INTRODUCTION

Marie is the mother of two children, one of whom is school-aged. Her son Jackson, now in fourth grade, was diagnosed with a learning disability the prior year by a teacher who, according to Marie, “was the first teacher to really see him for who he was.” In years prior, Jackson had struggled to read; with these mighty struggles, he became frustrated and disappointed in himself, especially as he witnessed the seeming leaps and bounds made by his classmates. His greatest challenge was second grade, a year that both mother and son like to put behind them.

A socially introverted young boy fascinated by Marvel comic books and building—out of LEGO blocks, recyclable materials, toothpicks, popsicle sticks, dominoes, and playing cards—Jackson became withdrawn at school during that year. He felt ashamed by his inability to read like his classmates. When it was time to read, he sought the solace of science books and magazines. The illustrations always communicated a story and the text on the pages was not overwhelming.

At school, his second-grade teacher, in an attempt to encourage him to read books that were appropriate to his reading level, began to forbid him from reading the books he loved. He could no longer take the *DK Knowledge Encyclopedia* to his reading nook. Instead, he was sent along with *Elephant and Piggy* or *I Can Read!* books featuring Pete the Cat, Paddington, or Amelia Bedelia. Angry and frustrated about his struggle to read and the punitive use of his beloved books, Jackson became defiant. Refusing to read the books from his teacher, he instead began to tear out their pages, slowly and silently, hiding them inside the book’s back cover.

It wasn’t long before his teacher discovered his acts of defiance, and a couple days later, Marie was called in to discuss the situation. Jackson’s teacher was visibly frustrated with Jackson’s “antics,” which she believed were getting in the way of her ability to support him academi-
cally. She assumed Marie didn’t know what happened in the classroom, but she did. To the teacher’s surprise, Jackson had told his mother about the incident the day he was reprimanded by his teacher. When Marie asked him why he would do such a thing “when you love books so much,” Jackson’s eyes welled up with tears. In the only explanation he could muster, he sobbed and asked, “Why does she have to punish me because I can’t read like the other kids?”

What this teacher didn’t understand or care to comprehend was that Jackson’s anxieties about reading were spilling over into all aspects of his classroom experience. Marie explained that his struggles were affecting his friendships; he was no longer willing to break out of his shy personality and “into friendships with kids who could give him a break from the troubles he was enduring every day in the classroom.” He did not look forward to school; every upset stomach led to a long and protracted battle about whether he could stay home.

As Marie tried to broach these topics with Jackson’s teacher, she was met with sharp rebuke. In a tone of unwavering confidence, the teacher reported that for as long as she had known him—which had only been a month and a half—she had noticed that he was a “loner,” a child who preferred to play by himself rather than with others. She believed the reading issues were a separate matter and one that she was addressing in her work with him at school. Marie responded with her own explanations: “Yes, he likes to do things on his own, but he has always enjoyed friendships until this year,” and “When you have a boy like Jackson who wants to read so badly but is having trouble learning how, can’t it create some hardship in other parts of his life in school?” Each of Marie’s explanations, however, was dismissed. Hesitant to blame or challenge the teacher in that moment, Marie recalls this conversation with deep shame and regret that she “did not stand up for Jackson more than I did.”

As the conversation came to a close, Jackson’s teacher recommended, “If you send him to school well fed, with a lunch to eat and a good night’s sleep, then you can let us take care of the rest. Let’s focus on what we each do best.”
Who knows what is best for the child? Is it Jackson’s teacher, who has training and expertise in child literacy? Or is it Marie, who has the long view on her son’s development and can zero in on Jackson’s response to the social, emotional, and academic demands that are placed on him? Is Marie’s view tainted because she is singularly focused on Jackson, or is the teacher’s judgment clouded by her responsibility to twenty-six other students? Why are Marie and Jackson’s teacher so naturally inclined to be in confrontation with each other? If their views are conflicting, who knows what is best for young Jackson? Who has the authority to act on that knowledge?

These questions lie at the heart of every debate about school transformation: Who knows how best to improve our schools and classrooms? What are some of the common refrains in this debate? Schools need instructional leaders who commit to carrying out a vision of school improvement and stick around long enough to see it through. Teachers must design classroom learning environments to be student-centered and engaging. For teachers to carry out their plans successfully, they need guidance and professional support from the moment they begin their teacher education programs, through their early years as a novice teacher, and well into their careers as school communities, programs, and policies evolve. All the while, we must think about the diversity of school communities and not lose sight of the ways race, class, and opportunity impact the dynamics of student-teacher interaction, the curriculum that influences how they see the world, and the policies that seek to build equity across schools. Most of us would acknowledge that children—their academic, social, and emotional development—are, or at least should be, at the core of every conversation about school transformation.

