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Lynn McDonald Hannah Miller Jen Sandler

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A social ecological, relationship-based strategy for parent involvement: Families And Schools Together (FAST)

Lynn McDonald, Hannah Miller and Jen Sandler

Professor Lynn McDonald is based at Middlesex University, London, UK.

Hannah Miller is based at University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, USA.

Dr Jen Sandler is based at University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst, Massachusetts, USA.

Abstract

Purpose – Most schools struggle to get busy and stressed parents to come repeatedly to the school building for events. At primary schools, especially those with pupils living in low-income communities or with many immigrants, involving parents to come at all is seen as a challenge. The purpose of this paper is to present a social ecological strategy of using the school building as a site for families to gather and for community networks to grow by building relationships between parents who have same-aged children attending that school. When families know other families, they feel more comfortable coming into the school building, and probably will return frequently.

Design/methodology/approach – A large randomised controlled trial of 52 urban schools with an average of 73 per cent Latino students situated in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the USA has data to examine the impact of this strategy on parent involvement. Parents of all first-grade students (age 6 or 7) at schools assigned either to Families and Schools Together (FAST) or services-as-usual were invited to participate. At schools with the social ecological strategy universal invites were made to those in the study to attend any one of eight weekly multi-family group sessions offered after-school at the building. Trained teams were culturally representative of the families (language, ethnicity) and made up of local parents and professionals; each team hosted up to ten families in a hub for two and a half hours (83 families attended at one session). Parents were socially included, treated with respect, coached by the team to lead a family meal, singing, family crafts and games at a family table. Parent time (respite) was provided with chat-time in pairs, followed by parent-led discussion groups. Parents were coached in one to one time, “child-led” responsive play for 15 minutes.

Findings – Parent involvement data showed that on average, 43.6 per cent of all first-graders’ families (an average of 44 families per school) attended at least one session; of those, who attended at least one session, 69 per cent returned for another. On average, of those families who attended at least once, the average family went four times; an average of 22 families per school attended six or more sessions. Parent graduates led monthly booster sessions open to all families. In half of the families, both fathers and mothers attended; immigrant parents attended statistically significantly more than native-born ones. In surveys, more parents in schools with FAST vs control reported attending three or more events at school.

Practical implications – The FAST programme encourages the involvement of reluctant parents in school events. This benefits both children’s general well-being and academic attainment and so contributes to preventative public health strategies.

Originality/value – This paper brings new perspectives to the challenges faced by educators in involving parents at school by a sociologist-led research team introducing a social worker-developed social ecological, systemic strategy to schools in low-income communities using a randomised controlled design. This novel social ecological approach has consistently and effectively engaged whole families into increased involvement in schools in 20 countries, especially in low-income communities. Headteachers consistently report increased school engagement of FAST parent graduates for years, suggesting that the early intensity builds ongoing relationships of trust and reciprocity across home, school and community. Policy makers should note that building social capital in disadvantaged communities through partnerships with parents and schools can result in decreased disparities in health, social care and education.

Keywords Social capital, Community involvement, Education disparities, Family engagement, Parent empowerment, Parent partnerships

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Parent involvement in children's schooling is widely seen as critical to improving standardised test scores and closing the achievement gap (Mattingly *et al.*, 2002; Henderson, 2010), yet effective strategies are hard to identify. Educators frequently rate improving family-school partnerships, family engagement and parent involvement as one of the most important goals and biggest challenges facing schools (Speth *et al.*, 2008). Estimates of the effect of parent involvement on academic achievement have varied according to the data collected, outcomes measured and definition of parent involvement used (Nye *et al.*, 2006). While correlational meta-analyses by Graue *et al.* (1983) and Fan and Chen (2001) offered early evidence of associations between parent involvement and a variety of academic outcomes, recent meta-analyses provide the most convincing evidence that parent involvement improves children's academic performance.

