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How Marginalized Families Are Pushed Out of PTAs

Parents with socioeconomic resources are more likely to exert influence on school officials.



Rogelio V. Solis / AP

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TEXT SIZE



When Rolling Terrace Elementary School in Takoma Park, Maryland, told parents in the fall of 2014 that it would allow students to use Chromebooks as a way to bridge the [digital divide](#) between low-income families and affluent families, there were mixed reactions. The plan was aimed at helping students become more adept at using technology, but the affluent parents, most of whom were white, were apprehensive about their children getting more screen time.

Alison Risso, then the president of the school's PTA, said she was frustrated by the

complaints those parents expressed at a meeting. “Everyone who could pay for that Chromebook with the money in their pockets was in the room,” Risso said. As Risso recalled, one parent said to her, “I don't need my daughter to learn to make a PowerPoint.”

At Rolling Terrace, **68 percent** of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch. Sixty-three percent of its population is Hispanic, 15 percent is black, and another 15 percent is white. But the parents of that sliver of the student population that is white and affluent—most of whom were drawn to the school’s Spanish-immersion program—have outsize influence over what happens in the school.

Risso explained to parents why it was important for the lower-income children to have access to the Chromebooks. Many of the school’s parents—mostly low-income people of color who didn’t attend the PTA meeting—were excited about the computers.

Despite the differences in priorities, the school’s parents are expected to make decisions as a community. That kind of unity rarely happens in gentrifying neighborhoods, however. When white, affluent parents come into a school that has a high percentage of less-affluent students of color, the more advantaged group tends to take over parent organizations and unintentionally marginalize the parent community that was already there. Ultimately, Rolling Terrace proceeded with its plan to use Chromebooks, but not all such issues are resolved in ways that give low-income parents a voice.

That’s unfortunate because parental engagement can greatly improve adolescents’ academic and emotional functioning, according to a 2014 **study** published in *Child Development*. A substantial **body of research** also indicates that parent involvement at home and school is an important factor in improving young children’s literacy and math skills. PTA membership was also associated with student achievement in a 2006 *School Community Journal* **study** authored by researchers at the University of West Florida.

Allyson Criner Brown, the associate director at the nonprofit Teaching for Change,

said she has seen small groups of advantaged parents, many of them members of parent organizations, wield great influence on school policy. They often push for programs that would benefit their own children and not necessarily the kids of less means. When these parents don't get what they want, they often make calls to someone higher up than the principal, such as the superintendent, to flex their muscle—something lower-income parents rarely do.

“[Affluent] parents are much more likely to think they have the right to tell principals what they think.”

The influence of the PTA depends a lot on the given school's culture and in part on how big a role parents play in fundraising. It can be challenging for a busy principal to seek input from parent groups, especially when those organizations aren't financially supporting a cash-strapped school.

“If the principal knows that the PTA is not a source for fundraising, depending on the principal they might not go to the PTA and ask parents if [a particular project] is a priority,” said Alexandra Freidus, doctoral candidate in urban education at New York University. In wealthy or socioeconomically diverse communities, on the other hand, “principals frequently count on parents to fill in budget gaps. Those parents are much more likely to think they have the right to tell principals what they think, to believe their opinions matters to the school, and they're much more likely to be a dominant voice.” And while it's true that kids of all backgrounds [benefit](#) from attending integrated schools, affluent and white parents tend to think they're the ones bringing value to their school, according to [research](#) released earlier this year.

The imbalance of power has become especially clear in recent years as parents with means in gentrifying neighborhoods look for schools that will enrich their kids' lives—schools with diverse student populations, for example, and supplemental-learning opportunities. Schools serving high numbers of poor children often offer Spanish-immersion or gifted-and-talented programs that attract affluent families,

which often bring with them the ability to fundraise. (Although Spanish-immersion programs were initially meant to serve children who spoke Spanish at home and were still learning English, they have become increasingly popular across the country with non-Latino parents whose children speak primarily or only English at home, according to a 2015 [dissertation](#) for the City University of New York's urban-education program.) But the ability can also mean wealthy families wield disproportionate influence on campus and in the PTA.

According to Freidus, the current body of research on parent engagement in gentrifying schools shows that schools tends to accommodate those parents' interests and concerns. Freidus [analyzed](#) a decade of posts in a listserv for parents new to the school and neighborhood and discovered how quickly one unidentified Brooklyn school and its ostensible priorities evolved as the student population became whiter and more affluent. The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch fell from 90 percent in the 2003-04 school year to 65 percent in the 2011-12 year. At the same time, the school spent much of its resources on the playground and other facilities rather than efforts to get classroom computers and support for the student prom.

Criner Brown said she has seen similar issues play out in Washington, D.C., schools. In some cases, according to Criner Brown, white and affluent parents begin advocating for their children before they even attend the school. "Yes, it is parent advocacy, but a more forceful and entitled version that is more of a demand than a request," she said.

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Kelly Wickham Hurst, an education advocate and former guidance dean at Lincoln Magnet School in Springfield, Illinois, said PTAs rarely discuss race directly, instead using words that "refer to race while not referring to race" out of fear that they'd otherwise appear racist. When disadvantaged parents do try to speak up, they're often dismissed by other parents or by administrators, Wickham Hurst said. Parents of color, she said, bring up concerns about testing and how to help students who are underperforming, but are sometimes brushed off. As one parent spoke, she

recalled, a white PTO member who is considered an education expert by parents because she works in the district, sighed and rolled her eyes.

