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BLACK PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN A SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

by

Walter L. Fields, Jr.

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Black Parental Involvement in a Suburban School District
A Case Study

by

Walter L. Fields, Jr.

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

_______________________ _______________________

Date Michael Fortner

Thesis Advisor

_______________________ _______________________

Date Alyson Cole

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Black Parental Involvement in a Suburban School District: A Case Study

by

Walter L. Fields, Jr.

Advisor: Michael Fortner

Since the historic decision of the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, Black parents in the United States have been in a continual search for public school districts in which their children would receive an education that would allow them to be productive citizens and economically self-sufficient. From the period of the Great Migration to present day, the movement of Blacks in America has been driven by a quest for opportunity. Black parents have made tremendous sacrifices in the hope of securing a good education for their children, including movement away from families, longtime friendships and trusted institutions. This took the form in the mid-20th century of leaving central cities and relocating to nearby suburban communities. As a Black middle-class emerged, families began to seek refuge in communities across the country such as Shaker Heights (OH), Prince George's County (MD), Teaneck (NJ) and the suburb under examination in this paper, South Orange-Maplewood (NJ).

This paper explores the extent of Black parental involvement, activity and attitudes in the South Orange-Maplewood School District and compares conditions in that community with the findings of research on the Shaker-Heights school district.

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .... **IV**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .... **V**

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION **1**

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW **11**

CHAPTER 3: HISTORY OF SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN NEW JERSEY **28**

CHAPTER 4: SUBURBANIZATION IN NEW JERSEY **41**

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH DESIGN **55**

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS **63**

SURVEY RESULTS 66

ANALYSIS 70

CONCLUSION 73

BIBLIOGRAPHY **76**

Chapter 1

Introduction

In this paper I will explore the dimensions of Black parental involvement in their children's education in a suburban public-school district. Within the limitations of this paper, the objective is to develop a line of inquiry on how Black parental involvement might elevate Black students' academic performance and increase the civic engagement of Black families in suburban communities. Significant research and scholarship have been generated on the subject of parental involvement in general, and the degree of involvement of Black parents in urban school settings. There is a dearth of research and scholarship on the relatively new phenomena of Black family life in suburban America, and the role of Black parents in the education process and civic life of these new communities.

As Black parental involvement is explored, we must recognize the important role that families play in the success of Black children in school and in society. For many Black children, multi-generational support in the family is a critical factor in shaping the child's attitudes towards learning and ultimate performance in the classroom. Black children are nurtured by their parents/guardians, grandparents, and other relatives such as aunts and uncles. The breadth of support a Black child receives from family members is often cited during graduation celebrations as a key factor in the child's success and accomplishments.

The American family, however defined, is a political unit in civil society. The family is comprised of taxpayers, voters, and workers. In each role, the family member is tied to the general welfare of the nation. Each member of the family, in their own way, is a contributor to

the maintenance of our democracy. The activity of the family member, whether it is through voting, schooling, or involvement in some civic activity, is the sweat equity that preserves democratic rule. The parent or guardian of the family serve as the motivator of aspirations and the facilitator of opportunity for children through their ability to inspire, teach, model success and advocate for their children in school settings. Children are the connective tissue of communities as they motivate parent involvement in activities and groups beyond the school building. Parent networks, built upon relationships between children, facilitate parental involvement in local athletic clubs, service auxiliaries, cultural groups, churches and faith-based associations, and political organizations.

Central to the civic value of a family is its collective knowledge and economic contribution, both attributed to the degree of formal education that has been accumulated through generations. For Blacks, the challenge has always been to accrue the social capital to create a more inclusive society. It is the public engagement of Blacks in the education sphere that has produced the greatest advancements of the race in the United States and has also provoked the most vociferous and violent resistance by whites. Blacks have had to continually invent new models of public engagement to secure access to an education equivalent to that of whites and to ensure that future generations would gain the benefits of American citizenship as prescribed by the nation's foundational documents.

This is evident in the history and cultural traditions of the Black family. The Black parent, and Black women in particular, have inspired and molded the aspirations of Black children and been the primary conveyors of the message that schooling and formal education are

the key to success and economic mobility. Black parents have also advised their children of the importance of being good, 'law abiding' citizens and the responsibility to be civically engaged through voting.

Against a backdrop of enslavement, terroristic violence and de jure segregation, the role of the Black parent is well chronicled in the oral narrative tradition of Black families. Black parents, since the period of enslavement, subsequent involuntary servitude, and Jim Crow to the post-civil rights period, have been the principal factor in the success and economic mobility of Black children. Beginning with the exodus from southern states to northern cities during the Great Migration to the movement to the suburbs, at the heart of Blacks' transitory patterns has been a quest by Black parents for equal educational opportunity for Black children.

The shift in the Black population to northern states during the 'Great Migration' of the early 20th century created new tensions between Blacks and working-class whites for increasingly scarce resources in cities (Fortner 2016). Some 6 million Blacks left the south and trekked north in search of a better life. Cities such as Chicago, St. Louis, Gary, Indiana, Pittsburgh, New York City, and Newark, New Jersey became the repositories for Blacks' aspirations. Eventually, the competition for jobs and housing sparked race riots and led to 'white flight' as whites abandoned cities in which the quality of life declined (Wilkerson 2010). As cities experienced economic distress, there was a purposeful effort to develop outlying suburban communities and limit the growth of central cities (Jackson 1985). Many central cities saw declines in their manufacturing base, coupled with a loss of good wage jobs that resulted in a change in the racial composition of communities and public schools (Shirley 2011).

The third, and current, migration of Blacks in the United States is out of central cities and into suburban communities. Suburbanization was fully evident in the 2010 Census that detailed most Blacks in the nation now reside in suburban communities. This represents a dramatic reversal of the Great Migration and raises again questions of Black citizenship and civic engagement.

Since the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, Black Americans have been searching for communities where their children could attend quality and resourced schools and receive an education that would prepare them for economic opportunities. In a nation where a 'good' neighborhood or community is defined by the perceived quality of its public schools, and local tax rates are driven by spending on schools, the decision by a family with children of where to locate is heavily influenced by the quality of public schools. For Black Americans, who face discrimination in the housing and labor markets, those choices are few and far between.

By the 1960s as Whites fled cities that were experiencing deindustrialization, public schools lost significant political support as schools became populated by Black children and segregated in the process. Blacks, initially landlocked in cities by restrictive policies and lower household incomes, saw their children stuck in underperforming schools in deteriorating buildings in poverty stricken and crime ridden neighborhoods. What they encountered was a new formulation of white supremacy in *de facto* segregation, as the segregation of neighborhoods through redlining, restrictive covenants and other government sanctioned devices resulted in schools segregated by race. The better place Blacks assumed northern cities represented soon

began to mimic some of the worst practices of the south, with poverty increasingly enveloping Black families.

The search by Blacks for a 'Promise Land' eventually shifted to areas outside of central cities to suburbs that emerged from federal transportation policy, the return of white soldiers post-World War II and their utilization of the GI Bill, and the transition to a technical and knowledge economy from one based on manufacturing industry. As a Black middle class emerged, mimicking DuBois' *Talented Tenth*, the suburbs became an aspiration as these areas were considered safe, with better housing options and better schools.

The emerging Black middle class of the 1970s soon mimicked Whites and followed suit and took flight to suburbs ringing cities such as Cleveland, Baltimore, Newark, and New York City. The exodus of the Black middle class was rooted in the same premise as their white peers: safer neighborhoods, better housing, and better schools. However, unlike the experience of White ethnics, the discriminatory practices that were in place in cities followed Blacks to the suburbs. The suburbs became the new battleground for equity as Blacks sought to claim their full citizenship rights and whites fought to retain their privilege in an environment of scarcity. Citizenship became a zero-sum game for whites who believed any advancement by Blacks represented a loss of white advantage and hegemony.

The movement of Blacks into the suburbs was treated as an 'insurance policy' for their children's success. All things being equal, and they were not, the consensus was that if enrolled in a predominantly White school in the suburbs and situated next to White children, Black

children by default, would receive a better educational experience because they would have access to more resources, enhanced extracurricular activities, modern facilities and more experienced teachers with greater subject matter expertise. This calculation implied a willingness to sever ties to urban places and the connection to family, cultural institutions and practices, customs and traditions that were the accumulated experiences and richness of the Great Migration. Frazier (1957) observed, “The Black bourgeoisie has been uprooted from its “racial” tradition and as a consequence has no cultural roots in either the Negro or the white world.”

It was assumed that Black students would perform better in suburban schools. However, data in the form of scores on state mandated standardized tests, grade point averages, and enrollment in advanced-level and Advanced Placement (AP) classes reveal that Black children in suburban schools generally fare no better than their urban peers. The achievement gap that exists between Black and White students exists across geographical boundaries.

The insurance policy of suburban relocation came with a heavy premium. Blacks soon experienced isolation or resegregation in the form of segregated Black neighborhoods in suburban communities and segregated schools and classrooms. There was also the loss of cultural identity as assimilation required the diminishment of practices and traditions identified as uniquely Black. This included hairstyle, patterns of speech and vernacular, and social practices. Proximity to Whiteness and conspicuous consumption soon became the measure of Black success and mobility. For Black families to be accepted in the suburbs required an approximation of Whiteness without the privilege. Frazier (1962) noted “As a consequence of

their isolation, the majority of the black bourgeoisie live in a cultural vacuum and their lives are devoted largely to fatuities."

In suburban communities, Black adults and parents mistake their residence and physical presence as signifying equal social and economic status as Whites. It is the phenomenon of having "arrived" as economic mobility is treated as a sign of equality. Significant energy is invested by Blacks in suburban communities in replicating the practices and customs of dominant White groups to gain White's trust and acceptance.

This condition has had major implications for Black families in suburban communities, affected the social standing of Black parents and their engagement in their children's education, and the political capital they are willing to expend to advocate on behalf of their children. The anticipated benefit Black children were to receive by enrolling in suburban schools has been muted by a significant academic achievement gap and disparate rates of discipline. The status of Black children in suburban public schools reveals the same deficits of Black students in urban schools albeit in a more aesthetically pleasing environment.

There are several hypotheses that frame my inquiry of Black parental involvement in the context of the underachievement of Black children in suburban schools.

1. Black migration into suburban communities has solidified White opposition to public school integration and education equity in general.

Fundamental to these engagements by Blacks in public education is the refutation of theories of intellectual deficits in Black children and the lowered expectations for their academic performance (Clark, 1965). Embedded in the psyche of many white Americans is the belief that Black children are incapable of learning, and thus investment in their education is a waste of already scarce and finite resources. Population shifts and the allocation of resources between cities and suburbs resulted in new conflicts over public education making collective efforts for reform difficult (Stone, Henig, et al. 2001). Attempts to first desegregate urban schools through bussing was met with massive and sometimes violent white resistance and efforts to redistrict public schools between urban and suburban boundaries became impossible as whites threatened to withdraw their children and courts resisted. The growing presence of Blacks in suburban communities in the late 20th century presented new challenges for their engagement in public schools, and how Black parents could successfully advocate on behalf of their children. The need for direct action by parents became apparent as courts became less hospitable to legal challenges to segregation and legislatures, particularly in southern states, unwilling to address issues of equity.

2. Black parental engagement in suburban public schools is undermined due to false consciousness among middle class Black parents and an aversion to making race-based claims.