In a 2003 meta-analysis of 20 studies, Jeynes examined the effect of parent involvement on minority students' academic achievement as measured by grades, standardised test scores, teacher rating scales and indices of academic behaviours and attitudes. Jeynes defined parent involvement broadly, including studies that examined parents' expectations for their children's academic success as well as those that increased parents' attendance at school events. Jeynes found that the effect sizes varied from two-tenths to four-tenths of a standard deviation depending on which minority groups were studied, with parent involvement appearing to benefit African-Americans and Latinos more than Asian-Americans. In a subsequent meta-analysis of 41 studies of parent involvement interventions targeted at the parents of urban elementary school students, Jeynes (2005) found that the effect sizes of parent involvement ranged from 0.70 to 0.75 of a standard deviation and were significant regardless of the students' race or gender.

Nye *et al.* (2006) argued that, due to methodological limitations, the previously discussed meta-analyses can only suggest that parent involvement positively affects students' academic achievement. To produce a more rigorous estimate of the effect of parent involvement, Nye *et al.* conducted a meta-analysis of 18 studies that used a randomised-controlled trial (RCT) design. Compared to Jeynes (2003), Nye *et al.* (2006) used a narrower definition of parent involvement as a "program in which the parent has a direct interaction with the child in either the delivery or monitoring of the program of intervention", such as reading with the child at home or attending workshops designed to teach particular mathematical skills (p. 11). Nye and colleagues found that the average effect of the parent involvement interventions on elementary students' achievement was $d = 0.43$ and was statistically significant, with a 95 per cent confidence interval from $d = 0.30$ to 0.56. This indicated that the academic performance of children in the treatment group was nearly half a standard deviation higher than that of children in the control group. Overall, these meta-analyses by Nye *et al.* (2006) and Jeynes (2003, 2005) provide the most convincing evidence to date that parent involvement has a positive and significant direct effect on students' academic achievement.

In a study examining parent involvement in 12 urban charter schools, Smith *et al.* (2011) suggested that the specific parent involvement activities that schools provide are less important for increasing academic achievement than the involvement strategies utilised to draw parents into schools and to make them feel comfortable and useful once they are involved. Smith *et al.* (2011) defined parent involvement as "letting parents know the school's expectations, having parent[s] attend school events and meetings", and they distinguished these activities from parent engagement, which they suggest means that parents have an "ongoing presence at the school" and shape the school's policies and governance (p. 89). Strategies which have been widely used to increase parent involvement include: first, providing information to parents in an understandable format; second, arranging for language interpreters at all school meetings; third, increasing access to school events by providing transportation and childcare; fourth, offering professional development or training to parents to improve their own skills; and fifth, increasing parent confidence in terms of interacting with school staff (Epstein and Becker, 1982; Feuerstein, 2000; Schulting *et al.*, 2005; Cooper, 2010; Smith *et al.*, 2011).

Researchers have surveyed teachers about parent involvement in their classrooms (Becker and Epstein, 1982) and parents about the school activities in which they participate and their frequency of participation (Miedel and Reynolds, 2000). Studies have found that parents are less likely to participate in school-based activities if they are less educated, have lower incomes,

are from ethnic minority groups or are single mothers (Epstein, 1984; Lareau, 1987; Griffith, 1998). Educators report being frustrated by “low levels” of parent involvement (Lareau, 1996) and also by the challenges of engaging “hard to reach parents” (Rich, 1993; Aronson, 1996; Crozier and Davies, 2007). Numerous reasons are hypothesised for these challenges. For instance, economically disadvantaged parents may work long hours with inflexible schedules and have less access to transportation (Edin and Lein, 1997; Lareau, 2003) or socially marginalised parents may feel less confident intervening on behalf of their children at a school (Furstenberg *et al.*, 1999; Crosnoe *et al.*, 2002).