But what about their families? What about parents like Marie? Are they to step aside and allow educators to do what they believe is best for the academic, social, and emotional development of their children? Even with the best ideas and intentions about school reform, there is a curious silence about the role of families.
The dissonance between Marie and Jackson’s teacher, and often between families and schools, represents a power struggle. Jackson’s teacher and mother are at odds about the child’s challenges and how best to address them, but as this situation illustrates, and is often the case, schools and teachers are in a position of power over parents when it comes to the education of children. How is this realized?

Sociologist Willard Waller identified this conflict between parents and teachers, noting that the adversarial nature of their relationship made them “natural enemies.” He argued that parents and teachers were inevitably and naturally in conflict due to their competing goals and intentions. Parents seek to advantage their child in the school system and promote that child’s well-being and success, but teachers seek to promote the learning and well-being of all children. These fundamentally disparate orientations to schooling and its purposes set parents and teachers on a collision course where small differences can be seen as egregious errors in judgment and intention. Most importantly, if parents’ interests are viewed as private and teachers’ interests are a public good, then setting a common vision for educational transformation will be impossible.

This characterization of parents and teachers as natural enemies is incomplete, however. Differences in social class, language, and culture can create distinctions between home and school as well. These contrasting settings may lead children and their families to see the home and school as worlds apart. This can be particularly true for immigrant students, students living in poverty, and students of color. Immigrant parents may view the school as a place that will integrate their children into the larger society, providing opportunities that were not available to them when they themselves were children. School can become a place where children are taught to be “American,” and being American usually means white and middle class. Historically, schools have been sites of cultural assimilation—be it the Indian boarding schools at the turn of the twentieth century, which sought to eradicate tribal language and culture; the earliest kindergartens, where white middle-
school teachers sought to teach parents and children habits of hygiene, cleanliness, and order; or even present-day schools, with their focus on monolingual instruction. Consequently, the education of immigrant youth and children of immigrants continues to be shaped by policies and practices that devalue students' funds of knowledge, placing them at the margins and perpetuating inequality of educational experience. This marginalization results from ideologies of cultural deficit as well as the dominance and superiority of the English language in schools.

If schools seek to assimilate children into the larger society, then the gulf between home and school persists. If educators believe the school’s dominant culture is preferable, they learn to view students’ families through perceived deficits. Void of any connection or mutual understanding, parents might perceive teachers as uncaring and teachers might assume parents are uninterested in the educational process. This can only widen the gulf between home and school and reinforce the tendency to blame each other for any struggles that arise.

One of the clearest windows into a school’s relationship with students’ families is its family engagement practices. It is striking how strangely universal the methods for parent involvement have become. Bake sales, PTAs, parent-teacher conferences, and back-to-school nights are just a few of the common rituals of parent engagement in schools. These practices may be, in many schools, well received by parents who view these rare glimpses into schools as precious and meaningful, but the sheer uniformity in how schools design parent participation also assumes there is one way to involve families.

By relying on these parent involvement traditions, schools have designed a suite of engagement practices that are school-centered rather than family-centered in their approach. These rituals of involvement focus on activities for parents rather than their engagement or connection to a school community. With a focus on presentations, such as those given by teachers at a parent open house, and highly structured conversations about student progress, such as those of a parent-teacher conference, these family engagement strategies operate on the assumption that schools know what is best for children, and parents must lis-
ten and follow. Additionally, schools often place a higher premium on planning the event and miss the importance of creating thoughtful and meaningful invitations to participate.

These interactions show us that not all players in public schools are equal. Schemes to encourage parent participation in schools will fail to transform education if they operate with the “presumption of equality between parents and schools, and the refusal to address power struggles.” While a parent’s lack of knowledge or formal expertise in educational matters may signal incompetence to educators, the imbalance in power between educators and families can discourage parent participation in schools. When schools do attempt to include parents in school decision-making, they may not provide the necessary knowledge to fully inform and engage parents; intentional or not, this invites passive rather than full participation. And certainly, in an era when families encounter challenges with immigration status and the specter of harsh and punitive consequences looms large among mixed-status families, a family’s engagement and interaction with the school may be riddled with serious issues of trust and insecurity. Without prying and causing families to feel anxious, schools can consider the myriad ways that a family’s participation in school is influenced—beyond the typical assumptions of parent care or interest. And while it may feel that the work is done when the programs for parents are scheduled and the school doors are opened, a school’s stance toward families—perceptions about their knowledge, about what they can offer to schools and their children, and about their involvement and participation—is continually communicated through the everyday interactions between educators and families. It is a reflection of who has power in schools.

**Demanding Power from Schools: Parents’ Rights**

Schools are under increased pressure to deliver successful outcomes for students, and this can be a source of stress and demoralization for teachers. Heightened expectations for success and the high-stakes nature of standardized assessments may lead teachers to turn to formal expertise or follow school or district directives. Within this context, parents may feel that they lack the information to be adequately informed and can-
not ask the right questions to engage in conversation with teachers or support their child’s progress and development. In turn, educators may blame parents for the challenges students face in the classroom.

