



Honoring African American parents as partners in education

Educators must explicitly grant families of color authentic access to share their voices. That means allowing ourselves to be more uncomfortable than they are and not pulling rank by posture, tone or title.

When I set out to pen this article, I had no idea that what you are about to read is what it would become. I had grandiose ideas of talking strategy, discussing my book on equitable family engagement and parent empowerment strategies, and providing a few quotes from African American parents and official parent liaisons to support my key points.

Instead, after reflecting on what was shared with me, I was moved to play a lesser role, and walk-my-talk by creating access to the voice of a key stakeholder group in our schools throughout the nation: African American families. Being an equity leader and a woman of color, I am careful not to support the stereotype that “one person of color speaks for the whole.” Yet, what this mother and father share with us all too often in my work is the sentiment of “the group.”

While the bulk of this article focuses on parent voices, I will lightly offer both some start-now solutions as well as some concluding thoughts for us as educators in this difficult work of engagement regarding families of color, particularly African American families.

Listening to parent voices

Let’s hear from Collette (not her real name), a middle-class African American mother of three students, ranging from college to elementary school, in a progressive urban school district in a progressive urban city. Collette has been involved in parent leadership work in the district since 2010.

Q: What motivated you to get involved as a parent leader? Was there one specific instance?

A: My daughter was in the 10th grade. She asked me to come to her school because things just “weren’t right.” She couldn’t define it any better than that, even though she was normally very articulate. Because “Progressive High” was popular, and I had read all the catalog information, I didn’t understand what could be wrong. So I went to the school, and that’s when I was able to see that some kids were expected to succeed, and others were expected to fail and treated as throw-aways – the latter were all Black.

Around the same time, I went to a PTA meeting at my other daughter’s elementary

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school in which the principal was going over test scores, suspension rates and attendance for the students by race. After some probing, he admitted that racism had been identified as the biggest reason for the variances in results. This is when I decided to get others on board and begin to advocate for change.

Q: What do you “give up” to do the amount of parent leadership work that you do? Please share why that sacrifice is so important.

A: The biggest thing I gave up was the perception that the school was going to do their best to give my child the education I thought all students in “Progressive City” were receiving. I lost my comfort zone. I realized that if I didn’t do something, even if my kids were OK and meeting my expectations, how could I be satisfied knowing that their peers who looked like them were not? That’s when I started finding out how the “Progressive Unified School District” system worked and what I could do with the collective power of the parent voice.

I gave up a lot of time to volunteer and endured lots of frustrating moments, since the speed of change is so slow, politics are so great, and the red tape is so thick. But as I see some of the improvements we’ve advocated for have been implemented, I can say it has been worth it.

Q: One more question: What do you see as your biggest obstacles to family engagement/parent empowerment work, as an African American parent?

A: The biggest obstacle is the turnover with the parents’ ability to offer all the volunteer support that is needed. As life happens to people (e.g. parents get sick, work requires travel/longer hours, families are involved in other activities such as sports/church groups, etc.) it’s hard to keep a constant flow of hands in this work.

In addition, you have parents leaving as students graduate and others are entering. It takes time to bring people up to speed to continue the work. Next thing you know, it’s winter break, then spring break, then graduation season.

So again, life happens, which is a big challenge with families trying to balance the needs of their own home and the needs

