

Chapter 7

Fortifying Parent Partnerships Through the Black Church Space

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the Black Church as a community space for African American families to engage in collaborative activities with schools. The author explores why the Black Church functions as a desirable space for collaborations between schools and African American parents, as well as how schools can make greater use of church space to strengthen their parent partnerships. The author identifies several barriers to successful school-based partnerships including parent work schedules, socioeconomic status, mistrust of mainstream education, busyness of school staff, limited technology access and proficiency, and lack of culturally relevant experiences. The author offers recommendations for expanding outreach efforts with approaches that lean on the social and cultural relevance of the Black Church as well as some of its resources.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why should schools consider alternative settings for African American parent engagement?
- Why does the Black Church function as a desirable space for collaborations between schools and African American parents?
- How can schools make greater use of this community-based space to strengthen their parent partnerships?

I think that a church should be setting the pace for social justice. -Max Lucado

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INTRODUCTION

As a middle grades professional school counselor, I could not imagine what someone would want me to talk to the youth about at the local church Bible study. What might I, in the capacity of a school counselor, discuss with kids at Bible study? In retrospect, I chuckle at the silliness of my question. Counselors can explore many subjects with their students that align with scripture-based principles: good character, sound decision-making, personal responsibility, and healthy relationships are a few. A decade ago, when I received that Bible study invitation, however, I was unable to think as deeply. Perhaps it was because I was accustomed to the primarily school-based school counseling as I had known it in my community. By this, I mean that counselors connected with students and families at school, not through other venues. After all, they were *school* counselors and their work site was *the school*. They were more than willing to assist students and families, and they even periodically hosted various workshops and information sessions. Nonetheless, these conversations and exchanges were stationed at school.

I expanded my borders when I accepted the Bible study group's invitation. The church youth director selected the topic: Internet etiquette and safety. When I arrived for the presentation, I was pleasantly surprised to see several children in the youth group who were students at my school. Afterwards, I had the opportunity to meet some of their parents, who had participated in the adult Bible study group upstairs in the main sanctuary. I also liked that engaging with families outside regular school hours, yet in the capacity of a professional school counselor, improved my school counseling program's visibility. I took my school's program into the community instead of relying on the community to come to my school.

A peculiar thing happened after that night's presentation. I received a call from another church, and then another. By the third presentation, I had made the transition from middle grades to high school counseling and was asked to provide families with an overview of graduation requirements. Undoubtedly, the most interesting aspect of the event coordinator's request was the time and place.

"We'd like for you to speak to our teens and their families at the [Sunday morning] 11 AM service," she said.

"As in *during* the service?" I inquired.

"Yes ma'am, in the sanctuary," she confirmed.

"I see." Actually, I didn't. My curiosity was piqued. *What in the world?* I thought.

"Is this a regular service—with singing, prayers, an offering, and a sermon?" I asked.

"Yes, it's going to be just like our other services. The only difference is that it's Youth Sunday," she clarified. I knew "Youth Sunday" to be an event common among numerous churches, wherein youth congregants led the worship service through music, skits, speeches, and other creative expressions.

Indeed, on "Youth Sunday," I stood nervously before the small African American congregation in the stained glass windowed sanctuary and delivered a twenty-minute presentation on high school graduation requirements. My presentation slides were projected onto the same screen that had displayed the worship team's song lyrics minutes earlier.

Consequently, I discovered that, whether warning youth of the perils of sharing private information via social media or helping high school students and parents understand the differences between the SAT and ACT, I had tapped into something significant as a result of my willingness to partner with students and their families in their worship communities. Notably, the invites came from people affiliated with African American churches. Was this merely a coincidence? If not, why were the African American churches choosing to host these presentations? At best, the people who invited me offered an explanation along the lines of, "We just want to make sure *our* kids and parents know what's what and get the

information they need.” I had no problem reading between the lines. The question then became, why does the Black Church function as a desirable space for collaborations between schools and African American parents? Subsequently, how can schools make greater use of this community-based space to strengthen their parent partnerships?

In this chapter, I explore these questions in hopes that schools consider incorporating the use of churches within the African American community to expand parent partnership efforts. It is not my assertion that the school-church collaboration should be that of a religious nature. Rather, I suggest that the Black Church *facility* is one that schools can and should use for collaboration with African American families, given the connectedness that African Americans—as a marginalized people—have to their church settings as nurturing, accessible, culturally affirming, and supportive spaces. The practice of social justice relies on the efforts of people who seek to create access and opportunity for everyone. As I discuss in the next several pages, school-based parent engagement has historically been inhibited by several variables that contribute to unequal access and opportunities for African American parents. If educators insist that school-family collaborations occur solely in the school, they are complicit in the privileging of the school as the only viable collaborative space for all families. In many communities, however, the Black Church has been a logistically accessible, culturally affirming, and resource-abundant space for its congregants to connect, engage, and escape societal stigmatization. I suggest that, by using the Black Church space to collaborate with families in the service of social change, educators demonstrate that social justice is not strictly a concern of the marginalized, but it is an issue that matters to us all. More significantly, educators who partner and collaborate with African American families in the spaces where they gather open doors of access and opportunity to them that may otherwise remain closed.