When parents sense that the system works against them and serves to disempower them, they may design strategies to demand power from schools. Often in the spotlight of the media, this strand of policy and practice focuses on parents’ “rights” to challenge schools, districts, and educational policies and often pits parents and educators against each other. Increasingly, these efforts use the courts as a mechanism for effecting education reform; while parents are the public faces of these cases, educational interest groups and neoliberal reformers often drive and fund the efforts.\(^{17}\)

One such case is the *Vergara v. California* decision on seniority rights and tenure. Nine public school plaintiffs filed a lawsuit in 2012 to challenge the tenure process of teachers. The student plaintiffs argued that they were taught by inferior teachers who were protected by tenure provisions and were thus denied equal protection of the law. A Los Angeles County Superior Court judge ruled that the statutes of tenure were unconstitutional in 2014; two years later, the Court of Appeal’s three-judge panel unanimously reversed the trial court’s decision.\(^{18}\)

The lawsuit was followed by a series of similar legal efforts to weaken teacher job protections through the courts.\(^{19}\) Six parents from Newark Public Schools filed a suit to prove that seniority-based layoffs were detrimental to their children’s educational experience.\(^{20}\) In Minnesota, the parents of five children filed a lawsuit arguing that teacher protections contribute to the achievement gap between white students and students of color. They argued that policies favored ineffective veteran teachers over effective teachers who lack seniority.\(^{21}\) A similar case in New York pitted a parent group, the New York City Parents Union, against the very policies that seek to protect teacher tenure.\(^{22}\)

It is important to note that these high-profile cases have the backing and private funding of education reform groups.\(^{23}\) The *Vergara v. California* case was funded by Silicon Valley technology entrepreneur David Welch and his organization Students Matter. In New York, Welch’s involvement provided an infusion of funding and legal expertise for the
suit. Subsequent *Vergara*-style lawsuits were supported by Partnership for Educational Justice, a national education reform group founded by former CNN anchor Campbell Brown that seeks to challenge teacher job protections across the country.24

Parent trigger laws have also framed the interactions between families and schools as fraught with conflict and adversarial in nature. The policy allows parents to intervene in the operation of schools by petition when school performance is deemed “failing” due to low test scores over a period of two or three years. Parents of children in these schools, with successful petitions, can close the school, reconstitute the school by replacing faculty and staff, convert the school to a charter school, or make use of private school vouchers. While only two California communities have actually exercised the parent trigger option thus far, seven states (California, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, Connecticut, and Texas) have enacted parent trigger laws of varying types and twenty-five states have considered the legislation.25

Efforts to enact parent triggers can thrive in a system where parents feel they lack voice, choice, and agency, leading to questions about who has the power to determine the fate and future of schools.26 Similar to the claims of plaintiffs in the cases to upend teacher protections, parents report a sense of desperation in reforming a broken public school system. The claims in parent trigger cases highlight schools’ lack of responsiveness to parental concern; parents make the case that this is a consequence of the actions of educators who choose to protect their own interests rather than those of children.27

Parent trigger legislation efforts and challenges to teacher tenure follow a common pattern of blaming poor educational outcomes on teachers, school district officials, teacher unions, and administrators. With the spotlight of the media, parents are the face of these campaigns to reform schools and hold teachers accountable. Like the private funding that generated momentum for the suits to challenge teacher protections, parent trigger efforts have been fueled by the support of foundations such as the Walton Family Foundation, the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—three organizations that support Parent Revolution, a group that initiated the
first parent trigger legislation and continues to support efforts nationwide. The movement has built support from a variety of conservative political institutions such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and the Heartland Institute.

These are just some of the ways parents’ “rights” become highlighted in the mainstream media’s coverage of educational reform. These efforts, funded largely by conservative foundations that represent a preference for neoliberal policies, attempt to paint parents and teachers as foes in a broken public school system that can be fixed only through the injection of choice and competition into the public sector. The Walton Family Foundation alone has donated $335 million to charter schools and spent more than $164 million in 2013 to support institutions and organizations that promote and advocate for charter schools. We see a protracted struggle between schools and the families they are called to serve. When families in a school community exercise the parent trigger or when parent plaintiffs reverse the layoff of a young untenured teacher, there is a sense that we are democratizing public education: parents are exercising a choice that should be theirs and having their say.

But these efforts do not transform the culture of schools, nor do they repair the relationship between families and schools. What they do is signify that a battle is being waged for the hearts and minds of parents. Corporate reformers and neoliberal organizations seek to challenge the historical arrangement of public schools and transform the options that are available to families. The very shape and function of parent engagement and democracy are being re-created.

Organizing for Power Within Schools: Parent-Teacher Solidarity

Can parents and educators enjoy common fates and shared interests in improving public education? There is a newly emergent strand of parent organizing that proves it is possible. In this forceful yet far less well-funded framework, parents and teachers are not adversaries or foes; instead, they are allies working toward common goals.

