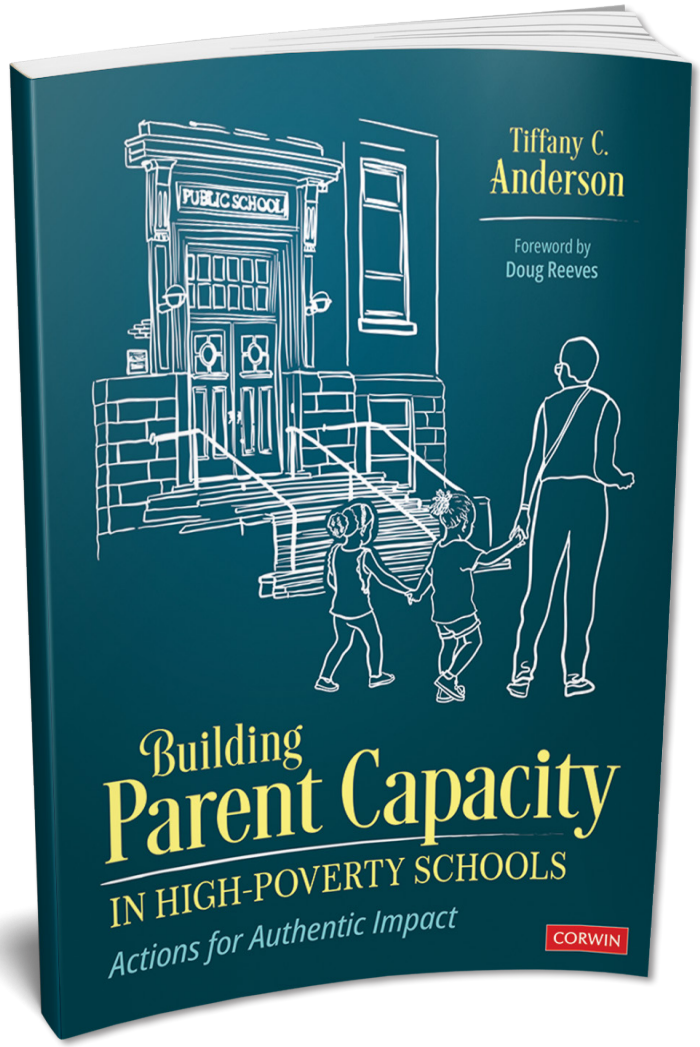

Thank you

FOR YOUR INTEREST IN CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Building Parent Capacity in High-Poverty Schools.

LEARN MORE about this title!

CORWIN

CHAPTER 1

Understanding Parent Capacity and Its Role in Student Success

"Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek."

—Obama (2008)

Let's think back to the early 1950s. The decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson,* about sixty years prior, had provided a constitutional basis for racial segregation. And although the Supreme Court's intention was to uphold the Fourteenth Amendment's commitment to "equal protection under the law" for all citizens, in reality the ruling led to the devastating "separate but equal" doctrine, which opened the door to the Jim Crow era, physically dividing Americans in almost every aspect of daily life—housing, shopping, transportation, access to health care and adequate municipals, and especially education, just to name a few.

Segregated schools for Black children were often overcrowded and the buildings were underfunded and not maintained or upheld to safety standards. Students did not have enough access to necessary learning supplies, such as desks or books. And the materials they did have were worn out, old, and outdated. Students typically had to walk long distances or take buses to school, often extending their school day by hours.

By 1951, parents of Black children across the country began to speak up, especially those in Topeka, Kansas. Among others, Lucinda Todd, Zelma Henderson, Sadie Emanuel, Lena Carper, and Rev. Oliver Brown were tired of their children being bused across town to segregated schools, instead of

being able to attend their neighborhood schools closer to home. So, they attempted to enroll their children in neighborhood schools, but were denied admittance because those schools were only for white children.

None of those parents were lawyers or had experience filing court cases—Lucinda was a teacher, Zelma was a beautician, Oliver was a welder and minister—but through the support of the NAACP and Thurgood Marshall, they eventually brought their concerns to the Supreme Court (along with the court cases of five others) in the historic class action lawsuit, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

In 1954, the Supreme Court voted unanimously in favor of the parents. Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote the decision stating, in part, "Segregation in public education is a denial of the equal protection of the laws. To separate some children from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone." The ruling held, "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal; segregation in public education is a denial of the equal protection of the laws."

