CREATING STRONG PARTNERSHIPS TO SUPPORT SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES
A COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS, COMMUNITY AND
SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

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Abstract

School reform and poverty alleviation initiatives must include parents and communities as active partners. Current efforts made are insufficient and do not actively engage all families particularly single parent families who face unique challenges. Through a predominantly qualitative study, this research investigated how to better support single parent families of city A. It emphasized the importance of collaboration between school A, the community and single parent families jointly to improve student achievement and begin to close the achievement gap. Research findings and recommendations are presented through the framework of research conducted by Pedro Noguera (2004) that emphasized the importance of parent empowerment.
Chapter I

Introduction

An increasing number of urban schools are unable to meet the demands of school reform and risk facing the sanctions associated with receiving government funds. For this reason, many are desperate for new reform initiatives that promise to increase student achievement and close the achievement gap. Unfortunately, many of these same schools neglect to include their parents and communities in their school reform. Strategies that politicians and educators have proposed have been mostly school-based initiatives that address standards-based instructions, assessments, and after-school intervention programs developed independently of family and community input. In fact, many blame parents for their lack of participation (Bryk, Anthony, & Schneider, Barbara, 2003).

The problem with these strategies is that by not actively seeking parental involvement, we neglect one of the most important tools that closes the achievement gap and increases student achievement (Christinakis, 2011; Lee, & Bowen, 2006). A bigger problem is that even when schools reach out to families, single parent families cannot fully take advantage of the available resources because of factors that prevent them from doing so. Some of these factors include lack of time, low level of parental education, and lack of flexibility of school personnel to accommodate parent availability (Astone & McLanahan, 1990; Blum, Boyle & Offord, 1988; Gennetian & Knox, 2003; Manning & Brown, 2003). When any or all of these challenges are at play in a family situation, some single parent families without the means to overcome these challenges are at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts with at least one available parent or one who is educated and with more flexible work hours (Lee & Bowen, 2006).
To mitigate the challenges faced by single parent families, strong partnerships between schools, families, and the community must develop, and schools must initiate the efforts to create such collaborations, thus empowering parents to become better advocates for their children and equal partners with school staff (Noguera, 2004). For better and stronger partnerships to develop, all stakeholders must recognize that students learn and grow at home, at school, and in their communities, and they are influenced by their families, teachers, principals and others in the community (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). Ysseldyke and Christenson (2002) have indicated that to understand a student’s complete learning environment more fully, we need to give consideration to multiple approaches: instructional support, availability of home-based support, and the quality of communication between home and school, knowing that all of these factors contribute to student failure or success. As schools design academic and social intervention strategies, the role of home-to-school connections and the impact of home structure must not be neglected since students spend more than 90% of their time outside of school and are constantly learning outside of the regular school day.

To create continuity between learning that takes place in school and that which continues after the school day, there needs to be ongoing communication between home and school (Christenson, 2002, Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). This desired continuity is harder to achieve when parents lack the information necessary to navigate the educational system, have had bad experiences at schools themselves, or are engaged in other activities such as working to support their families and not resort to welfare or other support (Gennetian & Knox, 2003). These factors are true for many families but are more apparent in single family homes where lone parents serve as models, disciplinarians, child care providers, and in some cases sole providers (Sharkey & Chambliss, 1993).
Statement of the Problem

School accountability is often measured by the progress made by students in significant subgroups over a period of time. The major subgroups targeted are the socio-economically disadvantaged, minorities, students with disabilities and English language learners, but very little consideration is given to the family structure of individual students (California Department of Education). With little understanding of the role of family structure, past and recent reform and poverty alleviation initiatives have not proven effective because they are generic in their approach to tackling the challenges many students face in our public schools and do not include community members in the decision making process (Noguera, 2004). Several schools do not actively include family and community, and when they do, single parents cannot fully participate in the process because of their unique employment challenges (Astone & McLanahan, 1990; Blum, Boyle, & Offord, 1988; Gennetian & Knox, 2003; Manning & Brown, 2003).

What some educators do not realize is that school-based reform does not close the achievement gap as educators expect and may negatively impact some students (Nocero, 2011). In some cases, reform programs have proven to be disastrous for “at-risk” students, who educators care about most (Christenson, 2002). At-risk students have been defined as “students who have been exposed to inadequate or inappropriate educational experiences in the family, school or community” (Pallas, 1989). It is important to caution that the description of “inadequate” and “appropriate” experiences will vary from person to person.

According to the U.S Census Bureau (2001) characteristics of “at-risk” students were students whose “personal” (being retained in school, disability, language deficiency) and “familial” circumstances (absence of at least one or both parents, at least one foreign-born parent of recent immigration, low family income, and no employed parent) would impact their
education. With the current national numbers of single parents at over 30% and the fact that 60% of children born after 1984 will now live with one parent for more than five years of their lives, it behooves the government, educators, and community members to create programs that address the needs of this increasing group (U.S Census Bureau, 2003, 2010). This study seeks to investigate specific strategies and tools that government, schools, and community members can use effectively to support single-parent families whose children may possess any one or more of the characteristics described by the United States Census Bureau.

To emphasize further the need for strong collaboration between schools, families, and the community, Rutherford and Billig (1995) stated that schools and communities were ideal contexts for developing and fostering strong relationships with families. For some single parent families, full participation may not be easy or attainable due to factors that prevent them from doing so. Such factors may include the lack of time, lack of resources such as transportation and money, low education, prior negative experiences in their own education, and extended hours of employment (Astone & McLanahan, 1990; Blum, Boyle & Offord, 1988; Gennetian & Knox, 2003; Manning & Brown, 2003).

In comparing how children from single-parent families fare compared to children from dual parent homes, several researchers have highlighted the deficits associated with single parenting and fewer emphasized the merits associated with this type of family structure. For example, the early model of Marsh (1990) reported that children’s “cogniti”, that is, emotional and behavioral development were impacted if they lived in single parent family situations. Riccuiti reported that after separation or divorce, there was an increased likelihood of students dropping out of school, especially among adolescents (Riccuiti, 2004). Rather than emphasize
only the challenges, this study will underscore both the unique challenges experienced by single parent families and the strengths that they bring to the table.

In order to advocate for single parent families, it is important to recognize socio-economic differences between dual income and single income families. This is because the welfare of the family and access to the much-needed basic necessities such as food, shelter, clothing and health care (Blum, Boyle & Offord, 1988) is limited. Mother-only as head of household families were often more impacted as they were likely to exhibit poverty levels lower than other groups (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). This added financial burden can be shared when external support is available from other family members and/or community-based agencies and schools. Such shared responsibility, though not without its own demerits, can be found in multigenerational households where some children have been known to perform better academically in comparison to single-parent only families without any support (Deleire & Kalil, 2002). This outcome was also supported by Geronimus (1997) who reported that shared child rearing minimizes the risk to child development associated with poverty, parental unemployment, poor parental physical health, and poor parental mental health (as cited by Deleire & Kalil, 2002). For school and community leaders who desire to improve the quality of the lives of students from single parent families, this shared child-rearing model can be adopted.

With an increase in the number of students in single parent families from 20 to 30% between 1980 and 2008, it is easy to see that there are possibly millions of children from single-parent families who may require additional academic, financial, emotional, and after school academic support. No longer can reform efforts remain school-based to address only standards-based instruction, assessments, after-school intervention programs, without family and community input. Such initiatives could raise test scores in some schools, while failing in others.
School-based reform won’t fix everything among this single parent demographic, even though some students will succeed (Nocero, 2011). In fact, many school-based reform strategies have proven to be disastrous for students, especially for those students who were most at risk (Christenson, 2002).

The role of parent inclusion in shared decision-making is not just for educators alone, but must extend to include leaders of other social institutions as well. For example, county, state, and federal agencies that provide welfare services could begin to examine their practices as an important step in supporting single-parent families and creating interventions such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), specifically designed to promote healthy and successful children (Gennetian & Knox, 2003). Though complex, such interagency support is doable and illustrated in Figure 1 (See page 33.).

**Purpose of the Study**

This study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how strong partnerships and support networks could benefit students from single-parent families. It will examine the role of educators in initiating genuine efforts aimed at parent inclusion and in creating partnerships with outside agencies and/or community-based organizations with similar student and community goals. A limited portion of this research will examine the role of government policies and mandates in facilitating such efforts and in directly providing the much needed social structures and services to single parent families.

With so many schools unable to demonstrate proficiency and progressive improvement for all students regardless of their ethnicity, disability, and language status or family backgrounds, it is becoming clear that school-based reforms can only go so far, thus
necessitating rather strong family-school connections that must be in place to enhance children’s educational outcomes (Christenson, 2002). This common understanding may very well be the much needed catalyst to encourage interests in developing policies that address school-home relationships. When families and educators collaborate with federal and local government agencies, we could reduce or even eliminate some of the differences in expectations, goals and communication patterns that are currently prevalent but largely unsuccessful in our educational system. Strong partnerships between school districts and families will make this happen (National Association of School Psychologists, 2005 n.a.).

**Leadership and Social Justice Significance of Study**

With over 30% of America’s children living in single parent family settings and the abundant research that highlights the challenges encountered by single parent families, it is important that educators, community members, and politicians pay closer attention to students from this family setting. If our goals are to close the achievement gaps between subgroups, to alleviate poverty between the socio-economically disadvantaged and the wealthy and prepare our children for the global market then our focus must be on engaging all families in the process (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

In 1989, President George H.W Bush’s regime sought to accomplish six national education goals by the year 2000. Some of those goals were to ensure all students entered school healthy and ready to learn, students would read by 3rd grade, and that at least 90% of students would graduate from high school. Unfortunately, we cannot boast of having achieved all of these goals despite reporting a 3% rise in graduation rates from 2007 to 2011. For example, some children who live with low-income, single-father, and minority families have experienced poor access to health care. Many of these students who miss 10 days or more per semester have also
shown difficulty staying on grade level and exhibit absenteeism due to chronic illnesses. Ultimately, they have performed poorly in school (Schwarz & Lui, 2000).

When comparing the academic performance of American children, Linda Darling Hammond (2010) declared the United States among the nations where socio-economic background most affected student outcomes. According to her, one reason for this socio-economic disparity was the inequitable spending by the U.S government on affluent children rather than poor children. Decades of efforts to equalize resource allocations have not leveled the playing field in urban schools (Aloo, 2011). In addition to variations in government spending, there are different patterns of local funding within and between districts. In wealthier neighborhoods, parents are able to contribute out of pocket to the success of their local schools, whether in volunteerism, with cash, or bringing in other resources while parents in poorer inner city neighborhoods are unable to make similar contributions. This further widens the performance gaps between inner city schools and suburban schools where limited parent participation is the norm, and many more families depend on the government for support for their resources. Many students still do not arrive healthy and ready for school as the Bush administration in 1989 had anticipated, nor are they meeting other goals outlined by the No Child Left Behind Act.

As educational leaders, our job is to ensure that all children are prepared to perform at grade level, regardless of their family backgrounds. It is important that this single parent research informs the work of policy makers, fellow researchers, and leaders as they explore school improvement strategies.
Without a much needed paradigm shift, reform efforts and alleviation strategies will only go so far, and we could continue to contradict each other’s efforts. We need to learn from nations such as Austria and Iceland, who through providing safety nets and support, were able to close the achievement gaps between children from single parent and those from dual parent families (Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003).

**Research on Single-Parenting**

**Family Structure: Types and Definitions.**

As I emphasize the importance of creating strong partnerships between single parent families, schools and the community, it is important that I provide background knowledge on the various types of family structures that exist. According to the Census Bureau (http://www.census.gov/cps, 2003), a family has consisted of two or more people related by blood, marriage, or adoption. The American “household” was also described as a single unit occupied by a person or group of people. Large institutions such as group homes, correctional facilities, and nursing facilities are not considered households. There are two major types of households: family and non-family households. A family household comprises a householder and one or more people related by blood, marriage or adoption, while a non-family household is shared with nonrelatives. The Census Bureau also has described America’s family households as either “traditional married” couples or “others” led by a single male or female. This definition remained the same in the 2010 census (http://www.census.gov/cps, 2012 n.p.).

**Background Research**

If we are to create effective support systems targeting single parent families, we must become familiar with the unique circumstances encountered by the families. For example,
Thiessen (1997) identified single-parenting as one risk factor that could lead to unsuccessful outcomes in children. For single parent families whose family life becomes interrupted with an event such as divorce, Davies and Cummings (1994) reported that the children often display anxiety, depression, aggression, defiance, and conduct behavior problems. They also stated that such children tend to develop a negative image of the world and themselves. Prior to that, Mendell (1983) reported that there was an increased possibility that such children would be unable to perform phase-appropriate tasks such as reading, writing, and social interactions (as cited in Alivandi Vafa & Ismail, 2009). Despite these shortcomings, Sharkey and Chambliss (1993) reported that single parents were able to give undivided attention to their children because there were no spousal distractions, thereby raising self-confident adults.

Another crucial finding was the strong correlations between one-parent households and low income households (Blum, Boyle & Offord, 1988). This was especially true in mother-led families when the parent had low education levels and depended on welfare for support (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Thiessen, 1997; Osborne, 2004). Many researchers indicated that creating support networks for single-parent, lone income families, such as those found in multigenerational homes could mitigate any possible risks associated with single-parenting (Deleire & Kalil, 2002). A strong school-home partnership was also critical to ensuring positive student performance (Christenson, 2002).

Student outcomes could also vary depending on the both the gender of the child and the parent. With an increasing number of America’s homes being led by single fathers, it has been observed that some children who resided in single-father families exhibited poorer access to health care in comparison to children in other family structures (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003; Garasky & Meyer, 1996, Leininger & Ziol-Guest, 2008). This outcome did not depend on their
economic status. For educators and politicians, the implication of this finding is crucial when dealing with children raised by single fathers. For mother-led families, experiences may differ. Osborne (2004) reported that when mothers were married, they typically handled stressful situations well and often exhibited better parenting skills. On the other hand, single mothers tended to be exposed to higher stress levels due to insufficient economic resources and were often unable to parent optimally. High levels of stress often led to even more emotional and psychological issues in women resulting in even more dire situations for the family. Wallerstein & Kelly (1980) declared that in the absence of fathers, some single mothers felt the need to overcompensate and often assigned harsh punishments to children, while others felt isolated and overwhelmed (as cited in Alivandi & Khaidzir, 2009).

The role of student gender is an important consideration in this study. Research has suggested that boys and girls react to situations differently. In some cases, while boys tended to have adjustment problems when their parents separated, girls, on the other hand, typically fared better after a separation, but tended to revert to troubled behaviors once the parent got remarried (Amato, 2006). Additionally, boys in stepfather families have been known to show more competent social behaviors, while girls showed more anxiety (Sharkey & Chambliss, 1993). This knowledge of gender differences in behavior may inform educational practices.

Another reason why the gender of student must be investigated by educators and policy makers is that Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and (Academic Performance Index) API performance data from the California Department of education suggested that girls outperformed the boys of similar age and grade. The fact that boys “act out” more than girls is supported by the increasing number of boys receiving school discipline, particularly African American male students. In “Why Black Boys Fail,” Whitmire (2009) stated that one in four black boys were
suspended at least once during the 2008 academic year in the state of Chicago alone. Despite these disturbing findings, educators continue to attempt to raise male graduation rates by focusing on school-based solutions. If the family’s role has been a key factor influencing school success, educators must consider ways to address different needs of different kinds of families.

Because differences abound in family structure among various racial groups, ethnicity ought to be an important variable in providing support for students. This statement does not suggest that any child deserves more support than others because of their ethnicity, but rather it supports research findings that indicate that certain ethnicities have more limited access to much needed resources. For example, some studies have indicated that more African American and American Indian children were born to single or never married mothers in comparison to other races (Milne, Myers, Rosenthal & Ginsburg, 1986; Kids Count Data Center 2009 n.p.) and that nationally, 67% of black and 53% of American Indian children spent more of their childhood in one-parent families compared to 40% in Hispanic and 24% in Caucasian. Others studies reported that the unemployment rates among minorities have been much higher than among whites (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Despite these obstacles, a strong support network often enable children to beat the odds as evidenced in the research by Entwise and Alexander (1996), who found that black children who lived in multigenerational families had better school conduct and grades when compared to children in single-parent households (as cited by Deleire & Kalil, 2002).

**Research Questions**

A child’s learning environment has exceeded the four walls of the classroom (Christenson, 2002). Research has shown that schools and communities were ideal contexts for
fostering relationships with families (Rutherford & Billig, 1995). When schools and families speak the same language, students will most likely succeed.

For single parent families, support systems are even more critical, especially in situations where there is no extended family involvement. Studies have shown that the risks associated with single parenting can be minimized when there was strong support such as those seen in multigenerational homes (Deliere & Kalil, 2002).

The role of government in supporting single parent families can also not be diminished. For example, countries with safety net programs have been shown to close the achievement gap between students from single parent families and those from dual parent families. For example in Europe out of the 11 countries studied by Pong, Dronkers, and Hamden Thompson in 2003, it was discovered that Austria and Iceland students showed no gaps on the TIMSS math and science test (p.695).

In order to complete the investigation on this important topic, the following research questions will guide this research:

1. What factors influence single parent family participation in the school community?
   1.1. What do single parents counter stories suggest schools, community agencies, and other service providers need to know to address their needs?
   1.2. What do schools, district staff, community agencies, and other stakeholders believe are the strengths and needs of single parent families?

2. How might the findings from the study inform collaborative practices with single parent families?
Conceptual Framework

This work is founded on the premise that students will perform better when there are strong connections between home and school. It is also based on the understanding that there ought to be formidable partnerships between schools, families and the surrounding community. These partnerships must be supported by government policies and mandates. Social welfare and educational policies must consider the unique challenges encountered by one-parent families. Figure 1 (on page 33) describes this complex relationship.

Conclusion

Policies and practices of society, educators, and politicians have increasingly marginalized single parent families. Though many schools claim to seek parental involvement, very few make conscious efforts to include the low income, lone parent families. Rather, I propose multiple school-based instructional strategies independent of community input. Unfortunately, most strategies have not been effective; rather, many blame parents, students, and the family backgrounds for their children’s educational shortcomings (Bryk, Anthony, & Schneider, 2003). This ought not to be the case; formal education must now include social, emotional and ethical competencies as these factors form the foundation for participation in a democracy and improved quality of life (Cohen, 2006).

Before educators and politicians begin to propose any academic improvement strategies, it is very important that we understand that family structure plays an important role in the life of a child. As we seek to level the playing field, we must jointly undertake the job of educating a child knowing full well that it takes a village to raise a child. With growing evidence that suggests that parent involvement has been the key to closing the achievement gap and mitigating poverty, all school improvement strategies must consider family structure and living

As I proceed with this research, I do so with the conviction that no one entity can raise student achievement by itself and that until strong heartfelt partnerships are established between all stakeholders, schools will not experience long-term academic improvement that we all so unequivocally desire to see.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

This section will introduce literature that addresses the following: Parent participation and student success; single family structure; the role of gender in parenting; socio-economic differences between single parent and dual parent families; and the roles of educators, community members and government in creating support networks for single parents. The purpose of these sub-sections is to lay the foundation for the work this research will entail.

Research and Societal Bias on Single Parenting

After more than two decades, researchers are now beginning to see that single parenthood is not always a source of disadvantage, but that single-parent families also possess assets and values that could contribute to the success of both their children and the society in which they live. In modern times, some women have chosen to be single parents for several reasons. For example, for health reasons some are unable to have biological children and simply adopt, while others have chosen to be separated or never married the other parent. For this category of single parents, financial instability might not have been a factor as many of them were well-educated and earned decent incomes (O'Connell, 2007).

Over time, emerging research has now shown that single parent families live in diverse arrangements; therefore it should be expected children outcomes would vary (Pong et al., 2003). Furthermore, it is now becoming apparent that several factors interplay and will influence the
experiences of various families. For example, the socio-economic status, the gender of the parent and student, as well as the involvement of extended family and friends could influence access to key resources such as shelter, food, transportation and health care (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Blum, Boyle & Offord, 1988; Deleire and Kalil, 2002; Garasky & Myers, 1996).

This positive approach to single parent research has not always been the case. In 1990, the Marsh early deficit model reported that children’s cogniti (emotional and behavioral development) would be negatively impacted if they lived in single parent families. Still, many more suggested that children living in single parent families faced a higher risk of low academic achievement and of dropping out than did children of dual-parent family homes (Amato, 2001; Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Thiessen, 1997;). There have been those who highlighted the economic impact of the loss of dual income as a major difference between single and dual parent families and others who signaled high stress associated with mother-led single parent families (Blum, Boyle & Offord, 1988; Osborne, 2004). It is important to note that many of the early researchers focused on single parenting that resulted from divorce or separation.

Society’s acceptance of dual parenting as a preferred style of parenting has played a major role in fueling this approach to research. Tuzlak and Hillcock (1988) argued that most researchers started with the priori assumption that divorce had disruptive effects on children. As a result, many looked specifically for the adverse effects of divorce and separation on children and adults and found them. The continuous support for this approach has continued to emphasize deficits of single parenting with little attention to possible assets or merits. Many studies did not highlight the importance of engaging the oppressed in the discourse to liberate them. This negligence contradicted the message of researchers like Paulo Freire (2001) who declared that true empowerment could only occur when the oppressed were able to negotiate the terms of their
freedom. This research will underscore both the challenges encountered by single parent families as well as the merits of this choice of parenting.