Before continuing, it is helpful to clarify my usage of the phrase *the Black Church* and the terms *Black*, *African American*, and *parent*. In this chapter, I use the phrase *the Black Church* to refer to African American churches in their historical and cultural contexts. I align my reference with Gaines (2010) who described it as “the collective, largely denominational body of churches comprised primarily of African-American people who, through communal worship, race consciousness, and civic engagement, operate as a locus of spiritual empowerment and social agency” (p. 369). I capitalize the phrase to emphasize its context as the name of the Black Church institution in its entirety. Additionally, I interchange the terms *Black* and *African American* throughout the chapter. The terms define the same group and do not connote any political or cultural differentiation on my part; rather, the terms are used within the context of the time periods in which they are associated. Lastly, I expand the use of the term *parent* in this chapter to include biological parents as well as others who act in a parenting capacity. In the next section, I provide a historical background for the Black Church as an alternative educative space along with theoretical perspectives on African American parent engagement. I also further describe my school counseling collaborations with three rural North Carolina churches.

BACKGROUND

Historical scholarship provides a context for understanding why the Black Church is a desirable space for collaborations between schools and African American families. The fact that African Americans have learned in alternative educative spaces is not new information. During slavery, for example, abolitionist Frederick Douglass taught Sabbath School under trees, in the homes of free Blacks, and wherever else he could do so discreetly, in an effort to teach slaves to read, write, and eventually be able to write their

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own passes to freedom (Douglass, 2008). From homes to churches (Billingsley, 1999; Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991) to families (Hughes, n.d., para 2) to barbershops (Douglas & Peck, 2013) and even to popular culture (Stovall, 2006), Blacks have continued to be educated beyond mainstream schooling.

The Black Church as an Alternative Educative Space

The Black Church in particular has long been an educative space for its people (Abrams, 2010; Gaines, 2010; Harris, 2001). During a time when the education of African Americans was prohibited because it threatened the institution of slavery, they sought their own means of education and empowerment (Harris, 2001; Langhorne, 2000; Simkin, 1997). One such means was through Black churches that either established schools (Brand, 2011; Harris, 2001) or provided education inside their own facilities (Brand, 2011). From those early days, through the Jim Crow era, and to the present, African Americans have leaned heavily on the Black Church for inspiration, impartation, and information. In addition to providing strong support systems and a sense of belonging (Abrams, 2010; Williams, Irby, & Warner, 2016), it has been uniquely powerful in its ability to provide its gatherers a variety of education, social, and economic resources (Dilulio, 1998; Gaines, 2010; Williams, 2003). Many Black churches offer academic enrichment programs and provide scholarships to their college students. Some Black churches or predominantly Black church denominations (such as African Methodist Episcopalians and Baptists) have even established independent schools and institutions of higher learning (American Baptist Churches, 2013; Global Scholars Academy, 2017; Institutions of Higher Education, 2013).

Research consistently underscores the Black Church as a rich learning space apart from mainstream education. What has appeared less common in the research, however, is the collaboration of K-12 schools with the Black Church within the church's own space. Many churches include announcements about educational enrichment opportunities in their bulletins; often, though, these opportunities are available offsite. Various churches have also established and/or funded private schools; some churches have even housed schools inside their buildings (Big Bethel AME Church, 2013; First AME Church, n.d., Seneca Village, n.d.). Additionally, churches demonstrate involvement with K-12 schools in a variety of ways—school supplies donations, volunteers and tutors, food distribution programs for needy students, and scholarship assistance, to name a few—but most of these interactions occur at the school site. This is not to say that these collaborative efforts are not an integral aspect of school-family-community partnerships; they are much needed and almost always embraced. The type of collaboration I am putting forth in this chapter, however, is one that does not occur at the school building, but rather within the Black Church space.