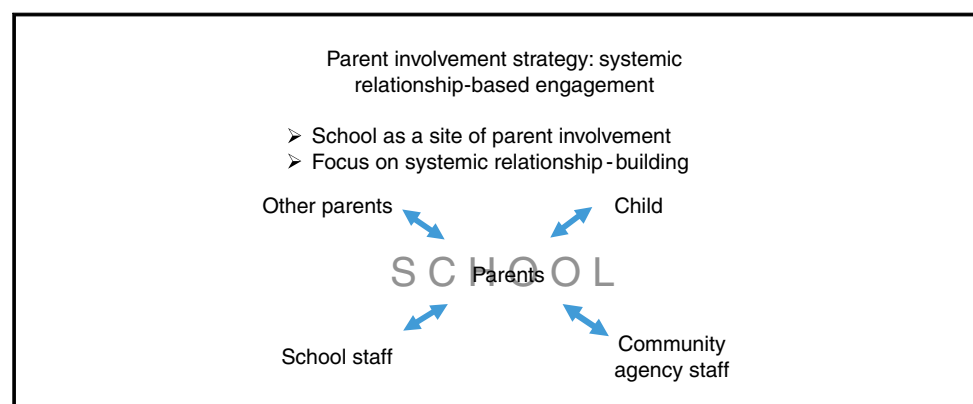
This paper introduces a social ecological, relationship-based (SERB) strategy in which the site of the school is used to gather together local families of same-aged children to build relationships and develop community networks. The benefit of this strategy for parents who are raising small children comes from providing universal accessible positive neighbourhood structures for building social capital. Social isolation combined with stress increases the risk of domestic violence, parental depression and child neglect and abuse. Protective factors are relationships across families, within families and with schools, and these can reduce the stresses on young children and reduce their levels of “toxic stress – a disruption in brain and metabolic circuitry that can result from strong, frequent, or prolonged activation of the body’s stress response systems in the absence of the buffering protection of a supportive, adult relationship” (Shonkoff *et al.*, 2012). At the same time that preventative issues are addressed, the school site benefits from hosting the social intervention, in that parent engagement at schools increases, even in urban schools serving low-income communities with many immigrants. This multi-family group strategy is also based on family systems and family stress theories, and is called Families and Schools Together (FAST). FAST has a track record for engaging parents and whole families into schools, especially with those who are considered “hard to reach”. Specific processes of the strategy are briefly described, followed by data analysis on parent involvement and engagement from a large experimental study of FAST in 52 primary schools.

A SERB strategy

In traditional parent involvement strategies, or “positive parent outreach”, the school’s aims are at the centre of the model. The school invites parents to utilise school-provided resources and to attend school-run events. Positive parent outreach assumes that the school’s work, which is to educate children, should be supported by the parents and that if this is achieved, the school will be able to undertake its work more effectively and academic performance will improve. The goal of positive parent outreach is, therefore, to help the school effectively impact the child’s academic outcomes.

In contrast, the SERB model places the parent at the centre (see Figure 1). The goal of SERB is to influence the child’s performance and well-being by many means simultaneously, focusing specifically on the parent’s role in facilitating the child’s social, emotional and academic improvement (which are often correlated), and connecting the parent positively to multiple

Figure 1 Social ecological, relationship-based (SERB) parent involvement strategy



resources and social supports of the school and community. This strategy is ecological because it intervenes at multiple levels of the child's social ecology, bringing the resources of the school, family and community to bear on empowering the parent, increasing social networks, strengthening parenting skills, improving the parent-child bond and building social protective factors against stress for the child's well-being, i.e. to prevent bad outcomes related to adverse childhood experiences.

The SERB model is relationship-based because it presumes that parents need strong relationships at multiple levels in order for them to support their young child effectively. These relationships include: first, relationships with other parents of same-aged children at the local school; second, relationships within their families and with their young child; third, relationships with school faculty, staff, counselors and principals; and fourth, relationships with community resources (e.g. mental health organisations, substance abuse treatment facilities). The assumption of the SERB parent involvement model is that strengthening the entire social ecology of the child is necessary in order to significantly improve the child's social and emotional well-being and academic performance. Thus, the school functions as the site of parent involvement and the focus is on systemic relationship-building, not on using the parents to support the school's work.