Engels identified 'false consciousness' as a condition by which a subordinate class ('the proletariat') identifies and equates itself with the ruling class because the subjugated class has been misled to support its own exploitation. It is a byproduct of the cultural

hegemony (Gramsci) by which a ruling class imposes its norms and values on culture to convey that its dominance is universally beneficial. In suburban communities, Black adults and parents mistake their residence as signifying equal social and economic standing with Whites. Significant energy is invested by Blacks in replicating the practices and customs of dominant White groups. Frazier saw this behavior in the Black bourgeoisie when he observed "their feelings of inferiority and insecurity are revealed in their pathological struggle for status within the isolated Negro world and craving for recognition in the white world." This behavior leads to several questions:

1. Do Black parents in the suburbs contribute to their own powerlessness by assuming privilege that does not exist?
2. Are the voices of Black suburban parents muted in school affairs out of fear of being culturally stereotyped?
3. Does the pressure to maintain lifestyles equivalent to the White middle class deter Black parents from being able to assist their children?
4. Does social isolation have an equal deleterious effect on Black parents as well as Black children?

3. Black parental engagement in suburban public schools has been limited by formal mechanisms of school district bureaucracy.

Despite ample evidence of Black academic excellence, the structure of public education and practices in public schools contribute to the often discussed and bemoaned 'achievement gap' between white and Black children. A reliance on culturally biased curricula, teaching methods and standardized tests have resulted in a self-fulfilling

> prophecy of Black student failure. Compounding matters is that the most influential adults in the lives of Black children, parents, and guardians, are kept at a distance by school environments that reject their input and involvement (Fortner 2016). School buildings are notoriously hostile toward the presence of Black parents who are often stereotyped as uninformed, illiterate, crude and violent. Traditional avenues of parental engagement such as school committees, Parent Teacher Organizations, and classroom-based activities are often structured in a way that deters the participation of Black parents. The school environment set by the principal often dictates the degree to which Black parents' involvement is welcomed or discouraged.

The question I seek to answer in this paper is what the extent of Black parental engagement in a suburban school setting is and can Black parents catalyze greater Black civic engagement through their involvement in public education.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This paper is focused on the extent of parental involvement in school and home among African American or Black parents in an upwardly mobile, middle class partially integrated suburban school district, and how that involvement might affect students' academic performance. There is significant research on the general concept of parental involvement in the education of children and a body of literature that examines parental involvement in the context of urban schools. What is lacking is sufficient research on the degree and quality of parental involvement for Black parents in a predominantly White suburban school setting. Despite this handicap, existing literature on parental involvement helps shape the inquiry of this paper by establishing a foundation upon which to explore this question.

I contend that parental involvement in education is an important, yet underappreciated, facet of civic engagement. When parents use their social capital to support the educational aspirations of their children they are contributing to the development of good citizens, and ultimately strengthening civil society. As children accrue the benefits of education and transition into adulthood, they are better able to engage institutions of public welfare, exercise privileges of citizenship such as expressing their viewpoints on matters of civic interest, voting and running for public office, and have a higher likelihood of becoming gainfully employed and contributing to the nation's economic growth and security. Fortner (2016) indicates that "my notion of *effective citizenship* emphasizes individual engagement with city politics and the *capacity* of residents to determine the fate of their communities, including the ability of residents, especially the poor, to use the urban state to achieve outcomes they value." Effective citizenship is

facilitated by the formal education process and issues of civic capacity are directly rooted in residents' ability to analyze issues. While this enlightened perspective can be acquired by other means than formal education, schooling and experiences in the home play a significant role in creating an enlightened citizenry. Parents are central to the formation of an enlightened citizenry by their ability to encourage learning in children, serving as role models to communicate to their children the value of education, and motivating aspirations among children.

This issue raises several general questions: What constitutes parental involvement? Is parental involvement restricted to school-based or home-based activity? Does parental involvement affect children's performance? More specifically, how is Black parental involvement motivated, shaped and facilitated?

While the literature generally acknowledges the engagement of parents in education, there are varying interpretations of what constitutes *parental involvement*. The term is fairly ambiguous and is frequently interchanged with *parental participation*. It can be deduced by the preference for the term parental involvement by scholars is an acknowledgment that engagement by parents is more meaningful than the act of participating in an activity. Involvement suggests a deeper commitment and an investment per se in the outcomes of children's schooling. Stone, et al. (2001) notes that "parents are not just stakeholders; they are stakeholders with deep emotional commitments because their children are involved."

There is a long tradition of parental involvement tracing back to home schooling prior to the establishment of state provided, compulsory public schools to mandates for parental

engagement in legislation and federal programs such as Head Start, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and in 2001 in the No Child Left Behind Act (Watson, Sanders-Lawson, McNeal 2012). Polling conducted by the Gallup organization from 1976 to present day have indicated a strong preference for parental involvement in education. Throughout history, parents have been seen as integral to the performance of their children in school, with varying tolerance for their engagement depending on the time period.

Trotman (2001) cites Perroncel (1993) who defines parental involvement as a partnership between home, school and community to support a child's education. There is also the view that parental involvement is more appropriately the behaviors of parents in setting the home environment by helping with homework, setting curfews, and providing a place for the child to study (Finders & Lewis, 1994 as cited by Trotman, 2001). Weitock (1994) is referenced by Trotman for his use of the term "high parental involvement" to describe a parent who attends PTA meetings and school programs, and parent-teacher conferences. What is consistent in the literature is that parental involvement is seen as behaviors in the home and school environments.

Central to the issue of parental involvement is whether it matters in terms of educational outcomes. Do children benefit academically as a result of the engagement of their parents? A 1980 report produced by Phi Delta Kappan indicated that parental representation was a significant factor in achieving positive outcomes in urban schools (Trotman, 2001). Watson et al., (2012) states that parental involvement has been tied to gains in student achievement (Dixon, 1992; Loucks, 1992, Wehlburg 1996), on special needs populations (Morris & Taylor, 1997; Deslandes, Royer, Potvin & Leclerc, 1999; Hornby 2011), and creating emotionally supportive

environments that also improved nonacademic outcomes (Wehlberg, 1996; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Jasso, 2007). In general, research has revealed that increased parental involvement has yielded increased student achievement (Jesse; Ramirez, 2001, Trotman, 2001; Weiss, et al., 2003; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). What appears to be consistent in the literature is the finding of the importance of parental involvement for children's learning (Stone, et al., 2001).

Brofenbrenner (1979) and Epstein (2004) have suggested multiple influences to demonstrate that learning takes place in a number of environments, and not just in the school building. This is consistent with a broad-based view of parental involvement that includes school-based activities and home-based activities (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1987). The literature cites a number of ways that parents engage with children and various roles they play in their children's education in school and in the home (Gordon, 1977; Bauch, Vietze & Morris, 1973 as cited in Watson, et al 2012). Such roles include traditional positions as a parent/observer, PTA member and classroom volunteer to serving as a paraprofessional or teacher's aide, and teachers of their own children in the home. Parental involvement is viewed as a way to foster collaboration between home and school to improve student outcomes (Trotman, 2001).

Brofenbrenner developed ecological systems theory that places the child at the center of a multi-layered environment consisting of a micro, meso, eso, macro and chrono systems. These systems are bi-directional and interrelated. In ecological systems theory the micro-system is the level at which the individual (the student) has direct experience at school or at home or in any setting in which the individual has contact who influences their development. The meso-system

accounts for the interconnections and relationships between two or more settings (micro-systems) such as school, family and peers that impact upon the individual (the student).

It is within the context of these interactions in the school and home within the micro-system that determines whether parental involvement is encouraged. The degree to which schools at the micro-system welcome parental engagement impacts the possibility of home-school relationships at the meso-system level can operate to affect student performance. According to LaBahn (1995) parental involvement declines as students grow older, with less involvement at the secondary level. LaBahn references the work of Vandergrift and Greene (1992) that identifies two key elements that work together to shape the concept of parental involvement. One is the level of commitment to parental support and the other is the level of parental activity and participation. When schools put in place structured programs that welcome parental involvement and are goal oriented it results in higher daily attendance by students, increased engagement by families and better academic outcomes for students (Epstein and Sheldon, 2016). The manner in which school personnel respond to parents' attempts to get involve may encourage or discourage them (Cousins and Mickelson, 2011). This phenomenon is referred to as 'moments of inclusion' and 'moments of exclusion' (Lareau and Horvat, 1999 as cited by Cousins, et al., 2011). In the school, the principal is seen as the key actor who can facilitate parental involvement (Lewis, 1992; Duncan, 1992; and Campbell, 1992 as cited by LaBahn, 1995). Stone et al. (2001) notes that though educators express concerns about the lack of parental involvement, educators are inattentive to opportunities to provide ways to increase and support parental involvement. African American parents who desire to be actively involved in their child's schooling anticipate barriers and try to overcome them but often "the barriers they

do perceive are in terms of relations with schools in which they do not feel invited or heard" (Cousins, et al., 2011 p. 2.) Barriers can take the form of the physical design of the building (how parents access the building), communications between school and home, and the temperament of school personnel who encounter parents. Parents often do not feel welcome at school, with many parents believing that their input is unimportant or not appreciated, or that they do not possess any knowledge that would interest a school (LaBahn, 1985). This can be particularly true when the parent does not have significant levels of formal education or may not believe that education is important (Dixon, 1992; Vandergrift and Greene, 1992 as cited by LaBahn, 1985). The extent of involvement is shaped by parents' ability to form beneficial partnerships with teachers and other school officials (Epstein, 2001; Lawson, 2003; Waggoner and Griffith, 1998 as cited by Cousins, et al., 2011).

The home as a micro-system has become recognized as one of the most significant aspects of parental involvement in their children's education outside the formal education system (Brooker, 2015 as cited by O'Toole et al., 2019). What occurs in the home is increasingly seen as a critical factor in educational outcomes for children. Home-based involvement encompasses activities and efforts put forth by parents to reinforce school-based learning. Activities such as monitoring homework completion, checking homework and providing educational enrichment activities fall within the range of efforts parents can put forth to support children (Brenner and Sadler, 2016 as cited by O'Toole et al., 2019). Dockett et al,. (2012) proposes that 'family readiness,' the ability of parents to support children's learning at home is crucial to the development of 'school readiness' in children (O'Toole, et al., 2019). This forces consideration of how socio-economic factors might play into the ability of parents to create a home

environment that is conducive to learning. According to O’Toole, researchers (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003) qualify the type of parenting that leads to children’s achievement. ‘At-home good parenting’ is defined by:

- The provision of a secure and stable environment
- Intellectual stimulation
- Parent-child discussion
- Constructive social and educational values
- High aspirations relating to personal fulfilment and good citizenship

This identification of ‘good parenting’ qualities, and the inference of ‘bad parenting’ when these qualities are absent or perceived to be lacking among parents, could inadvertently contribute to deficit assumptions made concerning Black parents. The literature suggests that children’s high achievement in Math and English can be attributed to having books in the home. Internet access, and access to educational games (Eivers et al., 2010; Kavanagh et al., 2015).

It is the process of ‘academic socialization’ that occurs within the home environment and provides children with the tools for educational success. (O’Toole et al., 2019). Brenner and Sadler (2016) define academic socialization as “including indirect messages about school that communicate parents’ expectations for the child” (O’Toole et al., 2019). The work of Harris and Robinson (2016) identifies four aspects of parental behavior that is successful in supporting academic achievement in their children.