Despite the dichotomy in opinions from previous and current research, it is important to note the role of choice in examining single parent families. This is because there are now increasing numbers of families led by parents who have chosen to be single and have never married, nor do they have a desire to do so, while there are those who were once married but have since separated. For example, according to U.S. Census Bureau, only 45% of single mothers were currently divorced or separated, while 34.2% never married, 19% had since remarried and 1.7% of them were widowed. The numbers for single fathers were equally impressive: 57.8% were divorced or separated, 20.9% never married, 20% had since remarried, and less than 1% was widowed (U.S Census Bureau, 2009). The numbers for those who chose to remain single represented millions of American families to whom some of the popular stereotypes may not apply.

**Parent Participation and Student Success**

For educators and educators to impact with all students, and to be able to teach core content and alleviate poverty levels, it has been important that we understood a student’s complete learning environment and that we would be willing to make connections beyond the classroom walls (Christenson, 2002). School districts must take the initial step in reaching out to their communities (Noguera, 2004). The natural yearning for relationships is a foundational need for the human species and is critical for student success. Theodore Roosevelt once said, “People don’t care how much you know unless they know how much you care” (Ziemann, 2009. n.p). That statement remains true today even with many children arriving into our classrooms from various family structures and personal challenges. Today, with a higher percentage of minority
parents living below the poverty line, more families have faced the inability to meet the basic needs of their children (Astone & McLanahan, 1991, Blum, Boyle & Offord, 1988). In these situations, older children are often expected to work after school jobs in support of the family’s financial needs, while others babysit their siblings (Thiessen, 1997). Suffice to say that an increasing number of students in this type of setting are unable to spend time doing homework or participate in after school enrichment programs. The use of after school time has been a critical factor in explaining the differences in the academic outcomes of children from various family backgrounds (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

In the investigation of the effects of family structure and parenthood on the performance of Nigerian students, Uwaifo (2008) reported intelligence (innate ability), health, motivation, anxiety and school learning environment as some factors that influenced student success. While school policies have limited reach in controlling student performance, other factors such as the home environment have had a far greater influence over the student’s life, with over 75 percent of a student’s day spent at home. Still, researchers Ajila and Olutola (2007) referred to causes and cures of low student performance as teachers, inadequate school facilities, students, parents, society at large and government policies and low funding of schools (as cited by Uwaifo, 2007, p.122). This statement implies that each of the aforementioned groups plays a critical role in student outcomes.

As we now know, family background plays an important role in framing the contexts and views of a child despite the hours spent at school (Himmelweit, Halsey, & Oppenheim, 1952); therefore, we must be willing to empower the parent community into active partnerships with schools. Such active partnerships could lead to shared decision making and foster a welcoming environment in schools. Socio-economic status of parents, parental involvement, parents’
education, and use of after school time are others predictors of student confidence and performance shown as factors beyond the control of educators. However, parental involvement has been the one predictor educators and politicians could influence (Rutherford & Billig, 1995). With extended family, school and, societal support, students will succeed (Deleire & Kalil, 2002).

Single Parent Family Structure

Over the past few decades, studies have indicated single parenting itself was one risk factor that could lead to unsuccessful outcomes in children (Thiessen, 1997). However, other studies have shown that risks associated with single parenting were minimized when there was a strong support network such as those seen in multigenerational homes (Deleire & Kalil, 2002). Single parents encountered unique challenges due to additional pressures of becoming the sole disciplinarian, mentor and provider all at once (Alivandi & Khaidzir, 2009; 1988, Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Astone and McLanahan (1990) reported that some single parents have had the tendency to spend less time interacting with children and doing homework because of the increased responsibilities. Parent absence often resulted in poor supervision and incomplete homework (Berridge & Romich, 2010). As a result, these students will underperform unless other groups such as the other parent, extended family, and community organizations step in to provide after school supervision, childcare and homework help (Deleire & Kalil, 2002).

In the case of divorce or separation, the negative effects of separation were more observable in younger adults than in children (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1993). In the research conducted by McLanahan and Beck (2010), they reported how adolescents and young adults experienced unfavorable schooling and behavioral outcomes in comparison to younger children.
Other researchers also reported that many adolescents were prone to dropping out of high school (Milne et al., 1986; Riccuiti, 2004).

**Parent-Child Relationship: Considering the Role of Gender in Single Parenting**

In this section, we examine how parenting by a father may differ from that of a mother and how children’s responses to changes in living arrangements vary by gender. For instance, studies indicate an increased risk for children who live in single father-led homes where there is no additional external support. Additionally, Dawson (1991) indicated an increased risk for negative health outcomes for children who lived with single fathers. For educators, this knowledge is important in understanding the possible explanations for poor school attendance and weak academic performances.

The numbers of single-father families quintupled between 1970 and 2003 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). In fact, this rate of growth in single father-led homes is higher than the rate of growth in mother-led homes. According to Bianchi (1995) and Garasky and Meyer, (1991, 1996), this increase was largely due to an increase in single-parent families headed by previously married fathers (as cited by Leininger & Ziol-Guest, 2008). Again, these numbers ought to be of interest to policy makers, educators and community members.

Furthermore, Hoffman and Johnson (1998) noted important child outcomes varied with gender of the single parent. They found that adolescents who resided in single-father homes have had a higher propensity for drug use when compared with youth from other family structures. Harris, Cavanaugh, and Elder (2002), stated that youth who lived in single father families had more school problems and exhibited risky health behaviors more frequently than children in single-mother homes. This same group of youth is reported to be slightly cognitively
disadvantaged when compared with those from single-mother homes. As adults, many were found to have one-half year less education than their counterparts who live other family structures (cited by Leininger & Ziol-Guest, 2008. p.683).

For married women, it has been reported that there is a considerable lower amount of parenting stress than there was with unmarried, single mothers (Osborne, 2004). Demo & Acock (1988) cited that if a single-family’s living arrangement did not change over the child’s course of life, the child might not necessarily experience the same challenges that unstable families experience (as cited in Osborne, 2004. p.4). In 2000, the National Research Council reported that a secure attachment between mother and child was the most important resource for navigating subsequent stressful life events (as cited by Osborne, 2004). This type of relationship is critical in examining the role of a mother in a child’s life. When a parent is under stress and unable to cope or has to work for long hours, this crucial bond is threatened.

The gender of the student also matters. In the article “Black Boys in Chicago Schools: Not a Great Story,” Richard Whitmire (2009) reported that black boys in Chicago schools did not merely bring street life into the schools but that these young men were allowed to slip behind in their literacy skills and acting out was preferred to looking dumb. These boys were ultimately suspended and expelled at higher rates than other subgroups. Nearly one in four black males in Chicago Public schools were suspended in 2008, at a rate twice the district average and one of the highest rates of all big city school districts. This has increased the proclivity to failing courses and dropping out of school as there were strong correlations between school attendance, grades and graduation. District initiatives to combat increase in suspension and expulsion rates included the restorative justice program which encourages schools to be less punitive and to emphasize teaching students how to make better decisions. At the time of this study, this
program’s effectiveness had shown little impact on the suspension and expulsion rates of African American males.

Socio-economic Differences between Single Parent and Dual Parent families

Economic differences between single parenting and dual parenting homes have been important to explore (Blum, Boyle & Offord, 1988). Many studies have shown that children in single parent homes lived below the poverty line when compared to children of two-parent families, and that children in married families enjoyed higher levels of economic well-being than did children from other family structures (Manning & Brown, 2003). This is because the greater potential for earning two incomes puts children from single-family homes at a disadvantage. Some reports also stated that the greater economic resources of two married parents explained about half of the differences in child outcomes across family types (Osborne, 2004). McLanahan (1991) observed that even with single parents who earn higher incomes; there was still a sense of economic insecurity. In 1984, Weiss cited that this sense of financial instability was more pronounced in recently divorced female-led single families as they experienced a decline in their family income. In some of these cases, divorced families enjoyed a better sense of financial security than did never-married parents. Maternal education and welfare status also contributed to the economic status of a family; not being on welfare and higher education level minimized the risk factor.

The 1991 studies completed by Astone and McLanahan, found 35% of children from low economic backgrounds exhibited drop out tendencies. They further suggested that single parent households in rural areas experienced poorer access to opportunity; girls were often required to
perform chores that could interfere with school work and the older boys would most likely fail as they, too, often had to seek employment to support their families. Further studies are needed to validate these hypotheses.

Despite these findings, it is important to caution that socio-economic status alone could not account for student performance, but that other factors such as race, ability, and educational aspirations will also contribute to student success. Thus, it was possible that when children of similar economic backgrounds and family structures were compared, academic performance could vary (Cashion, 1982).

To explore socio-economic differences by gender, Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986) stated that mother-only families were likely to be poor; Bane and Ellwood (1983) also confirmed that their poverty was more extreme than those of other groups (as cited in Astone & McLanahan, 1991, p.309). Low economic status is not only limited to single mothers only, but it also has affects some single fathers as well. Among single fathers, one must also explore socio-economic differences by ethnicity. For example, we know repeated recessions devastate minority single parent families more than their white counterparts because minorities have historically worked low-paying and low status jobs and many minority families at the mercy of government aid. In fact, the rate of unemployment among minorities is significantly higher than among Caucasians (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011).

**Role of Educators in creating support networks for Single Parents**

Schools and communities are ideal contexts for developing and fostering strong relationships with families of students; therefore, schools must take the leadership in providing opportunities for creating collaborative partnerships with the families it serves (Rutherford &
When parents and educators have worked together, they become empowered to make a difference in the life of a child and improved the quality of their lives (Noguera, 2004). This essential partnership should not be limited to just a few events but should be at the core of any school’s single plan, allocating resources that contribute towards building a strong collaboration between its members and the community any school serves. These efforts will require ongoing planning throughout the school year.

The key components for developing home-school collaboration have included: (1) developing a framework for interaction with families; (2) challenging the values and perceptions held about family-school relationships; (3) creating a positive climate in schools for families and educators, and (4) developing strategies for building shared responsibility (Bethesda, 2005).

In describing parent, family, and community involvement in the middles grades, Rutherford and Billig, (1995) emphasized the need to create programs that responded to the unique needs of middle school parents and families. The Vital Link program in Fort Worth, Texas placed sixth graders in local businesses in a one-week internship to enable students to experience career opportunities and acquire hands-on experiences. Another way school staff can provide unique support for children and families is to pay particular attention to changes in their students whose parents have recently undergone divorce. To be able to do so, such staff must have first examined their own feelings about divorce (Fredericks, A., Rasinski, T. & Ritty, M., (1991). School programs that involve parents should not be gender specific, so as to prevent reminding the child of his/her parents’ separation. Back to school and open house events ought not to exclude children to avoid the need for childcare. Rather than excluding children, schools must be willing to provide child care for single parents to make it easier for them to attend.
Another important component of creating unique and welcoming events is in creating a friendly environment that openly admits families with diverse backgrounds. It is predicted that by the year 2100, minority groups would have become the majority group with whites at only 40% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). This diversity could be a double-edged sword for schools, positive when students who attended culturally diverse schools were able to acquire other cultural perspectives, but negative in cases where the staff was not culturally diverse and unprepared to welcome multicultural perspectives. A 2005 national teacher survey showed that 20% of new teachers and nearly 25% of principals identified parent relationships as a significant stress in their jobs (Metlife, 2005). Understanding how to work with students and parents from diverse family structures is also essential to promoting a welcoming environment for families and beneficial to staff as well. For this reason, staff training in preparation for a potentially positive experience is an important precursor in developing positive community relationships (Lopez del Bosque, 2010).

Effective communication between all stakeholders is vital in fostering strong community partnerships. This could involve the use of newsletters, websites, and automated phone calls with the goal of saving costs and increasing portability. The benefits of multiple communication strategies are immense because they increase parent participation dramatically. Jackson, Barbatis, Von Eye, Biocca, Zhao, and Fitzgerald (2003) cautioned that low income families without immediate access to technology and would miss out on important information.

**Role of Government Policies in creating support networks for Single Parents**

Although politicians rarely have direct contact with families, the policies they enact and support directly impact the well-being of their constituents. Pong et al. (2003) demonstrated that countries with safety net programs closed the achievement gap between single and two-parent
families. In their research, the performance of children in the TIMSS math and science test indicated achievement gaps between children from single parent families and dual parents. Of the 11 countries that were investigated, the biggest gaps were recorded in United States and New Zealand, while Austria and Iceland consistently showed no gaps between the two types of families. They also reported that family resources alone could not account for the achievement gap observed between the two types of families, but that other factors such as number of people a child lives with along with immigration status must also be taken into consideration.

Governmental policies have played an important role in providing the much needed support and access to basic resources such as food, shelter, transportation and education to the groups of greatest need (Zedlewski & Nelson; Edin, 2003). Manning and Brown (2003) observed that families in need such as divorced, low income, and single mothers were in greater need of public understanding and support. One way to provide support is to examine access to Welfare, Medicaid, and Food Stamp programs.

Zedlewski et al. (2003) noted the top reasons for joblessness among poor families as poor health, job scarcity, and a desire to stay home to care for their children. Unfortunately, polices and programs penalize parents in these situations with restrictions placed on government support programs. For example, applicants who could not meet the work requirements due to health issues were doubly impacted prior to the controversial 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) because many were too ill to work and did not have access to proper health care. These restrictions have often left many needy single parent families at the mercy of the absent parent’s sometimes sporadic and oftentimes non-payment of child support.
Holcomb, Tumlin, Koralek, Capps, and Zuberi, (2003) indicated that families who should otherwise have qualified for assistance often reported that access to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) had increasingly become difficult because of the stringent qualification process associated with government cash assistance, Food Stamps, and Medicaid. Access is even more difficult for immigrants and English language learners. It was also reported that many social workers were unclear and unable to determine the eligibility of “mixed-status” families whose children were citizens, but whose parents were not. This lack of clarity has left many families unaware of their right to public assistance.

Not all single parents want to depend on public assistance; instead, many would prefer to be able to work to sustain their families. This is another responsibility the government must be willing to undertake. With the current unemployment rate of over 10%, many more families have lost jobs and can no longer depend on child support from the absent spouse (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). One such initiative to address the high unemployment rate has been the controversial America’s Recovery and Rehabilitation Act of 2009. This legislation was enacted to provide tax incentives for individuals and companies, healthcare, education, aid to low income workers, unemployed and retirees, infrastructure investment and housing (http://www.irs.gov).

Finally, role of government in improving student performance cannot be underestimated. While the direct impact of classroom instruction has been established, many still see the role of government in education as distant and mostly monetary. Unfortunately, this belief could not be further from the truth. In 2007, California’s state superintendent of Public Instruction, Jack O’Connell, led a government initiative that fostered the creation of Closing the Achievement Gap: Achieving Success for All Students in 2008. The recommendations made by the founding group P-16 included the development of initiatives such as “Every Student Counted, Latino
Educational Opportunity, African American Educational Opportunity, Expanded Learning Opportunities” (California Department of Education, 2008, p.6). The purpose of many of the aforementioned initiatives was to close the performance gaps between students in public schools to create after-school programs.

After school programs are increasingly viewed as one way of bridging the gap between the end of the school day and the time parents arrive back at home. Although they were meant to be safe, supervised and educative, the caliber of programs has varied (Lumsden, 2003). Occasionally children have been warehoused in inadequate programs, thereby compounding the challenges encountered by lone parents. One way to alleviate this concern is to attach compliance monitoring to access to governmental funds as seen in the 21st Century Community Centers (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

The Role of Community Members

Community members of a school are comprised of school staff, parents, students, and other residents of a locality. Each of these is a stakeholder in the success or failure of a school. Therefore as schools seek to meet the stringent requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act that includes community involvement; program improvement plans must include all community member efforts. Many Title 1 schools have ignored this important aspect of the NCLB mandate, focusing on instructional practices only.

Unfortunately, this strategy alone has not addressed the whole child and has neglected the entire learning environment of a child (Ysseldyke & Christenson, 2002). Without the involvement and understanding that is required to foster positive relationships, each group will most likely contradicts each other’s values. Not only is trust important, Bryan (2005) observed
that strong school-family-community partnerships fostered educational resilience in children and often enabled them to overcome personal obstacles.

Additional research indicates that the definition of school leadership has now expanded to include not just administrators and lead teachers but now also includes students and parents. This research also suggested that the previously popular hierarchical structure of schools has now given way to more distributed leadership (Leithwood, K. & Riehl, C., 2003). The implication of this finding is that when every “joint” fulfills its role, the body will function as an effective whole.

The reality is that schools alone lack the resources to enable students to overcome the large number of obstacles to learning that many minority and poor students confront; therefore, strong partnerships with outside agencies and community groups are critical. Schorr (1997) stated “Schools can become islands of hope in otherwise devastated neighborhoods (as cited by Bryan, J, 2005). The improved performances of students who live in such communities benefit all stakeholders (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Parents have also become equipped with social capital that they drew from to help their children to succeed (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). Social capital is defined as resources gathered from human relationships and connections. Noguera (2004) has described it as the power attained as a result of belonging to a group.

Community based grassroots organizations that are familiar with the locality can also be developed to support families who attend local schools. Such partnerships could never be replaced by school based improvement initiatives.
Conclusion

Over the last few decades, the American family landscape has changed with approximately 30% of families now led by one parent and a high percentage led by low income single women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Though divergent views abound on the experiences of single parent families, it is hard to argue with research findings that indicate that parents with dual of income will most likely live above poverty lines while many single parent families live below poverty lines. This group will often require additional support from a network of extended family members, school officials, and government agencies to mitigate the risks associated with poverty and other challenges (Deleire & Kalil, 2002; Pong et al., 2003).

The role of government policies in fostering strong partnerships and providing external support to families is extremely critical. Research studies of 11 countries indicated the importance of government policy in mitigating low academic achievement associated with single-parenting (Pong et al., 2003). Students in the United States and New Zealand showed academic achievement gaps between children from single parent homes and dual parent families. Austria and Iceland did not show the achievement gaps observed in the U.S and New Zealand (Pong et al., 2003). This difference could be explained by the fact that U.S. government public welfare policies are unclear and often too stringent for the neediest families. Many families have reported feeling that the current welfare policies were vague with regards to “mixed” family eligibilities of children born in the United States (Holcomb et al., 2003).

Finally, as educators embrace their role in developing strong partnerships with their students, they must first examine and then rid themselves of any biases towards separation or divorce. This prevents the projection of negative feelings and judgments of the students that they teach daily. School culture and climate must be welcoming to diverse family structures and
accommodating to their families. A positive school climate can be achieved by providing ongoing professional development and training for staff, and parent volunteers who are school representatives. Also, school events and programs must embrace and enable all students and families to fully participate without restrictions that magnify the absence of one parent.

This research study will continue to investigate additional specific ways in which community members, educators, parents and policy makers could build even stronger support coalitions that will foster student success and build a stronger educational system founded on trust and equity.
Research Framework Figure 1

Federal Policies, Mandates.
Ex. NCLB, etc.

State Policies, Mandates, funds- Ex. Ed Code

County Oversight– Social Welfare, Schools Monitoring, etc.

School Districts
School Board- Mandates, policies, oversight, support

Schools- Culture & Climate
Parent Outreach, Family nights

Community Influence
Local Churches, Extended Family Neighbors, etc.

Single Parent Family
Child/Children

Figure 1 illustrates the complex interactions between all stakeholders and also indicates that decisions by each entity directly and indirectly impacts students.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology and Procedures

Introduction

Previous research has indicated that several factors contribute to student outcomes. These factors are family structure, health, innate ability, motivation and school learning environment (Uwaifo, 2008). However, many argue that family structure has a greater impact on student achievement and well-being because students spend more than 75% of their day at home (Alivandi & Khaidzar, 1990; Astone & McLanahan, 2009; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). For this reason, educators must consider creating strong collaborations between school, home and the community; understanding that student learning have exceeded the four walls of a classroom (Christenson, 2010). To bridge this gap, parental involvement must be sought by school officials and community agencies that provide services to children. After all, parental involvement has been one predictor school officials and politicians could influence (Rutherford & Billig, 1995). In order to achieve this goal at High School A, the following research questions will guide this study:

Research Questions
1. What factors influence single parent family participation in the school community?
   1.1. What do single parents counter stories suggest schools, community agencies, and other service providers need to know to address their needs?
   1.2. What do schools, district staff, community agencies and other stakeholders believe are the strengths and needs of single parent families?
2. How might the findings from the study inform collaborative practices with single parent families?

Research Setting

High School A is one of two comprehensive high schools located in a city east of Contra Costa County, California. The city has a total population of 99,717 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and High School A houses nearly 2,000 students. As the student population grew, so did the city’s total population. In the early 1950s, the total city population was under 12,000, compared to nearly 100,000 in the 2010 Census. It is worth noting that with this increase in population there was also an increase in diversity.

Student demographics at High School A have also tremendously changed from being predominantly white to only 29.5% as of 2011. There are also: 38.8% Hispanics; 16.2% African Americans; 7.6% unreported and mixed races; 2.9% Filipinos; 2.4% Asian Americans; 1.2% Native Americans and 1.09% Pacific Islanders. In general, 75% of students in City A Unified school district are minorities. More than half receive free and reduced lunch, compared to 37% in Contra Costa County.