The success of this particular theory of parent involvement can be assessed by measuring the ability of a SERB programme to create the desired child outcomes (improved social, emotional and academic outcomes of children), family outcomes (increased family harmony, reduced family conflict, stronger parent-child bonds), and community outcomes (increased social capital, social networks, parent leadership in the community), as well as its ability to engage repeat-participation at the school building with higher numbers of parents than the school's usual parent outreach efforts, leading to family engagement with the school. A great deal of research attests to the correlation between social support, pro-social behaviour, family and community well-being and academic achievement (e.g. Malecki and Elliott, 2002; Caprara *et al.*, 2000; Henderson and Mapp, 2002).

FAST is conceptualised here as an example of a SERB parent engagement programme (www.familiesandschools.org). Eight weekly offers of multi-family group sessions with meals and fun activities for all parents of first-graders are made, and parents may decide to attend one or more multi-family groups held at the building after-school; monthly booster sessions are then offered for two years (McDonald *et al.*, 1997, 2006; McDonald and Sayger, 1998).

FAST has been tested with four separate RCTs since 2001 in four distinct low-income communities: first, nine urban schools serving predominantly African-Americans (Layzer *et al.*, 2001); second, three rural schools with primarily Native Americans (Kratochwill *et al.*, 2004); third, seven medium-sized city schools with students from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds (Kratochwill *et al.*, 2009); and fourth, four urban schools serving primarily Mexican-Americans (McDonald *et al.*, 2006).

In each study, high rates of family engagement were reported with "hard to reach" parents, who have historically been socially marginalised, economically disadvantaged, and living in low-income communities. From 63 to 90 per cent of families returned after coming once to attend six or more sessions. Statistically significant positive outcomes were reported across home, school and community, using standardised instruments with established validity and reliability. Based on these four studies, FAST has been included in peer-reviewed government lists of evidence-based practices (National Review of Evidence-based Programs and Practices, 2014; Investing in Children, 2013; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010).

The quantitative studies provide evidence that a SERB parent involvement strategy which uses schools as sites can lead to repeated attendance at school building hosted events and also show positive impacts across the social ecology of home, school and community. The qualitative research further explores the interactive sequences underlying these outcomes (Shoji *et al.*, 2014). The research identified four interactional processes happening at FAST as key to creating an environment conducive to producing social capital and parent engagement: responsive communication; reciprocal communication; shared experiences and institutional linkage. These processes often build upon each other to create a larger cumulative effect. To ensure that these are actually in place, schools must examine and evaluate their current

efforts at community-building. "It's common sense that communication leads to relationships and relationships provide access to resources, but it's another thing altogether to actually create an environment where that is taking place [...] The answer is, you build this community by creating shared experiences and facilitating authentic communication among families and school staff, which then leads to shared expectations and values among them" (WCER web site).

FAST has core components in order to be replicable across thousands of schools. One example is that teams must include local parents from that school who work alongside school staff (including teachers) and community-based professionals. The parent-professional partnership must also represent the culture, ethnicity, race and language of the families at that school. Trained teams coach the participating parents to lead positive family activities (crafts and games) at a designated family table. There are no lectures or handouts, as learning is entirely experiential and does not depend on literacy levels or competence in English. Each week is the same. If a family comes only once, they still learn what all of the families learn. The benefits of repetition from repeated attendance are in the parent efficacy and in the building of stronger relationships. The quality of FAST implementation is monitored with checklists and with repeated on-site direct observations by a supervising trainer. Core components cannot be changed; however, there is flexibility and 60 per cent of FAST processes are locally adapted by the team to best fit cultural priorities and engage the families.

The whole family is recruited (babies, teenage siblings, grandparents) to come to the eight weekly school events to have positive experiences at the school. The parents are supported to lead the family activities for their own family: a family meal together and fun communication games. Parents are coached by the trained team members to ask children to wait for their turn, obey small commands, take turns to speak, listen to rules, bring their parent a plate during the meal, stay at the table during the family meal, sing a song with the family, tell about their drawing, act out and name their feelings and make crafts together as a family. The 15 minutes of responsive play one-on-one with their parent involves coaching by the team members. The family is in the school building for two and a half hours of positive activities and, over time, they build social connections with other parents and with school staff. These processes enhance well-being while also reducing stress levels for the child and the family week after week.