A mother of color also told Wickham Hurst that she and another nonwhite parent were dropping out of the PTO because their concerns were always left in the “parking lot” to be discussed another time—time that never came. “I’ve been cussed out many times in my career by a very frustrated parent who has never been listened to in school systems who would like to be heard but they never say it in the ‘right way,’” said Wickham Hurst, adding that black parents tell her they never hear from the school unless it’s about student discipline. Students of color are suspended at [disproportionate](#) rates, with some studies indicating [teacher bias](#) plays a role in determining discipline.

Alina Adams, the author of *Getting Into NYC Kindergarten*, works with many parents of color who are trying to get their children into New York City-area elementary schools; she also helps parents adjust to the schools once they’re there. According to Adams, many parents of color express concern that they won’t be listened to at the school. “[Reluctance to speak up] gets magnified when it’s someone of a different race than you or different ethnicity or different economic background,” she said. “Maybe you don’t speak English so well and you feel intimidated by that. How do I challenge this person on this issue when I know that she’s a lawyer and I [just] have a high-school diploma?”

The data bears out some of Adams’s points about disadvantaged parents’ lack of involvement. Lower educational levels are a factor in their limited engagement, as is having a lower socioeconomic status and being an underrepresented minority, a 2013 [study](#) on Parental Readiness Empowerment Programs shows. Meanwhile, a 2014 [paper](#) that analyzed black parents at an urban middle school found that perceptions of racism and hostile parent-teacher interactions were significant barriers to their engagement at school.

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Meanwhile, Myra Rivera-Blanco, the fundraising co-chair of the Rolling Terrace PTA, said that Latino parents tend to ask different questions about family engagement because, culturally, they see school participation differently. “I get questions about how things work rather than complaints about why things are happening,” she said. Many Latino parents believe they should trust the school to handle their child’s education appropriately and are less inclined to question teachers and administrators.

Rivera-Blanco is the main contact for many Latino families as one of few Latina members of the PTA; she also serves as the de facto translator at meetings. Rivera-Blanco said many of the school’s lower-income parents don’t have access to laptops and even cell phones, which makes communication especially difficult.

When schools are cash-strapped, the priorities of the members of the parent organization often become the priorities of the school as a whole. Rivera-Blanco says she sees this dynamic play out often at Rolling Terrace with the Spanish-immersion program, which is populated largely by students with means. For example, parents of kids in the program ensure that its teachers receive gift cards at the beginning of the year and during Teacher Appreciation Week to pay for supplies. “There are parents in our school that can’t put enough cents together to get a coat much less give their teacher their supply list,” Rivera-Blanco said. “That imbalance is huge. You can walk into a classroom and know which is a Spanish-immersion classroom and which one isn’t.”

The history of the PTA shows that these race and class dynamics have always been an issue. Christine A. Woyshner explores this context in her 2009 book *The National PTA, Race, and Civic Engagement, 1897-1970*, exploring how white affluent women who founded what is today known as the National PTA used their influence to achieve reforms. The “black PTA,” or the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, on the other hand, was more concerned with ensuring their schools had the basics.

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Parent organizations could improve their outreach to low-income parents and parents of color through various means. Experts on parent engagement suggest encouraging parents of color and low-income parents to work together to avoid feeling isolated and using co-chairs to ensure that both advantaged newcomers and disadvantaged have opportunities to influence school policy.

Karen Mapp, a senior lecturer on education at Harvard who has conducted research on family engagement, said that one of the most important factors in whether disadvantaged-parent voices are heard is whether a school leader decides to make inclusion a priority. Mapp pointed to Boston's William W. Henderson School, where the former principal [made it a priority](#) to ensure that the school reached out to all parents and fostered trustful relationships that in turn made parents participate more often in school activities.

Halley Potter, a fellow at the Century Foundation, pointed out that some charter schools, such as Blackstone Valley Prep Academy in Rhode Island, have co-chairs and require that a seat on the PTA be assigned to a bilingual parent to help ensure all parents' concerns are acknowledged. When asked what she thought of the path to diverse parent engagement in schools where students are separated by gifted-and-talented programs and general education, Potter said it's hard to bridge that divide. Unless every classroom in the school is diverse, the parents' goals are usually too different. "It's very hard in those situations to create an equitable school engagement and school governance model because ideally what you want in an integrated school is people are fighting together for all of their children," Potter said. A model where all students are challenged and their particular talents are developed through similar approaches to gifted classes, otherwise known as a "schoolwide-enrichment model," may be the best way to pursue true diversity, she said.

Parents, teachers, and administrators should state their goals clearly and work on

fostering trust between low-income parents and parents of color, [according to a 2013 paper from SEDL out of the Institutes for Research and the U.S. Department of Education](#). Schools could also increase communication through home visits, such as those made at William W. Henderson School.

As Potter said of Blackstone Valley Prep Academy, school administrators have to do more than hope families will get along. “They had to make sure that they were intentional about shared leadership,” Potter said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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