With regards to single parent demographics, the 2010 city social characteristics (see next page) show that of the total family households with children under 18 years (12,842), 7,645 of them are led by single parents. This number indicates a little over 35% of family households with children under 18 years in the city A are single parent families. These numbers do not include “non-family” households such as group homes and other similar institutions described by the Census Bureau.
Social Characteristics of City A, California


2000 Total population = 90,532. 90,116 lived in households.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Percent of total households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HOUSEHOLDS BY TYPE</strong></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total households</td>
<td>31,119</td>
<td>29,338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family households</td>
<td>24,180</td>
<td>23,173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With own children &lt; 18 years</td>
<td>12,842</td>
<td>13,382</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married couple family</td>
<td>16,527</td>
<td>17,696</td>
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<tr>
<td>With own children &lt; 18 years</td>
<td>8,282</td>
<td>10,108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male householder, no wife</td>
<td>2,577</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With own children &lt; 18 years</td>
<td>1,341</td>
<td>Not Reported</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female householder, no husband</td>
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<td>3,967</td>
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<tr>
<td>With own children &lt; 18 years</td>
<td>3,219</td>
<td>2572</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-family households</td>
<td>6939</td>
<td>6165</td>
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<tr>
<td>Householders living alone</td>
<td>5295</td>
<td>4666</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2, Source- U.S Census Bureau, 5 year American Communities Survey (2006-2010); 2000. Above chart is a modified version of actual chart.*
Research Procedures

A predominantly qualitative approach was utilized in this research with a minor quantitative approach in the analysis of the surveys. The qualitative aspect included the use of questionnaires, audiotape of interviews, and focus groups to capture the views of High School and district staff; community members; and the counter-stories of our single parent families. The methodology was also participatory action research (PAR) as the researcher participated in this single parent research. Survey responses were analyzed and coded for patterns in responses of participants using Excel and represented in charts (see chapter 4 for findings). The observed patterns provided the basis for comparison in the responses provided by the various stakeholders.

Participants and Samples Collection

The first step of data collection was to send nearly 2,000 participation request letters to High School A parents and students. Upon receiving return slips, families then received the surveys. After screening for availability and commitment, 10 families (students and single parents) were interviewed. In this research, some of the important variables are ethnicity and socio-economic status.

The purpose of sending a survey was to provide preliminary data collection and provide a basis for discussion during the interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis gathered from each step of data collection guided the next step of this study (See Figure 3 page 48). Another reason why a questionnaire was preferred as a first step was because there is currently no district data on the marital status of parents (See copy of survey on page 161). Survey responses of the participant families will provide data on the factors which influence single parent participation in schools (research question 1).
Families also participated in interviews and focus groups. Parents who agreed to participate in the family focus groups signed the Adult/Student Permission Form for both family participants. Two focus groups were conducted for student groups while only one was conducted with the single parents. For those unable to participate in focus groups, follow up interviews were conducted. Focus group sessions were all held at the High School at a pre-arranged time. Single parent participants included various ethnicities, were single mothers and a grandmother, grandparents.

To represent other stakeholder groups, 11 district/school level staff, and community service providers within the community were interviewed as well. This was a preferred means of collecting data from this group to maximize adult times and eliminate the challenge of pursuing busy adults.

**Participant Profiles**

A total of 20 single family participants were included in this study. Since this study became a participatory action research (PAR), my oldest daughter and I participated in this research as well. Family participants were comprised of all single mothers, three male students, and six female students. Staff and community members included two district and one site level administrators; two classified/office staff, three teachers; one school counselor; and two outside agency staff members. Ethnicities and additional participant information about participants can be found in the findings section (Chapter 4) of this study.

**Instruments**

The following tools have been developed to assist with answering the above research questions:
A parent letter for permission to conduct surveys, interviews and focus groups (page 160)

Survey for all parent and student participants (page 161). The purpose of the survey was to allow access to preliminary data and determine the marital status of parent participants. No surveys were administered to staff and community members due to time constraints.

Staff/community member recruiting letter

Audiotape interview and focus protocols for students, staff, and community members/leaders will also be included. The purpose of interviewing participants is to accurately capture the view of participants.

Focus Group questions/protocol

**Limitations of this Study**

The following are limitations of this study:

With only 10 families participating, it is important to caution that the findings of this study may not be applicable to all single parents. Also, the views reported by the 11 stakeholders may not accurately represent the views of all the district employees, city leaders and service providers.

Due to time constraints and the context of the study, it is not feasible to explore completely the role of politicians and government as stakeholders in creating strong partnerships and support networks for single parent families. A deeper and future study will place an emphasis on the specific roles that these policies will play.
Data Analysis

Information collected from the surveys has been grouped according to predominant themes and variables. Variables included employment/welfare status and family size. The frequently reported responses were then represented in charts and graphs as reported in the findings section of this study. Audiotape data received from interviews were transcribed and also coded for themes. These themes were developed from the quotes of participants and reported as headings of subsections of recommendations at the end of this study.
Methodology Framework

Single Parent Families

Parents

Participation letters to parents, returned to researcher

Participants letters sent to nearly 2,000 parents first. Surveys to only 10 students/10 single parents

Thematic Analysis informs interview process

Interviews for 10 single parents and one child per parent (total 20)

Thematic Analysis informs focus group process

Focus Groups at AHS: parents separate from students. No more than 5 per session.

Thematic Analysis/ Member check-in (clarification). Thematic outcomes reported in charts, etc

Students

Check for parent consent prior to interview

Thematic Analysis informs interview process

Thematic Analysis informs focus group process

Thematic Analysis/ Member check-in (clarification). Thematic outcomes reported on charts, etc

Other Stakeholders

Staff/Community members

Thematic Analysis

Interviews

Figure 3- Methodology Framework
Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to gather evidence and recommendations on how to better support single parent families at a local high school in the City A, California. Previous researchers have shown that in order for students to succeed, there must be collaboration between the school, home and community (Christenson, 2002). Furthermore, other studies have shown that actively soliciting parent participation was one way to close the achievement gap (Christinakis, 2011; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Unfortunately, active participation is not always possible for single parent families due to many factors such as time constraints, low parent educational level, and other factors that this researcher intends to explore (Astone & McLanahan, 1990; Blum, Boyle & Offord, 1988). This research seeks to consider the experiences of single parents of students who attend High School A.

The findings are arranged following the order in which data was gathered. Survey results were shared with focus groups, and the responses of focus group participants informed questions posed in individual interviews. Sample instruments used to gather data will be located in the appendix section of this dissertation.

The initial questions that guided this research were:

1. What factors influence single parent family participation in the school community?
a) What do single parents counter stories suggest schools, community agencies and other service providers need to know to address their needs?

b) What do schools, district staff, community agencies, and other stakeholders believe are the strengths and needs of single parent families?

c) How can the findings from the study inform collaborative practices with single parent families?

Participants of this study were comprised of nine single parent families that is, the single parent and one of their children that attended High School A. Also, 10 other participants including faculty and staff of the high school, district staff, and staff of outside agencies also participated. During the course of this research, the researcher herself and her daughter participated in this research because her spouse was out of the country on a business trip for one month. The temporary departure of the researcher’s husband was an opportunity for the researcher to share in the experiences of single parents first hand.

**Data Collection and Results**

Data was collected through multiple sources, namely, surveys, one-on-one interviews and focus groups. Three groups of stakeholders participated in this process. They are classified as follows:

(a) Single parents of the high school students

(b) Students of single parent families

(c) District and school staff (classified and certificated), community agency staff members

Faculty, district staff, and community agency staff participated in interviews that lasted anywhere between 15 and 25 minutes, while students and parents participated in surveys,
interviews and focus groups. Not all participants were able to attend focus groups at the same time; therefore, many parents and students were invited to follow up interviews rather than group sessions. I also became a participant in this research because my spouse went out of the country for one month during the data collection period in which I lived with my three daughters without the support of my spouse. During this period, I was able to make journal entries that recorded my personal experience as a single mother of three. My daughter, who is in high school, was also interviewed and surveyed to capture her experiences during the one month period. The inclusion of my daughter and myself as participants in the research converted this study into participatory action research (PAR). Participatory action research is a powerful means researchers use to honor, center and reflect the experiences of people most directly affected by issues in our communities (http://www.incite-national.org n.a. p.79) Parent participant gender was 100% female with ages ranging middle 30s to late 40s. The ethnicities of family participants are represented below in figure 4.

It is important to note that these participants were self-selected and were parents who responded to a letter sent to all parents of the high school’s 2,000 students. While all of the single parents interviewed were women, the students and staff participants were male and female. Finally, results and findings will be reported in the following order: parents, students and staff. Pseudonyms have also been used to protect their identities with the exception of the researcher and her daughter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Family Participants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gertrude Ulysses</th>
<th>Anna Joseph</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yasmine Acosta</td>
<td>Georgina Guevara</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Greta Lopez</td>
<td>Donetta Davis</td>
<td>Hispanic/ (daughter- Hispanic/White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Charlotte R</td>
<td>James Simpson</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Zoe Waters</td>
<td>Nathan Raymond</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sonya Lawrence</td>
<td>Charmaine Lawrence</td>
<td>Caucasian (White)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jane Bradley</td>
<td>David Bradley</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bukky Oyebade</td>
<td>Debbie Oyebade</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Davina Lang</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Edwina Shultz</td>
<td>Caucasian (White)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4- Family Participants

Parent Group Results and Findings

Summary Results of Surveys

Eighteen total participants took the family survey which was comprised of eleven questions altogether. Participants were self-selected and are families of students who returned the parent/student permission slips. No district/school staff took the surveys. Survey questions inquired about their strengths as single parent families, factors that influence the ability of the parent to participate in her student’s education, challenges and recommendations on how to better support their families. A sample of the survey can be found in the Appendix section of this research. In addition to the above information, participants also provided information about
family size, employment status, and ethnicity. The following charts summarize the findings. Also, results of the surveys guided the discussions of focus groups and follow up interviews.

**Parent Group**

1. Family Strengths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Strengths</th>
<th># of responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close Knit family</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/Friend Support</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy Family</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time together</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Willingness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Factors influencing parent participation in child’s education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors affecting Parent Participation in Child's education</th>
<th># of responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer/Internet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Parent not involved</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Access</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended Work Hours</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- If we lived near school, I would participate.
- Can fully participate sometimes, but transportation can be a problem. Also it depends on time, day of the month
- Without friends and family, childcare and transportation would have been more hectic than it has been. There are days I had to leave work to pick up my daughter early. The kids have extracurricular activities that I need to get drive them to.

3. Greatest Challenges as single parent family (low response rate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th># of responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic Needs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children don’t listen</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances to pay bills</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances for extracurricular</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited Time with child &amp; self</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Affecting Parenting Role</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other:
- I would have picked loneliness but I’m not lonely, nor do I need family after so many years. The friends I have now are OK in my life.
- Limited time for self.
- Sense of helplessness that comes from depending on others for transportation, childcare in the absence of spouse.
• Emotional toll on the parent who has to juggle all responsibilities.

4. Areas of additional support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional Support</th>
<th># of responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After School Care (younger children)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework help</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the school system</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Parent Focus Group Summaries**

The purpose of the focus group sessions was to clarify any unanswered questions as well as provide opportunities for participants to share additional information about their experiences as single parent families. One unintended outcome of focus group sessions was the sense of camaraderie and support between participants. For some, it was an opportunity to share updates on their families such as new employment and student progress. For example, Davina Lang...
obtained temporary employment within a month of the initial interview and gladly shared that information with the group (recall that Davina could not obtain employment prior to this research due to a felony on her record).

During focus groups, student and parent survey data were shared with parents. This was an opportunity for them to reflect on their responses as well as compare them to those of the student groups. For strengths, all participants agreed to the most common strengths identified by the parent group. The most common strengths were “closeness” and “spending a lot of time together” closely followed by “openness between members,” “Friend/Family support,” and “happiness” as a family.

According to the parent group, transportation and limited finances are major factors that influence the degree of single parent participation in their children’s education. During this discussion, they described occasions when they ran out of gas money and depended on public transportation to get their students to school. It was during these times that students often arrived late to school because of the inconsistency of public transit and safety concerns on the buses. In some instances this was especially true along the school bus route. Often students had not been able to get on the bus because the buses got filled with non-students passengers before arriving at the bus stops where students were waiting. Consequently, students had to wait another hour for the next bus. Recommendations made by this parent group will be described in the next chapter.

Another challenge mentioned by participants was regarding communication with school staff, especially when they needed to inquire about their student’s progress. Their concern was that staff did not respond promptly to their requests. Still, others noted that lack of full time employment posed financial challenges for their families.
Parent Interviews

Each parent interview was scheduled at a time that was convenient for them. Although most were able to attend the interview sessions, a few could not due to transportation issues. On one occasion, interviews were conducted at the home of one of the participants. Still, other interviews could not be conducted due to scheduling conflicts that could impact parents’ work schedules. In order to prevent delays, interviews were conducted with the more readily available participants that responded to interview invitations.

Participant 1: Gertrude Ulysses (parent of GG)

Divorce is different because you are better off without that other person, but separation by death is worse. I am lonely because he supported me, backed me up. I do not think I am better off without him.

Gertrude is a recent immigrant from Mexico who now lives with sister’s family. Her husband passed away two years ago in an auto accident. He was the breadwinner of the family. She has two daughters, one a sophomore enrolled in an ELD program at the high school, the other a 10 year girl. At the time of the interview, her daughter was passing all classes except her World History class that she barely passed with a D-. Gertrude has an inflammation of the cornea that affects her eyesight and prevents her from performing some major tasks such as driving. As a result, she and her daughter are dependent on relatives for transportation. While in Mexico and around relatives, Gertrude battled with and survived cancer. The survival of other challenging situations has given her the confidence to believe she would overcome other obstacles.

When asked how family supports education, Gertrude stated that education is important to her family, and that it is a way to better their lives. She talks about the day and wants her daughter to have better. She purchased physical education (PE) clothes for her daughter, got her shots (vaccinations) and whatever she has needed for school. The family’s biggest challenges are
primarily economic challenges because she has been unable to work or drive due to her poor eyesight. Because she is a recent immigrant, Gertrude has to live with her sister’s family, limiting the amount of privacy and space her daughter has for doing homework.

During the interview, Gertrude repeatedly stated that her husband’s death impacted her family, so much so, that loneliness is critical factor in her ability to continue to support her family despite the proximity to extended family. The sample quote stated at the beginning of this section is testament to that fact. Other challenges for this family have included occasional rebellion from her daughter and extended work hours when Gertrude previously worked in Mexico.

When asked how the school, community and district could better support her family, Gertrude asked for the school to continue to provide parent programs such the English Learner Advisory Council (ELAC) as well as fee waivers for extracurricular activities. She believes ELAC has provided her with information that will assist her daughter to graduate and go higher. For the community, she requested easy access to medical services and free college education.

During this interview, Gertrude stated that she would like community leaders and others to know that people like her single parent family have no transportation and cannot drive due to poor eyesight. She does not feel the U.S. is safe compared to Mexico. Her husband’s support of her family was critical and missed by her family. Furthermore, she recommends that other parents should not worry about being unable to meet the financial needs of their families, but to continue to build their children’s self-esteem and spiritual well-being. She recommends that they seek parenting classes when they are struggling with rebellion issues from children, like she did in Mexico. These classes were provided by the school psychologist. She also communicated that
though not everyone raises children in the same manner, every parent has similar expectations for their children, regardless of their family situation or status. The following is a quote from Gertrude regarding parenting styles:

All parents always have the same expectations and hope. We don’t always take the same path to get them to where we want them to be.

Note that an initial interview was conducted prior to Gertrude completing the survey and was followed by a follow up/member check-in interview. This was conducted in this manner because Ms. Ulysses could not attend the parent focus group.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Ms. Ulysses eagerly smiled throughout our interview and actively responded to my questions. She remained hopeful and made recommendations for other parents with rebellious children. Without a second interview/member check-in, I would not have known that she was a recent widow because of her positive outlook on life. One piece of profound advice she gives parents is to not worry about their inability to buy everything that their children their want, but to build their self-esteem and sense of spirituality. Gertrude also asks that parents treat each child differently and be positive role models for their children.

Don’t worry about giving everything financial, build their self-esteem, spiritually also. Make them feel like they can do everything . . . Be a good example for them. . . Every child is different; a parent has to treat each child differently.

**Participant 2 –Yasmine Acosta (Parent of Georgina Guevara)**

Yasmine is a 37 year-old immigrant from Mexico who arrived two years ago. She lives with her mother, brother and daughter. Though she previously operated a home day care, Yasmine is no longer employed. She has one daughter who is currently a sophomore at the local
high school.

When my daughter got an F grade on the last progress report, I told her, you can't do this to me; I do everything for you.

Since Yasmine lives with her English-speaking mother and brother as well as her sister, they are both able to assist her daughter with homework. She receives daily updates on Schoolloop (school website) and also involves her mother with disciplining her daughter. One of their discipline methods is to take away phone privileges from the daughter when necessary. According to her, no challenges can completely deter her from participating in her child's education.

When asked about the challenges her family encounters with supporting her daughter’s education, Yasmine stated that her limited English proficiency, limited education, and financial constraints were significant issues that her family confronted. To alleviate these challenges, Ms. Yasmine Acosta would like to see the school have more programs, keep the after school program, and tutoring. She would like to attend the English Learner Advisory Council (ELAC) meetings, but felt she would be unable to attend once she resumes her childcare business unless they are scheduled at a later time and not in conflict with her work, possibly after 5:00 pm. As for the community, she would like for the city or government to provide activities such as sports on weekends to keep the kids busy.

When asked of the important things people need to know to support single parent families, Yasmine stated that she would like people to know that it is not easy to raise a child alone, and that it is a big responsibility. Also, in some families like hers, single parents are often blamed for their children's failure or rebellion. Yasmin Acosta made the following comment in belief if the other parent were involved, he would be more supportive, but since he is married
and lives in Houston, he is unable to do so:

I want to be more independent now. My mom has been involved in my life. Mom still tries to convert me from Catholicism to Christianity. . . . When I complain to her (Yasmin’s mother), she says, You bought her (daughter-Georgina) the computer; You bought her the phone . . . I don’t feel like my mom is supporting me.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Although Yasmine was formerly employed and hoped to be independent in the near future, her childcare business recently lost students due to parents’ unemployment. She does not depend on the school or government employment resources. It is interesting to note that she was frustrated that her mother was involved in her life when compared to other families like Greta Lopez who yearn for extended family support. Yasmin’s comment about Georgina’s father also appeared to stir up negative emotions with her comment:

The dad lives in Houston and when she was two years old they separated. The dad told her that he had moved here (United States) on his own, then later she found out he moved here with his wife and because of the lies he told her, she doesn’t want to contact him anymore.

**Participant 3: Greta Lopez (Parent of JD and DD)**

Greta who was temporarily employed in the district as an instructional aide is the parent of two children – one boy (now graduated) and one girl (10th grader). As the only parent with no additional support, she has to help children with homework, and “shadow” her daughter in school to ensure that she is on track. Her greatest challenge with supporting her daughter in school is that her daughter is failing four classes, yet she seeks no help. Greta is seeking emotional counseling for her daughter from the school due to these failures and her recent slacking behavior. Greta commented:
Right now, she is failing in 4 classes and so I told her why she’s doing that. She used to be 4.0, and so I was trying to get her to talk to her counselor like a psychologist, somebody on campus.

We work hard for 2 people instead of 2 parents. We need some time off, but we don't get it. We are always involved no matter what; children are first.

To support her family, Greta would like for schools to keep after school programs and tutoring services. Also, she believes that employment resources such as resume writing classes and mock interviews could be offered on Saturdays on school campuses. These measures would send the message to struggling parents that the school cares for them as well. Finally, parenting classes focusing on how to raise teenage children would be beneficial for single parents as well.

When asked for the most important things she would like for people to know about single parent families, Greta stated that single parents need help from schools for students who are struggling academically, especially when parents have little or no education. She also stated that that single parents could also benefit from math and English classes, so they too can assist their children with their homework.

**Researcher Reflections/Observations**

Greta was very clear about her needs and how she felt that schools can support families like hers. These recommendations may stem from the fact she is a district employee who has had two children pass through the system. Since the interview, Greta has attended a few parent conferences with teachers of her daughter’s most challenging classes. She is determined to ensure that her daughter succeeds.

**Participant 4 Davina Lang- (Parent of DT/RA) 1st Interview**

Davina was raised in San Francisco by older female relatives and family members who died in the Jonestown massacre. She described how fortunate she was that her mother’s terminal
illness prevented her from going to Jonestown with the other relatives. Davina is the parent of at least 3 boys, ages 19, 17 and 14 years. (She did not refer to other children) and is also a grandmother. She currently has two sons in high school: a freshman football player and a 17 year-old senior.

Davina is generally perceived as assertive and is often misunderstood; she was extremely open and cooperative throughout this process. She was eager to attend every interview, and sent multiple email reminders. She is a certified custodian, but she has been unable to find employment due to a felony on her record. Her felony resulted in her children being placed in foster care in their earlier years. She has been unable to expunge that felony from her record and was informed by a judge that because she waited too long, she would have to live with the record. She has received other legal advice that she should raise $300 to clear this felony.

People are always kicking dirt at me, but by the grace of God I have been able to raise three boys . . . If you ain’t walk a day in my shoes, you can't tell me anything. . . I can't work and be productive if I have to worry about them (children) being focused . . . I feel low on the totem pole and not able to get a job. . .

Davina supports her children’s education by attending games and by showing her presence on campus. Throughout this interview, she expressed her desire to participate even more, as long as she was notified of volunteer opportunities. Despite her desire to participate in her children’s education, there are challenges that sometimes impact her ability to fully participate. These include limited financial resources as she depends on AFDC and SSI for herself. She often runs out of gas money before the end of the month and occasionally is unable to pay the bus fare:

I explain to my kids that I have had to fight a lot demons. I explain what I've had to go through to fight for them. I tell them you'll learn as you get older.