In this study, for eight weeks, all families of children in first grade were repeatedly invited to come and try FAST once. When the weekly sessions ended, monthly booster groups were offered for two years, co-hosted by parent graduates and school personnel. In total, 25 years ago, FAST groups were first designed to support parents of teacher-identified "at-risk" children to increase their child mental health outcomes (McDonald *et al.*, 1997). Based on new research and evaluation and feedback loops, FAST now aims to build protective factors for all children against stress. There is a shift to now engage all children and their families in one grade level at primary schools serving disadvantaged, low-income communities. Universal access becomes a public health model, which focuses on the social determinants of education disparities, including parent engagement with their family, other families and at the school.

Methods

The data come from a National Institute of Child Health and Human Development-funded cluster-randomised-controlled study of 52 Title I schools serving low-income communities (Title I provides financial assistance to schools with high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families) located in four school districts in San Antonio, TX, and Phoenix, AZ, USA. All schools recruited to participate in this study were primary schools with 25 per cent or more Latino student enrolment.

Half of the schools were randomly selected to receive FAST and the other half served as controls; no significant differences were observed in the demographic characteristics of the two groups (see Table I). All children (and parents) in the first grade were recruited into the study to sign informed consent forms, agree to respond to four surveys over three years and allow school district data to be shared with the research team. In total, 3,091 first-graders and their families were involved in the study. At the 26 schools with FAST, parents were invited to attend an after-school multi-family group session; they could come once any time over the eight

Table 1 Randomisation results: enrolment characteristics for 52 schools

| <i>Percentage of students who are</i> | <i>FAST</i> | <i>Control</i> | <i>t-test p-values</i> |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------------|------------------------|
| White | 14.54 | 12.84 | 0.72 |
| Hispanic | 72.30 | 74.69 | 0.66 |
| African American | 10.03 | 9.77 | 0.92 |
| American Indian | 1.29 | 1.02 | 0.54 |
| Free or reduced lunch | 76.11 | 77.14 | 0.84 |

weeks and/or they could also come repeatedly. The groups were kept open to new participants and could accommodate many families. Attendance data were collected from sign-in sheets. We calculated descriptive data on FAST participation rates per school and on average.

Because randomisation occurred at the level of the school and data on students and parents were collected from individuals within each cluster, we constructed multi-level statistical models in which families or children were nested within schools. In all multi-level models, we controlled for the child's gender, race, free or reduced lunch status, status as an English language learner, and whether one of the child's parents was born outside the USA. We examined a variety of dependent variables. First, for the dependent variable "parents' attendance at FAST", a count variable which ranged from 0 to 8, we estimated multi-level Poisson models. Second, on pre-test and post-test surveys, we asked parents whether they regularly attended their child's school events. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale but were recoded as 0 for respondents who reported that they strongly disagreed, somewhat disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed, and as 1 for respondents who reported that they somewhat or strongly agreed. Thus, to measure the dependent variable "parents' self-report of attendance at school events", we estimated multi-level logistic regressions. We followed the same procedure for teachers' reports of parents' attendance. Finally, on the post-test survey, parents were asked to report how many times in the last three months they had attended a school programme (any event held at the school after-school hours e.g. a music performance, sporting event, parent night, parent-teacher conference, etc.); response categories were never, once or twice, three to four times, five to ten times or 11 or more times. From these data, we constructed two binary variables, "parent reported attending at least one programme" and "parent reported attending three or more programmes".

We were interested in differences when parent attendance was counted in these ways because we think of "involvement" as parents showing up at the school once for an event, and "engagement" as parents repeatedly (three or more times) coming to the school to interact with school staff and their child. Therefore, we estimated multi-level logistic models for these variables to examine involvement and engagement across FAST and control schools.

