

School Leadership and Family-School-Community Partnerships: The Model Schools for Inner Cities Initiative

Context and issue

School-level leadership is key in establishing family-school-community partnerships^{1,2,3}. School leaders are vital in fostering and sustaining partnerships,⁴ combatting inequities,^{5,6} and advancing social justice in marginalized communities⁷. While some research suggests that leadership strategies can be effective in fostering family-school-community partnerships (e.g., creating a welcoming atmosphere in the school,⁸ engaging in open two-way communication with families,⁹ sharing leadership responsibilities with parents and community members¹⁰ and building trusting relationships with families^{8,12}.) few studies have considered school leadership and family-school-community partnerships in the Canadian context¹³. This study explored strategies that have helped establish family-school-community partnerships at two schools in the Toronto-based Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) Initiative. This board-level initiative was implemented to foster equity within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) by increasing access to social and educational supports for students and families in the city's most marginalized communities¹⁴.

Our approach

In 2014 and 2019, we spoke with parents and school administrators at two Toronto-area MSIC schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Model School 1 (MS1) is in a high-density downtown neighbourhood within walking distance for most students and near several community programs and services. Model School 2 (MS2) is in a more sprawling neighbourhood; it is in walking distance for many students, but services like community centres, libraries, and childcare centres are not generally within walking distance. The school building at MS2 is deteriorating and more cramped than at MS1.

The report is based on focus groups with parents and interviews with school administrators at two schools in the MSIC initiative (MS1 and MS2) in 2014 and 2019.

We asked parents and administrators about programs and services available to children and families at the school, school-family relationships, how the school acts as the hub of the community, and engagement of newcomer, refugee, and culturally diverse families.

Results

We identified seven main themes related to school leadership that fostered family-school-community partnerships.

1. Creating a welcoming physical and social school environment

- Participants noted that both the physical and social environment of the school can create a welcoming atmosphere for families.
- Parents at both schools discussed the importance of having an inviting entranceway. All schools in the TDSB have automatic locks on their doors, but MS1 administrators tried to allow more open access to families. Parents and administrators at MS2 commented that their front entrance was small, not welcoming, and inaccessible for people using wheelchairs or strollers.
- Parents and administrators at both schools referred to the important role played by all school staff, particularly front desk staff, in establishing a welcoming environment. For example, MS2 parents spoke highly of a now-retired school custodian who was particularly approachable and involved with the school. Still, some parents at both schools did not feel welcomed.
- One MS1 parent said that how parents are welcomed by school staff reflects the broader relationship between the school and community.

"[Let's say] I don't speak English, so what's my next step [when I arrive]... How do they [the school staff] interact with you? The principal, the teachers. It begins at that bare minimal level in regards to what relationship you're going to build [with parents and] therefore with the community." – Parent, 2019

2. Fostering a culture of care

- Participants discussed ways that schools fostered a culture of care among staff and families. MS1 administrators interpreted a culture of care as demonstrating that the school cared about family and community well-being, social justice, and student achievement. MS2 administrators interpreted a culture of care as fostering caring, trusting relationships between school staff and families.
- MS1 administrators fostered their culture of care by including it in conversations with students and families, the school newsletter, and in school announcements. A board near the school office also displayed examples of students caring for others.
- In 2014, MS2 parents and administrators referred to some distrust between families and school staff; administrators attributed this to past traumas or negative experiences with schools among parents, whereas parents said it was related to power dynamics and a lack of communication. In 2019, MS2 administrators spoke about specific strategies to encourage trusting relationships, including establishing the office as a safe space for students and families and taking time to build positive relationships with each family.
- Trust between MS2 parents and school staff appeared to have improved by 2019, when parents reported that school staff were very transparent in their communications with parents.

“When we talk about a culture of caring... you are looking at the social emotional piece of the child but also the academics and the third component will be the equity and social justice piece right. So we care about those pieces and one is no more important than the other.” – School Administrator, 2014

“Building trust is an individual thing... it is literally child by child, parent by parent, family by family... because they are marginalized already so they need proof in the pudding right? And then if something happens [and that trust breaks], then we have to build that all over again.” – School Administrator, 2019

3. Communication with families

- Both schools encouraged communication with families using flyers, newsletters, phone calls with families, emails, social media, informal conversations, and more formal events. The parent council was a key way parents could bring concerns to the attention of the school at MS1.
- Administrators at both schools discussed the importance of ensuring parents feel validated and heard when a concern is brought up.
- Parents at both schools referred to the importance of receiving phone calls when their children are doing well, instead of only when they are struggling; these phone calls contributed to a sense of pride in their parenting. MS2 parents in particular wanted more positive phone calls about their children’s achievements.
- In 2014, a few parents at MS1 said that the school never phoned or sent flyers to tell them about school events. This had greatly improved by 2019, when all MS1 parents spoke positively about family-school communications.
- In 2014, parents at MS2 noted a lack of organization among school staff and a lack of communication between school staff and families, which had improved somewhat by 2019.