| BLACK PARENT CONCERN | EDUCATOR REFLECTIVE SOLUTION |
|---|--|
| Physical environment of school lacks authentic cultural relevance. | Do away with kente-cloth board trim; have realistic posters of African American students being successful and academic. Do not have them on the “Don’t Be Late to Class” poster. |
| Lack of communication; generally only contacted when there is something “wrong” or failing is already happening. | Parents are relational. Be intentional about reaching out to Black parents early, before there’s a true issue; make a positive first-contact. |
| Poor communication – last minute, wrong “avenue.” | Improve frequency and relevancy of communication |
| Lack of respect/stereotyping families (uneducated, low-income, dysfunctional). | Check any possible personal bias, and view Black families outside of stereotypical media conditioning. |
| Not willing to address or accept cultural/ethnic differences. | Value the cultural difference of the Black experience in this country. |
| Lack of adequate resources for intentional, specified support (i.e., what if my Black child is not EL or SPED or low-achiever). | Reflect on targeted support for EL and SPED students; African American data is often just as abysmal, so that group needs targeted support too. |
| Lack of value for input/lack of inclusion (decision already made, just called in for you to tell it to me instead of including me). | Be inclusive with Black families when making decisions about their children; don’t assume they do not care. |
| Lack of clear guidelines set by school, plus the school and/or teachers’ actions not aligned with guidelines. | Follow and uphold the school guidelines for teachers/staff in interactions with students and families. |
| Time of activities/events while parents are working. | Consider doing a morning meeting and an evening meeting. |
| Time management/efficiency (time gets wasted). | Put yourself in the parents’ place and ask, “Is this time well structured?” |
| Students at too many different schools due to policies rather than convenience. | Look at school attendance policies for siblings. If a parent has several children at different schools, additional support may be needed. |
| Transparency not reciprocated by educator. | Be as honest and open as you want the parent to be. |
| Lack of school accountability (mistakes happen, so own them and let’s move on). | Don’t pretend to be perfect or without fault in a situation; own it and apologize, making every effort to not repeat the mistake. |



“Life happens, which is a big challenge with families trying to balance the needs of their own home and the needs of the school community.”

of the school community. The system also knows this and counts on this to maintain its comfort with its dysfunction.

Now, let's hear from Craig (not his real name), a middle-class African American father of two elementary-age children in the same progressive urban school district. Craig has been involved in parent leadership work in this district since late 2016.

Q: How long have you been doing the parent leadership work you are doing and what is it?

A: Currently, I serve as the co-chair of the Parent Advisory Committee for Progressive USD. We are an assembly of parents from each school in the district, tasked to represent parents “in an advisory capacity on matters pertaining to district finances.” I have most recently been appointed to the Superintendent's Budget Advisory Committee.

I have been in parent leadership for less than a year, but I'm gaining momentum. I don't mean in regards to fancy titles or open doors, but rather what can be done within those doors to improve our position. It's like learning a new language; you have to fully immerse in order to learn how to best serve the community and fully understand the way things are, so you can articulate why they can never be allowed to stay that way.

I keep our children, the children of English learners and children identified as special ed in the conversation from a human perspective. I make sure they aren't just seen as numbers. I push for the goal of excellence in education for the underserved. As things are today, they are being set up for failure in life. That can't be allowed to continue.

Q: What motivated you to start? Was there one specific instance?

A: From the moment I first saw the numbers for the education achievement gap by race in my children's school district, I have been a more active parent; first at their school and now at the district level. My stomach turned. My jaw tightened. I felt disgusted and disoriented. I moved my children to Progressive USD for a progressive education, thinking they would be working toward social change.

Moving them, the faces changed, but behind closed doors, things stayed the same. I understood now what I didn't as a child. Because I was marked as gifted, I had exposure to a higher level of education than most of my friends in the same district. Although some teachers tried to discourage me and derail me from “the track” along that journey, I still had the exposure and therefore a better foundation; an opportunity for a better life. Some of my friends weren't so fortunate. I could see the full picture now. Once you see it, it's hard to ignore.

I could move my children out of the district, but would things be different anywhere else in America? Probably not. One day I may move my children away if I learn of better schools. But, meanwhile, I won't sit back and accept the way things are without a fight. I will fight for our children until my last breath.

Q: What do you “give up” to do the amount of parent leadership work that you do? Please share why that sacrifice matters.

A: The main things I give up are time and energy, but I give them up freely, without

hesitation. Change is possible, but it takes commitment. When I say to myself that I want to be the best father I can be, this is a part of that commitment. I have to protect my children from the malicious elements within the education system. That takes time and energy. It takes devotion. It takes bravery. It takes unity. It takes strategy.

What are you living for? Most people answer that question by saying they're living for their children. If you honestly believe that to be true, you need to make the time to defend them. You need to hold schools and teachers accountable. You need to hold yourself accountable.

Q: As an African American parent, what are the main obstacles you face in doing this work?

A: Two things: the “Where are the Black fathers?” question and the myth of “the angry Black man.”