Results

We examined parent- and teacher-reported parent participation at school events across all 52 schools, assigned to either FAST or control conditions. On the pre-test, there was no statistically significant difference between parents at FAST vs control schools (although parents of students who received free or reduced price lunches were significantly less likely to report regularly participating in school activities). On the study post-test (three months later), parents in FAST schools were again not significantly more likely to report regular attendance at their child's school events compared to the parents at control group schools. The same was true of teachers in FAST vs control schools; there was no difference in reports of parents' attendance at school events.

A difference in survey responses on the study post-test emerged, however, when we asked about the number of events parents attended during the past three months. We asked all of the parents to recall how many school events they had attended in that period. Table II shows a significant positive effect of FAST, suggesting that parents in schools with FAST were statistically significantly more likely to report attending three or more school events than were parents in control schools.

Table II Multi-level logistic regression: parents' reports of attending 3+ school events at 52 schools

| | <i>Coeff.</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>p-value</i> |
|--------------------------|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| FAST | 0.29 | 0.13 | 0.03 |
| Gender | -0.05 | 0.11 | 0.65 |
| Hispanic | 0.12 | 0.20 | 0.55 |
| Other race/ethnicity | 0.15 | 0.25 | 0.53 |
| English language learner | 0.16 | 0.16 | 0.32 |
| Parent born outside USA | 0.31 | 0.15 | 0.03 |
| Free or reduced lunch | 0.18 | 0.16 | 0.27 |

Note: $n = 1,900$

These survey results provide some evidence that, while parents in both FAST and control schools regularly participated in some activities at their child's school, parents in FAST schools were statistically more likely to report participating in three or more school programmes, a response that suggests "engagement". Thus, a school offering FAST groups open to all families of first-graders may help to create parent engagement, not merely involvement. Although the type of school events parents attended was not specified, parents' reported participation rate increased significantly. In contrast, other schools in that area have offered between 20 and 35 school events a year to specifically involve parents without the desired increases in involvement (Paredes, 2011). Our conclusion is that hosting SERB events in schools facing challenges in engaging low-income parents offers an alternative strategy that might result in more engaged parents.

In addition, we used sign-in sheets to examine the attendance rate at FAST groups. Of the total 2,657 first-graders in 26 FAST schools, 1,594 (60 per cent) consented to participate in the research study. Of those 1,594 who consented to the study, 72.6 per cent had a parent attend at least one FAST session. The average number of families who came at least once to FAST per school was 44.5 families. As the schools had an average of 102 first-graders, with a range from 21 to 163, this is 43.6 per cent of all first grade families.

Of families who attended at least once, 69.5 per cent returned for a second time. On average, of the families who attended once, each attended 3.9 of the weekly group sessions. Thus, if one defines "parent involvement" as parents showing up at the school once for an event, FAST involved 44 per cent of first graders' families on average per school. If "parent engagement" is defined as parents who repeatedly come to a school (three or more times in a year), then 70 per cent of the parents in schools with FAST who came once to FAST can be described as "engaged, rather than merely involved" because they came back; on average they came four different times to a school event with their child in first grade.

Analysing the characteristics of parents who participated in FAST showed that non-US born parents attended more sessions on average (see Table III). Looking at the results from a multi-level Poisson model, which regressed parents' total attendance on a variety of demographic characteristics, we found that immigrants' attendance was significantly higher than that of

Table III Multi-level Poisson model predicting number of FAST sessions attended

| | <i>Coeff.</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>p-value</i> |
|-----------------------------|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| Gender | 0.06 | 0.04 | 0.11 |
| Hispanic | 0.12 | 0.07 | 0.07 |
| Other race/ethnicity | 0.08 | 0.08 | 0.34 |
| English language learner | -0.05 | 0.06 | 0.34 |
| Parent born outside the USA | 0.17 | 0.05 | 0.00 |
| Free or reduced lunch | -0.07 | 0.05 | 0.18 |

Note: $n = 931$

native-born parents. However, there were no statistically significant effects on attendance by gender, race, whether the child was an English language learner or whether the child received free or reduced lunches. We consider this a promising finding as it suggests that FAST was equally effective in reaching low-income, minority parents who are often considered difficult to involve in these traditional school-based activities.