Theoretical Perspectives on African American Parent-School Engagement

Conceptualizations of parent partnerships have evolved over time. Howard and Reynolds (2008) noted that

McNeal's (1999) work on parent involvement defined it as parent-teacher organization involvement, monitoring and educational support measures. Lee and Bowen (2006) assert that parent involvement can be situated in home contexts, which can include helping "with homework, discussing the child's school work and experiences at school and structuring home activities" (p. 194), as well as schooling situations which entail attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at school and being involved in school sponsored activities. (p. 83)

Even changes in the terminology used to describe parent partnerships have evolved from “involvement” to “engagement” to “partnership” to emphasize inclusivity and cultural sensitivity when considering how parents participate in their children’s education (Edwards & Kutaka, 2015). Epstein (1995) discussed a model of school and family partnerships that depicts overlapping spheres of influences. The external model suggests that there are three overlapping contexts which promote student learning and growth: the family, the school, and the community. Families, schools, and communities may at times work separately and at other times in concert to educate children. When families, schools, and communities work separately, the likely reason is because they have diverse objectives and abilities related to student learning and growth. Consequently, educators may believe learning is optimized within their classrooms (Edwards & Kutaka, 2015); meanwhile, families may limit their attempts to partner with the school, concerned that their efforts may not be well received. Likewise, community partners may have difficulty finding avenues for involvement without explicit invitations from families or the school. As a further consequence, the overlapping spheres of influence are separated or “pushed apart” (Epstein et al., 2002, p. 8).

Conversely, when families, schools, and communities work jointly, it is because they share similar goals and believe they can work cooperatively to affect learning. Epstein et al. (2002) detailed six types of involvement integral to successful school, family, and community partnerships. The sixth type addresses community collaboration, which is most relevant to this chapter. Community collaboration, according to Epstein et al. (2002), includes “connections to enable the community to contribute to schools, students, and families [and] connections to enable schools, students, and families to contribute to the community” (p. 171). My direct engagement with families at churches in my community informed my understanding of the viability of collaborations in the Black Church space.

Three Churches, Three Experiences

Three collaborations within the Black Church space, in my role as school counselor, shaped the questions I pose in this chapter: why does the Black Church function as a desirable space for collaborations between schools and African American parents and how can schools make greater use of this community-based space to strengthen their parent partnerships? The three churches are situated in a rural northern North Carolina county with a population of approximately 40,000 residents.

The initial presentation took place at a Baptist Church during its regularly scheduled Wednesday evening Bible study. The 150-year-old church has an entirely African American congregation of approximately 600 members and is located in the northern part of the county. The group to whom I presented consisted of approximately 20 children between the ages of 12 and 18, who attended various schools throughout the district. I conducted the session on the lower level of the church while the adults engaged in Bible study upstairs in the main sanctuary. My presentation topic was Internet etiquette and safety, and it lasted 30 minutes with a 10-minute question-and-answer session with the students at the end.

The second presentation took place at a Baptist Church during a Friday night youth conference hosted by the church’s youth department. This 139-year-old church has an entirely African American congregation of approximately 200 members and is located on the southern end of the county. The group to whom I presented consisted of approximately 10 middle school-aged children who attended the middle school where I worked as the school counselor. The session took place in a classroom, while the adults participated in a separate session that ran concurrently in the adjacent sanctuary. The presentation topic

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was bully prevention and lasted 30 minutes with a 10-minute question-and-answer session with the middle schoolers at the end.

The third presentation occurred at a Baptist Church during its Sunday morning worship service geared toward the youth. The 136-year-old church has a predominantly African American congregation of approximately 300 members and is located in the western part of the county. The group to whom I presented consisted of 20 students and their parents, who were among 150 congregants attending service that day. I led a 20-minute session in the main sanctuary, outlining high school graduation requirements. The time constraints did not permit a question-and-answer session, so I announced that I would remain after the service to answer questions. After the service, I was available in the sanctuary for approximately 30 minutes to answer questions and to chat with the teens and their families.

The Black Church is a pillar of the community for many African Americans. Rubin, Billingsley, and Caldwell (1994) described this body as “the primary institution exercising a positive role in black family life” (p. 260). The historical legacy of the Black Church establishes it not only as a house of worship for its congregants, but also as a pedagogical space dating as far back as slavery (Haight, 2002). As Gaines (2010) observed, “In conjunction with its communal and political roles, the Black Church functioned as an educative space in which citizens and congregants could acquire valuable skills” (p. 371). I contend that the Black Church remains rich in resources and opportunities that make it the pulse of the African American community and a viable space for schools to collaborate with African American families. One of the challenges of community collaboration, Epstein et al. (2002) noted, is to “solve turf problems of roles, responsibilities, funds, and places for collaborative activities” (p. 183). I address this challenge by discussing the church as a community space for African American families to engage in collaborative activities with schools, but it is important to first identify some of the barriers that inhibit school-based African American parent partnerships.

