetings of public bodies such as school district boards of education or the New Jersey Department of Education’s School Performance Reports that provide summaries of demographic, assessment

performance, student growth, graduation, post-secondary enrollment, and other data from each traditional public and charter school to the public are meant to inform advocacy efforts by parents regardless of their income level. However, data collected over the course of this study revealed that there is still considerable work to be done in this arena in high and low-income communities alike, though especially in low-income communities.

Given the continued controversy of the PARCC exams in New Jersey along with 2016's re-alignment of the SAT to be more in-sync with the also-controversial Common Core standards, parental voice in local, state, and federal education policy is as critical as ever. During these first few months of 2017, the New Jersey Department of Education is gearing up to submit the state plan for ESSA to the federal government. This plan lays out in great detail what the "Age of Accountability" will look like for New Jersey's public schools as the new administration in Washington, D.C. seeks to return more educational decision-making power to the states. During the public comment period from February 15 to March 20, parents have the opportunity to join with educators, business leaders, and others to discuss the plan via webinars, in-person roundtables, and other means and submit feedback to it. Additionally, the federal government is requiring that the DOE collect all public feedback and, when submitting the final state plan in April, describe why each element of feedback was incorporated into the final state plan—or why it was not. Whether individually or collectively, if parents advocate their voices will now be heard.

The primary research question explored was "What is the role of parental advocacy in school and district decision-making across communities of disparate income?" Data collected in the high-income community suggests that parental advocacy plays a role in some decisions made at the school and district level, though not others. At the school level, educators could cite

situations from when and what professional development they provide to teachers to the locations of major trips that students take as resulting from parental advocacy. At the district level, parental advocacy has influenced issues from the selection of entry criteria into accelerated courses to the academic calendar that impacted family vacation times. The openness of district leadership to parental advocacy is evidenced in school board meetings that have sometimes lasted past midnight so that each parent who wanted to speak was afforded an opportunity to do so. These realities are demonstrative of the palpable role of parental advocacy on the decision-making of educational leaders in the high-income community.

Perhaps more critical than the verified policy and practice that parental advocacy has shaped in the high-income district, however, was the general mentality among educators that the schools and district are legitimately beholden to parents. School and district officials seemed to embrace their parent-teacher groups and see them as active partners in the education of their children. While educators felt that sometimes parents were overly opinionated and attempted to exert influence in areas that they did not have the educational or professional experience to do so in, they recognized that parental input was legitimately warranted. Given both financial considerations regarding the money parents pay to live in their community and practical considerations regarding public acceptance of school and district decisions occurring smoothly, it is in educators' best interest to maintain an amicable relationship with parents. A critical part of this relationship is ensuring that parental voice is heeded in local educational decisions through an empowering, somewhat democratic process.

Data collected in the low-income community suggests that parental advocacy played a less critical role in school and district decision-making. Without consistently active parent-teacher groups, parents were largely left to their own individual devices to advocate for the

educational interests of their children. In some instances, individual parents could act as what Bloom (1992) would call a “case advocate” by playing an active role in decisions that reflected their specific child’s needs. For the involved elementary parent, this meant frequent communication with his son’s teacher and acting as a thought partner with his son’s teacher on how to keep his son consistently academically engaged and out of mischief. However, for the uninvolved elementary parent repeated frustrating encounters with school and district personnel left her eager to remove her son from the school district entirely though she eventually acquiesced to educator decisions that she ardently disagreed with. Both at the school and district levels, select parents seemed able to exert their influence on educator decisions though sustained parent involvement in decision-making seemed lacking.

For parents in the low-income community, mere cognizance of the empowerment model’s elements is critical for making their voices a more potent part of school and district decision-making. As the district leader stated, basic communication alone was an area in which the district needed to do better. For the higher levels of Bloom’s empowerment model to be realized, an open line of communication between parents and the district’s schools must be established. For him, how can parents know how to help their children’s learning at home if they do not have open communication with their children’s school on what their child should practice? How can parents decide how and when to volunteer with the school if they do not have a consistently working phone number to call? How can parents actively participate in advocacy when they lack transportation to even get to the location of meetings? While there was broad theoretical support for advocacy in the low-income community, actualizing that belief remains elusive.