“Why do I always have to get the negative phone call? All you are going to do is call me and tell me negativity. You’re never going to uplift my child. You’re always going to put down my child.” – Parent, 2014

4. Encouraging parent leadership and advocacy

- Participants, especially at MS1, said that school staff, including administrators as well as other TDSB and MSIC staff, created opportunities for parents to serve as leaders, make decisions, and advocate for themselves and community causes.
- At MS1, the parent council was a key avenue for parent leadership; it advocated for a school uniform, fundraised for community charities, and worked in collaboration with the MSIC Community Support Worker to advocate for more local recreation programs and plan events for parents in the school. Parents described the MSIC Community Support Worker and administrators as co-leaders in the parent council.

“[The parent council is] the forum where the parent’s voice is heard. I think that’s what I like the most. It’s not about what the principal wants or what the teacher’s want. It’s what we the parents want.” – Parent, 2019

- MS1 administrators spoke explicitly about their efforts to encourage families and school staff to see parents as co-leaders and decision-makers.
- The parent council at MS2 was not as active as the parent council at MS1; its main role was to organize hot lunches for students. MS2 parents did not take on leadership roles in terms of school or community initiatives as MS1 parents did.

“There is an initiative now in moving to uniforms and that’s all sort of school council and families that lead that and [we] supported. They’ve taken on that initiative. They are invested. They want to make it happen. I think there is a greater sense of ownership to this space and that’s a welcome piece to us.”
– School Administrator, 2014

5. Leadership presence in the community

- Parents at both schools felt that involvement of school staff in the community helped the school play an active role in the larger community.
- At MS1, the Community Support Worker was a basketball coach in the neighbourhood and administrators often attended community events and meetings. MS1 parents said these practices made the school an active, supportive part of the larger community.
- Community walks had been a regular practice at many MSIC schools, but the first of these at MS2 was not held until 2019, when administrators organized a community walk to help staff get to know the community. MS2 administrators noted that this educated teachers about available community supports and led to some teachers visiting community organizations with their classes.
- In 2019, MS2 administrators hosted parent council nights and an intergenerational book club in a local apartment building after noticing that it was difficult for some families to get to the school in the evenings. This demonstrated to families that school staff were working to be a part of the larger community.

“We’re meeting ... in the Community Housing Room. ...a place where someone was just killed a couple of months ago. It’s not the safest place to be if you wanna just look at the stats and these principals and vice principals and teachers are coming there 6:00 p.m. This is hours after they’ve finished, they’re not being paid to be there and they’re sitting with the community for one reason, to get feedback from the community on what we can do to better enable the students and the teachers at our school to help us to learn and to grow as a community.” – Parent, 2019

6. Establishing the school as a social and cultural broker

- Participants identified several ways school staff and administrators established their schools a social and cultural broker, helping families connect with and navigate information and services in social, health, and educational systems.
- MS1 administrators had a clear vision of the school as a place to serve families and the larger community. MS1 parents and administrators said their school is a community hub where parents can access services including an on-site school health clinic, a parent and child family support program, childcare centre, before- and after-school programs, and an adjacent community centre.
- MS2 had fewer on-site services, but parents said the school was a place they could turn to for referrals and support. One MS2 parent said the school helped her get glasses and hearing aids for her children.
- Parents and administrators at both schools identified Community Support Workers and TDSB Settlement Workers as key supports, particularly for newcomer families navigating Canadian health, education, and social systems. Still, some parents at both schools felt the schools could be more supportive of newcomer families, e.g., by providing translators and information about Canadian educational systems.