1. Parents are supportive
2. Parents skillfully navigate school choices
3. Parents effectively convey the importance of school
4. Label of being ‘smart’ is applied to children by parents

In Epstein’s (1998) conceptualization of six types of parental involvement, two types directly relate largely to the home environment. Type 1, ‘parenting’ and Type 4, ‘learning at home’ are essentially activities that take place outside the school environment and occur in the home. These activities range from involving families in academic learning in the home to goal setting by parents and setting conditions for age and grade specific home learning.

What is evident in the literature is that parental involvement is not an artificial choice between the school and the home. Involvement is important across environments in Brofenbrenner’s model and is conditioned by the willingness and capacity of schools to engage parents.

Ecological systems theory is a more holistic perspective that encompasses a wider view of education than schooling. While more encompassing than linear models of parental engagement, ecological systems theory fails to account for how culture affects the individual in the micro-system. Thus, specifically in relation to the experiences of Black students, the interrelationships between the systems of Brofenbrenner’s model seemingly fails to incorporate the unique lived experiences of racism, implicit bias and discrimination that Black students encounter during their educational journey.

The framework of parental involvement developed by Epstein (1988) can be viewed as cutting across the ecological system Brofenbrenner theorizes. Epstein's framework suggests six types of parental involvement: 1) parenting 2) communicating 3) volunteering 4) learning at home 5) decision making and 6) collaborating with community. It is types 1 and 4 that are most relevant to this paper. Parenting (Type 1) is focused on how families create home environments to support children in school. Activities in this category include training for parents, GED acquisition, health and nutrition programs to support families and home visits by school staff during transition points (e.g. elementary school to middle school). Learning at Home (Type 4) reflects how schools assist families to help students in their homes. Methods include providing families with information on the skills students need to develop to master subjects at each grade and making parents aware of homework policies and how to monitor schoolwork at home.

Epstein's framework is situated in the micro and meso systems of Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory in that parental involvement occurs in the home and school, and falls within the relationships between micro-systems, or the meso-system. This is evident operationally as students experience activities in school and outside the school building that causes parents to transverse multiple environments on behalf of their children.

What underlies these theories is the motivation for parental involvement. Simply put, what compels a parent to become involved in the education of their child beyond biologically driven paternal instincts? Ispa, Su-Russell, and Im (2020) examine conversations between African American mothers and children about school and education. Though the study is focused on low-income children and the engagement of their families in education, it seeks to address

more universally held deficit-oriented assumptions about low-income African American parents. These deficit views are tied to beliefs about race (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016) that researchers have noted lead to misconceptions about the capacity of Black families to support their children's education (Harry & Klinger, 2005; Kunjufu, 2002 as cited by Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016). This has resulted in school staff and teachers, and the general public, discounting the agency of Black parents and a limited awareness of the positive role Black parents and families play in the encouragement and development of Black children.

Ispa, et al (2020) cites Eccles and Wigfield (2000, 2002) in framing parental participation as a function of the expectancy-value model of achievement motivation. This model suggests that an individual's academic persistence and performance are heavily influenced by their values and beliefs about their competencies and likelihood of success (Ispa, et al., 2020). The achievement values are categorized as *attainment value* that a person feels that succeeding on a task is important, *utility value* that an individual contemplates the practical usefulness of a task to present or future well-being, *intrinsic value* that an individual receives is executing a task is enjoyable, and the *cost* of a task in terms of the tradeoffs in time, energy, money or other resources that come with completing the task. These considerations weigh heavily when an individual weigh the merits of the pursuit of academic goals. Parental achievement values have been linked (Halle, Kurtz-Costes &Mahoney, 1997; Varner & Mandara, 2014 as cited by Ispa, et al., 2020) to children's academic self-perceptions and performance.

"Research in this area demonstrates that home-based parental involvement is connected to positive child outcomes, as indexed by willingness to exert effort on schoolwork, academic self-confidence and achievement, and low incidence of behavior problems." (Ispa, et al., 2020)

This leads us to the issue of parental involvement in the context of the Black student experience in public education. Considerable research has examined this in the context of large, urban systems that are predominantly Black and/or Latino. Similar to the consensus in the broader research, parental engagement or involvement is viewed as transmitting important messages to children about the value of education (Orr, et al., 2016). This view aligns with what researchers (Cousins and Mickelson, 2011) have found in education research that parent participation is one of several factors that contribute to the academic success of Black children in public schools (Epstein, 1995, 2001; Gutman and McLoyd, 2000). Cousins et al. examined the extent of parental involvement in a Math and Science Equity program in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School system. Among the findings is that parents who participated in the program (a series of workshops on math and science course sequencing, curricular tracking, social networking and legal rights) indicated they developed skills to directly ask school officials for information and asserting their rights as parents to request certain course-level placements for their children. This outcome can be viewed in the context of the empowerment of Black parents and the creation of a sense of agency to negotiate on behalf of their children with school officials. According to Trotman (2001), parents can become empowered when they participate in their child's educational process. Trotman (2001) states that both the child and the school benefits when parents participate in either school-based or home-based activities. In the matter of schools, that perceived 'benefit' is conditioned by the cultural competency of school staff to

understand and value the input of Black parents. Latunde and Louque (2016) acknowledge in their own research (2014) and that of another researcher (Delpit, 2012) that disparities in academic achievement and inequitable treatment of Black parents had led to strained relationships between Black family and schools.

Race plays an important role in the degree to which Black parents are involved (Diamond, Wang and Gomez, 2006) and the holding by schools of deficit views of Black families. Negative perceptions of Black families have led to schools underestimating the capacity of Black adults to support their children's learning (Harry and Klinger, 2005; Kunjufu, 2002 as cited by Trotman, 2001). Misconceptions about Black families is tied to beliefs about race and learning in America (Delpit; 2012, Kunjufu, 2012; Leuchovius, 2006 as cited by Trotman, 2001).

Researchers have recognized multiple barriers to Black parental involvement in their children's education. Watson, et al. (2012) cite the multiple responsibilities of work, school and family that converge to create a dilemma for minority and low-income families as considered by Weiss, et al. (2003). In addition, Trotman (2001) suggests the multiple and inconsistent definitions of parental involvement could contribute to the low level of parent involvement in urban schools. Trotman also recognized the disparities between parents' perception of their involvement and schools and policymakers' perception of parent involvement as a barrier. The lack of awareness and appreciation by educators of *invisible* strategies (e.g. limiting children's chores to allow for more study time and making sacrifices so their children can attend better schools) minority and low-income parents employ to support their children can lead to a misunderstanding of parents' desire and capacity to support their children (Smith and Wohletter,

2009). Watson et al. (2012) note that how parents perceive their roles could be a function of how they are treated by schools. In the case of low-income parents, the lack of a presence in the school should not be misinterpreted as a lack of involvement in their children's learning or disinterest (Ispa, et al., 2020).

Ogbu (2003) specifically examines Black student disengagement in the affluent suburb of Shaker Heights, Ohio. His study did not look for ways to increase parental involvement, examine relationships with schools, empower parents or focus on 'academic management' in poor Black families. Ogbu was concerned with what Black parents did or did not do about their children's education at school and at home. The motivation behind Ogbu's study was research that indicates that in some minority groups the influence exerted by parents at home had a strong influence on their children's education, even when the parent(s) is not involved with their children's schools. Ogbu looks at involvement at home and at schools and incorporated the observations of school staff, teachers, community members parents and students. Thus, his work aligns directly with the inquiry of this paper.

Ogbu's research indicates that Black parents in Shaker Heights have high expectations for their children and this was communicated to children and acknowledged by children. Black parents also deemed the Shaker Heights public school system good and it was viewed as an aspirational choice by parents who were willing to make sacrifices to live in the community so their children could attend its schools. Despite this positive view of the schools, Black parents' involvement was limited and elicited concern and confusion among schools' staff as to why.

Ogbu found that Black parents in Shaker Heights did not participate in school activities and were noticeably absent in Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings. One principal suggested the distance that parents lived from the school was the reason for the low participation by Black parents. However, Black participation in PTO's in neighborhood schools was also low. Similarly, few Black parents participated in academic programs sponsored by the school district despite these programs principally designed to support Black parents. These programs included an early elementary school program for low achievers and a workshop to teach parents on how to help their children improve their performance on state proficiency tests. The majority of students who failed these tests were Black. Parents were also absent during Open Houses in the middle school and high school. School officials in charge of these programs were vocal about their discouragement and frustration by the lack of Black parent participation.

Low involvement by Black parents in Shaker Heights was attributed by some teachers and members in the community to the low education of parents. This explanation failed to account for the low involvement of well-educated Black middle-class parents. Another reason advanced was that Black parents work demands and working-class parents held multiple jobs prevented their involvement. Again, the explanation defies the low involvement of the many Black middle-class and professional parents. Like Black working-class parents, Black professionals claimed they worked long hours to maintain the middle-class lifestyle that allowed them to live in the community. The mistrust of the school system was conveyed as a reason for Black parents' low involvement, and that it was felt across all segments of the Black community. It was also observed that Black parents had a different cultural model of teaching and learning, and expectations for what schools should provide their children. This clashed with the views of

teachers and staff who believed that Black parents expect too much from the schools in terms of children's formal education. One of the striking deficits in Black parents understanding was their lack of knowledge about the children's curriculum and difference in the levels of rigor between remedial and college preparatory courses and honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Black parents did not emphasize to their children the importance of these classes.

When it came to parental involvement at home, Ogbu found that some, but not all, Black parents prepared their children for entry into kindergarten. However, some teachers and Black students believed that Black parents did not do enough to push their children in the early grades. This opinion was shaped by the belief that Black parents did not check their children's homework on a regular basis and pay sufficient attention to performance in reading and math. Teachers and students were in agreement that students did not take their homework seriously and parents did not adequately supervise and monitor schoolwork at home.

This belief that parents were complacent extended to the monitoring of television watching at home and it distracted from schoolwork, as well as introduced children to bad role models that were featured in some programming. Parents were also faulted for not monitoring their children's friends and allowing their children to be distracted by peer pressure. Parents did try to employ a rewards system to recognize when their children rose to the parents' expectations. Rewards for good grades included money and special privileges, such as being treated to a favorite meal at a fast-food restaurant. Punishment for poor grades included restrictions on participation in social events and the loss of other privileges.

Several explanations were given for low parent involvement at home. Like in the scenario of school-based activities, the low education of parents was suggested as a factor in their minimal involvement. Students believed that their parents limited education made it difficult for them to convincingly convey the importance of education to their children. This resulted in a communications barrier that limited the ability of parents to have meaningful conversations with their children in the home. The ‘generation gap’ was also offered by students as a communications barrier as parents’ advice on education and their views was deemed old-fashioned. Parents’ effectiveness was also hampered by competing role models society and the media presented to youth and that these alternative role models often achieved success and fame without formal education.

Students also believed that their parents work demands affected parents’ ability to motivate their children and monitor their homework. This was felt to be the case for working-class and middle-class parents. All parents were seen as struggling, with working-class parents juggling multiple jobs and middle-class parents working long hours to maintain their lifestyles. For middle-class parents living in Shaker Heights was considered the fulfillment of their obligation to their children and there was an expectation that the schools would educate their children. Parents believed it was now up to their children to study and do well in school. Some parents also lacked an awareness of academic problems their children encountered. This led to parents being unaware of their children’s progress in school and not being prepared to assist them with their schoolwork or offer advice.