When the district voted to have students wear school uniforms about 3 years ago, Davina
expressed her apprehension with the cost of purchasing new uniforms for her sons. She is thankful that students were allowed to be exempt from participating. Another major frustration for Davina is her inability to obtain employment to support her family. She is concerned about the lack of parental supervision for her boys should she obtain employment. During the interview, Davina expressed a sense of guilt that was the result of her children being placed in foster care; she shared that she still has to deal with the pain of answering the questions her children still ask.

To alleviate these burdens, Davina would like the school staff to listen a little more and not send mixed messages regarding discipline (inequitable discipline). She gave an example of when one of her sons posted a negative message about a girl on Facebook and received a suspension, but when she brought a similar allegation against another student, she was informed the school could not get involved with cyber bullying. It was obvious she was displeased with the school’s unstable position on this matter. In addition to the school being supportive with discipline, Davina would like for the city and community to create a safe recreational place such as the Omega boys club.

Finally, as a single parent, if Davina had an opportunity to speak with community leaders, the president or other prominent people, she would like for people to know that she is eager to participate. She would also like people to know that, all single parents need help and support because there is always the feeling of a void, even though they may not show it.

Single mothers and single fathers they always need support in some way in some way or another. There’s always empty space, there’s always something missing although we may not show it and you may look at our face and not see it, but we all need support and help.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**
My interaction with Davina was very eye opening because her candor invited me into a world that I had no idea her family had experienced. She shared a little about how she has struggled to raise her children with meager resources and her inability to find employment. Despite these inadequacies, she regularly participated in her children’s education. Without a doubt, the interview sessions with Davina gave me a better understanding of why she came across as aggressive at times in her interactions with school staff. It explains why on one occasion when her government aid was threatened by her son’s truancy, she came across as “fighting” with school staff. With ill feelings that resulted from being maltreated for so long, Davina had grown accustomed to contending with the system.

**Participant 5-Charlotte Richards (Parent of Jane, James, Johnny and Jamar)**

Charlotte is the mother of four children ages 18, 17, 14 and 5. She is currently unemployed but she has the desire to work and/or return to school to complete high school diploma. Charlotte would like people to know the following:

I never had family members to help me ease off the system; I never had the help. Other people get more than I have. I am one of the ones who work harder. Most of them have boyfriend or husband that ruins their lives. I am single because ain’t no man will come and change my life. I don't feel like I am missing anything. I'm raising my kids to be better than the ones I don't want to be around me (referring to suitors). I can't say I was close to any family member. My dad was in jail when I was 6 months, just got out 7 years ago; but I have no questions for him. He does not want to relate to me but I just want him to be available to do what he couldn't do for me for my kids. Charlotte supports her children’s education by driving her children to school until gas money runs out. She encourages coaches to work with her freshman
son who is a basketball player. She also attends school meetings for each of her four children despite their busy and complicated schedules.

The boys want to do more but they know it’s not possible because of the family situation. The boys want to go beyond what they can (do); they like to challenge each other in sports.

Despite her availability and willingness to participate, there are challenges that hamper the degree to which she is able to participate sometimes. For example, two of her children (the 14 and 19 year-olds) are rebellious. She stated the following:

Jane leaves and comes when she wants, but I can't let that bring me down. I have to be strong enough for the others. Johnny is not working hard enough even though coaches are working with him and the family. James is the sweetest ‘cause we think alike.

Charlotte further explained how two of her children do not assist her with chores or babysitting their younger brother. Instead, her 19 year old daughter and 15 year old son live at home without permission. In comparison, James (17years) spends time at home with the family and is non-combative.

Other factors that often hinder Charlotte’s ability to fully participate in her children’s education include limited financial resources that affect her ability to pay bills, purchase gas, or pay for extra-curricular activities. Because she is the only involved parent of the four children, she is sometimes too busy to give attention to all four of the children.

To better support her family, Charlotte would like for school officials and teachers to get on the same page as her and consider her struggles as they interact with families like hers. When asked about the most important things community leaders and others need to know about single parent families, Ms. Charlotte Richards stated there was a need to fill the void of missing fathers. She also wants people to know that although she is on Section 8 and AFDC, she is looking to become more independent, and she is not lazy. She also expressed her frustrations with feeling
trapped in the welfare system that has become too restricting and unsupportive to people who want to ease of the system. For example, if she works, she will lose the little money aide that she receives. She plans on returning to school but is concerned that the lack of childcare could interrupt her children’s education. She does not want to interrupt her older children's education, so she may have to wait for the youngest to get into kindergarten.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Charlotte has had three children attend the high school; only one has graduated as of today. She was eager to participate in this research and offered recommendations for supporting single parent families. It is my opinion that though her family experiences financial limitations and her children are rebellious, she still believes her family will experience positive outcomes. Although she currently receives government aid, she would like to be able to complete her high school diploma and obtain employment to better support her family. She does not anticipate extended family to provide tangible support but is open to school officials mentoring her children.

**Participant 6- Zoe Waters (Parent of Nathan Raymond)**

Zoe is a mother and grandmother who lives with two children and a grandchild. The older child is over 18 years old, and her other child, Nathan, is a 14-year-old high school freshman. The two adults (parent and older child) are currently employed. Zoe describes Nathan in the following manner:

He’s a pretty good kid. I’ve been talking to him, explaining the bigger picture, asking him not to be bitter at dad or dad’s behavior.

Zoe Waters is the only one supporting her 9th grade son by providing him with shelter, clothes, and other needs. Dad is not there for him. He lived with his father for 4 years, but while with
dad, he experienced verbal and mental abuse. Support for her son comes from herself, her fiancé, and her 2 daughters, the people who help him stay on track. Her youngest daughter, the 18 year old is the one who assists her with disciplining her son, Nathan Raymond.

Communication is Zoe’s family’s first challenge. Siblings argue and are hostile towards each other. Nathan talks back and recently balled his fists at his mother Zoe. Despite this challenge, Zoe considers him to be a good kid. She often counsels him to lose the bitterness he holds against his father and urges him to see the bigger picture. To address his anger, she would like for her son to seek counseling. Another challenge this family confronts is a financial limitation. Zoe has not received any child support from Nathan’s father. She wants to be able to pay for extracurricular activities such as karate, but she has not been able to. The issue of financial limitation also impacts transportation for her and her son. She drives him to and from school daily and also drives herself to work.

When asked how the school, district and community could better support her family, Zoe at first did not know what resources were available and did not know what to ask for. However, she knew that there was tutoring, and her son needed homework help for the subjects that he was failing. In order to better support her family, Ms. Zoe would like for the people to know that every day is a struggle for her family. She struggles with paying rent, buying food, clothing, shoes, and getting school supplies. She believes that the school is supportive of her family any time she has needed us. In her words, “You guys work with me; we’ve got a good relationship. You guys care.”

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

This is Zoe’s first year at the high school. She recently took back her son Nathan
Raymond from his father recently after he had lived with him for four years. Zoe welcomes the involvement of school officials and readily comes in when she is needed.

**Participant 7- Sonya Lawrence (Parent of Charmaine L)**

Sonya is the mother of Charmaine, a female sophomore at the high school. Sonya lives with her parents and her daughter. She works as a special education substitute teacher for various districts. She works additional odd jobs to supplement her substitute teacher income. Sonya expressed her frustration in the following manner:

> I have difficulty getting in touch with teachers. Communication here is not open and friendly.

Sonya believes her family works hard at supporting her daughter who is in special education and has an individualized education plan (IEP). Though helpful with driving her daughter to and from school, they often get frustrated with assisting their granddaughter with her homework.

One of her greatest challenges is financial hardship as she and her daughter depend on one income. She works two part-time jobs and is often unable to assist with her daughter’s homework. One way she copes with this challenge of tracking homework is to use the online parent/student access system known as *Schoolloop*. Despite this tool, Sonya describes her experience with her daughter’s special education placement in negative terms. She had no input into her daughter’s selection of classes and had to take time off work to ensure the errors were corrected. She further expressed that by the time the class schedule was finally corrected, her daughter had missed two weeks of one of her elective classes. As a special education teacher herself, she has found the IEP process unsatisfactory. She says teachers rarely attend and never once had an administrator attended any of the meetings. She also reported that IEP deadlines
were ignored, meetings were unorganized and teachers behaved unprofessionally.

When asked how the school, district, and community can better support her daughter, Ms Sonya said she was open to suggestions. She also asked for safe transportation as she currently does not feel safe putting her daughter on public transportation. She praised the newly introduced on campus mobile health clinic as she and her daughter were recently dropped from the Healthy Families program.

In order to understand how to better support single parent families, Sonya would like people to know that single parents do what they can to support their families. One way government can support families like hers is to provide easier access to social services. For example, she had to jump through several hoops in order to obtain the Healthy Family program, yet she has now lost access to that program. She is frustrated at this loss because of her daughter’s disability and dependence on medications that Sonya cannot afford to purchase on her own.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Sonya’s frustrations were apparent during the interview. She expressed the need to constantly work multiple jobs to support herself and her daughter. Though a credentialed special education teacher, she has been unable to obtain full time employment, but has instead she has worked as a substitute teacher and game attendant. Though not mentioned during the interview, Sonya depends on her parents to assist with driving her daughter to school.

**Participant 8- Jane Bradley (Grandparent of 17 year old David Bradley)**

Jane is a widowed grandmother who is raising three male step-grandchildren. Prior to his death, Jane took care of her ailing husband for 9 years and chose to adopt his grandchildren as her own after his death. Only the 8th and 11th graders still live at home. The eldest grandchild dropped out of school and moved out of the home. He now rarely
has contact with the rest of the family. Also living in the same house are Jane’s fiancé, sister, and her daughter’s family of four; only one of the adults in this household is currently employed. The biggest support we need is financial. I don’t like to tell them (children), I don’t know how long they’ll (landlord) go without paying full rent.

Jane’s family supports her grandchildren by driving them to school and by staying on top of their education. Her sister is a preschool teacher who helps her grandchildren with homework sometimes, although she is not really good in math. According to Jane, another way she supports her family is by praying for them. One of her challenges is staying patient with the children. One of them (David Bradley) is 16 years old but acts like he is 25 years because he believes he knows it all. According to her, she sometimes has to let the children fail, so they can understand and know what they are up against. She maintains a 10:00 pm curfew and has sometimes gone to pick up the children whenever they were past curfew. At some point, David Bradley left the home for 6 months to live with his uncle because of grandma’s rules. David Bradley found out his uncle had rules and needed him as a babysitter for his nephews.

Another major challenge for this family is financial difficulty. Jane has not been able to pay her full rent because she has encountered difficulty with receiving social security insurance (SSI) for two years now since she suffered a neck injury. She recently lost the foster care contribution for the oldest grandson when he turned 18 years old.

Ms. Bradley would like to see her grandchildren get math help through tutoring. She recently enrolled them in the supplementary educational services (SES) tutoring program provided through the district. Throughout her grandchildren’s educational experiences, Jane has depended on the county school liaison, especially when she needed to obtain special education testing for her youngest grandson Nicholas Bradley. Despite the individualized education plan, Nicholas is still failing all but one of his 8th grade classes. She believes that he needs a smaller
setting and has tried to ask the middle school for these types of services but has yet to receive any responses since asking earlier this year.

When asked how the school, district and community can better support her family, Jane Bradley stated she would like increased communication from his teachers. For example, she asked that all Nicholas’ teachers contact her prior to his failure, but his teachers have not contacted her. Jane states, “I am afraid for him to go to high school blinded.” She would also like for the high school to review its enrollment and records release procedures because some of her relatives successfully changed her contact information without first checking with her.

In order to better support single parent families, Jane Bradley believes that people need to understand that raising the children is a hard struggle for families like hers. However, she believes that with firm rules and integrity, the children will eventually positively respond. She encourages families such as hers to keep communication lines open in order for parents to know and supervise their children’s company and whereabouts. One important thing Jane would like for policy makers to know is that prayer needs to return to schools. As she puts it, “less guns more prayer”. Finally, she asks that city officials enforce curfews in order to minimize opportunities or youth to get in trouble.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Despite Jane’s desire to advocate for her grandsons, it became apparent to me that she largely depends on the county assigned educational advocate to communicate with the school. For example, when she needed to schedule an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to review her middle school grandson’s progress, she reports the school did not respond to her request until the advocate got involved.
Participant 9- Bukky Oyebade (Parent of 14 year old Debbie Oyebade)

Ms. Oyebade is the researcher of this study and is a married woman who temporarily experienced firsthand what it meant to be a single parent when her spouse was out of town for a one month period. It is important to note that this portion of the study came at the latter part of this research. During this one month period, she began every day of the week day by dropping off the 12 year old at 6:20 am with another family, so her daughter would have a ride to school. She also dropped off the 9 year old first at school and then drove herself to work. Thankfully, her 14 year old attends school very close to the home. Because Bukky is a fulltime employee, she also enlisted the help of friends and paid some others to assist with afternoon school runs. Also, during the week on three out of the five days, she needed to drive the children to their extra-curricular activities at the end of the day. By the end of the day, she checked in to ensure that homework was completed. Only occasionally was she able to supervise her children’s homework closely.

Throughout this period, the greatest challenge was with transportation. Because the family schedule had been developed around the availability of the other parent, transporting the family to their various destinations was very difficult to accomplish alone. Without the three friends and family member, this task would have been impossible to achieve. Another major challenge was supervising the three children’s homework completion. During this period, one of the girls lost her binder of homework and missed five assignments in one class alone! On a few occasions the family stayed up till late in order to complete assignments. Despite these challenges, the children were very cooperative and supportive of her single parent status. On one occasion when there was a last minute change to their schedule and there was no available adult to drive the 9 year old to school, the 14 year old volunteered to stay at home. She did not need to
stay at home after all because the issue was resolved.

During this period, one way the elementary school could have helped was to have provided a temporary place for students to stay before 7:45 in the morning. This would have eliminated the need for so many adults to drive the children to school and would have alleviated the transportation challenge a little bit. Also, although the school district did provide transportation services, past experience of the 14 year on the school bus suggested that the conduct of the other children on the bus was inappropriate for elementary age children.

Also, without the encouragement and communication with the other parent, friends, and relatives coping with daily tasks of managing, the family would have been a more arduous task for the researcher herself.

In order for schools, districts, and community members to support single parent families better, they need to appreciate the amount of work one parent has to do for the family. This understanding could prompt flexibility in accommodating the student’s academic and social needs. By taking on the task of two parents, single parents often struggle with meeting the needs of every individual in the family, whether in the amount of time they can spend with the children or on themselves. For parents with no extended family or friends nearby, these tasks can be very daunting and impossible to accomplish alone. It is very likely that some needs go unmet, and some tasks will go unaccomplished. In the case of the researcher, the only way she discovered her daughter was missing assignments was through an email sent by the teacher listing the missing tasks; therefore, teachers must be willing to initiate the first contact informing parents of their children’s lack of success.
Student Group Summary of Results and Findings

Surveys

The following charts summarize student survey responses. Additional comments made participants are also included below the charts.

1. Family Strengths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional Support</th>
<th># of responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close Knit family</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend/family Support</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy Family</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness between members</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend a lot of time together</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other: Communication

2. Factors influencing ability to fully participate in child’s education (not answered by all students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors influencing parent participation in education</th>
<th># of responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience with staff</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language barrier</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Parent not involved</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology access</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Hours</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Other:** Grandmother wants me to get better education than she had growing up.

3. **Greatest challenges as single parent family (low response rate) - Follow up during focus group discussions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th># of responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic Necessities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances for Extra Curricular activities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances to pay bills</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for self</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for children</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work affecting parenting role</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other:** Grandmother works; I go to school.

3. **Additional Support (needs)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of additional support</th>
<th># of responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After School care (younger children)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework Help</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of Student Focus Groups

Two student focus groups were held on the same day. Students were invited based on their school lunches and provided permission slips in order to participate in the groups. Lunch was also provided to these groups. After providing a brief introduction into the purpose of research, I invited students to agree on confidentiality to protect the conversation about to be held.

During the focus group, students were introduced to the survey findings. Each focus group consisted of four to five students. In each group, students were invited to observe the data and make comments about the accuracy of the findings or insert additional comments. For example, in the first focus group that consisted of three girls and two boys, students were asked if they felt that one their family’s greatest strength was openness with one another. In response, the girls agreed, but the boys did not. David Bradley said he did not feel the need to share with his family and preferred to share his concerns with a few selected friends.

In the focus group discussion, it was apparent that the girls appreciated the openness their families possessed, but different for the boys who preferred access and closeness to their parents. David Bradley who lives with his grandmother lamented about limited access to his
grandmother. According to him, she was responsible for too many people besides him and his brother. He complained about how when he moved in with her, she cared for their ailing grandfather for close to ten years, and after his death took on the responsibility of feeding and housing her new boyfriend, her daughter’s family of four, her sister, and three grandchildren. According to him, he enjoyed his grandmother for a short while right after his grandfather’s death and before she took in other relatives and her boyfriend:

    I saw a little glimpse of my grandma after my grandpa died. She took us to Disneyland, Six Flags and all kinds of places. Now that she has this boyfriend and all these other people, she hardly has time for me and my brother…

Another participant (a female) complained of a similar situation where her grandmother assists her 37 year-old aunt with her bills, but is hardly able to provide her with basic necessities. According to Edwina:

    I don’t even mind that my grandma gets all this money on me and gives some of it away, what makes me mad is that I don’t get some for what I need.

    It is also important to note that boys were more eager to share personal information than the girls were. Despite their initial shyness, a few students eventually shared information about their academic progress and how their relationships with their estranged parent impacted their academics. For example, a few students (boys and girls) openly admitted to attaining poor grades in 9th grade because there were no relatives to assist them with homework, and in some cases they were angry with their uninvolved parent. Despite the initially poor grades, all of these participants were determined to recover from their prior failures.

**One-on-One Interviews**

**Participant 1: Anna Joseph (daughter of Gertrude Ulysses)**
When asked about the challenges family encounters around supporting her education, one of Anna’s responses was:

My mom did not get a college degree but got up to high school in Mexico. She is not able to assist with schoolwork…My mum asks me to read English/Spanish. She told me don’t forget my first language and practice English as well.

Furthermore, Anna noted that:

Having to depend on my aunty, I have to wait for my cousins to get ready. I get dropped off last and become late for classes

Anna is an English language learner currently in the tenth grade. She and her mother live with her aunt’s family. She and her mother depend on her mother’s sister for transportation, shelter, and food because her mother has been unable to obtain employment since their immigration to the United States.

Anna is regularly encouraged and reminded to study by her mother. With regards to challenges with supporting her education, Anna states that her mom’s high school education from Mexico prevents her from assisting her daughter with homework, sometimes. Anna’s family supports her education by assisting with homework. Her mother has asked her to practice speaking in English but still wants Anna to maintain her first language, Spanish. It did not appear that her aunt was directly involved with the school. Another challenge this family encounters is a dependence on relatives. Oftentimes, Anna has to wait for her cousins to get dressed in the mornings and is dropped off last, making her late to school. Anna stated that adequate transportation would minimize the number of tardies that she receives. Finally, the lack of access to technology sometimes serves as an obstacle since the family does not have a computer. On occasion, Anna has stayed late after school to use the school’s library computers because the one family computer is either in use by her cousins or do not have the programs she has needed for
her school work. Whenever she has stayed back at school, Anna has either had to wait for her aunt or made the 45-minute walk home.

Anna’s advice to youth with both parents is to value having both of them: “You have to value having 2 parents. When you only have one, you have to value them more because they’re doing the job of two. Help them whenever you can.” She encourages those with one parent to value them even more since they take on tasks meant for two. One way to better support her family would be to provide access to merit scholarships and awards based on good grades. Anna plans to be a public defender in the future.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Anna is an English language learner who was only able to communicate with limited English part of the time and required an interpreter for a portion of this interview. She is a very determined young lady with great aspirations of becoming a public defender. While her mother reflects on the absence created from her father’s death, Anna never mentioned it at all during the interview. Instead, she focused on their current situation of dependence on her relatives. It was apparent that she was very concerned with getting dropped off last in the mornings and being late for classes. Recently, Anna informed me that her mother has obtained employment with a local business.

**Participant 2- Georgina Guevara (daughter of Yasmin Acosta)**

When asked to describe the most important thing she would like people to know about single parent families, Georgina responded:

A lot of people think because we’re Latin, we cannot accomplish careers, but I want people to know they (other Latinas) can accomplish.
Georgina’s family helps her with homework and studying for tests and finals. She is an only child who lives with her mother, grandmother and uncle. They are recent immigrants still learning the English language; however her uncle is better proficient in English and is able to sometimes assist with school work. They receive daily online updates from Schoolloop and assign discipline when needed. For example, her mother (Yasmin Acosta) informed her that she would not pay her cell phone bill if she did not raise her grades. Challenges encountered with supporting her education include the difficulty with picking Georgina up from school. Because her mother did not study in the United States and has a low level of education, she is unable to assist her daughter with homework. Georgina believes that schools can help alleviate the stress of completing homework by offering after school homework support/assistance. Another way to support families like hers is to provide counseling for student, provide employment resources and to have high expectations of Latina families like hers. According to Georgina, too many people expect Latinas not to accomplish much; therefore she wants other Latinas to believe in themselves.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

The session with Georgina required an interpreter because she is an English Learner. As a result, some of the originality of her quotes may have been lost in translation. Her family recently emigrated to the United Stated from El Salvador and her uncle (mother’s brother) also attended this same high school.