STUMBLING BLOCKS TO SCHOOL-BASED AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT PARTNERSHIPS

As parent partnerships have evolved to become more inclusive for parents who have not engaged by traditional means (e.g., volunteering, attending school meetings, and participating in the school’s parent-teacher organization), schools have continued to seek innovative ways to involve parents in their children’s education. Research suggests that African American parents want to be involved in their children’s education (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008; Field-Smith, 2005). However, schools’ efforts to engage African American parents have proven challenging because of issues that affect parents’ ability or willingness to participate in on-campus activities. Rather, a number of the families prefer methods of engagement that do not require their physical presence. Research points to several reasons, including parent schedules, socioeconomic status, mistrust of mainstream education, busyness of school staff, limited technology access and proficiency, and lack of culturally relevant experiences. I discuss each of these issues in the next several pages.

Parent Work Schedules

One stumbling block that affects parents' engagement in on-campus activities is scheduling conflicts. Studies on African American parent involvement repeatedly cite work schedules as a barrier (Cousins & Mickelson, 2011; Howard, 2015; Hubbard, 2016). Parents are faced with competing demands and find themselves attempting to balance work, school, and home obligations. For some African American parents, participation in on-campus activities is influenced by their work hours, availability of child-care for younger children, and/or the availability of the other working parent (Trotman, 2001). Reports released by the Michigan Department of Education (2004) and Panorama Education (2017) posit that successful parent and family involvement programs should accommodate parents' varied scheduling and child care needs. To encourage parent partnerships among families whose schedules limit their presence in the school setting, many schools are leveraging technology to interact with parents. School staff use communication tools like Google Hangout and mobile classroom management applications like Class Dojo as alternatives to in-person meetings and conferences, thereby reducing the need for parents to take time off work. Unfortunately, as I discuss later, technology can also become a barrier to involvement when families have limited access and proficiency.

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status is another factor affecting parent involvement. Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2008) pointed out that the educational environments that middle-class and working-class African American parents navigate are often quite different. Middle-class African American parents earn higher incomes and therefore, according to Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2008), "tend to have greater access to human, financial, social, and cultural resources than working-class parents" (p. 144). Working-class African American parents are sometimes affected by financial strains that present to school staff as disinterest in their children's education. For instance, school staff may sometimes have difficulty contacting working-class parents due to disruptions in phone service or lack of access to email and other web communication tools. Working-class parents may also be unavailable to attend in-person school activities due to competing work schedules or unreliable transportation (Baker, Wise, Kelly, & Skiba, 2016), the latter of which can pose challenges particularly in rural communities that are not served by public transit services (Cheatham & Williams, 2016). As a result of the impact socioeconomic status has on parent involvement, some school staff members have made incorrect assumptions that working-class parents are less concerned about their children's education than middle-class parents (Trotman, 2001), when, in fact, many working-class parents are simply having to navigate the educational environment with fewer resources than their middle-class counterparts.

While working-class African American parents may not necessarily be less concerned about their children's education than middle-class African American parents, they may demonstrate reluctance in being involved, according to McDermott and Rothenburg (2000). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (as cited in McDermott & Rothenburg, 2000) asserted that this reluctance may likely be attributed to self-perceptions as "outsiders" who "feel it is the school's responsibility to do the teaching" (p. 4); feelings that their involvement will not make a meaningful impact on their children's education; and an unwelcoming,

uncomfortable school atmosphere. To create a more supportive and inclusive atmosphere for parents of low socioeconomic status, schools are being encouraged to provide a variety of opportunities for parent involvement—not simply opportunities described in school-centered terms (Allen & White-Smith, 2017). Additionally, Howard, Dresser, and Dunklee (2009) suggested improving community outreach efforts to engage with families in the comfort of their social settings.

Mistrust of Mainstream Education

Mistrust of mainstream education is another barrier to African-American parent involvement. Historically, African Americans were deprived of the mainstream education afforded to whites (Meier, Stuart, & England, 1989; Tyack, 1974). African Americans have experienced racism, segregation, and other acts of marginalization that have shaped their perspectives of hegemonic classes and systems. Within the sphere of American education, many African Americans expected court rulings in the cases of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to level the playing field for African Americans. They discovered, however, that the “separate but equal” ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* did not prove to be equal at all and that the desegregation that African Americans hoped for as a result of *Brown v. Board of Education* ended at just that—desegregation—rather than ushering them into the fullness of integration (Tilley, 1957).

Understandably, then, many African Americans have been leery about mainstream schools’ intent (or lack thereof) in the education of African American students. In some school systems, there are even hard-working African American students who struggle beneath the radar while their White counterparts secure higher quality and quantity interactions with teachers, counselors, and administrators. Accordingly, concerns linger among some African American students and their families that mainstream education does not serve their best interests. The Black Church has attempted to fill such voids and provide supplementary education for the African American community (Haight, 2002). Presently, African American families continue to confront issues of unequal access to educational resources (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Thomas, 2013). These inequalities present themselves in the allocation of school funds, the availability of quality teachers, and gaps in standardized test data for certain racial and socioeconomic groups (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.; Black Youth Project, 2013). McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown, and Lynn (2003) asserted that “suspicion of institutions (e.g. schools) and concerns about interaction with school staff” can affect parents’ involvement with the school (p. 108). In one study, approximately one-fifth of parents said they feared their child would be treated differently by adults at the school if they express concerns (Panorama Education, 2017). Justifiably, many African American parents who are wary of these present and historical problems have reservations about partnering with an institution that they do not trust.