Regarding the various methods of parental advocacy, there were similarities as well as differences in the methods employed to advocate in each community. One major similarity was that school board meetings were not consistently sites of parental advocacy. Generally speaking, only a small percentage of parents in either school district attended school board meetings and many in attendance did not address the school board during public comment periods. This was not the case in instances where especially controversial topics regarding students' academic loads in the high-income community or budget cuts in the low-income community were on the board's agenda, however. Another similarity was that parent groups did not consistently function as advocacy organizations in their school buildings, contrary to the expectations of research (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2011; Bui & Rush, 2016). In the high-income community this seemed to reflect the philosophical belief of each of the parent-teacher group's presidents while in the low-income community parent-teacher groups were simply not assembled. A final similarity was that advocacy most often was employed by individual parents--case advocates--on behalf of individual students and their individual issues. In doing so, steadily involved parents were often able to get favorable treatment for their child though by working in silos parents did not harness their greatest strength—their collective power and voice.

A critical difference between the advocacy methods employed by parents in the high-income community and parents in the low-income community was their use of the Internet. In the high-income community, various Internet outlets were cited as being employed by parents to express and disseminate their opinions on local educational issues such as Facebook, WeChat, blogs, and letters to editors of newspapers. It appears the social class of parents in the high-income community was an asset in this regard as having greater access to technological resources supported their parental advocacy efforts. Given the median household income of

approximately \$162,000 in the high-income community, about 93% of households at this income level have Internet access while at the median income level of the low-income community, approximately \$34,000, just 69% of households have Internet access (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). On top of this, more than one in three households in the low-income community have median incomes under \$25,000 wherein just 48% of households have Internet access (ibid.). When coupled with magnifying factors such as educational attainment, it is more clearly apparent why parental use of the Internet through the written word was a difference of approach to advocacy between the two communities.

In all, it appeared that parents in the high-income community were better-prepared than parents in the low-income community to escalate their grievance if it was not adequately addressed by the lower levels of school district personnel. Taking their issue from the classroom level to the school level to the district level was a real possibility that parents seemed comfortable employing. Knowledge of this was shared by teachers, principals, and district leaders alike providing them with an incentive to handle issues with parents at the lowest levels possible prior to them becoming issues that become aired in public settings such as school board meetings where they may galvanize a more collective response from sympathetic parents with comparable issues. Though intangible, this mentality among educators in the high-income school district differed from the mentality of educators in the low-income school district who knew that their decisions around policy and practice were less likely to be challenged by parents individually or en masse through organized groups like PTAs/PTOs that may serve as vehicles for pushing against the decisions of educators (Rasinski & Fredericks, 1989; Bloom, 1992). This changed the effort that leaders in each district exerted to support well-informed, active parents; for those in the high-income community it was a matter that had real implications for their

professional retention while in the low-income community it was a matter of attempting to do what they felt parents deserved.

My third research question centered on the different factors that impact the degree of parental advocacy in communities of disparate income. Across both communities it was intriguing to see how time constraints, cultural barriers, and local norms impacted parental advocacy efforts. As prior research has illuminated, participants in both communities cited parental work responsibilities and different manifestations of transportation issues as impediments related to time (Auerbach, 2007; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Lewis & Foreman, 2002; Kahlenberg, 2001). In the high-income community, jobs that demanded significant amounts of time and sometimes led to parents bringing work home were hindrances to increased parent involvement. This was magnified by the potential for these jobs to be in New York City which would add roughly three hours of commute time daily to parents' schedules. A late or packed train hampered travel time even more, constricting parents' free time to engage with their children's schools. In the low-income community, parents who worked seemed to face comparable struggles around work schedules. Additionally, transportation issues manifested themselves by low-income parents sometimes not having the personal means to travel to school or district meetings or events which literature supports as the type of inhibitor that stifles low-income parental involvement (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010; Auerbach, 2010; Olivos, 2006).