Ogbu's work is a significant contribution to furthering the understanding of Black parental involvement in a middle-class, suburban setting. It offers a reasonable comparison to the wealth of knowledge of behaviors and involvement of low-income parents in urban schools. Shaker Heights resembles in population, socio-economic status and demographics the community that is the focus of this paper. Research on this district and the literature reviewed offer a framework to examine the subject school district.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the strategies Black parents/guardians in a middle-class suburban school district employ to become involved in their children's education. The study addresses two questions:

1. In what ways do Black parents engage with their children's education?
2. What resources, tactics and activities do Black families use to engage to support their children's academic progress?

Chapter 3

History of School Desegregation in New Jersey

Similar to the southern experience, Black families in northern states have had to contend with discriminatory practices and segregated public schools. Though *de jure* segregation was not as entrenched in the north, public school systems in states like New Jersey and New York were impacted by legal practices segregating children by race. Black parents in northern states also had to navigate racial landmines to make certain their children received a formal education. For many Black parents it meant sending their children to segregated schools within their segregated neighborhoods as few alternatives existed. New Jersey's history of racial discrimination is extensive, as is the many efforts to desegregate its public schools. This history is important to consider in evaluating Black parental involvement in one of the state's suburban school districts, the South Orange-Maplewood School District.

New Jersey has a deep history of racial segregation in public education. The state operated segregated schools in its southern region throughout the 19th century and into the 20th century, and segregation existed in the northern section of the state as well. "This was not the residential segregation – flowing directly from the racial makeup of any given neighborhood – that continues to bedevil the state's schools to this day. Rather, it was the result of institutional policies – often unspoken – to keep children separated by race." (O'Brien, 1982) New Jersey took an early lead in addressing racial segregation in public schools when the School Law of 1881 prohibited the forced segregation of children by race or nationality in public schools. Voluntary segregation at the elementary level, however, was permissible and in fact, some Black families supported separate schools and believed Black children would fare better. In a landmark decision in the case, *Jeremiah H. Pierce v. The Union District Trustees*, the New Jersey Supreme

Court ruled on February 21,1884 in favor of Rev. Jeremiah Pierce who sought to enroll his four children in segregated White schools in Burlington County. The opinion of the Court was clear in establishing the rights of Pierce's children to enroll in the school of their choice regardless of their race or the segregated nature of the Burlington County schools.

"The Constitution of the State (Art. IV. Sec. VII, paragraph 6) declares that the legislature shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of free public schools for the instruction of all the children in the state between the ages of five and eighteen years. Our school law (Rev. p. 1070, Sec. 94) provides that all public schools in the State shall be free to all persons over five and under eighteen years of age residing within the school-district. The city of Burlington contains four public schools, but constitute a single school-district under the government of the respondents. Hence there can be no doubt of the legal right of those children to enter one of those schools for free instruction." (Price, 1980. 148-149)

Despite the forward-thinking vision of the state Supreme Court, New Jersey's schools remained segregated and conditions persisted. Historian Giles R. Wright chronicled how deeply segregation was embedded in the state's public schools at the start of the 20th century and leading up to 1947 when the state constitution was revised and included a new amendment expressly prohibiting segregation by race in public schools. At the 1947 state constitutional convention attorney Oliver Randolph, the first Black admitted to the bar in the state and a Republican legislator from Essex County, convinced delegates to include a provision barring segregation in public education in the new state constitution (NJ Constitution). Thus, New Jersey became the only state in the nation with a constitutional prohibition against segregation. This was seven years before the historic United States Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

This victory only came about because Black activists in the state demanded constitutional reforms that would assure civil rights protections.

In a paper commissioned by the New Jersey Historical Commission of the New Jersey Department of State, Wright (1988) noted:

"Between 1910 and 1940 the number of separate black schools continued to increase. From 1919 to 1930 it grew from fifty-two to sixty-six, and there were seventy black schools by 1935. One the eve of World War II, from Princeton south every city or town with an appreciable black population supported a dual system of elementary schools. A report submitted to the state legislature in 1939 deplored much about this system. Most commonly White pupils were taught in larger and more modern facilities than black students, and in some cases blacks were not even given the minimum essentials for adequate instruction – books, maps, gymnasium facilities, shop equipment. In a less common arrangement Whites and blacks shared a school but had separate classrooms and sometimes separate entrances, toilets and playgrounds."

One casualty of school segregation in the post-*Brown* era was the Manual Training and Industrial School for Colored Youth, a vocational boarding school in Bordentown. Ironically, the school was held in high regard by Blacks but following the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* the school shut its doors in 1955.

Most schools in northern counties of the state had discontinued separate schools. Southern counties were still operating segregated schools. The link between suburban schools and desegregation efforts in New Jersey took root in the birthplace of Paul Robeson.

Princeton, a suburb in the central area of the state and home to the fabled university, was a holdout until the mid-20th century. Princeton University itself did not admit its first Black student until 1947. The next year Princeton tackled public school segregation with the Princeton Plan. The town's high school was integrated but it maintained two racially segregated elementary schools. This was a common occurrence in communities as the early grades were the last to be integrated. In Princeton, the Witherspoon School was attended by Blacks and the Nassau School was the White elementary schools. The two schools were within walking distance of each other. The Princeton Plan was put into effect in 1948, making the Nassau School a K-5 elementary school and housing grades 6 through 8 in the Witherspoon School, and reassigning students and teachers. The plan proceeded with little controversy though historical accounts suggest some Black families lamented the loss of the Witherspoon School as an exclusively Black elementary school (Hyman, 2008). This was a real dilemma in some Black communities. Segregated schools were seen as nurturing and Black teachers were respected for the care they showed Black children and their skills in the classroom. While integrating schools had great civic value, for Black parents, their foremost concern was the education of their children.

New Jersey became a hotbed of activity in the *Brown* era as efforts were launched across the state to desegregate public schools in northern communities. While the nation's attention was focused on the reaction in southern states to the *Brown* decision, suburban communities in the north were already engaged in all-out warfare over the demands of Blacks and progressive Whites that Black and White children attend school together.

In New Jersey two issues are at play. The first is 'home rule' and the state's tradition of local prerogative. In many respects, home rule has played out like 'states rights' in that

communities religiously cling to the idea that the ‘right’ to determine what transpires within local boundaries takes precedence over all other considerations. The zealous adherence to home rule has resulted in needless duplication of government services, as New Jersey suffocates under its insane number of local government units. Home rule is also an effective way to keep ‘others’ out of communities through racially rigid borders. The second issue is ‘neighborhood schools.’ The belief that children are entitled to attend schools in close proximity to their homes has fed school segregation due to the state’s hyper-residential segregation. As certain municipalities or neighborhoods become segregated by race it becomes convenient for those opposed to desegregation to shield their true feelings. School segregation is then treated as an ill rooted in housing patterns that are out of the control of local residents. The defense is the inconvenience of disturbing the traditional school zone and violating the principle of neighborhood schools. It is never about race, but always about race.

School desegregation efforts in New Jersey have generally occurred within a school district and seldom across district boundaries or the merging of an urban and suburban school district. Large city school districts in the state have remained untouched by efforts to desegregate public education. Three suburban school districts in New Jersey, Teaneck, Montclair, and Morristown, represent the challenges of desegregation in the state in the context of suburban school systems. These communities experienced shifts in the racial composition of the towns and schools, and resistance from White residents to ameliorate conditions contributing to Black students’ underachievement. Within each district the issues of *de facto* segregation in school buildings, racial tracking that resulted in segregated classrooms, and an academic achievement gap were prevalent.

Teaneck, New Jersey

In the early 1950s the Jewish community in the town, fairly progressive for the times, pushed a school building referendum to expand schools to accommodate growing numbers of Jews and the early influx of Blacks. The Teaneck League for Better Schools was an early proponent of school integration. The referendum was defeated but the influx of Blacks continued through the end of the decade and into the early 1960s. Teaneck was gaining a reputation for being open to Blacks but those that moved into the town were being steered by realtors into the northeast section. This quickly was becoming a segregated neighborhood to the dismay of Blacks who moved to the suburb looking to live in a more inclusive community with good schools. What's more, the lower grade schools were segregated but Teaneck High School was integrated. The hiring of a new school superintendent in 1961 coincided with renewed efforts to integrate the schools. A voluntary busing program was created but few families signed up; no more than 13 in total. Still, there was growing support for school integration as Teaneck and other communities were trying to fulfill the court's mandate in Brown. By 1964 an interracial organization, the North East Community Organization, was established, spearheaded by Theodora Lacey, an educator and Black resident of the neighborhood who moved with her husband to the town several years earlier. The focus was the William Bryant School, an elementary school in the northeast neighborhood. The school was majority White, but the Black student population had grown to almost half the student body. What happened next made Teaneck stand out among communities in the nation.

A coalition of Black, White, and Jewish residents advocated for the integration of the elementary schools against the racially coded rhetoric of the Teaneck Taxpayers League. The

League had opposed the budget referendum to expand the town's schools and it was fairly obvious that the opposition was rooted in hatred of Jews and Blacks. Residents in support of integration continued to make the case and in 1964 a proposal was taken up by the Board of Education to create a single 6th grade at an integrated William Bryant School. On May 13, 1964, the Board of Education approved the plan in a 7-2 vote. The meeting was chaotic as hundreds of Whites packed the high school auditorium to vent and pressure the Board into opposing the integration plan. The Board held its ground, and on that night, Teaneck, New Jersey became the first community in the nation in the post-Brown era to voluntarily integrate its schools. The next fall White and Black students arrived for 6th grade in an integrated Bryant School. The following year the goodwill created by the interracial coalition held firm and a pro-integration slate of candidates was elected to the Board of Education.

The Teaneck High School Class of 1976 was the first graduating class to have been educated in a fully integrated public school-district in the suburb.

Issues in Teaneck around race and class did not go away. In fact, they remained visible for decades and began to manifest in racial tracking, the oversubscription of Black students to special education categories and the dearth of culturally inclusive curriculum in the schools. These issues festered for years and were part of the underlying tension in 1990 after the killing of young 16-year old Phillip Pannell by a White police officer in 1990. Phillip was killed nearby the William Bryant School. Grievances toward the school-district from the Black community burst into the open the weeks following Phillip's death. The pent-up anger of Blacks was directed at the Teaneck Board of Education as well as the Teaneck police department (Duarte, 1990). The connection was made between dual civic failures that had significant consequences for Black

youth. In 2018, the Teaneck Board of Education hired 35-year old Christopher Irving, a Black male, as its schools' superintendent (Burrow, 2018).

Montclair, New Jersey

In 1961 a community group, the Taylor Committee, had been appointed to study the school-district's junior high and elementary schools. Montclair was grappling with racial segregation at the elementary school level. Specifically, Glenfield Junior High School was predominantly Black, and the Board of Education proposed to close the school and redistribute its Black students to racially balance the district. The superintendent put forth a proposal to send students who lived south of Bloomfield Avenue (a predominantly Black area) to Hillside Junior High School and those that lived north of Bloomfield Avenue (the largely White areas of Montclair) to George Inness Junior High School. Black residents opposed the plan because they feared the district would replicate the segregated conditions of Glenfield Junior High School in Hillside Junior High School. They also complained that another school, Mount Hebron Junior High School, would remain all-White under the plan. The sole Black member of the Board, Mrs. Bessie Marsh, opposed the plan (Montclair Meets). Recognizing the problems with the initial proposal, and awaiting the recommendations of the Taylor Committee, the Board put forth a revised plan that would divide Glenfield's students equally among all three existing junior high schools and parents would be given three choices and placement would be based on a lottery. The state Commissioner of Education supported the Board's plan and a lawsuit, *Morean v. Board of Education of Town of Montclair*, was filed in opposition (Morean). On March 16, 1964 the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled in *Morean* and affirmed the Commissioner's decision. The

Court recognized the diligence the Board had displayed in attempting to meet the goal of not disrupting too many students, avoiding aggravating the racial imbalance in the Hillside School and creating greater racial balance between all of its elementary schools. The Court was unanimous in its ruling, that stated in part:

"When the Board made its decision to close Glenfield (a decision which is not under attack here), it was duty bound to relocate Glenfield's pupils in a manner consistent with sound educational and legal principals. Dividing them equally between George Innes and Hillside, as originally suggested, would have greatly aggravated the already existing racial imbalance in Hillside. In seeking to avoid this, the Board acted in proper discharge of its responsibilities. The plan of relocation which it ultimately chose, dealt equally with all of the Glenfield pupils without any reference to race and any disruption of the pupils in the other high schools. It presented no troublesome educational or transportation problems and brought about an increased measure of integration pending the anticipated construction of a totally integrated junior high school for the entire town."