These acts of solidarity are crafted with care and trust and sustained with devotion and dignity. They emerge, sometimes, through a pro-
cess of healing broken relationships between educators and parents, and between schools and communities, but in their protracted struggles to demand educational equity in schools, parents and educators have begun to understand that their hopes and aspirations for change are intertwined.30

Under the leadership of then president Karen Lewis, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) created the GEM Alliance (Grassroots Education Movement; https://gemchicago.org/) in 2008 to integrate parents and community organizations as key partners in the union’s work to transform schools. In an effort to move away from the service model of unionism—where a teacher brings an individual issue to the union for support in its resolution—and the public perception that unions are purely in the business of contract negotiations, CTU brokered partnerships with parents and community organizations to focus on the need to organize in their buildings against violations of students’ rights as well.31 When parents and community partners pushed CTU to be more confrontational in their challenge to Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s school privatization plans, the union listened. Together with parents and community partners, GEM marched to the mayor’s home to protest.32

CTU’s creation of the GEM Alliance is also an acknowledgment that historically, teacher unions have had a tenuous relationship with communities of color. For too long, unions have stood in the way of community demands for educational equity and school improvement. Issues of deep-seated mistrust, manipulation, antagonism, and power must be addressed. However, the growth of teacher activism, and its synergy with community-based education organizing efforts, highlights a future path for change in public schools where unions and communities have shared interests in demanding equitable change.33

In 2012, when CTU went on strike to challenge the mayor’s proposal to create high-stakes evaluations for teachers, cut teacher benefits, and remove the cap on class sizes, parents stood alongside teachers on the picket lines. Polls showed that the majority of parents supported their efforts from the start, despite the hardships that a labor dispute can place on families.34 The success of the strike was built, in part, by
the union’s alliance with parents and community groups and establishment of shared interests. As one parent put it, “We want a fair contract for the teachers because their working conditions are our kids’ learning conditions.”

Three years later, parents stood alongside community members in Chicago’s South Side neighborhood of Bronzeville to protest the closure of Walter H. Dyett High School. The school’s closure solidified for parents the school district’s disinvestment in the majority-black community in favor of the new young professionals and families that were gentrifying the neighborhood. On August 17, 2015, twelve parents and community members of the recently formed Coalition to Revitalize Dyett launched a hunger strike to protest the school’s closure as well as the school district’s lack of transparency and responsiveness to parent demands to save the school. With concrete plans to reopen Dyett High School as an open enrollment high school focused on global leadership and green technology, the Coalition demanded a response from CPS. For thirty-four days, parents and supporters showed their steadfast devotion to a community and the school that was at its center. They participated in the strike for their children but also for the teachers—many of whom were black women—who would stand to lose their ties to the community and their livelihood as teachers.

When CPS announced that Dyett would be reopened as an open enrollment arts high school and not the green technology and global leadership academy they envisioned, parents and community organizers continued the strike. When asked why, parents explained that it was never just about Dyett. As sociologist and Chicago native Eve Ewing explains in her account of the Dyett action, “A fight for a school is never just about a school. A school means the potential for stability in an unstable world, the potential for agency in the face of powerlessness, the enactment of one’s own dreams and visions for one’s own children. Because whether you’re in Detroit or Austin or Louisiana or Chicago, you want to feel that your school is your school. That you have some say in the matter, that your voice can make a difference.”

Beyond Chicago, parents and community members have rallied to save public schools from disinvestment, closure, and harm. In Shreve-
port, Louisiana, parents hosted meetings and shared a petition to save a local elementary school from closure. Detroit parents and community members marched in front of state offices to protest the school closings. In Austin and in Philadelphia, parents have staged massive protests and community meetings to fight the onslaught of school closings. In every instance, parents demand that they be heard, that they have a say in the future of their schools. They fight a sense of powerlessness that the school generates.

In New York, the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (www.nyccej.org/) brought educators, parents, and community members together to launch the creation of 130 community schools across New York City. Threatened by the proposed slate of school closings, parents, educators, and community organizers collaborated to propose the establishment of community schools instead. For schools that were experiencing declining enrollment and disinvestment from the district, their re-establishment as community schools would serve to recast schools as hubs for deep and meaningful collaboration among parents, educators, and the community. Parents and teachers saw their fates as intertwined; they wanted to save the schools that they had invested in and to create an enhanced environment for student learning and development. Community schools would seek to support the whole child and foster parent engagement by providing health, nutrition, and social services to families.39

Parent-teacher coalitions have grown out of this solidarity movement. The Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), Journey for Justice Alliance (J4J), the Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC), and the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS) are just a few of the coalitions that have brought together educators, parents, and community members who see their interests in educational equity as a common fate that necessitates partnership, alliances, and solidarity. Working to combat issues like school pushout, zero-tolerance policies, and privatization, these coalitions bring together grassroots organizing and advocacy groups of educators, parents, and community members to ensure the right of every young person to a quality education.
INTRODUCTION