Busyness of School Staff

In a study conducted by Panorama Education (2017), approximately one-fourth of parents in diverse school communities indicated that their involvement was hampered by school staff who “seem too busy” (p. 7). While the study did not detail specific ways in which parents felt school staff seemed too busy, a myriad of circumstances could account for this perception: the unavailability of their child’s teacher or principal when the parent comes to school for an unscheduled visit; difficulty in scheduling appointments due to time conflicts on the school staff’s end; a phone call to the school’s teacher that goes to voicemail in order to protect instructional time; or parent-teacher conferences, often scheduled

in compact 15-minute increments, which might not afford adequate time for the mutual exchange and understanding of information about their child's progress (Graham-Clay, 2005). Some parents have also pointed out that school staff make time to communicate primarily when problematic behaviors occur (Murray et al., 2014).

Limited Technology Access and Proficiency

An additional stumbling block to parent involvement has been irregular communication between parents and the school. With the advent of technology, many schools have sought to reduce paper communication and to increase their engagement with parents through social media, classroom management mobile apps, and school web pages. These methods often result in immediate communication with parents and allow parents to quickly and conveniently initiate and respond to communication with school staff (Flowers, 2015), sometimes eliminating the need for parents to adjust their schedules to be physically present at the school. However, despite technology's conveniences, the *digital divide*, defined by Hu and Prieger (2008) as "a gap in computer and Internet usage between richer and poorer households, majority and minority groups, and households in urban and rural areas" (p. 241), presents a barrier to involvement for parents who have intermittent or no access to technology, or who have access but lack the necessary language or skills to use it (Barnett, 2016; Goodall, 2016).

Lack of Culturally Relevant Experiences

Culturally relevant parent partnership strategies send a message of inclusion and acceptance. Strategies that reflect cultural relevance communicate to families that educators both understand and value their identities and varied background experiences. Research shows, however, that differences in culture and communication between parents and educators can and often do negatively affect parent involvement (McDermott & Rothenburg, 2000). McKeown (2006) affirmed that "invariably, parental involvement is limited for the most part to White, English-speaking mothers of Judeo-Christian background" (p. 92). The reason, he suggested, is because many schools, while extending the same invitation for all parents to engage, do not consider the implications of "group dynamics" (p. 92). He further noted that

The dynamics of first meeting in a group with which we can identify racially, ethnically, linguistically or by faith are quite different than meeting with a cross-cultural group with people of diverse backgrounds. It's an issue of power. In our society, White, English-speaking parents have the power, dominate and are allowed to dominate a group. Their issues will be considered. They become de facto spokespersons for the others. Other parents keep quiet. They either do not attend or stop attending. Why should they? They are effectively marginalized. (p. 92)

These interactions often push minority groups farther into the margins, struggling to identify how—or even *if*—they and their children fit into the life of the school. The grappling makes school-based involvement uncomfortable, and perhaps unwelcoming, to say the least. This is why schools that desire to engage African American parents should do so in ways that value African American experiences and create authentic spaces for parent-school collaboration.

School-based partnerships have presented challenges for African American parents who are plagued by the barriers discussed above. Historically and presently, these issues have relegated many parents to

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the sidelines of their school communities. One way for schools to address these barriers in the interest of social justice is to first consider the ways in which the Black Church has historically supported communities. Then schools must tap into the ways in which the collaborative space of the Black Church can improve access and opportunity for those for whom school-based parent involvement is a barrier due to the factors just discussed. Understanding the ways in which school-based involvement has been problematic for many African American parents is essential to understanding how the space of the Black church functions as a desirable, welcoming space for more socially just collaborations among African American parents and school staff. In the next section, I discuss these supports as solutions to the impediments of inflexible work schedules, low socioeconomic status, mistrust of mainstream education, busyness of school staff, limited technology access and proficiency, and lack of culturally relevant experiences.

SOLUTIONS

In addition to some of the approaches schools are taking to remedy the issues discussed in the preceding section, schools should consider collaborating with African American families within a community space as highly regarded as the Black Church. Clydesdale's work (as cited in Wilcox, 2002) found that church-going parents are more likely to be involved in the education of their children. Barna (2003) and Kunjufu (2012) agree that there is a positive relationship between families' religious affiliations and engagement with their children's education. Since research supports the significance of the Black Church as a supportive learning space, it is reasonable for schools to utilize the space by reaching out to families, similar to the manner in which home visits are used to connect with families face-to-face in a relaxed setting outside of the school environment. Now that we have looked at the stumbling blocks to school-based African American parent partnerships, let us consider why the Black Church can serve as a desirable setting for school-parent engagement.