This decision was a landmark victory. What those parents knew was that education is the great equalizer, and they were prepared to go to battle for their children to receive the education they deserved—and legally were entitled to—even if it seemed like David was taking on Goliath (1 Samuel 17). Through their case they demonstrated that resources matter, access to equal educational opportunities matter, and parent-educator partnerships matter. Ultimately, the *Brown v. Board* case was a catalyst for change through the Civil Rights Movement—barely one year later Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama—and central to that movement were parents and community members advocating for equitable access to opportunities in order to end segregated practices and disrupt generational poverty.

Resources matter, access to educational opportunities matter, and parent-educator partnerships matter.

Seventy years later, we are still working to realize the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Although progress has been made since that court decision, we still see evidence of institutionalized racism, voter suppression, unfair housing opportunities, and inequitable educational practices. In 2023, the Supreme Court overturned affirmative action admission practices in higher education, effectively challenging a college or university's ability to ensure a racially diverse student population that reflects diverse perspectives, cultures, and backgrounds. Just as parents were key in 1954, they remain central to solutions in today's educational climate.

▶ Students and parents who initiated the landmark civil rights lawsuit *Brown v. Board of Education*, Topeka, Kansas, 1953. Front row from left, students Vicki Henderson, Donald Henderson, Linda Brown, James Emanuel, Nancy Todd, and Katherine Carper; back row from left, parents Zelma Henderson, Oliver Brown, Sadie Emanuel, Lucinda Todd, and Lena Carper. Photo by Carl Iwasaki/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images.

DEFINING PARENT CAPACITY

Parents are a child's first educator. The years in which a child's brain has the greatest growth are the first years from birth to when they enter school. They will be shaped by experiences with their parents or guardians. Therefore, just as we focus on building the capacity of our traditional school-level educators, we must also focus on building the capacity of the adults serving as parents to the current and future students of our schools so that when the children enter our schools for the first time and throughout their educational careers they are as prepared as possible for learning.

Pedro Noguera discusses the importance of context in many of his works, for example, *City Schools and the American Dream*, *Excellence Through Equity*, and *Creating the Opportunity to Learn*. He focuses on creating schools where a child's race or class is no longer a predictor of how well they might perform. I have found that in addition to school, context matters in our approach with parents, and it matters when addressing the conditions provided at home for students to learn. Noguera states, "Unless we believe that those who have more are inherently superior to those who have less, we should be troubled by the fact that patterns of achievement are often fairly predictable, particularly with respect to students' race and class" (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Imagine if we could create communities in which race and class was not a predictor of performance. This is possible if we engage families and change the conditions in which they live. Simply put, the context in

which a student lives matters. The ability of parents, or the individuals serving in the role of parents, to grow and develop in support of their child matters.

Let's look more closely at building capacity and what this means. Fullan (2012) writes, "capacity building is about encouraging and supporting teachers in their desire to be excellent at their craft. The end result of this work is that there is deeper motivation on the part of teachers to continue their growth unencumbered." Since we know that parents are children's first teachers, we can in essence replace the word *teachers* with the word *parents*. When we do that, capacity building then becomes about encouraging and supporting parents in their desire to be excellent at parenting. This is the focus of parent capacity: helping parents build their intrinsic desire to support their child's growth and learning.

Similarly, self-efficacy can be described as the confidence we have in ourselves, and collective efficacy as the confidence we have in our group to make a difference (DeWitt, 2019; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). There is a direct correlation to parents. When parents feel empowered to be the change, to help uplift, and problem solve needs in their schools as educational partners, they are empowered to engage more because their ability to have a greater impact has grown.

Parent capacity is the degree in which parents are empowered and intrinsically engaged to support student learning and growth.

My definition of parent capacity is the degree in which parents are empowered and intrinsically engaged to support student learning and growth.

WHY PARENT CAPACITY MATTERS: THE URGENCY TO RESPOND

We all have the capacity to learn and grow. The amount in which we are willing to grow depends largely on our experience, our mindset, and preparation. In visiting schools across the country, school leaders often cite lack of parental involvement as a challenge area. The more time I spend discussing this challenge, the clearer it becomes that parent capacity is the root issue. Once capacity is developed in ongoing ways, parents and the school can do more as partners in education. Without parents, schools are limited because teachers and staff can only impact students during the confines of the actual school day.