Cultural barriers played out in different ways across the two communities as well. In the high-income community, the cultures of many of the foreign parents in general and the Asian parents in particular are ones that place a greater emphasis on academic rigor and are perhaps less sensitive to issues around student stress and academic fatigue. Asian families now make up

the majority of the district and, at times, differing opinions on overworking students places them at odds with White parents and White district leaders who have been in the district longer and come with different cultural views around education and mental health. In the low-income community, foreign-born Latino parents from places such as Guatemala, Ecuador, and Mexico have been shifting what was previously an overwhelmingly Black student body and city landscape. Given these demographic shifts, teachers and leaders in the district are attempting to confront related issues such as language barriers as well as knowledge-sharing about the educational policy hierarchy in the United States that literature has highlighted as important in fostering parental involvement among marginalized groups (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2010; Lightfoot, 2004). In both communities, continued majority-minority parent dialogue as well as continued educator-parent dialogue seem needed to mend present fissures and develop a more inclusive community of stakeholders.

Local norms were a third shared inhibitor to parental advocacy in each community. The high-income community was one in which parents were historically accustomed to getting things done their way—the “Burger King” district as one participant called it. While individuals and small groups of parents seemed able to get school and district personnel to adopt policies and practices that these parents found favorable, carrying this out on a broader scale through parent-teacher groups or larger scale advocacy seemed elusive. Among the two parent-teacher group presidents, the elementary principal, the high school principal, and the district leader, only the high school principal saw parental advocacy as the ideal level of parent involvement making local support among parent and educational leaders for advocacy seem minimal. As was the case in the high-income community, in the low-income community parents did not seem to employ what is perhaps their greatest asset—their numbers. Lacking functional parent-teacher groups at

schools and district acceptance of this as normal leaves parent advocacy up to individuals willing to take on the school or district. The local norms of schools with 500, 600, or 700 students not being able to recruit a group of 10-20 dedicated parents seems to reflect lethargy in recruitment practices at least as much as parental disengagement.

A difference between the factors that impacted the degree of parental advocacy in each community was the role that class, particularly issues related to poverty, played in the low-income community. In writing about the effects of poverty in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Ruby Payne (1995) described the lack of agency that families living in poverty often deal with. In their experience, impactful things simply happen to them outside of their control or their purview to counter. The uninvolved elementary parent reflected this notion that she was not able to impact the decisions around special education placement and services for her son that adults at his school were making about him without her agreement or approval. Jobless, with minimal apartment furniture, and with two young children to raise independently, it appeared that the stress of her circumstances was overwhelming. This was co-signed by the involved elementary parent who was raising his son in a neighborhood struggling with street violence, prostitution, and open-air drug markets. Environments where issues such as these are more often the rule than the exception place considerable stress on parents who can get consumed by their roadblocks and surroundings despite their best intentions for their children.

The final research question dealt with what parental advocacy strategies were perceived to be the most effective. In the high-income community these strategies seemed to include both individualist tactics such as parents speaking to teachers and school leaders privately as well as more collectivist tactics such as parents attending school board meetings and addressing district leaders publicly. As previously stated, the use of the Internet to influence parental opinions,

galvanize support, and organize actions was also perceived to be an effective advocacy strategy in the high-income community. As educators in the high-income community have realized, parents are diligently watchful and comfortable advocating for what they feel is best within the school district. Even when unable to attend meetings, online resources provide meeting agendas, minutes, video, and more to keep the public well-informed. In the low-income community, individual parents were able to advocate for the educational needs of their child. This was especially the case with both involved parents in the low-income community who have children with unique educational needs, as all students do. What seemed to make these parents more effective at advocacy was their persistence—not settling for what other students were receiving and pushing their children's school to provide more services and support as needed.