In 1966 the Montclair Board of Education put forth a $4 million bond issue to renovate its school buildings *and* desegregate its schools. It was the latter that caused great distress among Whites. Proponents of the plan believed it would address *de facto* segregation in the elementary grades. Opponents of the plan argued for 'open enrollment' in one or two schools and suggested that would suffice in bringing about desegregation. As is the case today in Maplewood and South Orange, desegregation was cast as a deficit as a New York Times article described the school-district as one "which was once boasted it had one of the country's best school systems." (Montclair Is Split) This is a consistent narrative applied to suburban school-districts once the

enrollment experiences a noticeable increase of Black students: It was once a *good* district, but the presence of Black students automatically taints the perceived quality of the schools.

In the early 1990s Montclair was still grappling with the residual effects of its desegregation efforts from three decades earlier (Fields, 1996). The issue of racial tracking in its schools was beginning to emerge, as was a vocal constituency pressed for reform. In 2008, the Board of Education was taken aback by the disproportionate number of Black and special education students being suspended when it reviewed data on school suspensions (Maginnis, 2018).

Morristown, New Jersey

Arguably, the most dramatic step taken to desegregate public schools occurred in the aftermath of a lawsuit *Jenkins v. Township of Morris School-District* (Jenkins). The lawsuit was filed by residents of Morristown, a suburban community with a significant minority population, and Morris Township, a White suburban community. The residents were attempting to block the Morris Township School District from severing its longstanding relationship with the Morristown School District. In that case the New Jersey Supreme Court took the unprecedented step to affirm the power of the state Commissioner of Education to merge school-districts to bring about desegregation. The two districts were ordered merged by state Education Commissioner Dr. Carl Marburger; the first and only time in the state's history that two school-districts were compelled to merge to integrate its schools. The decision, however, would cost Marburger his job. While the New Jersey State Board of Education supported Marburger's reappointment and he was reappointed by Governor William Cahill, the state's teachers' union,

the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), opposed him and his confirmation was blocked by Essex County Democrats in the state Senate. In a Letter to the Editor published November 16, 1972 in the New York Times, Katherine L. Auchincloss, vice president of the New Jersey State Board of Education, wrote concerning the Board's directives to correct racial imbalances in school-districts and the importance of reappointing Commissioner Marburger:

"The Commissioner must enforce this policy and at his direction the Department of Education has worked with individual districts to develop the desegregation plans best suited to each district. Many such plans have been implemented with the support of the communities involved, but the successes have not had that much publicity. In no case has the state mandated busing as the specific tool, but in some cases, districts have used it. The board must and will continue to uphold the Constitution and laws of New Jersey, in this respect (and in all others) regardless of who is Commissioner of Education." (Auchincloss, 1972)

The state Senate rejected the appointment of Dr. Marburger on November 16, 1972 by one vote. The vote was 20-19, with 12 Republicans and 7 Democrats opposing Marburger's reappointment and 12 Republicans and 8 Democrats voting in favor of his reappointment (Sullivan, 1972) He resigned his position and vacated the post in April 1973. The state teacher's union rejoiced but Carl Hurd, the president of the state Board of Education and a Black man, said the Senate's rejection of Marburger would have a "chilling effect" on any future efforts to address equal educational opportunity in New Jersey. Hurd was correct.

In *Morris*, the Court again referenced New Jersey's long history of standing against racial discrimination and segregation in its public schools:

"The history and vigor of our State's policy in favor of a thorough and efficient public school system are matched in its policy against racial discrimination and segregation in the public schools. Since 1881 there has been explicit legislation declaring it unlawful to exclude a child from any public school because of his race (L. 1881, c. 149; N.J.S.A. *496 18A:38-5.1), and indirect as well as direct efforts to circumvent the legislation have been stricken judicially. See Pierce v. Union District School Trustees, 46 N.J.L. 76 (Sup. Ct. 1884), aff'd, 47 N.J.L. 348 (E. & A. 1885); Raison v. Bd. of Education, Berkeley, 103 N.J.L. 547 (Sup. Ct. 1927); Patterson v. Board of Education, 11 N.J. Misc. 179 (Sup. Ct. 1933), aff'd, 112 N.J.L. 99 (E. & A. 1934); Hedgepeth v. Board of Education of Trenton, 131 N.J.L. 153 (Sup. Ct. 1944). In 1947 the delegates to the Constitutional Convention took pains to provide, not only in general terms that no person shall be denied any civil right, but also in specific terms that no person shall be segregated in the public schools because of his "religious principles, race, color, ancestry or national origin." Art. 1, para. 5. Implementing legislation now provides that persons shall have the opportunity to obtain "all the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of any place of public accommodation," including any public school, "without discrimination because of race, creed, color, national origin, ancestry" etc. N.J.S.A. 10:5-4, 5(l); see Blumrosen, "Antidiscrimination Laws in Action in New Jersey: A Law-Sociology Study," 19 Rutgers L. Rev. 189, 257-258 (1965)."

Legal scholar Paul Tractenberg, founder of the Education Law Center who has spent decades advocating for the desegregation of New Jersey's public schools, points to the Morris School District's success as an example of what is possible if the state could free itself from its addiction to 'home rule.' "Despite initial start-up issues, 40 years later the Morris School-district is an amazing success story. It may be the most racially and socioeconomically balanced district

in the state, it sends 93 percent of its students to higher education, and it is widely considered to have been primarily responsible for Morristown's ability to flower as the state's leading county seat." (Tractenberg, 2013)

Today, the Morris School District serves as a model of how diversity can be achieved and work in public schools. There is no denying that the school-district still has work to do on issues of equity as do all school-districts. Tractenberg noted as much in a 2017 report by the Center for Diversity and Equality in Education, that he now leads, and published by the Century Foundation. He reflected:

"The Morris district still struggles with two aspects of diversity, however. First, — in common with virtually every diverse school-district in the country — it is still attempting to bring meaningful diversity to every program and course within its school buildings, from higher-level Honors and Advanced Placement courses to special education classifications and rosters of disciplinary actions. Second, in common with some but hardly all diverse districts across the country, the Morris district is trying to cope with the explosive growth of Hispanic students, many of them in recent years economically disadvantaged students from Central American countries where they often failed to receive a solid educational foundation in their own language and culture." (Tractenberg, Roda and Coughlin, 2016)

Chapter 4

Suburbanization in New Jersey

As has been the case in states throughout the nation, Black families and parents in New Jersey have had to contend with histories of racial discrimination and segregation as they sought to find hospitable communities in which to live and educate their children. New Jersey's history illustrates the hostilities Blacks have faced and the challenges of migrating to areas outside of central cities to establish residency. The post-Civil War era, Great Migration and Jim Crow preceded the post-World War II and civil rights era suburbanization of New Jersey. During the latter, the state's cities experienced population loss, economic decline, and white flight, as areas outside of central cities restricted Blacks' access to newly created suburban communities.

New Jersey has a fascinating racial lineage. The "Garden State," deemed so by its history of agriculture, has for some time embraced suburbia. It is a northern state imbued with the spirit of the Confederacy and Jim Crow. Settled as two colonies, East Jersey and West Jersey, the state was one of those northern slave states that children's history books conveniently omit in recounting the period of American slavery. Carteret was a port of entry for enslaved Africans trafficked from the south. Bergen County in the northeast corner of New Jersey was the largest slaveholding county in the state.

New Jersey was the last northern state to abolish slavery. It is little wonder that a Virginian committed to segregation, Woodrow Wilson, could become president of venerable Princeton University in the state and get elected governor. New Jersey has always exhibited southern tendencies in its culture and attitude. As president, Wilson would segregate federal workers in Washington, D.C., and screen *Birth of a Nation* in the White House.

In his book *Suburban Erasure*, author Walter David Greason (2014) contends the suburbs ended the modern civil rights movement in New Jersey. I concur with that assessment and Greason's acknowledgement of the state's deplorable racial history.

"New Jersey had been one of the most conservative states in the Union at the start of the Civil War. It is the only northern state that voted against Abraham Lincoln in both 1860 and 1864. The state's commitment to white supremacy persevered through the nineteenth century and culminated in the ascendance of Woodrow Wilson to the presidency of the United States. Wilson embodied the elite intellectualism that defended white supremacy as both religiously and scientifically unquestionable. These attitudes towards equality made the Garden State fertile soil for the second Ku Klux Klan precisely during the period that Mulligan identified for its lack of civil rights cases."

The Great Migration was in full effect in New Jersey in the middle of the 20th century (A decade by decade, 2005). In 1940, Blacks comprised just 5.3% of the state's population but there was an influx of southern Blacks from Virginia, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina that would alter the state's complexion. These southern Blacks found their way to cities such as Newark and Camden, and smaller communities like Hackensack, Montclair, and rural towns in the southern end of the state. At the time only 11% of Blacks had high school diplomas and 2% had college degrees. The Black homeownership rate was 20%. Twenty years later the migration of southern Blacks to the north had forever changed New Jersey. Blacks were now 8.5% of the state's population and the numbers would consistently grow over the next thirty years. By 1990, Blacks represented 13.7% of the population. In 1960, 25% of Blacks held high school diplomas; a dramatic increase from 1940. The Great Migration was not just impactful on the state's

population. It set the stage for a new era of political engagement that led to an increase in Blacks in government and serving as elected officials. The migration of Blacks to New Jersey facilitated the election of Newark's first Black mayor in 1970. New Jersey, a state with a small Black presence prior to 1940, was now a state where the concentration of Blacks in some areas was yielding political dividends. This remained true for barely a decade, as most cities in New Jersey were on the decline by the early 1980s and became predominantly Black and Latino, and poor.

New Jersey is now one of the most diverse, but segregated, states in the nation. This dichotomy is really evident when you look at the structure of public school-districts in the state. Despite its small size, New Jersey has over 600 school-districts that roughly align with a similar number of local governments. The school-districts reflect the demographics of the local municipalities so they tend to be hyper-segregated with a few exceptions (Fields, 2014). Five of the state's 21 counties are majority-minority, and those counties are the most populous (Wu, 2011). Some of New Jersey's major urban centers are located in the five counties. The state has a multi-cultural identity with the Hispanic population accounting for all of the state's population growth between 2000 and 2010. Asians were the fastest growing racial group during the period. The Black population also increased but not to the degree of Hispanics or Asians. Essex County has the state's largest Black population and the highest proportion of Blacks of any county. governments.