**Participant 3- Donetta Davis (16 year old sophomore, daughter of Greta Lopez)**

The one thing Donetta Davis would like people to know about single parent families is:

> It’s hard but you need to appreciate the parent you have. Some people don’t have either parent. We need to appreciate our one parent. I appreciate my mom because she does the role of both parents. It’s important for me to tell her I love her.
Donetta is the second of two children. Her brother also graduated from the same High School and now lives with his father. Her father is not involved in her life and does not support her education; however her mother supports her by checking on homework and sending emails to teachers as needed. To illustrate how her mother feels when she does not complete homework, Donetta said:

Mum gets frustrated when I can’t do my homework.

According to Donetta, her mother struggles with paying bills because she has had difficulty gaining fulltime employment and receives no child support from their father. Her mother typically runs out of money and has no friends or relatives nearby. All of her mother’s extended family is located in Mexico. To better support her mother and herself, Donetta is seeking tutorials to assist her with academics. Donetta encourages other youths to appreciate their single parent and regularly demonstrate their appreciation.

**Researcher reflection/Observations**

At the time of this research, Donetta was failing two major classes – Biology and Geometry. Donetta did not appear angry that her mother got involved with her school work. She seemed to appreciate that her mother was so closely involved; her mother is the only blood relative that she has around her because her parents got divorced when she was about 12 years old.

**Participant 4 – James Simpson (17 year old junior, son of Charlotte Richards)**

To describe one of the challenges faced by single parent families, James Simpson noted:

It is tough on single parents especially if they have more than one kid. They need the other parent/gender that they can talk to and trust.
James is the second of four children. He is also the second child in his family that has attended this high school. His mother is his main supporter as his dad is out of the picture and pays no child support. His mother Charmaine supports his education by driving him and siblings to school, helping with homework when needed, and providing school supplies.

Despite James’ mother’s willingness to participate, transportation can be a problem when she runs out of gas money. Also, just buying school supplies can be a challenge at times. On many occasions, he and his siblings have had to recycle previously used supplies.

When asked for recommendations on how to better support his family, at first James did not think there was anything any group could do to assist his family. His initial stance was that if they lack anything and are unable to purchase it, they just “won’t ask anybody else.” He later conceded that free bus passes would alleviate their transportation challenges.

James rates the high school highly because he receives free lunch and is allowed to play sports without coming up with the fees upfront (even though he knows he would have to eventually pay the fees). He is thankful that he doesn’t have to pay for books. He would like to see more schools give free bus passes for a month at a time. He also applauds the social welfare system that assists families with food stamps and AFDC. His only concern was that the social workers assigned to his family have been frequently changed sometimes resulting in delays of government aid. He further explains that when new social workers are assigned to their family, they have to go through the qualification process again and provide additional paper work each time. Despite these challenges, James believes that his family will be fine. For example, last Christmas, his family was adopted by other families who bought them gift cards. Finally, he would like people to know that it is tough on single parents with more than one child.
I don’t think my situation is bad; I got something for Christmas. I got two target cards and was able to buy what I wanted.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

James is like any other student and does not feel like he deserves any special privileges from others. He seems to have a grasp of his family’s financial situation but forges on anyway. He cares about his grades and attendance. According to him, his attendance suffered a little because he and his brother recently began to share a bus pass after their car ran out of gas. He has to wait for this younger brother, or his brother would not bother coming to school. He recently played with the high school’s soccer team and hopes to receive his letterman jacket for that sport soon. James hopes to become an architect.

**Participant 5- Nathan Raymond (14 year old freshman, son of Zoe Waters)**

Nathan’s 20-year-old sister is the only one he really gets along with, as he admits he sometimes does not talk to his mother. His father is not involved at this stage of his life even though he lived with him for four years. Nathan was removed to live with his mother because of physical and mental abuse. To cope with the negative impact of this abuse, Nathan is now in therapy. With regards to supporting his education, he reports that his mother buys him school supplies.

Nathan’s family relies on food stamps and one of his older sisters also buys food for the house. Due to financial constraints, there are times when they cannot afford school supplies or food. According to him, he tried not to eat at home because he gets into trouble sometimes for eating other people’s food. He says, “They act like I have money to buy food.”

To better support his family, Nathan believes that if there were an enforcement of child support from his dad, things would be a lot better for them. He also needs tutoring for biology
and Earth science. He feels his math class is a little out of control, even though his teacher is a good
teacher. Overall, he feels his teachers are great even though they bump heads at times. His
favorite teacher is his Earth Science teacher.

The one thing that Nathan feels people need to know about single parent families is that
even though things may be rough sometimes, he believes they’ll still get through it. This
statement was made in reference to the disagreements between him, his mother and older sisters:

Even though my family members bump heads sometimes, we still get through it…
Sometimes my mom or sister can’t get supplies. My older sister pays for food. I really try
not to eat at home. They tell me not to touch the food.

Researcher Reflection/Observations

Nathan was very eager to participate and expressed his desire to excel in his academics.
Despite his family challenges, he was very positive and funny. He ended this interview with a
smile and said, “One thing people need to know is that we may bump heads sometimes, we still
get through it… but I’m not going to talk to my mom for one day.” After this interview, Nathan’s
Earth science teacher informed me that he had delivered an excellent science project and was
performing better.

Participant 6: Charmaine Lawrence (16 yr old sophomore, daughter of Sonya Lawrence)

When asked about the one thing she would like people to know about single parent families,
Charmaine stated:

Parents will always love you. They actually try hard when there’s nobody else to help.

Although she is a substitute teacher, Charmaine’s mom constantly works babysits, works school
games, and other jobs for extra money. Despite having to work for extended hours sometimes,
her mother tries to assist with homework and also drives her to school. According to Charmaine, her mother is tired a lot and is constantly trying to catch up with her responsibilities. Charmaine also reports that she struggles with bipolar disorder and depends on her mother to help her get through difficult times associated with this disorder:

I want people to know they’re (single parents) are working really hard to live and survive. You guys don’t seem to care, you seem to care. (Anna begins to cry but continues). . .

They put money where there’s already money and not where people need it. This could lead to people dying . . . By giving to those who don’t have you increase your wealth, especially to those who can’t get help. People give money to those who have and keep on taking money from us by taxes. We need to help each other out. If you fight for what you need, you will get what you need. My mom has been fighting for me. She’s been protecting me.

To better support her family, Charmaine would like to have other people be available for her because she believes her mother will not be there all the time. She would like for people to know that her family works hard to live and survive. She believes that policy makers need to reallocate funds to areas most needed by the less fortunate. She would also like for policy makers to put the needs of their constituents first prior to their own interests.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

My conversation with Charmaine seemed to reveal emotion and passion about people caring about others. This became apparent when I asked her for recommendations on how to better support her family. Charmaine was also very eager to participate in this research. She enjoys art, writes short stories and hopes to sell her bookmarks to support her family financially. For several days after this interview, Charmaine would return to share her latest piece of artwork collection of stories with me.

**Participant 7: David Bradley (17 yr old junior, grandson of Jane Bradley)**
David is one of the three grandchildren adopted by his step grandmother after his grandfather died. Prior to that, he lived with his own mother with four other siblings who later moved in with their grandmother. He described how they (mother, younger brother and him) moved around from motel to motel, from house to house and sometimes completely homeless:

People say children from single parent families will turn out bad, but I don’t believe me and brother turned out bad. We’ve been through a lot more pain. Just living with a single parent is nothing compared to what we’ve been through. We’ve been through a lot…when my brothers and sister lived with my grandmother, me, my younger brother live with my mom at the time. . . I just remember us, our living was horrible. We were homeless, living from house to house; we slept in like weird places like back of motels. We lived off cold Top Ramen and like basically all I am saying is that we had it a lot worse and that we’re like, should we say normal and we’re not living that life of where are we gonna put our heads at. We’re stable now with my grandma. I just don’t feel like living with a single grandparent is… I feel like she did a good job.

David believes that just living with a single grandparent has not had a negative impact on him and his brother. It did not appear that her aunt was directly involved with the school. His older brother dropped out of High School and no longer lives with the family; however, at the time of the interview, he and his younger brother still lived with his grandmother, four other adults, and two infants in a four-bedroom home.

David’s grandmother is his main support. She checks in with Danny and his brother regarding homework and about how the day went. The main distraction encountered around supporting their education is financial limitation. Although she does not work, his grandmother supports her fiancé, her sister, her daughter, her daughter’s boyfriend and the boys.

To better support the Bradleys, David would like to see gas prices go down. He also believes that one way his relatives could support his family is for them to move into their own homes. Finally, he wants people to know that living in a single parent family does not imply that
he and his brother will be negatively impacted. There are worse things that could happen to a family.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

David is not performing well academically and is credit deficient. This interview was an opportunity to address this deficiency and assigned after school credit recovery. He is often truant and is frequently late to school. He is also currently on the waiting list for one of the district’s alternative schools. Throughout this research and as David told his story, he appeared very composed and collected. He did not appear to be negatively impacted by his family’s challenges. Even though I knew his grandmother struggled with paying the rent, he hardly mentioned their financial challenges. In his opinion, his biggest need was for his grandmother’s undivided attention. He was frustrated that despite her not having enough, she was responsible for too many other adults. He misses having her undivided attention.

**Participant 8: Debbie Oyebade (14 yr old freshman, daughter of Bukky Oyebade)**

Debbie is a 9th grade high school freshman daughter of the researcher. As the oldest, Debbie was able to articulate her experiences as a child in a single parent family for a one month period. According to Debbie, strengths exhibited by her family during the one month absence of her father were closeness and the dependence on one another to make up for his absence. She described how every member of the family worked together because they knew they wouldn’t survive without each other.
The challenges were most apparent were the times when members of the family did not cooperate with each other. She also described how she forfeited her after school clubs in order to return home in time for her siblings:

I had after school clubs that I could not go because I knew my sisters would be home by themselves if I didn’t go home.

In terms of parents, she stated, “during this time, my mother had to take on the role of mom and dad in terms of discipline, maybe.” In terms of support, she admits that though her family benefitted the most from friends and paid people who assisted with transporting her siblings to school, her family could have also appreciated after school child care to allow her attend the after school programs. To better support single parent families, Debbie would like to see community members and others provide credible childcare/babysitting resources as well as computer and technology resources for families without dual income. Other valuable resources to assist widowed single parents could also include provision of employment resources and job training for those returning to unaccustomed to full-time employment.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

As the parent of the above student, it is encouraging to hear Debbie make such in depth recommendations regarding employment and childcare, especially because we had never discussed employment resources for any one prior to this experience. During this period of temporarily being a single parent family, Debbie stepped up to being a temporary babysitter until I returned from work. She never once complained about missing her after school clubs but gladly took on this role. On one occasion when it appeared that there would be no transportation for her younger sister, Debbie volunteered to stay home on independent study. What was most
intriguing to me was to discover she knew of independent studies and recommended it. Needless to say, I did not allow her to stay home and made other arrangements for her sibling.

**Participant 9- Edwina Shultz (18yr old senior female)**

Edwina is a female 12th grader at the high school. Although she has lived with multiple relatives at various times, Edwina has now returned to her grandmother who first took her in after her mother passed away when she was only nine months old. Soon after that her grandfather also died. While moving around with relatives, Edwina missed school and started taking care of other people’s children when she was only about 13 years old. Some of these children were barely younger than her, but she was responsible for cooking and caring for them while their parent worked. She began to work to pay for family meals while still under age; her paychecks were taken away by her aunt for this purpose. Edwin says:

> When I moved to Alaska, I worked and made $400-$500 weekly but my checks were taken away from me and I was left with $40. I was told by my aunt that you clean and feed us; I pay rent. I have always looked for small jobs to assist my grandma. . . I wouldn’t change anything. If I didn’t go through what I went through, I wouldn’t know how to deal with people, and kids, but I grew up fast.

Edwina’s grandmother supports her education by encouraging Edwina to complete school since she dropped out in 9th grade. She also encourages Edwina to seek homework assistance and tutorials from teachers at school. The challenges her family encounters with supporting her education include money, transportation, clothing and basic school supplies. Edwina also believes that living with her aunt negatively impacted her. She describes how she was often put down and scolded when she did not help the aunt’s family with chores. This relative often sent mixed messages – take care of my family and complete school. During a period of her life, this relative was more active in her life than her grandmother was; she disciplined Edwina and would also periodically encourage her to continue on with her education. As at the time of this
interview, this aunt had made attempts to restore her relationship with Edwina, but it appeared that trust had already been eroded.

When asked how schools, districts and community members could better support families like hers, Edwina rated the school very highly with providing tutorial support when she has needed it. She asked for fundraising opportunities to support families as well as free clothing and school supplies. She has also asked that the school do a better job of advertising programs to families. According to her, unless school personnel really got involved with their students, they wouldn’t be able to refer them to the appropriate community resources such as the county mobile health van that comes in weekly. To her peers, she asks that they speak up about their challenges in order for the adults to know their needs.

If given the opportunity, Ms. Shultz would tell of her family struggles. She would willingly share her challenges with growing up with other people. Reporting this in her words, “I am willing to provide direction to the good path for others.” The important thing that educators and policy makers need to know is that growing up been has been hard for children like her. She has had no free time and access to other relatives besides her grandmother and aunt. Because she has had to raise other people’s young children, she has missed school, homework and is often awakened frequently throughout the night to assist with the younger children. Her aunt often told her that since she paid the rent, Edwina had to feed the family. Finally, Edwina wouldn’t change any part of her experiences. She is thankful for the teachers and staff that helped her through her struggles with other teachers.

Researcher Reflection/Observations
I first met Edwina as a freshman in 2009 when she was referred to the office for classroom disruption. As I listened to her side of the story, it became apparent that she got into trouble for speaking up on behalf of her colleagues. During this conversation with her, I found out that she had excellent grades and attendance and I praised her for these achievements. This compliment caused her to smile and opened the door for me to be able to advise her to use an alternative approach to voicing her opinion in the future. From then on, Edwina and I developed a rapport! She is now a senior who still receives excellent grades and plans on joining the military.

**District/School/Community Agency Staff Group**

For this group of participants, only audio interviews were conducted. A total of eleven participants were included in this study. This group comprised of classified and certificated staff, staff of agencies that provide services to students and district administrators all of whom received verbal and written requests to participate in this research.

**Participant Profiles**

The following chart presents the pseudonyms used to protect the identity of participants as well as their roles and responsibilities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Category/Role or Responsibility in the district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda Scott</td>
<td>Certificated Management (district level)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginny Kava</td>
<td>Certificated Management (district level)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danny Lee</td>
<td>Certificated (teacher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marsha Kendall</td>
<td>Outside Agency Staff- (health educator)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melba Moore</td>
<td>Certificated (teacher)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Interviews

Amanda Scott

Amanda is a district-level administrator who is very compassionate towards this group because she was a single parent herself. Her children are now in their twenties and living independently. This information was not known by the researcher before she was invited to participate in this research. When asked about her perception of strengths that single-parent families possess, she believes that the families become closer and get to know each other well:

Resiliency is strength of single parent families, even for the kids. You are forced to take risks you wouldn’t take otherwise and do things you wouldn’t do and risk taking in our society in the right setting can be very powerful and positive.

Furthermore, she believes that every member of that family could become resilient due to the necessity of taking risks and undertaking tasks that they normally would not if both parents were present. She also believes that for those with support structures in place, their single parent status could prove positive and that like other parents, single parent families want the same things for their families.

Regarding challenges, Ms. Scott describes a myriad of obstacles that single parent families encounter, from combating cultural and societal bias against single parents, to her belief
that single mothers have to work twice as hard to earn as much their male counterparts. When describing media and societal bias, Ms. Scott stated:

Single parent families want the same things other families want and to some degree there’s the fierce desire having been a single mother myself and guilt associated with ending up in a place where you don’t want to be. I found myself wanting to work twice as hard because I didn’t want my kids to be at a disadvantage because of my choices. Ms. Scott further drew attention to how some women are viewed as sex symbols and as available women by the opposite sex and how some married women view single women as a threat to their marriages:

I remember being at the baseball games with my sons and being the only one without a husband or partner and it became very uncomfortable to be that person.

With regards to current support structures, Amanda does not believe the district does a good enough job and feels like the district has not made supporting single parents a priority. There are basic things the district could do; for example, we could obtain grants to provide transportation to support families and provide after school services across the district. One way the society could support single parent families is through the federal tax coding system that could provide additional tax deductions rather than the current system that favors families with dual incomes. She noted: “The system pays you for getting married.” Another way to create awareness is to consider students from single parent families as a subgroup of students similar to the grouping assigned to ethnic subgroups, although this could pose its own challenges.

To better provide support for single parent families, Ms. Scott would like the school and society to appreciate the stressors faced by single parent families. She would like government and school districts to reinvest in their families, rearrange student schedules to accommodate families with multiple children, and provide after school programs. For office staff, she would ask them to understand that when some single parents come across as “rockets” and are
aggressive, fear is the underlying feeling they have. She further describes the pressure some feel in order to prove that they are good parents after their divorce. In some cases, they needed to show love to their children by leaving a loveless marriage.

In her role as a district level administrator, Amanda believes she must not assume she knows the “backstories” of families that come her way, nor can she make assumptions about their needs prior to speaking with them. She vows never to look at the deficit model of single parenting and feels there is still a lot she can do to support single parent families. Because her personal experience as a single parent has made her strong, she feels she can be a role model for others. She would like to see schools progress from superficial to authentic parent involvement to prevent parents from shutting down. In her words:

Love is the purpose of our career. People respond out of fear. Children are innocent…I hope this research will pull back layers and allow people to see that single parents have a lot to offer school systems. I know this may not result in programs, but I hope it will stop us from looking at single parent families in the deficit. What would have helped me would have been feeling valued, changes to taxes and awareness from others.

Researcher Reflection/Observations

Amanda Scott’s perspectives on how to better support single parents were unique and valuable in providing how educators and politicians could better support single parent families. I believe these perspectives were fueled by her experiences both as a child and as a single mother herself. An interesting fact worth noting is that Amanda was able to articulate many of the underlying challenges that parent and student participants could not. In my opinion, this ease of articulation could be attributed to her higher level of education in comparison to other family participants.

Ginny Kava
Ginny is also a district-level administrator who willingly volunteered to participate in this research. According to her, because single parent families are led by one parent, it is possible for the parent to provide a clear focus for his/family compared to having two parents leading in divergent directions. Another strength Ginny shared with me was the possibility of developing stronger relationships with the children, especially for those who believe it is “us against the world.” As she stated, “It all depends on the quality rather than quantity to produce a functional family.”

As for challenges, Ginny described difficulties associated with balancing work with supporting their children as a critical factor that will determine the extent to which single parents can get involved. In cases where families are impacted by time constraint and not having the other parent to share the responsibility, Ms. Kava believes partnerships with the school or other relatives would be crucial.

In terms of current support, Ginny does not believe that the district and school have provided any support targeted towards single parents. She encourages schools to employ multiple modes of communication to reach all families at various socio-economic levels. She further encourages flexibility with scheduling parent appointments in order to accommodate their scheduling constraints and improving family outreach methods. To better support single parent families, Ginny would like to see district wide efforts such as the creation of focus groups to identify the needs of single parent families within the district. She would also like to increase and better advertise volunteer opportunities, as well as expand the centralized counseling model recently introduced to the district. Another way to improve our services to our families is to regularly provide childcare at parent events.
At Ginny’s level in the district, she believes that she regularly has to consider how to balance individual needs with system structures. As the central office supervisor of counselors, Ginny believes she could promote and provide financial aid workshops for families, be aware of issues of transportation and be another line of appeal for and serve as advocate for single parents: “If we can acknowledge the differences and similarities between single parent and others and find common interests, starting with the fact that we’re all working for the same thing…”

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Ginny’s responses provided additional perspectives to this research. For example, she was one of the few staff participants who reflected on the impact of district policies on single parent families. It was also interesting to hear Gina acknowledge transportation as a challenge for single parent families. At the time of the interview, Ms. Kava did make district-level recommendations.

**Danny Lee**

Danny teaches upper classmen at the high school. He is a single parent himself and a father of two children who are now living independently. In his opinion, one of the strengths displayed by single parents is fortitude in that they tackle the challenges of raising children alone. Another strength is the love for their children that drives the decisions that they make on behalf of their families. As for challenges, Danny Lee believes that emotional issues, self-perception and a sense of guilt could affect how single parents perceive themselves. For example, he says the following: “We care about the affective world, what happens in our heads, what we cannot do, how many sports, activities we cannot attend. We have feelings of being incapacitated.”
Still, other parents are unable to catch up with the changes in education:

The pace of education, not hearing enough from our children puts us behind the times.

Danny Lee made the statement in reference to bilateral communications between school and home. With regards to the types of current support provided to single parent families, Danny is not aware of any services targeting these types of families. He is, however, aware of some parent outreach efforts through the PASS (parents assisting students success) program as well as the automated calls sent from school to inform parents of activities.

Mr. Lee advocates for staff empathy and connections with students. He believes that once staff becomes aware of students’ personal challenges, people like him are more apt to responding differently to students. He also believes sensitivity to the fact that some students live with relatives other than their parents is another way of being supportive. To this end, Danny would rather see schools address communications to “guardians” rather than parents alone. In Danny Lee’s opinion, these aforementioned support strategies will be more effective through individuals than if established through systematic structures. Examples of individual efforts are the ones he makes in his classroom. He carefully selects how he addresses students even in potentially confrontational situations and solicits student cooperation and response to better serve them: “I tell children I’m a much better teacher when you let me know how I can reach you.”

Researcher Reflection/Observations

Danny Lee is a single father and a teacher who was one of the first staff members to respond to the research participation request. He understands the hindrances to fully participating in children’s education. During the interview, he informed me of the efforts that he makes to support students when he is informed of their personal and familial challenges. According to
him, balancing multiple tasks for single parents could result in emotional fatigue and stress on the parent.