Convenience for Parents With Complicated Schedules

Many working parents have complicated work schedules that conflict with school-based activities. In addition to arrangements schools already make to accommodate working parents' schedules, schools can ask to take part in churches' regularly scheduled activities—not in a religious capacity, but in a parent partnership capacity. I, for example, conducted a presentation on high school graduation requirements during a Sunday morning worship service designated as “Youth Sunday.” I presented in the main sanctuary to the entire congregation of approximately 150 attendees.

As unconventional as this approach sounds, the pastor, event coordinator, and I considered the many benefits to engaging parents during this weekend time slot. First, we recognized that Sunday morning services are typically the most well-attended of the Black Church's weekly events. Second, we understood that “Youth Sunday” was very likely to afford us our target audience: youth and their parents. Third, we understood the benefit of convenience to the families. No special trips to the school or adjustments to their schedules were required. The church nursery provided child care for babies in attendance. Parents and students were already present for the worship service and would be gaining valuable information without having to carve out any additional time. That particular Sunday, I met twenty high school students and their families.

At the end of the service, a mother approached me and introduced herself. She eagerly shared that she would be calling the school counselor assigned to her son, “now that I know what questions to ask.” In the days following the presentation, one student wrote in a journal assignment for his teacher, “[Ms. Boyd] spoke at my church. I looked on the Internet to look at the requirements for college. I heard the presentation and she was very clear.” The fact that the student thought the information was clear and subsequently conducted independent research is indicative of his engagement with the presentation and his understanding of material that had either never been explained or never been made available.

Admittedly, I would be surprised if most churches yielded a chunk of their Sunday morning service for such a presentation. The main suggestion I propose, however, is that schools consider the constraints on parents’ work schedules and the ways in which sharing space and portions of the Black Church’s already scheduled programming can help alleviate the problem that inflexible schedules impose on school-based parent partnerships. This is a good place to point out that for school staff, these partnerships may frequently require time commitments outside of regular school hours. However, we should be mindful that engaging parents in unconventional ways demands that we not only think outside the box but step outside the box to achieve desired outcomes.

Logistical Access for Working-Class Parents

Families affected by low socioeconomic status are tasked with making the most of limited resources. As discussed earlier, limited resources can complicate parents’ efforts to be involved in school-based activities. We should not assume, for example, that parents have transportation to and from school for the several conferences, meetings, and workshops that take place. In rural areas especially, the lack of transportation poses challenges because there is often no public transportation. Fortunately, in many cases, families attend churches in the neighborhoods where they live. And many of these churches, including the three where I presented, offer free bus, van, or shuttle transportation to activities held onsite. If the school collaborates with the church to host an event at the church site, this could mean that families would have transportation access that would otherwise be out of their reach.

The Black Church is known to provide support and comfort to its congregants and community in times of distress. Understanding that families of low socioeconomic status often grapple with feeling unwelcomed and uncomfortable in the school setting, schools should create opportunities for affected families to partner with them in the welcoming, supportive, and accessible social setting of the Black Church.

Trust in Established Relationships

Calloway and London (n.d.) asserted, “When African-Americans were shut out of mainstream opportunities by segregation, the church led the way to the development of a viable community.” As I discussed earlier in the chapter, historically, the African American community depended on the Black Church to provide educational opportunities denied to them in mainstream society. African American parents who are distrustful of mainstream education may not readily be receptive to school-based partnerships. In fact, Mapp and Kuttner (2013) pointed out that an emphasis on relationship building is particularly important in these circumstances, since impersonal forms of communication such as automated calls, mailings, and attendance incentives do little to engage parents’ ongoing participation.

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Prior to one of my church presentations, the event host, a long-time congregant at the church, told me that some of the families were apprehensive about communicating with the staff at their children's schools. Several even implied feelings of mistrust. These families eagerly confided in her, which was attributed to her link to the congregation as well as to the field of education as a public school teacher. Griffin (2012) would describe her as a *cultural broker*, "[a] minority [individual] who [is] part of the culture and who can serve as a bridge to assist the school in understanding the family culture, while also helping the family to understand the school culture" (para. 16). The host found it troubling that parents' reservations could hinder meaningful parent-school collaborations. This is one reason the school building may not initially be the ideal space for cultivating parent partnerships. Instead, parent partnerships that begin at the church site allow parents to participate in their child's education from their own physical space of familiarity and comfort. According to Teaching Tolerance (n.d.), "Communication built on misinformation, assumptions or stereotypes can create distance between schools, families and students. If handled with respect and cultural sensitivity, however, school-family communication provides an opportunity to live out the values of inclusiveness and equity" (para. 2). Additionally, as Nunnally (2012) posited, "The one place that blacks are more trusting is in the context of their religious institutions" (p. 169). I observed that by engaging with students and their families informally at the conclusion of the church service during which I presented graduation requirements, I opened a line of communication with family members that encouraged subsequent dialogue with me while they grew more confident and trusting of the staff at their respective schools. Schools can learn from these assertions that fostering parent-school engagement at the church site can serve as a bridge of support and empowerment for African American parents.