Essex County has 22 municipalities and nearby Bergen County has 70 municipalities. Northern New Jersey is a hodgepodge of towns and cities known best by their highway exit or their proximity to New York City. Many of the towns date back to the Revolutionary War but even that historical distinction is lost to geography and the challenge of navigating local roads or

traffic choked highways for those interested in exploring. This fiefdom fixation has asphyxiated the state and wreaked havoc on its finances. Layer upon layer of government has been the curse of New Jersey.

Shadowing white flight, a Black exodus to suburban communities emerged in the 1980s. Black families that could fled New Jersey's cities. Two of those places they headed to were the townships of Maplewood and South Orange, outside of Newark.

Maplewood and South Orange are in Essex County, a jurisdiction that is both urban and poor, and suburban and affluent. Though once the state's most populous county not many years ago, Essex now is the third largest county in population in New Jersey. Essex and Cape May counties were the only two New Jersey counties to see a decline in population between 2000 and 2010. For Essex that decline can be attributed to continued drift from the cities. Still, the county is an attractive location because of its close proximity to New York City and Pennsylvania. Some of the state's largest cities in the state, and by most standards New Jersey's cities are small, are in Essex County. They include the largest city in the state, Newark (population 277,000), and the cities of Irvington (54,000), and East Orange (64,000), and to a lesser degree Orange (30,000). These are all cities with predominantly Black populations, Black political leadership, majority Black schools and poverty. In keeping with the matchbox size of the state, none of these cities are at a distance from the suburbs. They are within minutes of Maplewood, South Orange, West Orange, and Montclair – all fairly affluent suburbs – and Millburn and Essex Falls, at the upper income strata. The medium household income in Millburn is $190,000 and the population of Essex Fells is a shade over 2,000 according to U.S. Census data. So close are these communities that had it not been for the historical anti-urban bias of New Jersey, several of these suburban

communities would likely all be part of the city of Newark today. The suburban sentiment, however, has been separation not integration. Over the years Montclair, Millburn and Roseland have had nonbinding referendums to secede from the county (Pearce, 2003). This anti-urban sentiment was also reflected in an unsuccessful attempt to consider changing the name of the Village of South Orange to South Mountain. While geographically correct since the community sits at the foot of South Mountain, the real impetus for the suggested name change was to divorce the suburb from any association with the cities of East Orange and Orange.

The close proximity of schools in 'urban' and 'suburban' districts and the relative short distance between privilege and disadvantage is easy to see in Essex County. Columbia High School in suburban Maplewood is only 2.9 miles from Orange High School in that city and just 1.7 miles from Irvington High School in that urban community. Columbia High and Irvington High are literally on the same street that snakes through both communities; it is Parker Avenue in Maplewood that morphs into Clinton Avenue in Irvington. The high school in Maplewood is also just 3.6 miles from Weequahic High School in the south ward of Newark, on a street that runs from the city into the suburb. Columbia High School is also just 5 miles from another city's high school, East Orange Campus High School. Union Avenue School, an elementary school in Irvington, is just 1.3 miles from Seth Boyden Elementary School in Maplewood. One of the farthest distances between schools in this area is that of University Middle School in Irvington and South Orange Middle School in suburban South Orange, about 3.5 miles apart. These are distances that by motor vehicle are reached from most points within 15 minutes. Yet, these schools are part of five *different* public-school-districts.

Essex County's urban core is so compact it is conceivable that a much larger Newark could exist if the city was not perceived as non-salvageable by many outside its borders. The late former state Assembly Speaker Alan J. Karcher penned *New Jersey's Multiple Municipal Madness*, a tome on the state's dysfunctional governance structure. The suburban sprawl, combined with suspect political motivations, has come at the expense of the development of the state's cities. Newark in particular.

Already handicapped by its late start, Newark proceeded to curtail its potential by purposely shrinking its borders. Its inadequate size is dramatically evident by the fact that the bulk of Newark Airport is in neighboring Elizabeth. Its opportunities for expansion were severely and myopically curtailed by its willingness to surrender hegemony over Bloomfield (then including Belleville, Montclair, and Glen Ridge) and all the Oranges, East, West, and South. With its land base of less than 24 square miles, Newark could never hope to be a major player in terms of metropolitan areas. In comparison, New York City is 365 square miles, with Manhattan Island being the smallest of the five boroughs with a land mass of 31 square miles – still 25 percent larger than all of Newark. Boston is 48 square miles; Baltimore 78 square miles; Philadelphia, square 130 miles." (Karcher, 1998)

The separation of the suburbs from Newark has deprived the state's largest city of much needed property tax revenue and helped accelerate its decline. The arrangement is an artifact of segregation and has been counterproductive to the welfare of the state. As much as suburban residents claim Newark is a drag on the state, the truth is that suburbia long ago sucked the life out of that city. Following the urban unrest of 1967, the Governor's Select Commission on Civil Disorder released its exhaustive report on the disorder and the state of New Jersey's response

and recommendations to preempt a reoccurrence of the destruction of property and loss of life that occurred in Newark. The report referenced the interconnectedness of suburban communities to cities.

"Suburban residents must understand that the future of their communities is inextricably linked to the fate of the city, instead of harboring the illusion that they can maintain invisible walls or continue to run away." (State of New Jersey, 1968)

It is against this backdrop that Black parents are now challenged to sustain their families and raise their children. The decision to enroll a Black child in a suburban school district requires an understanding of the many devices of implicit bias and discriminatory practices that Black students face in these communities. The suburbs also present a challenge to civic engagement for Blacks as social networks are frayed and social capital is taxed to maintain a reasonable quality of life in these often-hostile environments. This is the challenge to Black parental involvement in the South Orange-Maplewood School District.

Achievement Gap in a Suburban School District

As the Black residential population increased in South Orange and Maplewood toward the end of the 20th century, the schools began to reflect the change as well. With the change came a growing unease among whites and the quiet whispers that 'the quality of the schools had declined.' Suddenly the narrative changed about a school-district that the community had held in high regard. It was becoming a little too Black for comfort. It is no secret that there is a magical tipping point at which an increase in Black homeowners or students triggers feelings of

displacement by whites. As these two towns neared that point the schools became the obvious focus of much attention and a platform to engage in coded dialogue to vent fears over the shifting demographics of the two towns. Sometimes the real cause of a conflict is not what it seems but is grounded in a totally different set of circumstances. In this case the real source of contention was a growing Black population and that angst was transposed onto the schools. The school-district was not measurably different, good or bad, by the early 2000s. It was simply getting darker in hue.

To compensate for this emerging colorization of the student population a new strategy was launched to differentiate and segment access by race. *Racial tracking*. The answer was in implementing a rigid system of 'ability grouping' or 'tracking' that could be presented as merit-based but employed as a filtering tool to provide white students a rigorous education and channel Black students into a more remedial academic program. What's more, it could be achieved under the cover of integration as the public would see all students walk through the same schoolhouse door but not see Black and white students walk into separate classrooms.

Ability grouping is purportedly based on the principle of merit. It is a system that assigns students to various levels of coursework on the basis of their 'ability' and academic performance in prerequisite courses. Ability is usually measured by some form of assessment, either a statewide assessment tool or some school-district test. These assessments are held up by whites as the indicator of intelligence and ability despite volumes of research pointing to cultural bias in standardized testing. In many instances the recommendation of a teacher is also used to determine if a student will have access to an advanced-level course or an Advanced Placement (AP) course. The entire process is rife with cultural and implicit bias and is why we have such a

wide gap in Black student enrollment in rigorous courses that lead to a racial achievement gap. This was identified as far back as the 1960s when the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders issued its findings on the urban unrest that rocked America. 'The Kerner Report' called attention to tracking and *de facto* segregation when it described the events leading up to the violence in Plainfield, New Jersey.

"Pressure increased upon the school system to adapt itself to the changing social and ethnic backgrounds of its pupils. There were strikes and boycotts. The track system created *de facto* segregation within a supposedly integrated school system. Most of the youngsters from white middle-class districts were in the higher track, most of the Negro poverty areas in the lower. Relations were strained between some white teachers and Negro pupils. Two-thirds of school dropouts were estimated to be Negro." (National Advisory Commission, 1968)

Though some form of 'ability grouping' existed in many schools across the country, where students were assigned to different 'levels' of courses of varying academic rigor based upon their perceived ability, this practice quickly became racialized. It came to be used as a way to hide discriminatory practices behind a façade of merit and to preserve white privilege in a way that could elude constitutional prohibitions against segregation in public education (Losen, 1996). Racial tracking provided relief to white parents who harbored racial animus but were politically astute enough to avoid the appearance of being racist. Black children were not denied access because they were black but because they were not *qualified* to be in the same classes as white students.

"After studying the detracking process in 10 integrated schools, Oakes, Wells, Jones, and Danow (1997) concluded that much of the resistance is based on long-standing incorrect

assumptions regarding race and intelligence. Some of the conclusions that are drawn come, in self-perpetuating manner, from the negative results of tracking itself. In tracked schools, African-American and Latino students are less likely to be placed in high-track classes than their white or Asian counterparts with the same achievement test scores (Vanfossen et al, 1987), and they are overrepresented in low-track classes further reinforcing false stereotypes (Heubert & Hauser, 1999)." (Burris and Garrity, 2008)

Noted educator Dr. Carol Burris has invested considerable time and energy during her career unpacking false narratives of low expectations and dismantling tracking and ability grouping. The former principal of South Side High School in Rockville Centre, Long Island defines tracking as "…the sorting of students within a school or district that results in different access to academic curriculum and the opportunity to learn." (Burris, 2014)

With the support of a forward-thinking superintendent, Dr. Bill Johnson, Burris reimagined South Side High School as a building where all students would be challenged academically, have the opportunity to take rigorous courses, and learn in an environment where excellence would be the expectation for all students. What made the transformation of the school impressive is that its student enrollment is diverse racially and economically.

Testing also became a way to weed out Black students and a convenient way for school-districts to defend their exclusion by pointing to assessments as evidence of their underachievement. Despite mounting evidence of cultural bias in standardized assessments and research that disproved the effectiveness of tracking, and its harm to students of color, it became the weapon of choice in school-districts intent on preserving racial hierarchies. This was the case in the South Orange-Maplewood School-district.

The school-district employed racial tracking at the very time that the Black student population increased in the schools. It was not simply a matter of tracking students by race at the high school level. The racial sorting of students began in elementary school with Black students identified as below academic proficiency and labeled as such for the purpose of limiting their trajectory in middle school and high school. Once in middle school Black students are further sorted, particularly in mathematics and science, and then tracked into lower-level classes in high school. This tracking results in few Black students in advanced-level and Advanced Placement (AP) courses once they enter Columbia High School. It is a system that suffocates all Black students as even those that manage to be placed in rigorous courses often feel isolated and under tremendous pressure as the token representatives in class.

A parallel process of disproportionately punishing Black students through the disciplinary process further suppresses their academic progression as class time is missed and they become further marginalized. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report in 2018, *Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities*, that detailed the impact of racial differences in student discipline (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). The data, though focused on national trends, confirms what has been witnessed in the South Orange-Maplewood School-District. The report notes while 3.2% and 4.2% of white students were subjected to out-of-school and in-school suspension respectively, 14.1% and 11.4% of Black students were subjected to such punishment. The numbers were even more extreme for students with disabilities. Among white students with disabilities, 8.4% were subjected to out-of-school suspension and 7.6% faced in-school suspension for disciplinary infractions. The data for Black students with disabilities was grossly disproportional to their

white peers. For Black students with disabilities, 23.2% were subjected to out-of-school suspension and 16.1% received in-school suspension. The disciplinary process has quickly become a secondary method of racial tracking in schools.