These data provide some evidence suggesting that FAST brought many low-income and immigrant parents into primary school events and that many of them came back and attended multiple school events (three or more), suggesting parent engagement and not merely involvement.

Limitations

This RCT was designed to study the systematic building of social capital in primary schools, with a specific emphasis on one traditionally marginalized group, Latino families. The study has other papers being written which describe the methodology in detail, as well as the other more central findings of the study. These include results from quantitative and qualitative data and include effects on social capital, academic achievement, child mental health outcomes and mobility.

As parent involvement vs engagement was not the central focus of the study, we had missing parent involvement data. For example, in 16 of the 26 FAST schools data were missing which could have enabled us to code the number of adults per family of a first grader who attended the school events and who they were (e.g. father vs mother). Also, we did not collect data on parent attendance at other school events being offered at the same time at any of the 52 schools.

Unfortunately, neither schools nor school districts were required to report actual rates of parent involvement. We were unable to find baselines rates of parent involvement or longitudinal data from previous years on parent involvement levels at any of the 52 schools. If we had been able to access data covering the past three years, we might have compared rates of overall parent involvement/engagement without FAST and then later with FAST. Future research might focus more specifically from the outset on testing the effects of FAST as a parent involvement strategy, examining the relationship between a SERB approach to parent engagement and the emotional well-being and resilience of both parents and their children, in addition to other potential outcomes.

Conclusion

Despite meta-analyses which indicate that parent involvement is correlated with academic achievement (Jeynes, 2012), we know very little about actual rates of parent attendance at school events nor about repeated attendance at school events, i.e. "engagement". Information available through personal communication suggests that actual participation numbers are possibly far below what policy makers expect. On average, Paredes (2011) reported that, in one of the districts in our study, only 2.8 per cent of parents attended the school-wide events to which they were invited (range was between 0 and 15 per cent). This rate of 2.8 per cent is despite schools offering over 20 events per year for parents (Paredes, 2011). In contrast, the 26 FAST schools reported 44 per cent of first graders' parents showing up at least once (see Table IV).

Policy makers might consider requiring reports from headteachers specifying how many parents attended school events over a school year, rather than how many events were offered. Local governments could then reward successful strategies for high rates of parent involvement and parent engagement with supplemental allocations. Then, districts might begin to review the literature to seek out and implement proven, effective parent engagement strategies.

FAST is relatively recently recognised as a parent involvement-in-schools strategy as it shifted to universal recruitment of all families and could serve 40-60 families at a time. It is better known as a prevention intervention for drugs, crime and mental health problems, using the primary school as the site. Of 23 evidence-based family skills programmes to prevent drug abuse identified by the UNODC (2010), only two approaches worked in schools, with FAST being one of them.

Since 2010, UK primary schools situated in low-income communities have been trained in FAST to increase positive parenting and academic achievement. In the 100+ participating schools, on average 28 families per school per FAST cycle came once, and 78 per cent

Table IV Parent participation rates in first grade with FAST offered universally

| <i>Title I school</i> | <i>Total first-graders in the school</i> | <i>% of families who attended FAST at least once</i> | <i>% of families who attended FAST at least three times</i> |
|-----------------------|--|--|---|
| 1 | 115 | 50 | 30 |
| 2 | 137 | 28 | 19 |
| 3 | 21 | 52 | 48 |
| 4 | 116 | 24 | 18 |
| 5 | 84 | 51 | 27 |
| 6 | 81 | 38 | 31 |
| 7 | 123 | 33 | 17 |
| 8 | 41 | 63 | 54 |
| 9 | 101 | 21 | 10 |
| 10 | 73 | 67 | 44 |
| 11 | 65 | 52 | 43 |
| 12 | 70 | 43 | 21 |
| 13 | 33 | 42 | 30 |
| 14 | 127 | 40 | 11 |
| 15 | 120 | 32 | 17 |
| 16 | 137 | 50 | 36 |
| 17 | 163 | 55 | 31 |
| 18 | 111 | 41 | 27 |
| 19 | 95 | 55 | 25 |
| 20 | 128 | 36 | 16 |
| 21 | 130 | 52 | 16 |
| 22 | 159 | 23 | 9 |
| 23 | 93 | 63 | 34 |
| 24 | 84 | 45 | 29 |
| 25 | 122 | 54 | 26 |
| 26 | 119 | 66 | 44 |
| Total | 2,648 | 44 | 25 |