You may be wondering how to prioritize building parent capacity amid the sea of initiatives you have in front of you. In fact, if you are honest with yourself, perhaps building parent capacity is not even among your top priorities right now. If that is the case, I urge you to reframe how you look at the challenges your school faces through the lens of parent capacity. You will

then begin to understand how your school/district functions as the center of the community. And the key that will change student outcomes is to seek out what community needs are not being met that either directly or indirectly affect a parent's ability to support their child, and to do so without judgment. You cannot serve needs you do not know. Once you know the needs, it will be easier to understand what resources to put in place, what to add to your strategic plan, and how to empower and connect parents while uplifting and serving them with dignity.

During my first principal position in the 1990s in St. Louis, I learned firsthand the power and importance of prioritizing parent capacity. I also learned the value of serving without judgment. At the time, I really had no idea of the underlying community needs we should address in order to successfully support student achievement, but after what happened on March 6, 2001, I realized our school could never be successful if I stayed ignorant to those needs any longer. Please note, this story contains some graphic content.

LIVED AND LEARNED

Serve Without Judgment

▶ In the spring of 2001, I was the principal at Clark School, a historic, poorly maintained, inner-city school that had cycled through several principals in the past three years. Clark was located on Union Blvd., which was essentially the dividing line, separating neighborhoods of extreme poverty on the north side and extreme wealth on the south side. On March 6, 2001, I started my day like any other, greeting my two parent liaisons, Joann and Debra, as I entered the school. Shortly after arriving on campus, I received a call from a police officer asking a question that no school leader wants to hear: "Did all of your students show up today?" My heart sank and my stomach lurched, because I knew what the officer meant by that question. A tragedy involving a child had occurred, and the police were working to figure out who that child was. I sent Joann racing through the building to collect attendance, and within minutes, just as Mr. Ellery Clark's fourth-grade class was about to leave for a field trip to the St. Louis Art Museum, I pulled him into my office. His student, Rodney McAllister, was absent. Within the hour, Rodney's mangled body was identified across the street in Ivory Perry Park by the homework in his pocket. Rodney's mother, a drug addict, never realizing he hadn't come home the night before, was awakened by the knock of police officers at her door coming to tell her about her son. We later learned that Rodney had been mauled to death by a pack of stray dogs. A person walking through the park that morning found Rodney's remains and had called the police. As I saw parents, I asked, "didn't you hear screaming?" And the answer was, "Yes, Dr. Anderson, we heard screaming all night. Something was suffering out there."

(Continued)

(Continued)

I was horrified and leaped to judgment, thinking how different the outcome of this situation may have been if people would have simply checked out their windows to see what was occurring. Reporters captured this response from parents in the stories that followed, as they recounted what was described as screams for help and cries that went unanswered all night. They reported on apathy, in which neighbors excused themselves from helping a child in need in literally their backyard (Simon, 2001).

Like many, I, too, jumped to judgment as they incarcerated his mother for neglect, and I asked neighboring parents why they didn't seek help. They quickly put me in my place and taught me a lesson that changed how I serve others. Their response gave me a sense of urgency to build the capacity of parents who live in and protect the neighborhoods and children in our community. "How dare you judge us, Doc? When we call the police, *if* they come, it will not be immediate." Some parents had actually called animal control in the days and weeks before to report the stray dogs throughout the neighborhood, but nothing had been done about it. They went on to say, "When we hear gunshots nightly, we lock our doors and hide under the bed hoping we are not next. And when we hear screams, we shut the blinds and close our eyes to what we do not want to be a witness to." They described the destructive principle of self-preservation held by communities who live in fear. The mantra "each to his own" is the backbone of self-preservation. Everyone suffers in the end.

Self-preservation is instinctual and built into the DNA of all living beings, particularly in people living in at-risk communities. However, as teachers and school and district leaders tasked with creating successful schools where students can thrive, we have to think beyond self-preservation and make decisions for the greater good of the community and the families we serve. Joseph Hill writes, "The principles of responsibility and security are important where leadership is concerned, as well, but as responsible citizens, defending and serving **for others** is the acceptable key to healthy forms of preservation" (Hill, 2015). Therefore, in order to preserve ourselves, we must realize that we are connected to one another, and we can only do well when others around us thrive and do well. As we mourned the loss of Rodney McAllister, it was clear to me that the only way to change these outcomes was to build parent capacity by thinking beyond the walls of our school—sharing messages of collective success, community preservation over self-preservation, and empowerment.