The South Orange-Maplewood School District's deficits have been prominent in its racial achievement gap and has centered on five issues. First, the exclusion of Black students from advanced-level Honors and Advanced Placement classes (AP) that has resulted in segregated classrooms in Columbia High School. Second, the racial profiling of Black students through the disciplinary process causing wide racial disparities in suspensions. Third, the disproportionate placement of Black students into special education categories with many assigned due to 'behavioral issues.' Fourth, the dearth of Black teachers and the callousness of many white teachers toward Black students that enables the outcomes seen in student discipline. Fifth, permitting *de facto* segregation in its elementary schools by not accounting for the residential segregation that has developed in the neighborhood of Seth Boyden Elementary School. Each of these issues represent a serious impediment to academic progress. Collectively, they function as an impenetrable barrier.

The U.S. Department of Education, under the administration of President George W. Bush, issued a "Dear Colleague" letter on May 22, 2008 to local education authorities ('school boards') across the nation advising them of possible violations of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 related to access to advanced-level and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. There was growing concern that minority students were being denied enrollment in rigorous courses in public schools. Those concerns intensified with the arrival of the Obama administration in 2009 and the federal Department of Education would begin to probe the issue more deeply by

gathering data on individual school-districts. Among the districts that caught the attention of the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) was the South Orange-Maplewood School District and in 2012 the district found itself the subject of a compliance review. OCR was investigating school-districts for compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. What OCR spotted in the school district was an extreme level of racial disparity in student discipline and students' access to advanced-level ('Honors' and above) and Advanced Placement (AP) classes.

The ACLU of New Jersey and the UCLA Civil Rights Project also jointly investigated the district's practices. The two organizations filed a complaint against the district with OCR. The complaint alleged violations of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Specifically, the complaint focused on racial disparities caused by the use of ability grouping or 'leveling' and facilitated by tracking, and racially disparate disciplinary penalties imposed on students with disabilities. The data on academic placement was jarring. The complaint described an environment in Columbia High School where Black students were categorically denied access to the most rigorous classes that are central to college enrollment readiness.

"During the 2011-2012 school year, Black students consisted of 52.3 percent of the student population at Columbia High School, compared to a 38.3 percent White population. Nevertheless, only 21.5 percent of students in AP classes and 18.4 percent of students in Level 5 advanced classes were Black. In contrast, White students made up 69.0 percent of AP students and 71.5 percent of Level 5-Advanced students. Conversely, Black students comprised a disproportionately high percentage of the lower-level course population. District data from 2009 indicates that 72.8 percent of Columbia's Black student population was placed in Level 2 and 3

language arts courses, while only 17.6 percent of white students attended the same courses." (ACLU, 2014)

In terms of student discipline, the ACLU complaint noted that in the 2011-2012 academic year the out-of-school suspension rate for students in New Jersey was 5.5 percent but the rate for Columbia High School students was 10.7 percent. The suspension risk for white students at the high school was 3.5 percent, the risk for Black and Latino students was 15.9 percent and 7.1 percent.[1] Black students were 4.5 times more likely to face an out-of-school suspension than white students. Black males had a 21.2 percent suspension risk, Hispanic males a 12.5 percent suspension risk, and white males a 5.9 percent suspension risk. Black females had a 12.2 percent suspension risk while the suspension risk for white females was only 1.1 percent.

The multiple obstacles to Black students' achievement and success in this suburban school district poses a challenge to Black parental involvement. Knowing the degree to which Black student achievement lags White students in this district, Black parents and guardians are faced with the need to effectively engage their children at home and their schools to support their children. In this paper I seek to examine Black parental involvement in this suburban school district in New Jersey and determine if behaviors resemble parental involvement in a similar school district in the state of Ohio.

[1] The suspension risk is calculated by dividing the number of suspended students in a given group by the overall number of students in said group.

Chapter 5

Research Design

I will employ a qualitative research design to assess Black parental involvement in a suburban school district. The subject school district has many of the characteristics of similarly situated suburban communities across the country: stable property base, a mix of working-class and middle-class families, racially diverse and schools that are deemed 'good.' A survey will be distributed electronically to a pool of 71 Black parents/guardians who are on the mailing list of a local parents' organization in the suburban public-school district of South Orange-Maplewood, New Jersey. The parents/guardians are working-class and middle-class and have children in the K-12 grades in the school district's schools. The survey results will then be compared to the findings of Ogbu's (2003) research on the suburban Shaker Heights, Ohio school district. Specifically, to determine what similarities or differences exist in Black parental involvement in the two comparable school districts. My objective is to contribute to a more complete understanding of Black parental engagement in suburban communities, the degree to which schools engage parents and how the involvement of parents might facilitate improved academic performance among Black students.

The survey seeks to answer the questions:

1. In what ways do Black parents engage with their children's education?
2. What resources, tactics and activities do Black families use to engage to support their children's academic progress?

Using Epstein's 6 Types of Parental Involvement (1988) as the framework, the survey instrument is focused on Types (1), Parenting and (4), Learning at home.

Parenting (Type 1): Help all families establish home environments to support children as students

- Parent education and other courses or training for parents (e.g. GED, college credit, family literacy)
- Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services
- Home visits at transition points to elementary, middle and high school

Learning at home (Type 4): Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning.

- Information for families on skills required for students in all subjects at each grade
- Information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home

Survey

1. What is the highest level of education obtained by the parent/guardian in the household?
2. How would you describe your employment status?

a) Blue collar

b) White collar

3. How many hours do you work per week?

a) Full-time

b) Part-time

4. What is your annual household income?

a) Below $30,000

b) Between $30,000 and $49,999

c) Between $50,000 and $100,000

d) Above $100,000

5. Do you own or rent your home?

a) Own

b) Rent

6. How long have you lived at your residence?

7. How many children of school age (K-12) live in your home?

8. What grade level is your child?

a) Elementary School

b) Middle School

c) High School

9. At what age did you start having discussions with your child about education?

10. How would you rate your child's attitude toward school?

a) Poor

b) Good

c) Excellent

11. Do you make family trips with your child to museums, the library or performance venues?

a) Yes

b) No

12. If Yes, how many trips per year do you make?

13. Do you discuss the possibility of attending college or career options with your child?

a) Yes

b) No

14. Have you engaged in financial planning for your child's college education?

a) Yes

b) No

15. Are there resources (e.g. Dictionary, Thesaurus, Computer, Printer) in your home for your child to use to complete school assignments?

    a) Yes
    b) No

16. Do you monitor your child's television viewing during the school week?

    a) Yes
    b) No

17. Are you familiar with your child's friends?

18. How many hours per week does your child commit to homework?

19. Do you assist your child with homework?

    a) Yes
    b) No

20. Do you help your child select her/his classes?

    a) Yes
    b) No

21. Do you understand the types of classes and curriculum offered at your child's school?

    a) Yes

b) No

22. How often do you check your school's online portal to monitor your child's attendance and academic performance?

a) Once per week

b) Three times per week

c) More than three times per week

23. Do you impose disciplinary measures if your child is not performing satisfactorily in school?

a) Yes

b) No

24. Do you attend Back-to-School Night?

a) Yes

b) No

25. Have you attended a Board of Education Meeting?

a) Yes

b) No

26. Have you observed racism in your school?

a) Yes

b) No

27. Has your child experienced racism in his/her school?

a) Yes

b) No

28. Have you ever participated in a protest or direct action related to the school district?

a) Yes

b) No

29. Have you voted in a School Board election?

a) Yes

b) No

30. Do you attend your child's extracurricular or athletic events at school?

31. How would you describe communications with your child's school?

a) Poor

b) Good

c) Excellent

32. Have you ever received a call from your child's school regarding her/his academic progress?

a) Yes

b) No

33. Have you ever received a call from your child's school regarding a disciplinary issue with your child?

    a) Yes

    b) No

34. Have you ever scheduled an in-school conference with your child's teacher to discuss her/his academic performance?

    a) Yes

    b) No

35. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being poor and 5 excellent, how would you rate your child's school?

36. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being poor and 5 excellent, how would you rate your child's teachers overall?

Chapter 6

Findings

The purpose of this paper is to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of Black parents in suburban communities toward their children's formal schooling and their involvement at home and with their children's schools. The impetus of this paper is the growing presence of Black families in our nation's suburbs, that had been previously overwhelmingly White, and the growing diversity of school districts that serve these communities. My objective, within the limitations of this paper to extrapolate findings beyond the subject community, is to help contribute to the incremental understanding of the Black suburban experience in America.

I am seeking to identify any convergence between Black parental involvement and experiences in two comparable suburban communities, Shaker Heights (OH) and South Orange-Maplewood (NJ). These profile of these two school districts has been shaped by the suburbanization of the Black community over the last three decades. The South Orange-Maplewood School District, adjacent to Newark in northern New Jersey, consists of ten schools, including six elementary schools, two middle schools, and a central high school. The district serves 7,200 students. Black or African American students comprise 27.4% of the student population and White students 54.6%. Students of Hispanic origin are 80% of the district's population.

The Shaker Heights and South Orange-Maplewood schools were considered very good, if not excellent, long before the migration of Blacks into the two communities. These places were aspirational locations for Black families seeking a better quality of life and an excellent

education for their children. Whether it was relocation from Cleveland to Shaker Heights or Newark to South Orange-Maplewood, the purchase of a home in the two suburbs was viewed as a step-up and resulted in some attainment of status. For Blacks, the perceived quality of housing and education created some class distinction from the Black community in the neighboring cities.

While there may exist ‘regional’ differences in attitudes, culture and civic history, the singular connection as parents or ‘guardians’ provides a platform from which to explore the extent of Black parental involvement in their children’s schooling and their civic engagement. Each district shares a history of Black student underachievement in relation to their White peers.

I employ the Parental Involvement framework of Epstein (1988), specifically the behavior of parents at home and in engagement with their children’s schools and overlaid on the ecological systems model of Brofenbrenner (1979) which places Epstein within the microsystem and mesosystem of that model. Though neither Epstein nor Brofenbrenner focus on the unique experiences of Black parents, their work does provide a foundation to build a culturally relevant model of Black parental involvement.

To gauge the involvement and experiences of Black parents in the South Orange-Maplewood (NJ) School District, I distributed a survey electronically, using the Survey Gizmo tool, to a group of 71 parents of current elementary and secondary students, across the socioeconomic spectrum, and members of a local Black parents advocacy organization. Parents were notified of the purpose of the survey, how their responses would be used, assured of the confidentiality of respondents and given 3 days to respond. After the initial distribution of the

survey a second email was sent out to encourage responses. The survey resulted in a 19.71% response rate. The response rate might have been affected by the unique circumstances facing parents handling work-at-home- and home-schooling responsibilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Questions from the survey were aligned with the work of Ogbu (2003) on the Shaker Heights (OH) school district. The questions seek to explore what Black parents are doing in the home and their contact with schools for the purpose of advancing the academic progress and success of their children. As much as possible, the questions were developed to mirror Ogbu's examination of Black parental involvement with schools and their involvement with their children's education at home in Shaker Heights.