I don't know if this is happening in anyone else's schools, but at mine, White women who paint themselves as allies have grown far too comfortable declaring that more Black men aren't in the room. My internal response is, “Where is your husband?”

Traditionally these spaces have been dominated by women, have they not? Their goal is to perpetuate the “absent Black father” narrative. Here is something they need to understand: Being absent from a room full of people who we don't trust does not equate to being absent from the lives of our children.

I have had the honor and privilege to meet many intelligent, passionate, articulate Black fathers along my journey. We need to unite and form our own forum locally for the nourishment, elevation and protection of our people. I see that happening in the near future.

From a village perspective, each of us represents a lot more children than our own. Do not concern yourself with the quantity in attendance. Pay respect to the quality of what is being said. This Black father is here with you today. Give him the respect he deserves.

And this needs to be said too: When it comes to important matters in schools, how things proceed often comes down to a vote. I've been let down in that regard, even when voting on matters concerning equity.

Being the only Black man fighting for young Black boys and girls has left me lit-

erally outvoted at times and temporarily discouraged. The “White agenda” often continues with the elevation of a few White and White-influenced hands and the words, “The ayes have it.”

I am highly passionate about making a difference in our children’s lives through education. A defensive mechanism that I have encountered frequently from some White parents, teachers and staff when challenged to do more to make things fair – specifically by a Black man – is dejection.

I can see it when some White parents, teachers and staff detach. It takes shape in a few ways, some more animated than others, but all motivated by the same societal training. When challenged by a passionate, intelligent Black man, they shut down.

One of my children’s teachers prefers to make a scene to garner auto-sympathy from her colleagues and allies and pretends to be a victim when I challenge the way things are. Instinctively, her colleagues try to attack, but are standing on loose footing. They lose all sense of order and civility. But none of that matters to them anymore. They have one goal: Silence the angry Black man because he’s making too much sense again.

Others pull back in their seats, cross their arms and search the room for allies who are equally disgusted by the thought of me challenging the way things are. They doodle or pantomime their discomfort until I’m finished talking, then try their best to get back to “business as usual.”

That’s when I know I’m on point. They

should be uncomfortable. They should be disgusted with themselves for the data.

I take note of who is really there to make a difference and who is there to block the path. You can’t close the door on our children any longer. Whenever you see me in a parent meeting, know I came to take the doors off the hinges.

Courage to speak up

For many educators, what these two parents have shared can be felt as hurtful or aggressive, and even as the “angry Black parent” stereotype. Yet, we must recognize and acknowledge the truth of many parts of their sharing. We must acknowledge their lack of trust of our system, and their quantifiable evidence as to why the trust is minimal. We must be honest about how we are challenged to support African American families instead of placing any blame or coming from a place of lack of knowledge about Black families culturally.

Further, we must acknowledge that they feel the effects of our implicit bias. I offer that we need to listen from a place of emotional intelligence – a place that unlocks our hearts from our differences – allowing us to hear their pain, their frustration, and their fear of how their kids and other kids of color can be failed if these parents and other parents don’t have the courage to speak up.

When considering what the two parents shared, it’s imperative that we reflect with the lens that we educators are in co-control of their most precious treasures, their children.

When parents speak, once we listen and respond, we must follow up in the ways we say that we will and make the parents part of the solution. That’s how we gain trust, the trust needed to partner for their children’s success and the success of our schools.

Overall, partnering with African American families looks a bit different. It takes intentionality, consistency, transparency and relevance, as well as sacrifice, the very same sacrifice the parents mention: time and energy.

In addition, for Black families, schools are simply one more place where they must yet again do more than others in order to try to stay on par. This sacrifice must be reciprocated more fully by us.

Due to historical pain in our country, “the system” is often represented first by our schools as the place where Black families send their children as the pipeline to college, career or prison. The difference between which pipeline the child travels down depends on both the willingness of the parent to engage with a system that often has the failure of their child institutionalized as part of its predictable outcomes, as well as the willingness of the system to sacrifice deep change and transformation in how it views and interacts with African American families for true engagement.

Tovi Scruggs-Hussein is an education leader and author of the book “Be a Parent Champion: A Guide to Becoming a Partner with Your Child’s School.”



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