BUILDING SOLIDARITY THROUGH PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

These public actions for parent-teacher solidarity represent what is possible when educators and families view each other as allies in an educational justice movement. Relationships and alliances are cultivated in the space of local communities, often with the support of community organizers and community-based organizations. In these spaces, parents share their stories of a child’s struggles in school, their sense of being unheard, and their questions about what can be done. They sit alongside teachers who talk about their own challenges in the classroom and their own sense of powerlessness and frustration. As plans to strike, converse, meet, and problem-solve develop, there is space for parents and teachers to find common ground and build a greater understanding of each other.

But these public collaborations are not enough. While they do underscore the important coalitions that must be built between parents and teachers and can reshape the public discourse on parent-teacher relationships, we need strategies that seek to build cultural change within schools as well. When CEJ jump-starts the creation of 130 community schools in New York City, the school must open with teachers who see children holistically and seek to cultivate relationships with their families. When Dyett High School reopens as an open enrollment arts high school, the educators in the building must know and appreciate the hard-fought parent and community action that gave new life to the school. The alliance with the community cannot end when the campaign is over.

Instead, the alliance between parents and teachers must continue and be imbued in the life and culture of the school. How and under what conditions can parents and teachers collaborate to support the education and development of children? What kind of cultural change will this require and how can that be enacted in schools?

Family and Community Engagement: Benefits and Challenges

Studies of family and community engagement in schools have illuminated the benefits of teachers collaborating with families to support
When schools engage families effectively, students make academic gains, school attendance is improved, graduation rates and college enrollment increase, and students’ social and emotional well-being is enhanced. Students whose parents are involved in the school are more likely to say that their teachers care about them and report satisfying relationships with their teachers and the principal. When teachers and parents work together, students benefit.

Parents benefit from this collaboration, too. High levels of engagement in a child’s school encourage parents to be optimistic about their child’s achievement and more likely to expect an upward trajectory of improvement in school. Parents report a greater sense of belonging in a school community when they are engaged in the school, connected to their child’s teacher as well as to other parents. School engagement leads parents to sense that they are working together with a child’s teacher to support their success.

There are benefits for teachers as well. While teacher job satisfaction has declined significantly, teachers who engage parents report greater job satisfaction. Despite the constant whirl of activity in a classroom, teaching can be a solitary practice. Teachers, especially those who are new to the profession, can feel its isolation. Teachers yearn for connections that help them sort out the issues of the day or talk through a challenging situation. Additionally, these connections to parents promote optimism about student achievement and reflect positive relationships between families and schools that are cultivated by plans for parent and community engagement.

Would it be beneficial for teachers to view students’ families as a network of support that enables them to address questions and challenges, share moments of success, and, consequently, view their practice as collaborative in nature and in pursuit of continuous improvement and change? If so, what would it take?

Any exploration of this question requires consideration of the context within which these parent-teacher relationships are embedded. Without meaningful connections to families, teachers are often guided by assumptions about families or parent roles in supporting their children, particularly when it comes to students living in poverty or stu-
students of color. Without understanding the challenges parents face in attending school events, teachers may assume a lack of caring. When teachers struggle to communicate with parents, they can assume that parents are hard to reach, when in fact schools are often very effective in reaching white middle-class families. When challenges arise with a student, teachers can be quick to blame families rather than assuming that parents are doing their best and willing to partner with teachers. As mentioned previously, there is a history of distrust and antagonism among educators and families in low-income communities and communities of color that is often unaddressed. This can prompt parents to develop a sense of independence or distance from school staff that keeps them uninvolved in the life of the school.

Studies of school culture have emphasized the problems that weaken the relationships between schools and families, particularly within communities of color or low-income communities. Researchers have also highlighted examples of successful school-community partnerships that integrate community resources, and seek to improve family engagement through effective school programming or district-community collaboration. These analyses provide us with a helpful overview of the stakeholders involved and some clear direction on how schools and districts can design policy and practice to integrate family and community engagement while considering the inherent challenges in the work.

But old habits die hard. In a 2014 study of collaborative district-level organizing efforts to enhance parent-school relations, Ann Ishimaru found that even as new organizing approaches sought to cultivate relationships between educators and parents, the dominant institutional scripts in schools—norms about the role of parents, professional authority, control, and power—got in the way. These scripts, rooted in a long history and unchallenged beliefs about parents, “were simultaneously rewritten and reinforced” even as these new efforts sought to institute change. These situations can produce mixed messages to families, when, for example, schools invite parental involvement but implicitly communicate that what they desire is deferential, supportive, positive, and compliant behavior from parents.
Ishimaru’s work is a beacon of light, because it is centered in the change processes that schools and districts enact to improve parent-school relations. Most of the studies of school culture tend to focus on the seemingly static issues surrounding parent-school relationships—the problems, the limitations, the misunderstandings, the brokenness. It remains less clear how schools and families have reformed, reimagined, and transformed their relationship and collaboration.