returned six or more times and graduated. Most were poor: 75 per cent had annual incomes under £20,000.

The training, supervision and evaluation of the programme is being led by FASTUK, Middlesex University, London. The national scale up is funded through the innovative partnership with Save the Children UK. The pre-post evaluations show improved child well-being (SDQ), child learning outcomes, increased parent self-efficacy, improved parent-child bonds, reduced family conflict and increased parent involvement in school by teacher and parent reports (www.familiesandschoolstogether.com).

However, this SERB approach is criticised for demanding too much time and effort of the school staff, and stands in contrast to offering workshops to teach parents. Considerable time is required to build relationships with community members and parents, help recruit parents to attend and participate in training, supervision of the eight weekly after-school sessions and evaluation. Often school staff are hesitant to rely on outside agency collaborations, which also take time. Therefore, SERB may not be the first choice for stressed schools with many agendas.

Co-production with local parents and community professionals is messy and the building and maintaining of collaborative relationships on an effective outreach and engagement team based at the school takes time. However, we suggest that it is exactly this messy teamwork which bridges families, schools and community to create deep relational trust that is responsible for building the social capital and social inclusion that research has shown has the capacity to increase both overall child well-being and learning outcomes (Bryk and Schneider, 2002).

If policy makers could see public health prevention goals being achieved by having stronger families and communities and by using the school as a site for a SERB to take place, the financial burden could perhaps be shared across health, social care and education. However, until policies

change, it may be challenging to convince many headteachers to allocate already stretched school staff to spend the time needed to implement such a SERB strategy.

The SERB strategy study reported here showed significantly increased parent engagement in 26 schools serving low-income communities with an average of nearly 75 per cent Latino children. In efforts to reduce education disparities, policy makers might consider investing in using the local school building as a site for reaching out to parents and building relationships with parents, empowering parents and building social capital in the community.

Implications for policy and practice

- Changes in the uses of school buildings can engage parents who are reluctant to attend school events.
- SERB programmes, and in particular FAST, are especially effective with low-income immigrant families living in poor areas.
- The potential benefits of increased involvement include: stronger school-family relationships; greater community cohesion; and less parental stress, isolation and depression. These affect both children's well-being and academic attainments.
- Programmes have not only to overcome the apprehension of parents but also to resolve practical issues arising from their work schedule, childcare, transport and language difficulties.
- These programmes are best implemented as part of a public health preventative strategy for people living in poor areas.

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About the authors

Lynn McDonald is a Professor of Social Work based at Middlesex University, in London, England doing research on strategies to reduce disparities in health and education and social care for children. She developed the FAST programme in 1988. She is a grandmother of four children under age 7, and observes the critical protective factor of positive parenting for child outcomes which society should proactively support applying evidence-based strategies. Professor Lynn McDonald is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: l.mcdonald@mdx.ac.uk

Hannah Miller is a PhD Student in Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where she studies educational achievement and attainment; gender, race and class inequalities; and the effects of social policies aimed at improving children's and families' well-being. She is grateful to have been funded as a Pre-Doctoral Fellow by the Institute of Education Sciences and as a Dissertator by the American Educational Research Association.

Dr Jen Sandler completed her PhD in Educational Policy Studies at the UW-Madison, and is now a Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology, and Director of the UMass Alliance for Community Transformation, at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

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