“[The school] truly becomes the hub of the community and I think people enjoy the fact that the school is a place that’s 7 til 7 and there is a rich variety of things that they can do and access 7 days a week in this space.” – School Administrator, 2014

“If I was in a situation [where I needed support], the first people I would go to is the Principal, Vice Principal, community workers right here ... and I would get my needs met... Or they would refer me to somebody who can. There are resources here that can keep... any mother, any father, single fathers are here as well, afloat... we’re afloat and they stabilize us. The programs that we’re having I’m hoping never get cut because they’re very necessary for the generations to come.” – Parent, 2019

7. Leveraging community partnerships and the personal social capital of administrators to address systemic inequities

- Participants noted that administrators used community partnerships and their own social position and networks to address various systemic inequities within the schools, the local communities, and broader society.
- MS1 administrators referred to partnering with universities, hospitals, and not-for-profit organizations to address systemic racism by offering professional development focused on anti-oppression and anti-racism for staff and targeted school-based programs for racialized students and their families. MS1 administrators also leveraged their power to ensure marginalized families were represented in school leadership (e.g., school staff, parent council) and in school resources (e.g., books, educational resources). MS2 administrators spoke less about specific partnerships to address systemic racism, but noted that they were beginning to organize professional development for staff members focused on Black student excellence and anti-bias training as part of a larger, board-wide initiative.
- MS1 administrators advocated within the school board for autism and developmental delay programs at their school so that students would not have to leave their neighbourhood to access these programs. MS1 parents said these programs helped create an inclusive school environment for children and families.
- Both schools have breakfast and lunch programs for students. MS2 also had a food-sharing program in partnership with a community organization. Food insecurity was of particular concern in the MS2 community, where grocery stores were far away and local food banks had long lineups; parents spoke about stigma associated with going to the food bank and therefore appreciated the food-sharing program.
- MS2 administrators were aware that nearby community recreation activities for families were limited and were partnering with local organizations to offer more programs and clubs. There was a notable change between 2014 and 2019, when parents noted more extracurricular activities offered at the school.
- MS2 parents wanted more relevant parent programming to address systemic issues like unemployment, food insecurity, addiction, and teen pregnancy. They noted that programming at the school (e.g., parent events focused on literacy) were 'band-aid' solutions that did not address the root problems, and felt the school had the potential to help address generational cycles of poverty, addiction, and other social justice concerns.
- How administrators viewed social justice seemed to affect how schools addressed systemic inequities. MS1 administrators noted that equity was at the centre of their work and often referred to social justice in conversations with families. They felt that by expressing their intention to create more equitable educational and social systems, they helped parents view the school as an ally that cares about their children, family, and community.

"There is a lot of opportunity for our students [here in the school] because they don't get to go to a lot of the other excursions or [extra curriculars], so with the [MSIC] funding they have really benefited from that, like having arts groups in here."
– School Administrator, 2019

"I think we need to have programs that actually do address the issues in the community. If we did have programs that dealt with kids who are on drugs, and not 'what if' your kids try drugs. There is no 'what if' in this community. Even if your kids have never tried it there is a high chance that they will... Like these are the issues that we need to deal with our kids... we need to get the workshops that teach us how to deal with it once it's happened and not if it will happen. You know because this is where we live. It's a very high chance it will happen." – Parent, 2019

"So I talk about [our anti-oppressive stance] at school advisory council meetings. I was sending out correspondence around the work we were doing in my weekly newsletters to parents and so they knew that we were engaging in this kind of work. And I was naming it right. And so they would see okay they really care about this." – School Administrator, 2019

Recommendations and implications for practice

- Important first steps in fostering family-school-community partnerships are creating a welcoming social and physical school environment,^{1,8} fostering a culture of care within the school,⁷ and having various avenues for frequent, reciprocal communication with families and community members.⁹ Together, these strategies establish an inviting atmosphere and may be particularly important for families who have had negative or traumatic past experiences with schools.
- Trusting relationships are the foundation for future family and community partnerships.^{8,12} MS1 and MS2 administrators fostered trusting relationships by meeting with parents and establishing the office as a caring and safe space. The active participation of school staff in the community can contribute to trusting relationships.
- Consulting with families and providing opportunities for parent leadership can foster family-school-community partnerships and lead to community-level change.^{10,11} Some parents wanted more consultation about programs; providing opportunities for parents to make decisions will ensure the programs are relevant and meaningful for families.
- How administrators perceive social justice can help schools address systemic inequities and operate as social and cultural brokers for families, so this should be considered when hiring leaders, especially in an inner-city context. The TDSB offers anti-oppression and anti-Black racism training for administrators, as well as training in family and community engagement.^{15,16} This kind of equity training and a focus on shared leadership strategies is vital to ensure schools effectively support family well-being and student educational success.
- School staff and parents also play key roles in fostering family-school-community relations.^{3,6} MSIC Community Support Workers and TDSB Settlement Workers emerged as important cultural brokers for families. More research is needed to explore their roles in supporting family-school-community partnerships.

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