As the institutional scripts of Ishimaru’s study show, there is a need to explore the deep cultural shifts that these new partnerships and relationships require. They demand authentic, long-term commitments that are not often captured in one-time events or periodic programming.

Deep cultural shifts require explicit examinations of the values and beliefs that undergird a community. Deficit orientations toward students’ families and communities are profound and prevalent in schools that serve communities of color or other marginalized communities, such as poor, immigrant, and undocumented families. Instead, educators must view families for the community cultural wealth they possess, “the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that go unrecognized and unacknowledged.” This includes a family’s aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic capital. As Tara Yosso explains, this presentation of community cultural wealth—a family’s hopes and dreams for a child’s future, the communicative and social skills promoted by use of a native language, the sense of kinship and community history nurtured in the home, as well as the oppositional behavior that challenges inequality and unfair treatment—provides strength and opportunity for children and must be acknowledged and incorporated in schools and classrooms.

The Parent-Teacher Relationship Examined

The most common interaction between families and schools is the parent-teacher relationship, yet with all the attention and scholarship on family engagement, that relationship has received scant attention. Sociologists have often explored this relationship through its conflict-
ridden nature, as well as the social class and cultural forces that shape it. Studies of parents’ experiences have focused on perceptions of and interactions with school staff. Studies of teachers, even when focused on culturally responsive teaching or culturally sustaining pedagogies, are often silent on the issue of parent engagement. In fact, there is little attention to a teacher’s engagement with families beyond a specialized focus on understanding and improving the parent-teacher conference.

Interactions such as the parent-teacher conversation seem like high-stakes exchanges, where parents and teachers alike have much to prove, both in their knowledge and expertise about children. These isolated and formal interactions, however, do little to develop or build trust between parents and teachers. The casual, day-to-day social exchanges between teachers and parents—during arrival and dismissal, while passing in the hallway, or on a phone call—are the places where trust can be built. Building a sense of trust between families and schools is a key part of school improvement, the “connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students.”

How can we capture and understand the relational trust that can be built—over these day-to-day social exchanges in schools—between teachers and parents? How are these relationships built and sustained, and why do teachers and parents choose to engage with each other in these ways? At the site of parent-teacher solidarity that seems so critical to school transformation, how and under what conditions can parents and teachers function as “natural allies” rather than “natural enemies”?

Karen Mapp and Paul Kuttner, in the development of the Dual Capacity Framework for Family-School Partnerships, lay out the goals and conditions that are critical to the development of effective family engagement efforts in schools. They explain that part of the challenge stems from the fact that none of the stakeholders tasked with building effective family engagement practices (teachers, administrators, school staff, parents, and community members) have had sufficient guidance in doing so. In particular, while school districts have begun to step up their efforts to engage parents in districtwide and school-based parent universities and parent academies, there is minimal support for school staff.
In order to promote a sense of partnership between teachers and families, Mapp and Kuttner identify a set of opportunity conditions that underlie effective partnerships. These conditions are linked to learning; are rooted in relationships of trust and respect; nurture the intellectual, social, and leadership development of educators; enhance collaboration; and promote engagement and interaction. Mapp and Kuttner also describe organizational conditions, which are the infrastructure needed to provide and sustain partnerships. These organizational conditions should be systemic—integrated into systems of training and professional development—and should provide the resources to be sustainable.

Whether or not school districts have prioritized the support and development of effective family-school partnerships, scholars and practitioners increasingly are creating and developing practitioner-oriented resources to guide willing teachers, administrators, and parents as they seek to develop more meaningful partnerships in schools.64 In-depth case studies of parent-teacher-community collaborations are also an essential part of understanding both the complexity of parent-teacher interactions and the contextual factors of race, ethnicity, language, and immigration that shape them.65

These resources and research accounts highlight the need to create cultural shifts in how schools perceive, interact with, and engage families and communities. To support these shifts, researchers must make long-term, in-depth commitments to studying the relationships of teachers and parents at work—the challenges, the moments of possibility, the dynamism, and the evolution.

WHAT IS GOOD HERE? EXPLORING HOPE AND POSSIBILITY IN PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

While the “problem” of parent-teacher relationships is clearly evident, there must also be significant exploration of their goodness and humanizing role in education.66 We must be committed not only to documenting the challenges educators face but also to exploring more deeply why they occur. If, for example, parents are not overtly involved in schools, could there be intention behind their nonparticipation? Rather than be-
ing an indictment on parents’ caring (or lack thereof), are the boundaries between home and school consciously set by parents to protect their children? These explanations move us away from the negative assessments of parents that emerge through deficit frameworks and toward uncovering the acts of care and core beliefs that motivate parents.