Our lived experience shapes us, and as we learn, we grow. The parents at Clark School described a community that I did not live in, resulting in a different perspective that I needed to more fully understand in order to help my school and my students be successful. As I reflected on the situation, I realized that they were right—how dare I judge or question? In the neighborhood I live in, police come when they are called and neighbors watch out for each other. As a result of Rodney's death, I realized two things: 1) I could not serve needs I did not know. Thus, my sneaker philosophy—walking

the neighborhoods and meeting parents out at places within the community—was born; and 2) Parents have to see themselves as connected to the schools, and schools have to see themselves as the center of the community. No school improvement initiative will be sustainable unless capacity building is rooted in those two foundational pieces. Everyone benefits when we embrace the idea that parents are educators too. They are copartners in extending safety, compassion, and education in the neighborhood when the school day ends.

My Sneaker Philosophy

My sneaker philosophy is to come dressed for the work at hand, ready to meet people where they are. That means I wear sneakers every day as a feet-to-the-ground action plan in motion. I wear sneakers; I can't do the work I need to do in heels! To me, it's vital to be in classrooms and in the community every day in order to be most effective. Even though I serve as a superintendent, my role is to teach and learn in support of adults and students. Sometimes that's helping them see a path they didn't know they needed to be on or know that the path even existed for them.

BRINGING SCHOOLS TO THE CENTER OF THE COMMUNITY

To build parent capacity, we must change how we think about schools. Instead of schools being one aspect of the community—of equal importance as the neighborhoods, the places to eat or buy food, the places to purchase goods and services—we must think of schools as the center of the community around which the rest of the community can thrive.

A growing body of research suggests that placing schools at the center of the community has both a positive effect on student achievement (e.g., work efforts, habits, and attitudes; improved test scores and grades; lower dropout rates; and higher graduation rates) as well as success of the community itself (Henderson & Mapp, 2016). "Through partnerships with various community organizations, the school becomes a resource for community members to address their educational, physical, social, and emotional needs" (Simington, 2015) as well as helps target out-of-school barriers that children face (The Policy Circle, 2023). After all, it is very difficult for students to focus on academics and perform well in the classroom if their lives outside the classroom are chaotic. This holistic approach to the learning environment remodels the school into a multidimensional space to improve overall student well-being and builds the capacity of the families who support our students outside of school hours.

I like to think of the approach much like a relay race. When families drop off their children at school, they are passing the baton to the educators, saying, "Here you go! Please give my child the tools they need for success both inside the classroom and beyond." And at the end of the day when the children leave, we are passing the baton back to the families, saying, "Here you

Models of a school-centered community approach include:

- Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC)
- Head Start
- Harlem Children's Zone
- Camino Nuevo Charter Academies
- KIPP NYC Public Schools

go! Let's keep this momentum moving forward." The greater the capacity parents have to perpetuate that momentum at home and in a community that is responsive to their needs, the greater our capacity is as educators to move the academic needle forward.

As we consider the implications of building parent capacity and shifting our mindset to understand schools as the center of the community, take some time to consider how this approach is different from the traditional model of school. Figure 1.1 provides some examples of the traditional approach versus the community-based approach.

FIGURE 1.1 Characteristics of a Traditional Approach vs. a Community-Based Approach

TRADITIONAL APPROACH	COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH
• Activity based, determined by school	• Relationship based, based on mutual need
• Parents as individuals	• Parents as members of the community/ collective
• Parents adapt to school rules and norms	• School holds necessary rules and norms but incorporates and reflects meaningful cultural and community values
• Parents follow school agenda and events	• Parents as leaders and collaborators in setting agendas and events
• Workshops provide information	• Workshops and training provide capacity building and personal growth
• Top-down, school to parent communication	• Meaningful conversation and two-way communication

SOURCE: Adapted from Warren et al. (2009).

Schools are more than institutions that produce graduates. Unlike transactional systems in business and in some factories, schools have interrelated parts that must work in concert with one another to serve the whole child. Schools are central to the transformational experiences within a community. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. often quoted John Donne's famous words, "No man is an island, Entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main . . . The bell tolls for thee" (Donne, 1624). Communities and schools consist of collective voices that have the power to change

generations, and their impact is in part dependent on their capacity to actively listen as involved parents, and become allies, advocates, and leaders moving with urgency in transforming schools and communities that will create a future filled with hope and prosperity.

