



## School-based parental involvement as a predictor of achievement and school learning environment: An elementary school-level analysis



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### ABSTRACT

Recent federal and state policies promote school-level parent involvement (PI) (e.g., volunteering), although evidence linking it to both student-level academic performance and school-level outcomes is thin. Using social capital theory and drawing upon a longitudinal sample of public schools ( $n = 914$ ) from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), we examine the relationship of school-level student achievement and the school learning environment to three forms of school-level PI: involvement directed toward school improvement (public-good PI); involvement directed toward parents' own children's schooling (private-good PI); and the formation of social networks among parents (networking). Multilevel modeling analyses revealed that schools characterized by high aggregate levels of parents' public-good PI (participation in PTA/PTO, volunteering, and fundraising) and networking were more likely than other schools to have higher percentages of students at or above national/state standards in math and reading achievement and more likely to show more positive learning environments. School-level socio-economic status (SES) moderated these effects such that aggregate private-good PI and networking related to more positive learning environments and higher school achievement in low-SES schools while aggregate public-good PI brought more benefit within high-SES schools.

### 1. Introduction

Federal and state education policy strongly encourages parents' active participation in school-sponsored activities (e.g., volunteering, PTA/PTO membership, attending parent-teacher conferences). Indeed, strengthening family-school partnerships is a key goal of recent federal initiatives related to standards-based reform, including the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) and Race to the Top Fund (Race to the Top Act [RTTA], 2011). Most recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), stresses the importance of family and parent engagement, with particular emphasis on families in Title I schools (ESSA, 2015). Several states, in addition, grant parents leave time from work to attend conferences or activities at their children's schools (e.g., California's Family School Partnership Act, Illinois' School Conference and Activity Leave). Since the implementation of these policies, national surveys of households across the United States indicate that the percentage of parents' reported involvement at their children's school sites, including attendance at school events and volunteering appears to have risen significantly (Child Trends, 2010).

Such initiatives assume that these forms of school-based parent

involvement (what we will hereafter refer to as school-based PI) will raise student achievement levels. Yet, evidence supporting this assumption is inconclusive. Relative to well-established positive associations between home-based parent involvement (hereafter home-based PI; e.g., shared reading, holding high educational expectations), prior research suggests that school-based PI may, at best, be marginally associated with individual student's academic outcomes, including academic motivation as well as math and reading standardized scores (Jeynes, 2005; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Recent longitudinal studies do not find a significant link between school-based PI and children's achievement, controlling for their previous achievement (Domina, 2005; El Nokali, Bachman & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Based on such findings, some scholars and practitioners suggest a shift in policy emphasis away from the relationship between parents and schools and toward a focus on supporting the relationship between parents and children (e.g., Goodall & Montgomery, 2013).

On the other hand, school-based PI may be beneficial in other ways besides fostering individual student achievement. Valuing school-based PI on the basis of student academic achievement scores alone misses

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one of the ways in which parents meaningfully impact schools. Involved parents at school sites are often effective in supplementing teachers' instruction, creating safe and orderly schools, and securing more resources. This kind of PI may not directly affect a given parent's own child's test scores, but it can make school a more positive place for all children regardless of what their parents do or don't do at home.

As members of a school community, parents may be willing and able to influence the school's learning environment, policies and practices, as well as the achievement of the student body as a whole. A recent qualitative study of school staff, parents, and students in five elementary schools serving low-income families in California found that, whereas parents and students described parent involvement as support for children's school work and general well-being at home, school staff discussed the ways parent involvement contributed to school morale, a sense of community and overall program quality (Westrich & Strobel, 2013). School staff also noted that parent volunteers helped teachers manage their workload and seemed, through their presence in the school, to reduce the number of disciplinary problems. These findings echo findings from the school-effects and school effectiveness literatures, which conceptualize parent involvement as a school-level resource essential in building and sustaining social ties among parents, teachers, and children (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Grubb, 2008).