We also need to critically understand the ways that teachers successfully engage with families to meet the needs of diverse students. The organizing efforts at Dyett High School and CEJ are a reminder, however, that these parent-teacher collaborations do not occur in a vacuum. Relationships between educators and families are created, challenged, and shaped by the ever-present political and policy context. School closures build a sense of distrust and abandonment among the families whose school communities are sanctioned and shut down. The revolving door of young, novice teachers in urban schools with little to no training can affect how fully and well a family can be known among educators in a school. Regressive and punitive immigration policies shape the everyday realities of how families move about their communities, where they go for connection, and whom they trust with their challenges. A student’s undocumented or DACA status influences where they may attend college. Despite the well-meaning outreach of a school counselor or teacher, these family experiences, harbored and protected by families, can be deeply influential to a family’s decision-making process yet inaccessible to educators.

The successful campaigns for Dyett High School and community schools in New York City reveal that teachers and families can work together to push for change in school districts, but what about inside the school? These education organizing efforts focus on the engagement and relationship-building that is inherent in those collaborations, unlike the more static representations of parent-teacher relationships in schools. How do parents and teachers understand each other? How do they build relationships of mutual respect and collaboration? These school-based teacher-family relationships are not clearly understood, yet they have the potential to shed light on school transformation efforts. We need deep and thorough explorations of these relationships— their creation, sustenance, and evolution.
This book seeks to fill this void and illustrate the ways that families and educators can work collaboratively. In the same way that scholars have deeply examined portraits of success and goodness, this study seeks to provide in-depth portraits of teachers who have created authentic spaces for collaboration and caring with families. I use the methodology of portraiture, developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, to capture the goodness and humanity in these teachers’ relationships with families, not in an effort to deem them perfect, but to emphasize that in searching for goodness, we discover empathic and holistic ways of seeing what’s possible. To challenge the deficit-framed obsession with failure and pathology, in portraiture, “the researcher who asks first ‘What is good here?’ is likely to absorb a very different reality than the one who is on a mission to discover the sources of failure.” The powerful rhetoric of uncaring and uninvolved parents, teacher-parent antagonism, and parent contestations of educators’ rights and protections requires that we take a step back and disengage from pathologizing parents, teachers, and their relationship.

In this spirit, the following chapters sketch the portraits of five teachers—Ilene Carver, Megan Lucas, Cinthia Colón, Annie Shah, and Julia Finkelstein—who are committed to the deep appreciation of, partnership with, and cultural sustenance of students’ families. Some questions that guided the study were: What do these relationships look like and how do they progress over the school year? Why are teachers motivated to build these relationships? How do teachers and parents describe their interactions and relationship?

I spent two years meeting with teachers, administrators, community members, and public school parents to identify potential participants for the study. The referrals led to phone conversations and then in-person meetings at the school to get a sense of each teacher’s story as well as her school environment. I selected five teachers for the study who, in diverse and varied ways, were committed to families and fostered their own unique approaches to cultivating those relationships. They all imbued a sense of hope and optimism in their work with families while being honest and thoughtful about the challenges they faced. The five teachers in the study reflect: 1) a long-term commitment and
proven track record of success in engaging families and communities, 2) engagement with diverse urban communities that may superficially be viewed as “hard to reach,” and 3) diversity of age, years of teaching experience, and race/ethnicity. These teachers present a range of pathways to the profession (graduate teacher training, teacher residency, Teach For America, etc.). They teach in elementary and middle school classrooms, working with both native speakers and emergent bilinguals. Four of them teach in the Boston Public Schools and one teaches in the District of Columbia Public Schools.

The project, in its entirety, spanned three years. During the first year of the project, I met informally with the individual participants to get a sense of them as teachers. I visited their classrooms and learned about their journey as educators and their commitments to families. These conversations allowed me to get a clearer sense of their family engagement practices, which in turn allowed me to plan the data collection in the second year in a way that was uniquely designed to their practices. The majority of our work together was completed during the second year of the project: I conducted interviews with each teacher throughout the academic year, using an interpretive approach to the interview process. With interviews interspersed throughout the year, I could both follow up on observations made and also plan subsequent visits to their classroom or the school to support emerging questions. I could also explore if and how their perceptions of their relationships with families were changing or evolving.

In addition to the in-depth interviews, I also observed teachers in their classrooms to get a sense of how they interacted with students and how family and community were integrated into classroom experiences. To understand the variety of ways teachers engaged with parents and caregivers formally, I also attended every formal event they had with families, such as school open houses, parent-teacher conferences, family presentations, and schoolwide family events. These events allowed me to connect with parents, family members, and caregivers.