Access to School Representatives

Research suggests that actions as simple as greeting everyone who enters the school or hosting sessions to hear and receive feedback from parents can bolster parents' sense of belonging (Panorama Education, 2017). School staff who utilize the space of the Black Church for collaborative efforts create opportunities for interaction with parents and their children as the focus. It is difficult for school staff to seem too busy when we make ourselves available outside of our usual work spaces and regular work hours for the express purpose of engaging with families in a space that they know to be both accessible and welcoming. The atmosphere coupled with our presence and intentional efforts can improve parents' sense of connection and alter their attitudes about visiting the school in the future.

Technology Access and Education

Churches that address technology access and literacy barriers empower their beneficiaries to communicate more effectively through technological media. In recent years, the Black Church has recognized the importance of closing the digital divide (National Black Church Initiative, 2017). Reverend Jesse Jackson's Rainbow PUSH Coalition, for example, has opened technology labs at churches in African American communities to increase technological proficiency (Guynn, 2016). Several churches also now implement computer literacy classes, maintain onsite computer labs, and provide free wireless Internet access to members and guests. Along with public libraries, restaurants, and other community spaces, churches that have Internet availability and/or technology labs are additional sources of access and connectivity in communities and among populations where access is limited.

Culturally Relevant Experiences

The Black Church is a discourse community that provides culturally relevant experiences for its congregants (White, 2012). In his work, White (2012) posited that educators would do well learn from the discursive traditions of the Black Church:

Advocates for culturally relevant teaching recognize that there is often a cultural chasm between students' respective culture(s) and the culture of our K-12 schools that results in some students (minority students) finding themselves alienated from the classroom and from the curriculum. (p. 96)

Because the African American church community “speaks a language” to which its congregants can relate (while some K-12 educators do not), the Black Church creates a climate of inclusion, which is conducive to engagement, involvement, and knowledge production, thereby accentuating it as a pedagogical space within itself. I agree with White (2012) as, given its ability to communicate in a culturally relevant way, “the black gospel church has excelled where schools have struggled in teaching important life lessons to African-American youth” (p. 97). It is no coincidence that many African Americans, including Oprah Winfrey (Academy of Achievement, 2011), claim to have honed fundamental skills through activities at their churches which allowed them to engage in culturally meaningful exchanges.

Given these insights into why the Black Church can serve as a viable setting for school-parent engagement, how can schools make greater use of this community-based space to encourage parent partnerships? In the next section, I offer recommendations to school staff for partnering with the Black Church in order to initiate these collaborations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

If schools desire to be intentional in involving African-American parents in nontraditional ways, K-12 teachers and administrators need to be proactive. Instead of depending on parents to come to the school to engage, schools need to elicit the desired change by reaching out to parents in their social environments. It bears repeating that, in many communities, the Black Church has been a logistically accessible, culturally affirming, and resource rich space for its congregants to connect with each other, engage with their community, and receive respite from societal stigmatization. Teachers and administrators in K-12 contexts who collaborate with families in the Black Church space—and do so in the service of social change—demonstrate social justice advocacy and intentionality towards inviting and embracing parent partnership, whether the collaboration is ultimately school-based or community-based.

The first step in making greater use of the Black Church for parent partnerships is to identify churches in the community with which to partner. Several factors might guide the school’s decision-making: the school’s existing partnership with a particular church, the proximity of a church to the school (particularly if it is in the neighborhood), or a church’s reputation for community outreach, for example. Once the school has selected one or more churches—the number may vary based on the size of the community, higher concentrations of target families at a particular church, and/or the availability of school staff outside of regular school hours—the school can plan specific programs and activities in collaboration with the church(es). Drawing on these understandings of how partnerships within the Black Church space

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can eliminate the barriers that inflexible work schedules, low socioeconomic status, mistrust, perceived staff unavailability, limited technology access and proficiency, and culturally irrelevant experiences impose, teachers and administrators in K-12 contexts should consider collaborations with families and the Black Church within its space include:

- Participating in a meet-and-greet for school administrators and families following a weeknight Bible study at the start of the school year;
- Presenting an academic, career or social/emotional development-themed workshop (e.g. study/test taking tips, college prep, bullying prevention, etc.) to students in conjunction with one of the church's scheduled youth events;
- Hosting a Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) college fair in the church fellowship hall or multi-purpose space;
- Submitting announcements pertinent to school-community-family engagement for publication in the program bulletin, on the church website, and/or on church social media pages;
- Assembling an information table of college, career resources, and financial aid resources in the church lobby on "Graduation Sunday" or "Scholarship Sunday";
- Holding parent teacher organization meetings or a district school board forum at the church campus increase the school's visibility and build relationships in the African American community;
- Facilitating parent workshops (financial aid, effective parent-school communication, time management for busy parents, etc.)
- Training parents to access and navigate school-related communication tools and technologies (e.g. classroom management apps, websites, portals, etc.)