In all, this study contributes to the extant literature on parental advocacy in numerous ways. One such contribution is the study's comparative element looking at two dramatically different though highly proximal districts. My emphasis on class as being a distinguishing characteristic presents a unique dimension to the issue of how and when parents advocate. Along these lines, a second contribution to the field is conducting this study in New Jersey. Despite New Jersey's perennial place at or near the top of various indicators of public school quality whether they be National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores or the percent of high school graduates who go directly into four-year colleges, New Jersey's achievement gap along race and class lines remain one of the most severe in the nation. Thus, exploring class and race-related issues in education is especially important in New Jersey given the significantly disparate outcomes faced by students from different backgrounds here. A third way in which this study contributes to the literature on parental advocacy is by focusing specifically on the two structural vehicles for parental input in school and district decision-making—parent-teacher

groups and school board meetings. By focusing on these two settings in particular, I was able to explore the environments where advocacy is actually carried out in front of school and district leaders who dictate policy and practice.

Implications for Practice

Numerous implications for practice related to this study are readily apparent. For one, this study can be used by educators to determine strategies to help parents overcome the inhibitors to increased parental involvement that have been described. Some inhibitors are outside of the locus of control for school and district officials to impact. School and district officials cannot change the work hours of parents nor can they re-program cultural norms that influence parent perspectives towards advocacy. Schools and districts can help facilitate transportation to and from critical events such as Back to School nights, parent-teacher conferences, and school board meetings, however. Additionally, schools can engage parents in the decision-making process in more informal interactions than meetings. Each morning at the low-income elementary school, for instance, hundreds of parents, guardians, and siblings drop off children to the school. Perhaps providing parents with a brief survey to fill out on the spot or to return the following day can be a mechanism for soliciting parental input on critical decisions. At the district level, district leaders can set minimum membership quotas for school parent-teacher groups—even just 5% of parents—and provide incentives for schools to exceed this membership quota.

An additional implication for practice with this study relates to the work of parent-teacher groups. While different parent-teacher groups may have different missions, organizational philosophies, and norms, Bloom's empowerment model may allow them to think of their work in

a novel fashion; data collected from this study may guide that thinking. One such way this may guide their thinking is regarding the self-reflection of where their group is currently operating at among the various levels of the empowerment model. Coupling this self-reflection with a discussion around what level they feel is ideal may lead the organization's work in new directions or allow them to diversify operations and not simply focus on working at a single level. For both of the presidents of the parent-teacher groups in the high-income community, their shared belief in volunteering being the ideal level of parent involvement was telling. Another way this study may guide parent-teacher groups' thinking is with regards to the wide array of methods they may employ to advocate, if they so choose. While addressing district leaders in public, recorded sessions such as a school board meeting may be the boldest method of advocacy, cultivating support leading up to such meetings through online and in-person methods may be a helpful strategy for parent-teacher groups that struggle to garner shared support.

Most importantly, this study will hopefully influence parental advocacy in the low-income community. Parents in the low-income community may benefit from hearing about the work being done in the neighboring high-income community and this study offers insight into what parents in the high-income community have done around parental advocacy. Throughout my time living and working in the low-income community I can attest to the limited role parents play in decision-making at the school and district levels. While a handful of parents remain vocal on policy proposals and present at board meetings, in a school district with over 10,000 students the dearth of vocal and present parents when hundreds of millions of public dollars meant to provide their children with a "thorough and efficient" education are dispersed is stark. I find that a promising prospect for future action lies online in particular as many parents have access to social media outlets such as Facebook and may utilize it and other resources to carry out their

agenda. I know personally that local friends of mine who I have not seen in years are parents with students in local schools and are on Facebook daily. This practice implication may prove most potent if parents utilize their immense web imprint for shared educational advocacy aims.

Limitations of Study

The limitations of this study mentioned in Chapter 3 did present some unique challenges. For one, my positionality as an employee of the New Jersey Department of Education proved to be limiting. My specific work with the New Jersey Department of Education is in school improvement which requires me to regularly interface with educators in numerous chronically low-performing school districts, including the low-income school district in this study. Despite the low-income school district being one of the largest in the state having four times more schools than the average school district in New Jersey has, choosing my schools of focus from solely those which I do not have on my professional caseload proved limiting. Thus, while the district has over ten elementary schools only four were eligible for inclusion in my study based on this criterion and of the three high schools in the district only one was eligible. While I was able to interview district and school leaders who I do not regularly interface with in my policy work, they were familiar with who I was and the relationship between the school district and “the state” may have influenced their responses.