In the months after Rodney's tragic death, parents from Clark School (later renamed Clark Accelerated Academy) and I advocated for stray dog legislation in St. Louis and it was passed. The legislation was signed at our school. It's an example of parent capacity being built through the call to act as a result of tragedy. People were empowered to do more to protect their community. Our school invested in ways we could do that together. This marked our collective shift to a more community-focused and relationship-based approach in St. Louis County.

That year, I started receiving anonymous Save the Children scarves and have since continued buying scarves. I wear them daily to work as a reminder of Rodney and of my commitment to build the capacity of parents and the community. Ultimately, lives depend on it. When Rodney's mother was released from prison, the community saw the need to expand services for addicts. We met with her, showed her Rodney's classroom, and loved on her as a grieving mother. We even created a memorial that has our fingerprints within it and planted a tree in remembrance. Now, more than twenty years later, Mr. Clark, Rodney's fourth-grade teacher, and I still meet and clean Ivory Perry Park every March. I still write letters lamenting how the city neglects the park (Anderson, 2016). The tree now has large branches that extend over the memorial—reminding us that we are an extension of one another. When we grow together as one parent and school community, we thrive together in support of the entire community.

LIVED AND LEARNED

It's Okay to Take a Moment

▶ Being an educator is challenging and often stressful, especially in situations involving tragedy and hardship. As superintendent, I often find myself in conversation with other educators about those challenges, and it's important to be honest and open when those feelings become overwhelming and you need to take a moment to reflect and catch your breath. We all need a moment from time to time. I certainly had those moments surrounding the tragedy of Rodney McAllister's death, and there have been many more since. But a moment needs to last a moment because too many other people are counting on you to make sure that their moments are filled with hope. So if you or others around you need to have a moment of sadness, of grief, of anger, or of frustration, it's important to have a system of self-care to ensure that those times in which you are emotionally drained remain only a moment. You must be able to recharge and be available to positively impact all the other moments around you.

▶ Rodney's fourth-grade teacher, Mr. Clark, and Dr. Anderson at Rodney's memorial in 2015.

BUILDING PARENT CAPACITY IN ACTION

Dr. Aarion L. Gray is the Topeka Public Schools general director for instructional services and was principal at Randolph Elementary. Every day he welcomes students, parents, and staff as they enter school, and works to use every interaction as a teachable moment to empower others to change mindsets where needed. As an example, one year the school faced the challenge of parents dropping off their children unattended on campus well before the start of the school day. Dr. Gray, the school staff, and a group of parents quickly began a discussion about how to build parent capacity around this challenge. Every issue facing a student that a parent contributes to should be solved in partnership with parents when possible. While he was glad to see students coming to school, the dangers of leaving students outside before school began were clear to educators but not to the parents who were leaving

their children. Dr. Gray's approach was not to criticize or scold families; rather, he planned to build their understanding. Some thought parents may lose their temper or use colorful language and asked whether he needed school resource officer staff to join him. Dr. Gray declined and instead chose to use patience, grace, and a smile to begin the conversation. He wanted to make families feel safe to share and listen, and the presence of a school resource officer might cause parents to be defensive or feel mistrusted.

The day he began his education campaign, Dr. Gray stood outside in the parking lot at sunrise, meeting parents who were dropping their children off before school was open. He took time to greet each individual, shake their hand, and share with them how glad he was they were present. With sincere support and compassion, he then spoke about his concerns for the safety of students left unattended.

I stopped at the school that morning to see how parents were receiving his approach and witnessed a mindset shift for each parent as he devoted time to listen, to learn, and to brainstorm ways to address the early morning childcare issues some faced, causing them to deliver their children hours before school began. Every parent loves their child, and Dr. Gray saw this as an opportunity to teach families about ways to help him better serve. He modeled for staff what capacity building looks like.

BUILDING PARENT CAPACITY REFLECTION

Think back to what you read throughout this chapter. Use these reflection questions to consider your own school or district and the role you play in building parent capacity.

1. How do you see yourself (What role do you play in the school where you serve)?
2. How do teachers see themselves and how do they view the school?
3. How do parents see themselves and how do they view the school?

Take some time to reflect on your learning and plan for action in your next steps.

WHAT?

Summarize your learning and key takeaways from this chapter.

SO WHAT?

Record ideas about how your key takeaways apply to you, your school, and/or your district.

NOW WHAT?

Based on your key takeaways, plan your next steps for moving forward in this area.