Over the course of the year, as I became familiar with the students in the classroom and their families, I began to work with each teacher to select a few parents that I could get to know more closely. This al-
ollowed me to hone in on particular students, connect with a group of parents consistently throughout the year at the school, and interview them about their engagement at the school and with the teacher. These interviews with parents provided me with insight into how parents’ relationships with teachers evolved and developed.

All of the teachers in this study work in schools that provide resources and support to engage families and communities. So it became important to talk to the colleagues in their building that they partnered with, the family coordinator who helped them connect with parents who were difficult to reach, teacher colleagues who planned family events collaboratively, and the administrators whose support and expectations for family engagement were influential.

At the time of the study, three of the five teachers in the book—Cinthia Colón, Annie Shah, and Julia Finkelstein—worked at the Young Achievers Science and Mathematics Pilot School in Boston, Massachusetts. Through their narratives, I seek to explore how the school and community context shape these teachers’ interactions with families. What are the resources and supports that are in place to support teachers as they seek to engage families? Each teacher’s portrait explores the interplay among teacher practice, institutional support, and school culture, but in the final chapter, I discuss some of the ways Young Achievers specifically has built a vision of family engagement into the culture and everyday experience of the school.

The book strikes a balance between the personal narratives of teachers and their evolving interactions with families during the 2013–14 academic year. The personal narratives, gleaned primarily through in-depth interviews over a three-year span, reflect teachers’ motivations, experiences, and attitudes toward family and community engagement. The interactions reflect a wide range of practices that teachers use to build relationships with families. Some of these practices may feel familiar, others dramatically new, but they are all shaped and crafted by each teacher’s vision for family engagement. Ultimately, it is my hope that these teacher narratives honor the practice of teaching, sketch the tender relations between parents and teachers, and present us with a new framework for understanding family-school partnerships.
INTRODUCTION

An Overview of the Book

The book opens in chapter 1 with a portrait of Ilene Carver, a veteran teacher at the Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School, an in-district charter school in Boston. Ilene’s commitment to families originates from her experiences as a community organizer and public school parent. She describes the importance of a teacher’s mind-set and beliefs about families, and illustrates how those beliefs have shaped and influenced every aspect of her engagement with students’ families. As a teacher leader whose family engagement practices are well known and highly regarded, Ilene discusses the role she plays in supporting her colleagues in formal and informal ways.

Chapter 2 introduces us to Megan Lucas, who teaches at Stanton Elementary School in Washington, DC. With the support of an outside organization, the Flambayan Foundation, Megan and her colleagues addressed the climate of animosity and distrust between parents and teachers that escalated after a school turnaround. When Stanton educators engaged in a schoolwide effort to improve family engagement, Megan began to see her relationship with families as a critical part of her practice as a teacher. Her story reflects the importance of systemic change in schools and the key support that can be gleaned from outside organizations.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 feature three teachers from the Young Achievers Science and Mathematics Pilot School in Boston. Chapter 3 introduces Cinthia Colón, whose pedagogy of caring is a reflection of her own knowledge of and relationships with students’ families. She explores how her experience as an immigrant from the Dominican Republic shapes her commitment to serving as a mentor to students of color and immigrant students, as well as her vision for engaging families.

While many of the teachers in the book focus on their relationships with families, Annie Shah, profiled in chapter 4, views the local community of Mattapan, the city of Boston, and beyond as an extension of her classroom. While learning about Boston neighborhoods by visiting various branch libraries across the city, Annie and her students discover that one community, Chinatown, does not have a branch library—the only neighborhood in Boston without one. After learning the story of
the city’s unkept promise to rebuild a branch library in Chinatown, her students embark on an ambitious community action project to hold the city accountable. Using their new knowledge, Annie’s second graders shape community action.

These four teachers have charted a path for engaging families that has evolved over their teaching careers, but chapter 5 introduces us to a second-year teacher, Julia Finkelstein, who works with emergent bilinguals at Young Achievers. She explores both the rewards and challenges in engaging families from the perspective of a novice teacher who works exclusively with immigrant, Latinx families. The sole middle school teacher among the five teachers, Julia explores the role of and strategies for family engagement in middle schools.

The final chapter brings these narratives together to discuss how we can reimagine family engagement in schools. The chapter examines how tradition, values, and beliefs about families’ roles inhibit innovations in engaging families and communities. The discussion considers the ways in which schools have traditionally marginalized and excluded families and proposes a new framework for schools as grounded institutions—schools that are rooted in and reflect the full cultural lives and experiences of students’ families and communities. To cultivate schools as grounded institutions, educators must dramatically redesign their family engagement practices in ways that are culturally sustaining. Thus, the book concludes with three framing suggestions to advance a model of culturally sustaining family engagement: repair relationships through the development of relational trust and healing, renew perspectives by bringing new voices into the conversation, and reinvent the school with a vision for family and community engagement. Only by doing so can schools build a true alliance with families based on their shared goal and commitment to support the growth and development of the child.