Other than being the focus of a small number of qualitative studies, the potential school-wide benefits of school-based PI have seldom been empirically investigated. We address this gap in the literature by analyzing school-based PI as a school characteristic rather than as a property of families or parent-child dyads. Specifically, the goal of the current study is to examine deeply the potential school-level benefits that school-based PI might bring, using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Studies-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K). Because little is known about the effects of school-based PI at the school level, we will examine the association of school-based PI to average school-level achievement as well as the overall quality of the learning environment. Given heightened attention to aggregate family income differences across schools and their contribution to the achievement gap (Owens, Reardon, & Jencks, 2016), we also explore whether the effects of school-based PI on school-level outcomes depend on school poverty level. In summary, this study will shed light on how aggregate parent involvement efforts at school sites are related to key indicators of the performance and quality of schools. As we will demonstrate, our approach is conceptually grounded in social capital theory and school effectiveness scholarship.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. School-based parent involvement as social capital

Since Coleman's seminal work conceptualizing PI as social capital and examining its effect on child academic outcomes, social capital theory has been a widely used theoretical framework to study PI (for a review, see Dika & Singh, 2002). In his early work, Coleman (1988) defined social capital as the resources that children may access through close and supportive parent-child relationships, measuring it through indicators such as whether or not both parents were in the home and whether they held high expectations for schooling. Coleman's initial conceptualization was subsequently extended by political sociologists who placed emphasis on the collective attributes of social capital. Putnam (1993) conceptualized social capital as "features of social organizations, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 35). Conceptualizing social capital at the level of an aggregate social grouping, Putnam's work justified an emphasis on the "stock" of social capital possessed by communities and their consequent community-level effects. Indeed, Putnam (2000) lamented the rapidly declining level of membership in parent teacher associations (PTA) in schools as a sign of a decreasing

stock of social capital in the nation. Portes (2000) further refined the conceptualization of social capital, arguing that it could operate as a structural property of an aggregate grouping (e.g., a school or community) as well as an individual property. In spite of the conceptual richness of this work, the two sides of social capital – as an individual asset and a community resource – have not been explicitly theorized in research on parent involvement. Rather, PI as social capital is typically conceptualized as supportive relationships between parents and children that promote positive academically related behaviors and attitudes toward school (Parcel, Dufur, & Cornell Zito, 2010).

These two properties of social capital potentially have the capacity to produce multiple and multi-level effects. Unlike financial or human capital, which confers *private goods*, social capital has *public-good* benefits (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Portes, 2000; Putnam 1993). That is, while individual actors may cultivate and utilize social capital to advance their self-interest (Adler & Kwon, 2002), it also can be cultivated to facilitate group identity, promote shared interests and obligations, and reinforce commitment to common goals (Portes, 2000). School-based PI as social capital can thus be framed as a public resource that contributes to the wider school community.

Similarly, economists also define common benefits of school-based PI as a public good, wherein one parent's efforts may also benefit to other families at the same school (McMillan, 2000; Walsh, 2008). Participation in activities that improve school quality or provide resources to schools, such as volunteering, PTA/PTO membership, and fundraising, can be viewed as involvement for the public good. For example, parents' participation in the PTA/PTO positively relates to school-wide test scores in public elementary schools (McMillan, 2000) and the probability that principals frequently observe and evaluate all teachers (Walsh, 2008). In addition, aggregate volunteerism may be beneficial to creating positive school learning environments. Principals perceive volunteerism to benefit family-school relations and report that parents connected their volunteer experience to an enhanced respect for school staff and a greater understanding of how the school operates (Brent, 2000).

In contrast with public-good PI, private-good PI includes those strategies that may yield private returns to an individual family, such as attending a parent-teacher conference, back-to-school night, or open house (McMillan, 2000). Even though their intention is to accrue private benefit, these private-good activities may also produce a spill-over effect and indirectly affect the school environment, (e.g., teacher morale, overall sense of community). A possible explanation for this link is that private-good PI facilitates trust between school staff and parents that, in turn, enables more effective pursuit of common goals (Flessa, 2008). For example, an extensive study conducted with Chicago Public Schools (Bryk et al., 2010) found that high aggregate levels of private-good PI (measured by parental participation in parent-teacher conferences and school events) strongly and positively related to the "student-centeredness" (i.e. the extent to which staff held high expectations for and supported students) ( $r = 0.51$ ) as well as safety and orderliness of schools ( $r = 0.39$ ). Compared to schools without such attributes, those that were safe and orderly as well as student-centered showed a stronger capacity for school improvement and were four times more likely to show improvement in reading test scores and ten times more likely to show improvement in math scores.

This prior scholarship strongly suggests that public-good and private-good PI represent conceptually distinct ways that parents become involved with school sites, with potentially differential effects on children and schools. However, prior parent involvement research has not consistently considered these distinctions, typically conceptualizing school-based PI as a unitary construct, ultimately conflating or ignoring differences between public good and private-good PI. One important contribution of our study is that we take a first step to disentangle these potentially different types of school-based PI.

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