**Marsha Kendall**

Marsha is a health educator with an outside agency that provides free health services to the students of this high school. She is married with one child, currently pregnant and was raised by two parents. According to her, the choice to raise the children by themselves is strength on its own:

Not staying in a dysfunctional family relationship or a couple staying together for the sake of the kids when they obviously shouldn’t . . .

As for challenges, Gina identified financial limitations and increased responsibility as major challenges. Playing the role of the father and mother places undue pressures and a certain level of expectation on the parents; they feel they have to measure up to their peers and their children’s expectation of parenting. Despite these pressures, single parents continue to perform their parenting roles in addition to their jobs, their own education and finding time to themselves.

In terms of current support, Marsha does not know of any supportive programs created for single parents only. She recommends that educators and community members conduct a needs assessment to identify single parents within the community prior to determining appropriate services. She also encourages the development of single parent support groups and support for teens from single parent families for camaraderie and referral to essential support services. Another purpose of the teen support group is to encourage personal empowerment. As a health educator, Marsha perceives her role as one that encourages students to ownership and responsibility for their sexual identity, body, and overall health. She believes that by offering
medical services to low-income families or those without access to health care, she is able to support single parent families who fall within these categories as well.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Though not a district employee, Marsha performs a unique and non-punitive role with the high school student population. Her organization provides confidential health services that some families would not ordinarily have access to. Another interesting point to note is that because the identity of students who access her services is protected, she is able to reach students at a much deeper level than school staff can. This point is critical to this research because researchers such as Garasky & Meyer (1996) have stated that some children who reside with single fathers have exhibited poorer access to health care in comparison to their counterparts who live with single mothers. This could mean that at this high school, the presence of free medical services could potentially minimize the numbers of students who reside with single dads without health care.

**Melba Moore**

Melba is a teacher at the high school. She herself is a single parent of three children who informed me that her choice to be single was a recent decision. She believes that one strength of single parents in some cases is the parent’s decision to be single in response to an abusive relationship. In such cases, the parents can be viewed as positive role models. This parenting decision, however, may very well bring along its own demerits. According to her, challenges may include time limitations due to the fact the remaining parents are the only ones taking on multiples roles, for example, working extended hours and yet needing to spend time with the children.

In cases where there are no extended family members available to assist and provide
adult supervision, children may also miss out on learning basic self-care such as personal cleanliness. During the interview, Melba gave examples of students in similar circumstances in her classroom. Ms. Moore also added that another difficulty associated with single parenting in some situations is that children may only receive one gender’s perspective unless there are relatives or other adults available to participate in raising the children.

In terms of current support, Melba believes that schools can be safe places for students to be during the day when teachers develop positive relationships with their students and provide classroom structure and predictability. As a special education case manager, her job affords her the opportunity to get involved with her students’ families. When she comes across families in need, she has been able to refer them to local resources and social services. An example of such local resource is the county mobile health van that provides free medical checkup and physicals.

To better support, Melba believes that a school can be a one-stop shop for social services by bringing the services to the campus or simply referring out families to the appropriate agencies. As a case manager, she goes above and beyond their roles in order to reach students, even it means she would have to advocate with other colleagues on behalf of her students.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Melba Moore was quite eager to provide her perspective both as a teacher and single parent. She takes her role as a special education case manager very seriously and is able to take advantage the proximity to families it provides. Her emphasis on personal cleanliness comes from her interactions with some of her students who have arrived at school looking unkempt. According to her, these students either lived with single older relatives or families where there was not a lot of supervision.
Omar Stephens

Omar is a teacher on the high school campus, married and raised in a dual parent family. He believes that one of the strengths of single parent families is that every member of the family usually takes up additional responsibilities. This sense of responsibility also extends to older children caring for younger siblings. Another important value of single parenting is that children of single parents have a tendency to value the one parent that they have.

According to Omar, one major obstacle faced by single parent families is the lower academic achievement of some students because of increased responsibilities at home. He is concerned that some students would have to choose between completing homework and completing their family obligations. Another issue is that when parents have to work extended hours, students can go unsupervised.

Mr. Stephens believes the high school currently provides a myriad of services for single parent families. One such service is the availability of county mobile health van that provides free medical services to students. The school also provides some after school programs and utilizes multiple forms communication such as emails, auto dialer messages and the online Schoolloop student information database.

To better support single parent families, Omar Stephens believes that unless staff members take the time to better understand the relationship between family life and student performance, they will not be able to effectively connect with and engage students. He says:

We have to change how we do things and deal with children. This is a cool shift in time when the role of the teacher is changing. Kids are dealing with life, not just home and school and teacher training does not fix that. It will take time and willingness on the part of the teacher; however it will be more personally rewarding and probably more depressive and heartbreaking.
While Omar applauds the use of technology as a means of reaching families, he acknowledges the digital divide still exists and also describes the “homework” divide where some students are simply unable to complete homework because of increased familial responsibilities. Omar believes that teachers must review the importance of homework and consider other means of providing practice and repetition when they plan their lessons.

Another way to reach single parent families with time constraints is to take our messages and resources to them and become more flexible with meetings, dates, and appointments. In his opinion, these changes to educational practices may be difficult to achieve with veteran teachers but easier with newer teachers. As a teacher, he acknowledges that his job affords him the opportunity to provide mentorship to students and be a role model. He considers himself supportive of the whole child because he teaches a non-core subject that does not affect school accountability. Finally, although he is an older white male, he continues to seek ways to be relevant to his students, by paying attention to media.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Omar Stephens exemplifies educators who are not afraid to explore innovative ways to connect with his students. During this interview, it was apparent to me that although Omar was raised in a dual parent family. He articulated the importance of educators taking advantage of the skills that students already have. One such skill is the increase in responsibilities for older children in single parent families. Mr. Stephens provided me with an example of a student who rarely completed homework because of his after school responsibilities. As a student within an academy team, teachers often meet to address students’ academic and emotional needs. During one of their meetings with a student, they discovered the main reason he was underperforming was because there was little time to do homework. Omar described how this conversation with
the student inspired this group of teachers to reconsider other ways to provide practice and repetition beside homework.

**Riba Rosales**

Riba is an administrative assistant who serves in the front office of the school. Because of the nature of her job, she is often a first contact for students and parents of students who have received discipline or those with concerns and needs about staff, programs, and other school matters. Her approach is often gentle and calm towards visitors. When asked about her strengths, Riba at first admitted to having difficulty with reporting any because she was accustomed to hearing the deficits of single parenting, but she later provided a few. She believes that single parent families can become close since all they have is each other. She also states that children can become independent adults because of the additional responsibilities that they undertook as younger children living in single parent families.

Challenges include lack of childcare for younger children and limited time for parental participation in school and with each other. In some cases, employers are not supportive of single parents who need to take time off work for their family obligations. To better support single parent families, Ms. Rosales would like schools and communities to emulate those who provide after school programs like the YMCA. She applauds the district for implementing the online Schoolloop program that allows parents to check their children’s progress, attendance and communicate with teachers. On a larger scale, she would like to see the county provide family advocates and more employers provide onsite childcare centers and improve employee morale.
Furthermore, Ms. Rosales would like to see truancy contracts, home visits, and weekly progress reports implemented on a larger scale. For staff members, she advocates that they treat students from single parent families with respect and a high sense of value. In order for them to effectively do so, members of school staff would have to put aside their personal beliefs and biases, which act as barriers to fostering positive relationships with single parent families. In her opinion, teachers can also support single parent families by recognizing children with reading deficiencies as early as third grade for interventions. Finally, in her capacity, Riba Rosales views her job as an opportunity to develop positive relationships with at least three or four kids. She plans to listen, go out of her way to support, and steer single parents towards resources as well as maintaining relationships with families she encounters daily.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

During the interview, Riba was very reflective. When asked to list the strengths of single parent families, Riba quickly stated that she found it easier to provide challenges than strengths. One critical issue Riba raised that I could relate to is the challenge of providing childcare for younger children. She described the challenges that arise when children of single parents are ill and the parent’s employer is not supportive of their taking time off. As a solution, Riba would like to see more employers provide onsite childcare facilities for staff with younger or ill children.

**Ross Madden**

Ross is a counselor with an outside agency who has worked with the high school students on various issues pertaining to substance abuse, poor decision making, poor attendance, and failing grades. Because he is not a school district employee, Mr. Madden has the opportunity to
connect with students on a different level than school officials. He has often been successful at working with marginalized students because students do not perceive his role as threatening.

Ross Madden believes that the strengths of single parent families include the ability to provide structure, clear expectations, and boundaries for children. He grew up with his single mother who was firm and no-nonsense. She had a good work ethic and assigned responsibilities to each of her children and provided strong leadership to her family. Their extended families were also led by single mothers. These mothers held two to three jobs to support their families and created a strong support network for themselves. He says, “It was a village back then,” implying that relatives helped to supervise each other’s children.

Today, Ross believes that the greatest challenge that single parent families face is the absence of supervision because many are no longer part of the safety net created by the village. Each parent now has to make ends meet, has the difficulty of balancing work and raising children and will most likely neglect homework supervision. One way he believes single parents can manage these roles is for older children to take on the supervisory responsibilities.

With regards to support structures from schools and community, he states that there is help for families that reach out to the schools. Although he admits that many families may not be aware of the available resources, he applauds the parent sponsored PASS program available to students for weekend tutoring and parent workshops. He also stated that programs that specifically target certain groups would prove to be more beneficial than generic ones. This year, Ross’ agency will be piloting a 9th grade intervention program that addresses truancy and lack of school engagement. His goal is to invite the parents of identified freshmen to his meetings. To better support single parent families, Ross Madden would like to see positive relationships
between all support groups; teachers, community members, coaches, single parent families and counselors.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Ross Madden was also raised by a single mother and many relatives who were also single mothers. During this interview, he described the “village” approach to child-rearing that he experienced so much so that he could not “get away with anything” because there were too many aunts to discipline him. Ross also attributed his success to being raised by women with strong personalities. He believes that schools are already doing a lot for families by providing several services and would like to see families take advantage of extended family and school services. To make accessing resources easier, schools would need to do a better job of advertising resources.

**Russell Lander**

Russell is the principal of the high school who graduated from the same school and has had both of his children graduate from the same school. When asked to describe the strengths of single parents, Russell’s initial response indicated that there was a great deal more of challenges than strengths. Despite these challenges, he believes that single parents can be strong advocates of their children. They are passionate and want what’s best for their children.

In terms of obstacle to fully participating in their children’s education, Russell stated that parents with a low level of education will struggle with advocating for their children. Furthermore, without additional adult support, the added pressures of being the sole individual in
the lives of the children or the lone breadwinner can result in fatigue. To compound things, many parents are forced to depend on their children for school information, especially when they do not possess the social capital. When they have multiple children and different schools, communicating with schools can become cumbersome.

In his role as the principal of the school, Mr. Lander understands that the buck stops with him when he receives parent complaints and hears their frustrations, for example, to appeal suspensions or to challenge teacher decisions. In his capacity, he has the ability to engage parents by first listening to their complaints. In many cases, he has found that this approach has often resulted in developing partnerships that would otherwise not have been possible. In his words:

Passion can be masked as anger. Parents will always advocate, love our children. Phone calls that are contrary to our expectation make us feel like decisions will be made that may jeopardize our children’s future. In such cases, we become highly emotional.

In terms of support, Russell believes that this high school provides a great deal of support. For example, in the small learning communities and academies, students are able to develop relations with their teacher and colleagues. Furthermore, he has continually fought to retain academic counseling services with site budget. The school has also made efforts to form partnerships with outside agencies that can provide additional counseling on personal issues, drug abuse, and overall health. Finally, the school continues to maintain and advocate parent partnerships with the groups such as the PTSA (Parent-Teacher-Students Association), ELAC (English Learner Advisory Council), and PIQE (Parent Institute for Quality Education).

According the Russell, despite our efforts with our families, there is still a need to improve our relationships and services to our families, for example increasing parent attendance at our back to school and open house events: “Parent involvement is our site goal and a missing element.” He hopes to reverse the lull in parent participation often experienced at the high school.
levels. One such way he plans to achieve this goal is the willingness to go to where our parents are. During high stake tests, he has conducted home visits in anticipation of the tests. He wants educators to think outside the box and implores school employees to go the extra mile to reach families. He advocates for “precinct walks” where volunteers could assist with conducting home visits to truant families of the high school. He strongly advocates for all students, not just those with parents who can advocate for them:

We need to look at all families not just those with social capital... Social capital varies with local government resource distribution. I make programmatic decisions that support our goals and objectives and I must look beyond instructional programs . . . Children don’t care what you know; they don’t care to know what we know... Finally, he believes that we must seek to improve efforts made to reach children from socio-economically disadvantaged single parent families

We have to find better ways to invest in our children, especially children of poverty and those who live in single parent families who are at a more significant disadvantage compared to other kids

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Russell Lander was very reflective throughout this process. While he was able to list the efforts currently employed at the school, he was also quick to admit the need to reevaluate, continuously, our parent involvement programs. He was also able to state the significance of advocating on behalf of single parent families.

**Sally Mark**

Sally is former social worker who works as a counselor at the site. She also worked as social worker who made placement decisions on behalf of foster children. In her opinion, single parenting could offer some stability for families whose relationships degenerated when the other parent was involved. In her opinion, any parent who chooses to raise children on their own rather
than giving up on them should be commended. For Sally, challenges encountered by single parent families include language barriers for non-English speakers, balancing work and illnesses (children and parent) and fatigue from taking on multiple roles. Sally says:

You are the only one with the children 24-7 and will sometime need a mental break. When they are frustrated, they have no one to share the frustrations with. When parent is sick and needs care, who takes over?

Sally does not believe current services provided at the school target single parent families; however, she knows of individuals who probably reach out and are more flexible with single parent families, especially when scheduling appointments. To better support single parent families, she would like to see a support group that also provides childcare while the parent is in the meetings. By doing so, she hopes that we will be able to build connections with families who cannot attend the regular meetings.

As a counselor, Sally views her job as critical in offering recommendations and direction to students. She considers herself a good listener (someone to vent to), and she creates a safe place where students can share confidential information. She regularly talks to adolescents who want to commit suicide and won’t share the information with their parents. For some students, she is a friend.

**Researcher Reflection/Observations**

Sally’s experience with single parent families came from her personal relationship with a single father on two children. She eagerly described the challenges associated with moving children between their parents’ homes and the struggles of providing stability for the children in such situations. She views herself as an advocate for children and families and believes that her job as a counselor and confidant enable her to act in such advocacy roles.
Stella Freeman

Stella is a front office administrative staff at the high school raised by a single mother. For many years, Stella was the only bilingual staff member who received all the calls and served as the lone interpreter for Spanish speaking parents. In her opinion, single parenting can prove to be beneficial to the family if relatives such as the grandparents get involved. She believes there is strength in one parent making decisions in comparison to two.

In Stella’s opinion, limited finances and having to balance work and family alone (school, home, extra-curricular activities) can prove to be very challenging for single parents. She believes that after-school tutoring, clubs, and other programs should be maintained at the high school. She would like to see schools collaborate with community organizations such as churches to provide support for parents. In some cases, English classes could be offered to the non-English speakers. She regrets that schools are restrained from taking advantage of the services churches offer. For example, some Catholic churches have fulltime counselors that could work with schools and save them the cost of employee salaries and benefits.

As for parents, Ms Freeman asks them to live within their means and not feel obligated to purchase all the things that their children want. She advises that children be encouraged to participate in sports and avoid extended television hours. In her role as a front office staff, Stella feels like a lot of single parent families depend on her. She believes that she is a good listener as well. In many cases, family problems stem from conflicts between children and step parents or their parent’s significant other. Because Stella is bilingual, she often interacts with English learner families who have complained about the demeaning treatment from English speakers. Stella’s family’s personal example sheds more light on this matter, where on several occasions
when she had to translate for her mother, people yelled at the mother because she was visually impaired and not a fluent English speaker. Finally, she does not get offended when parents come across as aggressive towards her. In her words: “Parents yell at us because they are defending their children.”

Research Reflection/Observations

Stella Freeman was raised by an immigrant non-English speaking single mother. As a young child, she often had to advocate and acted as an interpreter for her mother on many occasions. Despite these challenges, Stella admits that the additional support from the Catholic Church helped her a lot in providing after school engagement opportunities. Another factor that was critical to her success was her mother’s determination and no-nonsense approach.

Summary

Chapter four has reflected the views of nine single parent families (including parents, and high school students), as well as eleven school, district, and community agency staff members. As the researcher in a participatory action research (PAR), my views, as well those of my oldest daughter (a high school freshman), have also been included. Although not a single parent, I had the opportunity to live as a single parent of three children during a one month period in the absence of my husband who was away on a business trip.

A few common threads within the data such as financial limitations, time constraints, transportation to and from school, and after school tutoring became apparent factors and needs of single parent families. These factors and challenges were postulated by participants in each group. Single parent families did not demand expensive, expansive new programs, but they did wish to be seen and heard, recognized and invited to participate. It is important to note that
throughout this research, single parent families declared their desire for educators, community leaders, and the society as a whole to become cognizant of the challenges encountered by their families. It also became apparent through interviews with staff that many had never considered the strengths of single parent families and had never sought to know more about these issues. These interviews created opportunities for reflective discourse that acknowledged the fact that no real consideration had been given to understanding the impact of policies and decisions on single parent families by district and school employees.

In chapter 5, I will highlight the common concerns and share the underlying themes reflected in the quotes gathered from participants. Some of these underlying themes were also identified as the result of observations made during the personal interactions with participants. Finally, you will find recommendations made by the single parent families, school/district staff, and from me, the researcher.
Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Pedro Noguera (2004) maintains that developing social capital is the only way to address a power imbalance and nurture productive relationships. Noguera’s social capital frame will aid in presenting the needs, experiences, and recommendations identified by single parent participants of this study. This body of work will emphasize the importance of consciously seeking parent engagement for the betterment of the communities that schools serve. It will create an awareness of the challenges encountered by single parent families and highlight the strengths and values that they bring to the school community. It is based on the premise that all parents fundamentally desire the same outcomes of success for their children and are often willing to participate when they can. Despite this desire, many are unable to actively participate due to factors that prevent them from doing so. Such factors include the lack of time, low parental education, and lack of flexibility of school personnel to parent schedule (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Blum et al., 1988; Gennetian & Knox, 2003; Manning & Brown, 2003).

The intent of this study was to develop an understanding of the true needs of single parent families and engage them in the process of school reform. This study may assist educators and politicians in this city in better serving the students of single parents and closing the opportunity gap. It calls attention to the need to address rather than reproduce social and economic inequalities that prevail between poor lower class students and middle class students. It beckons people in authority to examine the impact of their decisions on students from single parent families. It reveals the need to scrutinize the current structures that sometimes permit school
personnel to make unfair decisions with the air of legitimacy, and it challenges hegemonic acceptance of merit and mobility. That is, the belief that winners and losers earn what they receive in the end.

It is intended that with the findings of this type of study, educators and politicians in this city and beyond could begin to better address the opportunity gap. The proposed approach to engaging single parent families mirrors the work of Paulo Friere (2001) who believed that when marginalized people participate in discourse that negotiates their freedom, only then can their true empowerment occur. Such empowerment is visible in urban schools that perceive poor communities as sources of opportunity and support in developing social capital as a means to achieving positive academic student outcomes. Schools that pursued developing social capital have tended to rely heavily on the cooperation and support of parents (Noguera, 2004). High School A could benefit from adopting such an effective strategy.

In his work titled “Transforming Urban Schools through Investments in the Social Capital of Parents, Noguera (2004) described some of the ways in which schools could convert parent involvement into parent empowerment (social capital). In addition to placing the responsibility of developing partnerships with parents on schools, he clearly distinguished between negative social and positive social capital. According to Noguera (2004), schools where underperformance prevailed and was accepted were often those who perceived the community as “threatening.” Such schools isolated themselves from the community and as such undermined the value of parent and community involvement. In the absence of active community engagement, families with resources (financial and social) will exit such cities, leaving those without the means to escape. Relationships with families who remain in such communities are characterized with fear and distrust. Such “underlying” negative feelings were expressed by
some participants in this study. Positive social capital in contrast is present when all parents are perceived as valuable sources of opportunity and support for the improvement of students’ lives and are characterized with trust and mutual respect.

One major factor in determining the nature of social capital present in any school is the degree of social distance between school officials and parents. In other words, differences in class/social status and differences in roles or position can determine who has power in making significant decisions between the two groups. For example, it is a documented fact that parents of poor Black and Latino students (like the majority the single parent participants in this study) are often treated poorly in contrast to the parents or more affluent status (Comer, 1981). With institutional power in the hands of the schools authorities, marginalized parents, without the support or means or time to negotiate with schools, are at the mercy of school authorities. Unfortunately, this power differential is not just typical to public schools alone but prevalent in the larger society as well and leads some participants such as Davina Lang to describe “feeling low on the totem pole. . . seem like somebody always want to kick dirt on me.”

The experiences of participants Sonya Lawrence and Jane Bradley demonstrate the subtle differences in power even among single parent families. In this example, Sonya Lawrence, a Caucasian single mother of a child with special needs described how she needed to challenge school A staff regarding her special needs daughter’s placement and the provisions of her individual education plans (IEP). She was able to accomplish this feat because she is a trained special needs educator. In contrast, Jane Bradley (a single Hispanic grandmother) could not successfully advocate for her middle school grandson’s special education needs on her own but had to recruit the assistance of a county educational advocate to meet his needs (underlying feelings of distrust).
In an age when many believe in Neoliberalism and the, “You get what you put into life” approach, there is the need for local communities and schools to counter this misconception and jointly address social issues such as poverty, joblessness, the lack of, or limited resources. Rather than waiting for some federal or state program to transform our communities, we could begin by transforming schools into the one-stop-shop for social stability and developing parent potential for the sole purpose of improving the lives of the people in the community that we serve. Among other needs, single parents who participated in this research indicated the need for basic education, employment resources to better support their families, and assistance with student homework.