Ogbu gathered responses on the following measures of parental awareness and involvement:

- Parental education status
- Parental employment status
- Mistrust of the school system
- Presence or absence of a cultural model of teaching
- Knowledge of the difference in class levels and course types

- Supervision of homework
- Monitoring of children's television viewing
- Incentives or punishment to motivate children
- Communication barriers with school
- Communication barriers between parents and children (generational)
- Employment constraints on parent's time with children
- Parents' allocation of educational responsibility (home or school)

Survey Results

All of the respondents self-identified as white collar with all except one indicating a college degree or higher as the highest level of education attained. This is in keeping with the socio-economic profile of South Orange and Maplewood, with median household income in excess of $115,000 and median home value at $400,000. The majority of the respondents have lived in the two towns 10 years or longer, the longest period of residence being 20 years and the shortest 2 years. The length of residence also suggests significant experience with the elementary and secondary schools as the years spanned imply contact with the school system at some interval. In addition, the majority (78.6%) of the respondents are homeowners. This reflects the relative residential stability of the community and infers some degree of satisfaction with the

public schools since home buying in New Jersey is often predicated on the perceived quality of the local schools.

Respondents are overwhelmingly parents of single children with 2 children being the upper range of households. The population of the two towns is overwhelmingly comprised of Millennials and, combined with the expense of homes and high property taxes, may account for the size of Black households. The size of the household also dictates the experience and relationship with the school district as contact is generally limited to one grade level - elementary, middle school or high school - and seldom requires the parents to manage the intricacies of more than one level at a time. The majority (57.1%) of the respondents had children in high school and the remainder were evenly divided (21.4%) between elementary and middle school. The enrollment of students mirrors the profile of the length of residence.

All of the respondents expressed a significant degree of involvement with their children in the home. In response to Q9 that inquired when parents first started having discussions with their children about the importance of education, several respondents indicated communicating to their children as early as age 2 and with most having such discussions by the time their children were 8-years old. Such communications or 'talks could influence a child's disposition toward school and attitude concerning education in general. Q10 measured parents' views on their children's attitude toward school and the majority of respondents (42.9%) rated their child's attitude as 'good.' This measure could help influence the quality of students' interactions with teachers on issues of grading, student discipline and academic progress.

To further explore the role of parents in the home, two questions probed the extent of family excursions to support their children's learning and the resources in the household to support children's academic progress. Respondents overwhelmingly (92.9%) indicated that the family made trips to museums, the library and performance venues to enhance the learning of children and that those trips were frequent. The availability of local public libraries and the proximity of the two towns to New York City could account for the investment in family activities to enrich children's education. All of the respondents represented that their homes were well resourced (e.g. dictionary, computer, printer) to support their children's learning. Respondents also overwhelmingly (92.9%) monitor their children's television during the school week and all indicated a familiarity with their children's friends and peer network. As would be expected with the preponderance of respondents with high school students, the weekly hours children committed to homework generally exceeded 9.

Respondents appear to be actively engaged in assisting their children with homework (78.6%) and helping their children choose courses (78.6%). Respondents also indicated a familiarity with the types of classes and curriculum offered at their child's school. On Q22 that measured the monitoring of children's school attendance and academic progress through the available online portal, 42.9% indicated they did so once per week, 14.3% did so three times per week, and 42.9% were monitoring more than three times per week. All respondents impose some form of disciplinary measure if their children are not performing satisfactorily in school.

Respondents also indicate a significant presence in the local school district. A majority (78.6%) attend Back-to-School Night and almost 90% have attended a Board of Education

meeting. A high percentage (85.7%) of respondents attend their child's extracurricular or athletic events at school. There was also a significant number of respondents (78.6%) that have participated in a protest or direct action related to the school district. Respondents (92.9%) also confirmed their voting in a local School Board election. This degree of engagement might be driven by the experience of 92.9% of respondents having observed racism in their children's school and believing their child has personally experienced racism. Given that the majority of the respondents had children in high school, it raises the question of whether the racism experienced was evident in elementary and middle school as well. If so, respondents made a conscious decision to keep their children in a school district in which racism was evident.

Respondents generally had favorable experiences communicating with their children's school, with 42.9% describing that contact as 'good' and 28.6% labeling it 'excellent.' Still, a third (28.6%) rated communication with their child's school 'poor.' Respondents were evenly split on the question of whether they had ever received a call from their child's school regarding her/his academic progress. A larger percentage (57.1%) had not experienced a call from their child's school concerning a disciplinary issue. Respondents do appear proactive (92.9%) in initiating in-school conferences to discuss their child's academic performance with the teacher. On a sliding scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being poor and 5 excellent, respondents generally rated their child's school at the mid-range. The same is true in regard to how respondents rate their child's teacher.

Analysis

Under Epstein's framework, there are two types of parental involvement that cross the home-school boundary. It is this activity that falls within the microsystem of Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory. To some degree generalizations can be made using Epstein and Brofenbrenner as a template, but the nuances of the Black parent experience that is shaped by history, culture and stereotyping requires a new conceptualization of parental involvement.

Respondents' responses suggest that Black parents in the South Orange-Maplewood School District are involved to a high degree in the home and in their engagement with their children's schools to support their children's education. Where Ogbu indicates some detachment by Black parents in the Shaker Heights schools, the parents surveyed for this paper appear to be pro-active and fully cognizant of cultural barriers their children face. In Shaker Heights, Ogbu observed that parents went to their child's school 'mainly when there was a crisis." This the polar opposite of South Orange-Maplewood where respondents initiated in-school conferences to discuss their children's academic performance with teachers.

The degree to which respondents in South Orange-Maplewood engaged with the local school district through voting, attendance at their child's extracurricular or athletic events, Back-to-School Night and Board of Education meetings, and participating in protests or direct action to address grievances at their child's school, suggest a hyper-active parent network that might be an aberration given the volume of literature focused on increasing parental involvement in their children's education. The intensity of parent involvement by the respondents might explain the

more performance related (academic progress v. disciplinary) communications from schools. School principals and teachers may feel more pressure to be responsive to parents due to their presence and participation in school district related activities.

In Shaker Heights, the perception was that Black parents did not engage with their children in the early grades and were not vigilant in monitoring homework, particularly in reading and mathematics. Survey respondents in South Orange-Maplewood, including those with children in the elementary grades, indicated a hands-on approach to monitoring homework and assisting their children complete assignments. Teachers and students in Shaker Heights agreed that many students did not take homework seriously because parents failed to monitor their work in the home. Ogbu also observed that students in Shaker Heights acknowledged that they were distracted from their schoolwork by television and the influence of peers. The students also said their parents did not monitor their television viewing and the students admitted to viewing programming that was contrary to their schooling. This is in contrast to the respondents in South Orange-Maplewood, all of whom claim to monitor their children's television viewing and have full knowledge of their children's network of friends.

In Shaker Heights and South Orange-Maplewood parents indicated some degree of punishment for their children when their academic performance was not satisfactory. Since students were not surveyed in South Orange-Maplewood it cannot be determined if punishment was an effective strategy to drive student performance. Ogbu observed that students in Shaker Heights believed a system of rewards and punishment worked to help them focus on their schoolwork and improve their academic performance.

What appears to separate the experiences of in Shaker Heights and South Orange-Maplewood is the socio-economic status of parents. In the Ohio school district Ogbu found that there was a perception among students that parents lack of involvement was due to their limited education. This same view was held by teachers. On the contrary in South Orange-Maplewood, respondents all self-identified as white-collar with educations of college or higher. This likely accounts for the ease of engagement among parents and the various forms that engagement occurs. Still, respondents in South Orange-Maplewood were nearly unanimous in acknowledging racism in their children's school and that their children personally experienced racism in school. The high level of involvement by respondents in South Orange-Maplewood might have also tempered how they rated their children's school and teachers. Their involvement and activity might be in *reaction to* conditions and not necessarily a positive, affirmative exercise based solely on the academic aspirations of their children.

Brofenbrenner's *microsystem* includes the child's relationship to home, school, neighborhood, friends and church. The *mesosystem* is the interaction between microsystems and the *exosystem* is the connection between microsystems and environments outside the child's direct experience, like a parent's work or the community. In Shaker Heights, Ogbu's research seems to suggest a weak microsystem and exosystem. What may be at work in South Orange-Maplewood is a stronger exosystem due to the relative socioeconomic advantage of the respondents. Respondents in South Orange-Maplewood may have a healthier layer of external networks that keep parents better informed, provides greater peer-to-peer support, and makes involvement easier. It is the informal networks in suburban communities (e.g. professional associations, civic groups, recreational clubs, social clubs) that often serve to empower parents

and facilitate their involvement in civic affairs. Respondents in South Orange-Maplewood indicate high levels of voting and attendance at school related activities which might in turn give them greater standing with educators.

Conclusion

What connects both Shaker Heights and South Orange-Maplewood is the perception among parents that the schools are good and the nagging presence of a persistent achievement gap. Both school districts have confronted criticism over academic tracking and racial disparities in student discipline. Despite the degree of involvement conveyed by respondents in South Orange-Maplewood, that district has been plagued by racial incidents and the underperformance of Black students. So, at the extremes of Black parental involvement in two suburban school districts, the academic performance of Black students is lagging that of their White peers.

From my review of the literature and data on both school districts it appears to me that the implementation of broad systemic change might be affected by the inability of Black parents to dismantle vestiges of systemic racism. In the case of Shaker Heights this failure could be attributed to the socioeconomic status of Black parents, but the same systemic barriers plague Black families in South Orange-Maplewood. In the latter, parents appear to be involved and civically engaged but that engagement falls short of deconstructing oppressive practices and policies that impede Black students' progress. It is perhaps the very nature of suburban life that handicaps Black parents.

It is my contention that earnest conversations on race are muted in suburban communities to not offend Whites, many of whom show no real interest in a truthful accounting of how their privilege advantages them. This results in a false peace but no equity or justice. The tendency of middle-class Blacks to engage in ‘arrival survival’ discounts the very strength that allowed them to *arrive* in the first place. Blacks in suburban communities surrender power every day in the false hope of being welcomed or treated as equals. By doing so, they surrender their children and make them susceptible to the many devices that eventually engulf them.

The desire to co-exist in White spaces might diminish the full potential of Black parents’ involvement by silencing grievances out of fear of being ostracized and stereotyped. There is an utter fear among many middle-class Blacks to be perceived as troublemakers or rabble rousers. Black parents might also desire social acceptance from Whites and value accruing some degree of status over posing a threat to the status quo. Protest might be genteel and narrowly directed toward the interest of the parent’s child but not encompassing wider grievances that arise out of systemic barriers. The socioeconomic status of Black parents seems to have no bearing on the manner in which Black children are treated in these two suburban school districts. Ironically, it appears that after having made significant sacrifices to relocate to the suburbs, Blacks are burdened with an invisible tax for the *privilege* of sending their children to *better* schools.

Judging from the literature, experiences in both school districts and the responses to the survey, there are several conditions I propose must exist in suburban school districts to accelerate Black parental involvement and improve Blacks students’ performance.

1. School districts need to develop the cultural skill set to engage Black parents in the exosystem; the layer of activity outside the home and in the community.
2. Black parents must bring their ‘expertise’ to the table in an assertive way in school districts and claim their space in the public-school hierarchy. Black parents cannot play down their expertise or training and expect their children to receive a quality and legally entitled education.
3. Black parents must be aggressive and vocal and attack systemic bias even at the risk of being ostracized by Whites and somewhat isolated from the mainstream.
4. Participation in civic affairs by Black parents must be leveraged with the focus on reciprocity. Participation for participation sake is a futile exercise if benefits are not accrued that can support Black children’s aspirations.

These are areas that are beyond the scope of this paper but deserve further exploration in a more expansive research paper. Such an inquiry should examine Black parental behavior and involvement across a number of suburban school districts in America to supplement the research of Ogbu and the findings of this paper.

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