It is important to note that, in my personal experience, collaborative events within the church space included students and parents from various schools throughout the school district. My presentation topics were intentionally applicable, without regard to a particular school. Notwithstanding, my interaction with and availability to families whose children did not attend my particular school positioned me as a liaison, and I was able to help them form and direct questions to the appropriate staff persons at their schools. Perhaps more importantly, the information they acquired through my presentations empowered them with the requisite knowledge to initiate important conversations with staff at their respective schools. Again, the purpose for making use of the Black Church as a collaborative space is to offer improved access and flexibility and to cultivate meaningful relationships with African American parents for whom school-based partnerships are problematic.

To improve outreach efforts, schools would also benefit from working in tandem with cultural brokers. Cultural brokers, according to Torres, Lee, and Tran (2015), possess the capacity to:

1. *Educate parents to support the school's goals to improve student achievement;*
2. *Connect parents to resources and information; and*
3. *Advocate with parents and with school staff to promote change or decrease conflict. (p. 2)*

Within the church, this could be a congregant who is a school staff member—like the event coordinator who invited me to her church's "Youth Sunday"—or a congregant who is a parent who works closely with the school. These are just a few examples of ways schools can partner with the Black Church within

the church space to engage African American families. Whether implementing the above suggestions or devising their own, schools that dare to step outside the school-based parent partnership box demonstrate commitment to ensuring that their parent partners from the African American community are equally engaged in the education process.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Moving forward, it is imperative for school staff to remain sensitive to conceptualizations of African American parent involvement compared to their White counterparts, as well as existing and emerging factors that may impede their participation in school-based activities. Schools' ongoing desires to fortify partnerships with African American parents should be accompanied with research that enables them to understand the myriad ways schools can extend their outreach efforts to community spaces such as the Black Church. Discussions of the Black Church as a desirable parent-school collaborative space also prompt consideration of other influential community spaces for parent partnerships within the African American community. Social clubs, athletic hubs, barber shops, and neighborhoods, for instance, have already proven to be socially and culturally relevant spaces (Douglas, 2012) and could afford schools unique and empowering family engagement opportunities. De Pedro (2009) notes that in some locales, mosques are also feasible community gathering spaces for parent-school collaborations because they make "families feel comfortable" (p. 26). Certainly, the recommendations in the previous section can be fine-tuned and applied to other parent groups who face similar barriers to school-based parent involvement and whose community spaces can offer the same supports as the Black Church. For this reason, future research should also examine approaches to leveraging outreach efforts in socially and culturally relevant community spaces for other parent groups, such as fathers and other ethnic minority families.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we examined why the Black Church functions as a desirable space for collaborations between schools and African American parents, and how schools can make greater use of this community-based space to strengthen parent partnerships. We identified several barriers to successful school-based partnerships and offered recommendations for expanding outreach efforts with approaches that lean on the social and cultural relevance of the Black Church as well as some of its resources. Because most Black churches hold weekly evening and weekend services outside regular school hours and provide logistical neighborhood convenience, an accessible and welcoming atmosphere, a refuge of trust, and culturally relevant experiences, they are ideal settings for bridging family-school relations that are not as easily achievable through school-based programs and activities. Finally, we established that the merits of this community-based collaboration are multifold and advance schools' ongoing efforts to recognize African American parents as valued, respected members of their school communities.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

The Black Church: An umbrella term referring to Protestant churches that presently or historically have served predominantly African-American congregations in the United States.

Community-Based Partnerships: Activities that take place in community spaces and engage members of the community.

Culturally Relevant: Related to one’s experiences, culture, and diversity.

Mainstream Education: Education that is structured and organized around the dominating conventional attitudes and ideologies of American society.

Middle Class: A socioeconomic class which falls between the working and upper classes. This class usually includes white-collar workers, managers, and other business and professional workers.

Parent: A biological mother or father or anyone who shares the primary responsibility in the rearing of a child.

School-Based Partnerships: Activities that take place on the school campus (e.g., book fairs, parent-teacher conferences, or academic awards programs).

Working Class: A socioeconomic class which works for wages. This class usually includes blue-collar workers.