A second manifestation of my positionality that presented a challenge was the fact that I was born and raised in the low-income community in my study and attended its public schools for the duration of my pre-college education. Having grown up in the community I had a personal sense of what participant responses may be regarding how parents advocate, the inhibitors to parental advocacy, and what strategies are perceived to be most effective. After collecting the

interview data, it was fairly easy to allow participants' words to tell the story of their experience, however. While it is difficult to tell how my upbringing in the community may have influenced how I interpreted the interview data and wrote my results, it was my aim to use many direct quotes from participants to mitigate my own perspective's influence on this study.

Another limitation occurred with the high-income district selecting each of the parents, teachers, and leaders that I would interview. While this greatly streamlined my data collection in the high-income district allowing me to conduct all of this study's interviews there in a single morning, it was not clear why some of the interview participants were chosen. While I do feel that all participants were comfortable being open and honest, participants may have been selected by district or school leaders based on their known, non-controversial perspectives. Additionally, it seems as if some of the study's imperfect terminology around "involved" or "uninvolved" parents may have been communicated to some participants; at least one parent in the high-income community nervously stated that they were the "uninvolved" parent for my study upon walking into the conference room in which the interview was conducted. It is unclear how this may have influenced participant responses but being identified as "uninvolved" could prompt parents to play up their involvement in their children's schooling more than they would have previously, even to a stranger in an interview where their identities are kept confidential.

Regarding interview techniques, one of the challenges I faced when interviewing participants was allowing them to speak and not inadvertently cutting off their words. At times, simple interjections to confirm that I was paying attention or to get them to feel as if we were in a conversation more than an interview may have led participants to truncate their thoughts. Additionally, for some of the interviews I should have been more outspoken about the proper location for the interview. For instance, in the low-income community the elementary principal

interview occurred directly after the school day with the principal's office door open allowing any student, parent, or staff member who may have come by the main office to potentially overhear the interview. The involved elementary parent interview happened in the early evening at a public park near a major street where the cacophony of children, cars, and buses provided background noise that made accurate transcription especially challenging. Non-private settings such as these should have been avoided.

Further Research

Various directions for future research on the questions dealt with in this study exist. One such direction could entail expanding the range of parent participants to deliberately include parents from a variety of cultural and racial backgrounds in each community. While the cultural and racial backgrounds of the parents who were interviewed are reflective of the demographics of the communities they reside in, collecting the perspectives of parents who are in the racial minority locally may have further illuminated how one's culture may influence an orientation towards or away from advocacy. Additionally, doing a more in-depth dive into each community by interviewing all school principals or all parent-group leaders in the high-income community would have been feasible given the relatively small number of schools in the community.

Another direction for future research could be to solely conduct observations at school board meetings and school leadership team meetings. At school board meetings, documenting the number of parents who spoke as well as the topics they spoke on was helpful as school board meetings are sites where policy is codified. While executive sessions may be the settings where critical discussions around policy adoption occur, public sessions also illuminate how parent voices influence the decisions of district leaders. At school leadership team meetings, the very

presence or absence of a parent would provide insight into the school leader's feelings regarding parental advocacy as a parent literally having or not having "a seat at the table" would be revealed. As the high school teacher in the high-income community stated, his school leadership team did not feature a parent and critical budgetary and personnel decisions were seemingly made without the input of a single parent.

A final potential direction for further research could be to utilize Bloom's empowerment model as the model for the work of a parent-teacher group at a school. Early in the school year events at each level could be planned by the parent-teacher group. A pre-survey could collect the views of parents, teachers, and school leaders on parental advocacy at the start of the school year. At the end of the school year a post-survey could ask for their updated perspectives and changes in parents, teachers, or school leaders' experiences around parental advocacy could be documented. By deliberately employing a variety of involvement strategies the parent-teacher group could see what types of events parents in their community come out for and what types are less popular. This could guide subsequent programming that is better tailored to the demonstrated preferences of parents in their particular community. While advocacy may be ideal for some educators and parents, operating at the volunteering, home improvement, or basic communication levels may be just fine so long as parents ultimately feel that their students are being well-served by the school they entrust their children to, as is their human right.

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