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