This chapter will identify the glaring needs of single parent families that emerged from this study and will attempt to uncover the underlying experiences of single parent families. It will also provide concrete recommendations as well as suggestions that could prompt a new approach to daily interactions with all families, especially single parent families within our community. Patterns discovered in students, parents, and staff responses will provide the basis for these recommendations. Sample instruments and tools used in gathering information are located in the appendices section of this thesis.

Identified Needs of Single Parent Families

Several glaring needs immediately emerged from surveys, focus groups, and interviews. The needs shared by single parents and their students include transportation, academic support, extracurricular opportunities, single parent support, financial provisions, health care access, and a recognition of their time constraints.
Transportation

One glaring need that emerged throughout all phases of this research was the issue of transportation. While several single parents expressed the desire to participate in their children’s education, many described times when they were unable to visit the school because they ran out of gas money. According to this group of single parents, due to economic constraints, there are times when they are unable to purchase gas for their vehicles or are unable to buy bus passes; therefore, neither they nor their children were able to attend school on those days. Some also stated that even when they were able to afford bus passes, there were concerns regarding pick up times and bus routes. Single parent, Davina Lang described their experience:

I want to participate in school more but they don’t have a lot of offers and sometimes they do have things but I’m unable to get there because of gas, the economy. I don't have gas.

Charlotte Ramirez also shared:

I try to get them to school but it's hard sometimes when your income run out, no gas. We participated with getting the bus passes and we stretch that.

Single parents and their students explained that due to complicated and long bus rides that covered multiple routes, students often arrived late at school. They also stated that because buses along the school route were infrequent and arrived only once every hour, the buses sometimes often arrived filled to capacity, making it impossible for students to get on. As a result, students have had to wait for another hour.

The transportation issue was raised by multiple families and was a major topic of a parent focus group. It appeared that this is truly a factor that impacts the extent to which parents can be involved in their students’ education. It is the direct result of financial limitations and a lack of
social wherewithal to navigate through transportation issues. For those who are able to drive and have vehicles, they are often unable to afford gasoline about half way through the month and, therefore, have to depend on public transportation. Unfortunately, public transportation is unreliable and available only once an hour along the school routes. Because of such infrequency and longer intervals, some buses may arrive filled or nearly filled to capacity and are unable to pick up additional commuters. For many students, this poses a problem because they become automatically late to school by an hour and may suffer academic consequences. For those without the will to persist, there is a tendency for them to return home once they miss their bus. The ineffectiveness of societal infrastructure like public transportation if not addressed in this community, will only perpetuate the pre-existing marginalization of these single parent families. Recommendations made by participants to address transportation challenges will rent be described later in this chapter.

**Academic and Extracurricular Support**

Several parents and students repeatedly asked for tutoring and after school support services. Many were not aware of the after school help currently offered by the school, and when informed during this research, appeared to prefer at-home academic support rather than the tutorial services provided at school. The main reason for this preference was the challenge of transportation once the tutoring had ended and safety issues associated with staying later after school. This after school academic need is greater for families whose parents work extended hours and/or possess low educational levels. For English learners, this need is even greater due to language barriers. A recent immigrant student, Anna Joseph, explained that because her mother was schooled in Mexico and did not obtain a college degree so she was unable to assist Anna
with her homework. For another student immigrant, Georgina Guevara, only her uncle was able to help with homework, quizzes, and tests.

The reality is that single parents have less time to support students and, in this study, they lack resources to pay for tutoring, hence the request for after-school tutoring. After school tutoring was a common request by students, parents, and staff. Many of the participating parents admitted to being unable to support their children, either due to low educational levels and/or language barrier. Several depended on the school to meet the academic needs of their students adequately. Unfortunately, at the time of the interview, the school could only offer limited tutoring this year due to the loss of the after school 21st Century grant, but it did not appear that many of the participants knew of the tutoring program. Thankfully, despite this loss, families may still be able to access academic support through the Supplemental Educational Services (SES) designated to Title 1 schools like school A. Letters announcing this opportunity were mailed home to recipients of the free and reduced lunch program at the beginning of the school year informing them of the availability of tutoring services.

As we address the need for after school tutoring, it is important to note that single parents would like to see community-sponsored boys and girls organizations that could positively engage students in healthy, productive activities during weekends as well as after school and minimize their exposure to crimes and negative peer pressure.

**Single Parent Support Structures**

This recommendation was made during a parent focus group. What single parents wanted was an opportunity to be able to create support systems for one another. This would be an opportunity for them to share best practices, strategies, and resources with other. This group
would be a parent-facilitated organization that would meet regularly on campus. Such a group would not only be valuable to the parents themselves, but it could also prove to be an opportunity to increase positive parent presence on the campus. A collective sense of belonging brought about by membership of support groups and networks of this nature increases parents’ voices and active participation in the decision making process. This empowerment was what researchers like Noguera (2004) referred to as social capital. Single parents proposed offering parenting classes, English learner classes, basic resume writing and job search resources that might begin to complement the work that schools do during the day. These proposals would transform schools to become one-stop shops for family resources.

For people like Greta Lopez, there is still the need for the school to empower parents to be able to provide educational support for their children. According to her, single parent families already get help with food stamps from government, but the school can help the students and parents who don’t have the degree or only finished elementary or high school. A model that provided training for parents on how to better support their children is the Parent Resource Center of Stockton Unified in Stockton, California. In a report released in 1997, the district provided training and information to parents on parent involvement in their high-poverty, racially diverse urban school district. Classes offered to parents included educational decision making and involvement in Title I program planning and evaluation. Other classes included parenting, volunteering, and mentoring. Their main purpose of the Stockton parent resource program was to get parents to recruit other parents in lieu of the recruiting responsibility falling on the school administration. At the time of this report, approximately, 1200 parents, teachers and community members had graduated from this program. They also recorded a total of 3,500 hours of parent presence on school playgrounds, cafeterias, libraries and classrooms.
A similarly well-documented and ongoing program can be found in Syracuse City School District where a free Parent University exists. According to their 2013 brochure, courses for parents include math transition into common core standards. Furthermore, they stated that their objectives for creating the Parent University was to provide parents with necessary resources to support their children’s education provide opportunities and support for families to achieve their own personal academic and non-academic goals. To ensure parents can attend, the district provides transportation vouchers and childcare for parents who attend classes.

Parents also expressed a need for employment resources and access to job training. For many of the participants, this was a major area of need. For example, Charlotte Ramirez believes that the best support for her family is in providing employment resources and job training. Although many like her are thankful for county aid, they recognize that there are restrictions attached to receiving such financial support. They would like to ease off public aid into achieving their own independence.

Greta Lopez, who works on a temporary basis for the district, is seeking full time employment and resume writing assistance. She believes that by offering services like these to parents and guardians, schools would demonstrate care for their families’ well-being.

**Financial Provisions**

Financial constraints were a major barrier identified by all participant groups. Many single parent families were on government aid, received Section 8 housing and free and reduced lunch. Despite this limitation, many expressed the desire to participate actively in their children’s education and at their children’s schools. Single parents described struggling to provide school supplies and other basic necessities. For example, when Jane Bradley could not pay rent, she felt
the need to hide this from her grandchildren. The only support she received was from her sister who shared the home and paid part of the rent.

Financial limitations were also reflected in single parents’ inability to participate in extra-curricular activities, provide transportation throughout the month, and in some cases, feed their families. One way the school currently supports single parent families is by providing free and reduced lunch programs and occasional bus passes. In the words of parents Charlotte Ramirez and Davina Lang: “I don’t have too much – I’m on AFDC and it bothers me ‘cause I [would] like to do more but I can’t so that kind of keeps me down…”

When asked how her family supports her daughter’s education, Charlotte responded with the following statement:

. . . Starting with the income is AFDC, SSI, and a little bit of child support. And our living arrangement help us because we under Section 8 and getting them to school. I try to get them to school but it’s hard sometimes when your income run out, no gas. We participated with getting the bus passes and we stretch that. . .

**Health Care**

The need for health care was especially critical for people like Gertrude Ulysses, who put in an application for Medi-Cal. She has had inflammation of the cornea for 20 years, and she needs a corneal transplant. She says that without this operation, she will be unable to drive and will need to remain dependent on others for transportation. For many other participants dependent on Medicare and public health, continued access to social services is critical. There is no doubt that many would be unable to meet immunization requirements like the TDAP shots required for school enrollment if programs like this and after-school tutoring programs are completely eliminated.
Recognition of time constraints

For single parents, being able to balance daily demands of parenting with attending school activities and conferences is a challenge. For those with children at different schools, time constraints are a major deterrent to getting involved at their children’s schools. People like Yasmine Acosta, who ran a day care from her home, would not be able to attend programs like ELAC (English Learner Advisory Council) because it is scheduled during a time when she has to work. For others, juggling multiple responsibilities has often led to fatigue and added stress and required them to neglect their other duties and responsibilities. As Sonya Lawrence revealed, “I am tired a lot, always trying to catch up.”

Underlying Themes

“It is greed to do all the talking but not to want to listen at all.” (Democritus)

In the previous section, I shared the needs identified by single parents and their students. In this section, I will attempt to capture the underlying feelings I heard associated with the comments made by participants. Many themes emerged including a desire for others to recognize the individual as well as feelings of fear and distrust, low status, and loneliness, whenever possible; participants’ words were used as headings for these themes.

Dependence on family and others because other parent is not involved

There were mixed experiences with regard to the degree to which single parent participants wanted other people involved in their families. While there were those who currently receive support from extended family members, there were also those did not want family members involved. Also, while there were those who longed for the presence of the other parent, as in the case of Gertrude Ulysses, whose husband died in an auto accident, there were those who
preferred not to associate with that other parent due to prior negative experiences, including Charlotte Ramirez, Davina Lang, and Yasmine Acosta. In all three cases, they preferred to distance themselves from the fathers of their children rather than to have them present. This feeling was also expressed by staff participants Amanda Scott, Marsha Kendall, and Melba Moore, who stated that it was better for a parent to become single than to remain in a negative relationship with the other parent.

For some single parents with extended family, there was a downbeat feeling associated with needing to depend on the extended family’s support. For example, recent immigrants and single parents Gertrude Ulysses and Yasmine Acosta, who live with immediate relatives, felt that despite being appreciative of extended family support, they would prefer to be able to attain a certain degree of independence. For example, Gertrude’s daughter, Anne Joseph, depends on her aunt – not her mother – for transportation to and from school. According to Anne, she is often late to school because she has to wait for her cousins to get ready in the mornings. She also expressed similar concerns with computer access, since she has to share only one computer with her cousins. She has sometimes been able to use school computers to augment the family computer.

**Every child is different**

“Every child is different, I have two children and I have to treat them differently.”

(Gertrude Ulysses)

What is most intriguing about this statement is that it suggests that educators cannot provide generic services in hopes of meeting individual needs. Gertrude’s observation confirms the basis for this research – that without parent and community involvement, schools will not
successfully achieve student and societal improvement. It is a clarion call to all service providers in education and health to treat children as individuals rather than a generic group. To achieve this feat, there must be ongoing conversations between parents and guardians who know their children and those school officials and other community members who are supposed to serve their children. In his 2004 book, *Transforming Urban Schools Through Investments in the Social Capital of Parents*, Noguera states that omission by school officials in making organized efforts to include parents of disadvantaged children was a missed opportunity to alleviate poverty and reform the communities that attempted to serve them. Such omissions are not only missed opportunities, but they are reflective of the pervasive unfair treatment given to parents who are ill-equipped to sufficiently advocate for their children’s needs. Noguera (2004) proposed that equipping and empowering parents should be the responsibility of school districts interested in improving the quality of life of their students and the greater community.

**Fear and Distrust**

Many participants expressed a sense of fear and distrust in their dealings with the school and other organized institutions. One participant in particular, Davina, shared her frustrations with inequitable discipline measures taken with students. In particular, she described how her son was punished for an incident and when her son became a victim of a similar incident, the perpetrator did not receive any consequences. This deep sense of distrust prevented her from giving permission to her sons to participate in the student forums. Rather than getting offended, the researcher had to understand that the distrust was the result of many years of being disappointed by public officials.

Davina was not alone in feeling this way. Parents Jane Bradley, Gertrude Lopez, Sonya Lawrence, and student Charmaine Lawrence expressed similar disappointments. These parents
repeatedly expressed frustrations with their inability to reach teaching staff and administration both at this school and district. For example, when a single parent Sonya illustrated the difficulty she experienced with her daughter Charmaines’s special education placement, earlier in the year. According to her, being a special services educator herself allowed her to advocate for her daughter and to identify her individual education plan (IEP) compliance issues, yet she still received a substandard response prior to her intervention. For Jane Bradley, a single grandmother, things were more drastic. She found that the only way she could get her middle school grandson special education services was by inviting the county educational advocate first to obtain testing for her grandson and then to seek additional interventions when he failed to show academic progress. As at the time of his interviews, this student was failing every class except physical education.

Such inequalities in our system must not be tolerated. Without her education, Sonya Lawrence may not have been able to advocate for the changes made to her daughter’s IEP. As at the time of the interview, Jane Bradley still spoke of needing to re-invite the advocate back to her grandson’s middle school. This was primarily because he was still failing the majority of his classes. According to Noguera (2004), building social capital (collective benefits derived from participation in social organizations) has been the only means of countering such power imbalance and bringing about respectful and supportive relationships.

**Low on the totem pole**

For some single parents, there was a feeling of discouragement due to their personal experiences. In one case, Davina Lang made the following statement:

I’m low on the totem pole not being able to get down there to do what other parents are doing as far as jobs... Seem like people always kicking dirt on me ’cause I don’t work,
but by the grace of God I am able to take care of myself and take care of my boys but there’s always someone around the corner always trying to kick dirt on me. . .

Although this feeling was articulated by Davina, several other participants indirectly alluded to experiencing moments where their single parent families were made to feel inadequate in comparison to other dual parent families. When Davina made the above statement, she was referring to her inability to integrate back into the workforce after receiving a felony several years before; however, similar emotions were expressed by now district administrator, Amanda Scott. Scott described the fierce feeling of wanting to compensate for the absence of the father of her children. She clearly wanted to ensure that her boys (now men) did not suffer for her decision to be single and did not miss out anything that they needed. On many occasions when she took the boys to baseball games, she remembered being the only mother without a significant other. Rather than receiving support from other women, Amanda felt alienated by them because they did not want a single woman around their husbands.

**We’re doing this alone**

Throughout this research, parents and students expressed the impact of having only one parent perform multiple roles, especially those directly related to raising the children. While some of the single parents/mother participants may have become comfortable with their choice of being single, there were a few who continued to express their disappointment with the absence of the other parent. As a result, they expressed the need for partnerships with school staff to alleviate the anxiety associated with homework and extracurricular activities. For many single parents, such partnerships are crucial since schools could offer structure and dependability in comparison to their family members. For example, Charlotte Ramirez made the following statement:
I have family around, but they are no help. If I can make it through one month, I can make it through the year.

... I am single because ain’t no man will come and change my life. I don’t feel like I’m missing anything. I’m raising my kids to be better than the ones I don’t want to be around me. I can’t say I was close to any family member. My dad was in jail when I was 6 months old, just got out 7 years ago. . .

Zoe Waters said:

I am the only one supporting him at home. I provide him with shelter, clothes. Dad is not there. He spent time with dad for 4 years, but the verbal and mental abuse was too much.

When asked how the school/district and community could better support their families, initially a few participants did not feel the school or district could help them in any way. For many, there was the feeling that since they had been “doing this alone” for a while, they could continue without further assistance. These single parents and students believed their challenges were not issues the school could address. These challenges were related to their lack of social capital and often associated with financial hardships.

Charlotte Ramirez offered the following:

I don’t like to call and ask for a helping hand from anyone but they always tell me call but I let them know, I will not. … I don’t feel like I’m missing nothing by not having a guy around.

Her son, student James Simpson, had adopted a similar stance “We just won’t ask and if we can’t get it, too bad.”

**There is always something missing**

When asked to reflect on one statement that would speak on behalf of all single parents, Davina proclaimed, “There’s always empty space; there’s always something missing although we may not show it and you may look at our face and not see it, but we all need support and help.” For Davina, making this one statement was a little difficult. This was probably because
she had a lot to say throughout the interviews and eagerly volunteered personal information. Davina was very open to school involvement and alluded to this fact throughout the study. She is eager to form partnerships with others and could be a great single parent group leader once trust can be established with others in the group.

Gertrude Ulysses, a widow, described her loneliness; “Divorce is different because you are better off without that other person, but separation by death is worse. I am lonely because he supported me, backed me up. I do not think I am better off without him.” While she is grateful that her sister’s family is able to assist her, she would rather have her husband. Of course to her, he was everything, their sole breadwinner, and her friend and partner. This truly distinguishes Gertrude from the other participants, who may have grown accustomed not to having their significant other around because she still struggles with moving on without him.

Fight for them

Davina Lang is a parent often perceived as aggressive towards staff on issues pertaining to her children. What was eye-opening to me was the fact that she has fought against institutions just to be able to keep her family together. According to her, “I explain to my kids that I have had to fight a lot of demons. I explain what I’ve had to go through to fight for them. I tell them you’ll learn as you get older.”

In the statement above, Davina was describing the process of explaining life’s challenges to her children, particularly when they have asked why they had previously been placed in foster care. Prior to making this statement, Davina had also explained how she fought the system to have her children restored to her from foster care and to have a felony expunged from her record. She, too, expressed feelings of fear and distrust in organized societal institutions.
The “us versus the world” feeling emerged at multiple phases of this study. This feeling became apparent as parents made comments that suggested the need to protect their children against others. For example, Charlotte Ramirez, mother of four, explained how she feels the need to protect her family structure against suitors:

They (other parents) may have a husband or boyfriend that ruins that (family rules) or they are not strong enough to set goals or set rules the way we have it and that’s why I’m single. Like I tell ‘em, ain’t no man go wanna come and put up with I have going on. I’m not gonna let a guy change that because then I’m gonna have my kids think mum’s acting different because this guy is around or they don’t get this because some guy is around. I’m not gonna have my kids go through that. That’s how it was when I was growing up. So, I don’t feel like I’m missing nothing by not having a guy around, I have 3 guys at home that I’m raising to be better than the one I don’t want around my kids.

Charlotte Ramirez said that she was different from others on welfare in that she was not lazy. She described herself as being different because she did not have a boyfriend to support her family financially or interfere with her family routine. She also did not want the presence of other men to obstruct her interaction with her children.

Rather than alienating single parents who feel the same way that Davina Lang and Charlotte Ramirez feel and labeling them as impossible to reach, school and district staff must embrace them in order to be able to teach their children effectively. Since parents have knowledge of students’ lives outside of school, we ought to partner with them in developing effective pedagogical strategies (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It is worth noting that principal Russell Lander and district administrator Amanda Scott shared their understandings of the position taken by single parents. Principal Russell Lander commented:

Parents will always advocate, love our children. Phone calls that are contrary to our expectation make us feel like decisions … may jeopardize our children’s future. In such cases, we become highly emotional.

District Administrator Amanda Scott also said: “Love is the purpose of our career. People (single parents) respond out of fear.” Fear is often the by-product of negative prior experiences in
our relationship with others. This description of fear was succinctly explained by Principal Russell Lander during his interview. According to Lander, parents sometimes feel like nobody else has the right to make life-impacting decisions on their children except them. This feeling is exacerbated by weak connections between schools and their parent communities. This sense of fear could also be the result of receiving little to no assistance from friends and relatives as many participants stated during this research.

**We all want the same things for our children**

Another important theme that shone throughout this study was that parents, staff, and students all wanted the same outcomes – student success. Gertrude Ulysses made the following comment:

> All parents have the same expectation for their children. We don’t always take them though the same path to show them how to get to where we want them to be.

> All parents expressed high expectations for their children’s future but admitted to taking unique paths to attaining such success. All of the parents desired to maximize their resources in meeting their children’s needs but realize that there are limitations to their ability to do so. These barriers need not be viewed as disqualifiers to their ability to make contributions to curriculum and instruction (Anfara V., 2011) but rather should be an opportunity to connect with students’ cultural and familial differences. By including families in the “power” circle, parents can gradually become active contributors to their students’ success.

Delpitt (1988) stated, “Members of any culture transmit information implicitly to co-members. However, when implicit codes are attempted across cultures, communication frequently breaks down” (p.283). This implies that institutional rules and policies set by educators who are often middle class are easily adopted by children from middle class but not
embraced or understood by those from lower socio-economic class levels. Without acknowledging this disparity in the power structure, educators and single parent families will continue to marginalize families of lower socio-economic status.

**They probably don’t want me**

Davina Lang made the remark below when asked to describe her desire to participate in her children’s education:

> Well, I have R (her son) on the football team and I was looking for parent participation with that; I like to do parent participation. I like it to be so that I can just be seen, if I’m helping teachers with what she needs, maybe temporarily helping is [sic] she needs an aide, copying papers or whatever she needs, separating papers or what not. I been wanting to be around more you know to just be able to come. Talk the teachers that I am available to do things for them in class or set up this project. Things like that would help support me because my situation; I ain’t able to find a job like I want to. When you sent out this participation thing I was eager to participate; I wanted to let them know some of the challenges I have participating with my student. Never think that I don’t want to, being involved, if it’s bake sale or dance, you just have to let me know ahead of time; I’m always willing to come out. I’m always willing to come especially if I’m invited. You know sometimes, they send emails they already have a lot of people they want to participate, they probably don’t want me (laughs).

In the above quotation, single parent Davina Lang questions the sincerity of school personnel who invite parent participation. Comer (2005) stated schools wanted parents to cooperate by keeping their children under control but resist including them in further discussions about teaching/learning, management and culture, so they send mixed messages to parents like Davina who inadvertently feel unwanted by the school. Comer encouraged gradual introduction of collaborative opportunities between parents and staff in non-threatening situations.

**You ain’t been in my shoes**

Single parents also expressed a sense of being overwhelmed with raising their children alone by saying everyday is a struggle, paying rent, buying food, clothing, shoes, and supporting
students’ needs for school. Despite this struggle, they manage their family situations by laying down rules and keeping lines of communication open. Still, others cope with this task by putting up a defensive mechanism. For example, Davina Lang said, “You can’t tell me anything if you ain’t been in my shoes.”

She also commented:

> When my kids were removed from my home it caused me to have a felony. I was not able to get it expunged so I wasn’t able to get a job. . .They were moved for 4 years and I can’t get a job and be like the rest of the working class. I’m a good person; I mean well. I went to school I tried to get a trade so that after this was over with I would try to fit in with the society, but things didn’t just work out the way I planned. So now, I started again. . . wondering how God making a way for me.

> Several parents like Yasmine Acosta informed me that her biggest challenge was still not feeling supported others. She explained that when her daughter received a failing grade in World history, she felt let down by her daughter despite giving her daughter her best. This feeling of being alone was validated by Greta Lopez who said the following:

> We work hard for two people rather than just one person. We are everything for that child. We work hard and sometime we need some time off but we don’t have the time off and we have to do everything. That’s what I think and I guess that have to always be involved with their children, no matter what.

The details of each single parent’s experience are unique, but the experience of being disappointed by many institutions including schools and government is common. For someone like Davina who believes that only God can help her and that unless you have had similar experiences you could not help her, it is important for staff who serve this community to be provided with training for gradually winning over disenfranchised community members.
Recommendations

The following recommendations are reflective of research participants’ suggestions and recommendations. They are framed around the social capital models proposed by researchers Noguera (2004) and Comer (2005).

Listen more and create a welcoming atmosphere

Participants of this study asked that school staff be more open to listening to their concerns because parents often have no other advocates to speak on their behalf. While this skill is not one easily employed by all, it is possible to provide sensitivity and basic customer relationship training to faculty, administration, and front office staff. On one occasion, a parent participant expressed concerns about inconsistencies in discipline practices meted out by administration. According to single parent Davina Lang, all she wanted was for a school administrator to listen to her concerns and address them appropriately, but in her opinion her concerns were dismissed. In her example, she described how her son received discipline for an incident where he posted negative comments about a girl, and when others posted similar negative comments and pictures about him several months later, administration would not address this incident. In her mind, such inconsistencies send her mixed signals and cause her to question the sincerity of the school in involving parents.

The above scenario illustrates how African American single parent participant Davina Lang and her son received unequal treatment from school authorities. Though different in terms of intricate details, this incident is similar to one the vignettes explained by Noguera (2004) in his work Transforming Urban Schools Through Investments in the Social Capital of Parents. In his example, an African American family came to appeal their daughter’s suspension at an urban school and were labeled as “problematic” and not received with respect by the school’s principal.
In his opinion, Noguera revealed that the reason why this African American family was treated in this manner was due to the social distance between the school official and the parent and also the result of the differences in their roles and position. That is, the school principal in that vignette possessed institutional power to either mediate the circumstances or “enforce” the rules with an air of legitimacy. Such institutional structures will continue to reproduce inequality and further alienate single parent families like hers.

To overcome such feelings of distrust, Comer (2005) recommended that schools design different structures that redistributed the balance of power and increased distributed leadership. He proposed including classified employees, parents, teachers, and other community members in the decision process. To address the issues of discipline and restore trust, several school districts including City A Unified (AUSD) and Oakland Unified (OUSD) have begun to explore restorative justice models at their school sites. In OUSD for example, the district describes its mission for employing *restorative justice* (RJ) as needing to build community and respond to student misconduct with the goal of repairing harm and restoring relationships between those impacted. Furthermore, district administration intends to lower suspension/expulsion rates and foster positive school climates to eliminate racially disproportionate discipline practices and tackle the school to prison pipeline (OUSD Restorative Justice).

**Improve communication and create structures that anticipate and welcome parent involvement**

Currently, High School A sends most of its parent information via the school website *Schoolloop*, the automated dialer, and, to a lesser extent, via snail mail. Of all the methods applied, it appears the most effective method of communication is the automated caller system which reaches at least 85% of school families. For example, automated calls sent home to High
School A families reached only 1700 or the nearly 2,000 student body. Despite this relatively significant success rate, less than 25% of families (400 families) attended the Open House event. This dismal attendance rate should not be accepted as normal, but additional efforts to improve community relations and parent involvement must be considered.

Citing the work of Coleman (1988), Noguera suggested the importance of creating norms that facilitate action and cooperation between schools and parents. In his opinion, schools could effectively serve the needs of families and better reach disengaged families and those seeking involvement opportunities by increasing the closure between schools and the communities that they served. That is, making genuine efforts to invest in parents (especially single parents) can bring school personnel and parents closer. This desire for closeness was articulated by the single parent participants who desired sincere and open dialogue with the school that serves their community. An example of a school district that actively pursued this approach is the San Francisco Unified School District. In its efforts to include parents and the community, SFUSD has created an Office of Parent Relations to coordinate communication with parents, created and funded parent centers in poor neighborhoods specifically for African American, Asian and Latino families, developed community-based rallies and mobilization efforts to generate parent participation in school and district-wide affairs, and currently includes parents on the Superintendent’s cabinet. More details on the 2012 SFUSD’s Family Engagement and Partnership plan is available on the district website (sfusd.edu). This is an example of how school districts can take on the responsibility for reaching marginalized families.

In his *School Development Program (SDP) framework*, Comer (2009) provided a model for creating distributed leadership to include parents, support staff, and teachers in the decision making process at a school site. He proposed the creation of three structures: a School Planning
and Management Team, a Student and Staff Support Team, and a Parent Team. The Planning and Management team would be comprised of administrators, teachers, support staff and parents with the goal of creating the comprehensive school plan; the Student and Staff Support Team would be comprised of counselors, social workers, psychologists and nurses who would be charged with connecting students with resources, sharing and addressing student needs, and developing prevention programs. Finally, the job of the Parent Team would be to develop activities that support the school’s social and academic programs. For each of these teams, the major guiding principles are to find consensus, collaborate, and problem-solve with a no-fault-finding approach.

**Program Improvement through parent empowerment**

This section will address how High School A and the district can make concerted efforts to empower single parents with the sole purpose of improving the quality of life for them and the community at large. It will illustrate how meeting the needs delineated by the single parents of this research could ultimately raise student achievement and close the achievement gap.

During this research, several single parents requested parent education (basic Math and English) in order to be able to assist their children with homework. Still others wanted parenting classes and employment resources for themselves. To provide these resources, the San Francisco Unified School District Family Engagement and Partnership Plan and the Syracuse City District Model are examples that come to mind. In both instances, district-wide efforts have been made to provide training and classes that specifically address these needs. In addition making classes available to parents, SFUSD for example has created a “Parent Relations” department and an Office of Family and Community Engagement (OFACE). Both districts provided transportation vouchers, childcare, and translation services for parents who wanted to attend. For those who
could not attend, local parent centers situated in poor African American, Asian, and Latino neighborhoods were available to them. In cities where such conscious efforts are made and resources designated to address parent and community needs, trust will gradually be restored.

Another request made by the single parent participants is the need for a single parent support group. The purpose of such a group would be to give parents a voice in the school community. It would also be an occasion for them to feel a sense of efficacy as well. This single parent support group must not just be another parent club, but must be one supported by school and district administration, enabling them to channel their interests to the benefit of the schools.

For the first time this year at High School A, the county health van provides weekly free medical services to all students who attend that high school. Similar services are also located at various other schools within the district. While the provisions of medical services are laudable and praiseworthy, they are currently only for students who attend the hosting schools. Organized efforts by school personnel to either extend these services or provide ongoing referrals to other family members would be another way for schools to show they care and begin to gain the trust of the community.

Another great recommendation made by high school A principal, Russell was the introduction of precinct walks, a method similar to one politicians have utilized to solicit voter participation. By creating sections of the community and conducting home visits, schools with low parent involvement could begin to connect with the community. It is important to note that such efforts may require partnerships with other local organizations to minimize costs and volunteer maximize turn out since many grassroots organizations are led by local community leaders who know the community better than school staff.
Transportation

To address student transportation needs within school district A, participants would like to see specially designated school buses available. Such a feat can be achieved through collaboration between the school district and Tri-Delta (a public transportation provider). Secondly, single parent participants would like to see these school buses only travel limited routes and not extend to the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station or other stops in the neighboring cities. Thirdly, parents would like to see reduced and discounted rates offered to low income families.

Another interesting recommendation to address transportation needs of participants is the creation of a car pool list. Single parents did not ask the school to create or provide these lists, but asked that there be a parent coordinator for the carpool list. They would like to see that participants on this list be reliable and be willing to drive other people’s children to school as well.

Conclusion

Increasing the social capital of single parents is essential to the work that we do as educators. It is especially important now that statistics show that one in three students in High School A (and city A) lives in single parent families. With the factors that limit full parent involvement identified in this research by single parents, High School A and its district have only begun to scratch the surface of the extent of this need. There needs to be further discourse at the district level to address possible strategies for creating genuine parent partnerships such as those found in districts like San Francisco Unified and Syracuse City School Districts.
As educators and politicians seek to increase achievement and close the achievement gaps, it is critical that we give consideration to multiple approaches to serve students from single parent families. As stated by Epstein and Jansorn (2004), we must understand and acknowledge that students learn and grow at home, at school, and in their communities. Without continuity in the communications between all stakeholders, each group will most likely counteract each other’s efforts (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Such continuity is difficult to attain in the absence of social capital; therefore, concerted organized efforts must be made to empower marginalized parent groups in this district.

With the 2010 city census characteristics (p.41) indicating that close to 40% of the city’s family households are led by one parent, High School A, District staff, and City politicians cannot ignore the importance of increasing single parent involvement in schools. It is no longer sufficient to point fingers and blame parents for poor student performance, but it is time to address the needs of single parent families.

**Researcher Reflection on Research Process**

When asked how the school could support her family, student Charmaine Lawrence declared, “You guys don’t seem to care…you (referring to the researcher) seem to care.” When invited to participate in this research, Charmaine Lawrence eagerly returned the parent permission slip. For the next few days, she would show me her writing, art, and share any new developments with me. This student appeared to have been waiting for someone to show her that she was cared for. It is interesting to note that this anticipatory and eager attitude was not limited to students alone. Several parents were early for their interview and focus group appointments and did not mind sharing very personal information with me. Some would send emails asking
when their next appointment for their interview or focus groups would be. My experience with school staff was similar. After sharing a brief description of the purpose of my research, several quickly contacted me asking to participate in the research process.

It is also important for me to share that representing the views of my staff interviews was a lot easier for me as a fellow staff member than it was with students and parents. This was surprising because I thought I had a comprehensive understanding of the families and student population which I serve. Also, I felt that having been raised by a single mother myself gave me an edge in understanding the experiences of single parent families. Little did I know that my experiences both from the one month period that I was single during this research and from my childhood with a low income single mother/middle income father would be different from those of my families. It is easier to appreciate the challenges experienced by single parent families with no additional support and/or family connections.

Also, recommendations shared by participants were truly eye-opening for me as I did not know what types of recommendations would evolve from this process. As the administrator in charge of parent outreach events such as Open House and Back to School Night, I was particularly surprised to discover that despite the attempts that schools make to open doors with these events, some families still do not feel welcome or wanted. It is clear that one cannot ignore the experiences of our disenfranchised families. I feel more empowered to share the findings of this study with colleagues both on and offsite because I have the stories of my single parent participants as data to support the recommendations. My experience as a single parent will also serve me in conveying the findings of this research to colleagues and influence the decisions that I make as an administrator.
Being cognizant now of the time constraints experienced by single parent families, I have become more accommodating of visitors at our school front office counter because now I understand that that moment could be an opportunity to engage them in a partnership with the school. As a result of interactions that provided the foundation for building relationships with my single parent participants in this study, several parents have become closer to me and have relied on me to provide them with critical information that is supporting their children’s academic success as well as their professional goals. For example, Davina Lang has requested information on the local community college admission, while others like Zoe Waters have called to inquire about academic progress of her son. Others like Greta Lopez, Davina Lang, and Gertrude Ulysses have provided me with updates on their employment status, having since obtained employment after their interviews and focus groups.

I am on a mission to share the findings of my research with certificated, classified, and management level staff, both on and offsite in hopes that they too will begin to reflect on the impact of the policies they enact and enforce. In addition, I would also like to convey the outcomes of this research with city council members, Tri-Delta Transit, and other local advocacy groups who have access to and can provide community resources. My practices of interacting and communicating with students and their families have been influenced by the findings of this research and my personal experience as a temporary single parent. For example, I am a little more hesitant to make conclusions about the reasons for students’ poor attendance but more flexible and understanding of the possible challenges experienced by families who depend on public transit in city A. I now understand that the fierceness often perceived as aggression displayed by some single parents is nothing but the desire of parents to protect the integrity of their families. I have found that through these families’ counter stories which they shared; they
feel responsible for the successes or failures of their children. Many carry a sense of guilt and as single parents may overcompensate in some areas and neglect other areas that are critical aspects of raising their children. This realization is a result of my experience as a single mother during this work.

Since completing this research, I have had the opportunity to present my findings to the administrative team of High School A, the school site council, and leadership body of teachers, parents, students, and classified staff. I am also scheduled to present the same findings to the PTSA during the next few days. It is amazing to see the reception and reaction of my audience to the findings of this study. After each presentation, several members of the audience have begun to make plans to address concerns raised by the single parents. One such challenge was the issue of transportation. Many immediately began to plan visits and conversations with city council and district leaders to propose participant recommendations. I believe that as more people hear the stories of my participants, true change will begin from this high school to the world beyond. It is my hope that the policies and practices of educators and policy makers will begin to reflect the true needs of our single parent families and student population.
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Parent Participation letter

July 24, 2012

Parent Participation letter

Dear Parents:

We have recently become aware that approximately 35.5% of our families are led by single parents who could use the support of the school and community as a whole. Since High School A is always seeking ways to better support our parent and student community, we are interested in understanding how to best meet your needs, and to support you, knowing that you are a critical piece to the success our school and students.

To begin this process, we would like to collect some feedback and data that represent your point of views. Our goal is that by doing so, we will better understand your family’s unique strengths and needs. We believe that every family has something good to add to the value of our school and so we would like to request your participation in the surveys and interviews that will follow this letter in a few weeks.

To participate in this process, please complete the slip below and return it to the High School A Administration offices. You and your family members will be contacted within the next few weeks to begin interviews.

For further questions, please contact me- Assistant principal, Bukky Oyebade at (925) 779-7550 or via email at bukkyoyebade@citya.k12.ca.us. I will be conducting this research as part of the fulfillment of the doctorate degree. I look forward to beginning this process as soon as you return the permission slip below.

Finally, we would like for you to know that the information provided will not be used against you or your child in anyway. All information will be kept strictly confidential and private.

Thank you for your cooperation in this process.

Sincerely,

Bukky Oyebade (High School A Assistant Principal)

________________________________________________________________________

I am willing to have my child/children participate- Yes or No (please select one).

I am willing to participate- Yes or No.
Appendix 2- Student/Family Survey

1. What are the strengths of your family? Circle all that applies.
   
a. We are a close knit family
b. Openness between members
c. You have friends and family that support you
d. You spend a lot of time together (physical, emotional or communicative- select what applies
e. You are a happy family
f. Other. Please specify_____________________________________________________

2. What factors influence your ability to fully participate in your child’s education? Circle all that applies
   
a. Language
b. Transportation
c. Childcare
   a. Past experience with school staff
   b. Access to technology
   c. Extended work hours
d. Employer not flexible to family responsibilities
e. Not able to afford a computer with internet services
f. Other parent not involved with children
g. Other. Please be specific.

3. What are your greatest challenges as a single parent? Circle all that applies to you and your family.
   
a. Having enough time to spend with my children without being so tired
b. Desiring to have my children involved in extra-curricular activities but not having the finances to do so
c. Making sure I have enough money to pay bills
d. Transportation to and from school
e. Unstable shelter
f. No time for myself
g. Unable to seek employment
h. Childcare, if employed
   i. Loneliness; no extended family and friends
   j. Providing my children with basic necessities
   k. My children don’t listen to me
   l. Work interfering with parenting role
   m. Other. Please specify: ___

4. In what areas could you use additional support? Circle all that applies
   
a. Access to health care
b. Transportation for children and self to school  
c. Childcare (takes a huge chunk of the pay check; child support is sporadic)  
d. Employment  
e. Shelter  
f. Parenting  
g. Education  
h. After school activities for children (critical for younger children)  
i. Family Counseling or just someone to talk to in native language.  
j. Understanding the school system  
k. Homework help  
l. Other; only select if your needs are not represented.________  

5. What is your ethnicity?  

6. Do you have another adult in the household who supports you in raising your child(ren)?  
   a. Yes  b. No.  If yes, please select one of the following:  
      i. Spouse  ii. Partner  iii. Relative  iv. Friend  

7. How many children currently reside in your home?  
   a. 1  b. 2  c. 3  d. 4 or more  

8. How many people over the age of 18 reside in your home?  
   a. 1  b. 2  c. 3  d. 4 or more  e. 0  

9. How many people over the age of 18 have full or part time jobs? Please specify next to number.  
   a. 1  b. 2  c. 3  d. 4 or more  e. 0  

10. How many people live in your home?  
    a. 2  b. 3  c. 4  d. 4 or more  

11. How can the school district and the community effectively support you and your children?  
__________________________________________________________________________
Appendix 3- Student/Parent Interview Protocol

**Title:** Creating Strong Partnerships to support Single Parent families- a collaboration between Government, School, Community and Single Parent Families

- Introductions/Welcome
- Present copy and review consent form and remind participant of the ability to withdraw at any point during interview.
- Brief overview of purpose and benefits of this research
- Begin interview- anticipated to last approximately 10 minutes.

The following will be the interview questions:

1. Talk to me about how your family supports your education
2. What are the challenges your family encounters around supporting you in school?
3. a) How can schools and school districts better support your family?
   b) How can the community better support your family?
4. If you had a moment with a community leader such as the mayor, the county supervisor and a government official, what would you say to them on behalf of single parent families?
5. What is one important thing that people need to know about single parent families?
Dear Colleague,

I am writing to invite you to participate in the research that focuses on how to better support City A’s single parent families. This research focuses on creating strong partnerships between Government, School, Community and single parents in the community. It is part of my graduate thesis required for the completion of my doctorate degree.

Many studies have indicated single parenting as a risk factor that can lead to unsuccessful outcomes in children (Thiessen, 1997). For example, some researchers report that the pressures of being the sole disciplinarian, mentor and provider all at once could overwhelm single parents (Alivandi & Khaidzir, 2009, William & Compas, 1988, Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Furthermore, when single parents have to work, there is the tendency to spend less time interacting with children and doing home work because of the increased responsibilities. Parent absence often results in poor supervision and incomplete homework (Berridge & Romich, 2010). With nearly 60% (7,456 of 12,842)* household families reportedly led by one parent, City A stakeholders cannot afford to ignore the needs of our single parent families.

Despite these disturbing findings, there are studies that have reported that the risks associated with single parenting can be minimized when there is a strong support network such as those seen in multigenerational homes (Deliere & Kalil, 2002). These types of partnerships can be replicated when educators, politicians, community members collaborate to support children from single parent families. As a member of at least of these groups, your participation will help inform the work of other practitioners.

If you choose to participate, here’s what you can expect:

- You will complete a consent form to indicate your willingness to participate in this research
- You will also be participating in an interview that will last about 15-20 minutes at a pre-arranged place and time. The purpose of both steps is to gather your information about your views on how to better support single parents.
- Information gathered from you will be kept confidential and private.

For further questions or to confirm your participation, I can be reached at bukkyoyebade@citya.k12.ca.us or at (925) 779-xxxx.

Sincerely,
Bukky Oyebade
Appendix 5: District Staff/Community Members Interview Protocol

An audio-visual recording will be conducted for this group of participants. They will comprise of a total of 10 adults who will include: High School A teachers whose students participate in the survey/Administrators, district staff and staff of community agencies that provide services to High school A students. Also, because some of the high school students will have siblings at the middle and elementary school, it is expected that they too will participate in the interviews.

The following represents the interview protocol for this category of stakeholders:

Welcome, introductions and overview of the purpose of this research; for example “Thank you for agreeing to being interviewed. My goal today is to get your perspectives on how to better support single parent families in our community. According to the 2010 Census reports, close to 35.5% of High School A students under 18 years currently live in households led by one adult. Shall we begin with the first question?

1. What do believe are the strengths of a single parent family?
2. How would you describe the challenges encountered by single parent families?
3. How do you think we currently provide support for single parent families?
4. How can schools, school districts and the community better support single parent families?
5. In your capacity as a community member, district staff or city employee, how do you feel your job or role supports or influences the lives of students and children for single parent families?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add to your responses?