

Chapter 14

Impacting Rural Middle Schools Through School–University Partnerships: The Middle School Parent–Teacher Leadership Academy

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ABSTRACT

Effective family-school partnerships can enhance family-school involvement, and increase school and student outcomes. In low-resourced rural areas, many challenges hinder the development of such collaborative relationships, including expansive geographic distances between families and schools and the multiple roles that teachers and administrators assume. School-University partnerships can potentially help meet these challenges. This chapter describes a School-University partnership program, the Middle School Parent-Teacher Leadership Academy (MPTLA). MPTLA equips rural middle school parents and teachers to impact school and student outcomes. The chapter highlights the need for school-university partnerships in rural areas, discusses the uniqueness of the middle school context, explains the structure of the MPTLA and the partnership team model, provides two examples of the MPTLA partnership model in action, and recommends universities implement similar programs.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-0280-8.ch014

INTRODUCTION

With the rising state and national attention for increasing student academic outcomes, schools located in rural contexts face many barriers in accomplishing these goals. Geographic isolation typically results in increased school closures and consolidations, creating more family-school distance and teacher turnover (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Monk, 2007; Sheridan, Kunz, Holmes, & Witte, 2017). This, in addition to the limited resources for hiring new teachers and school personnel, necessitates schools to assume many roles outside of their primary function of educating students (DeLeon, Wakefield, & Hagglund, 2003; Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Besides the expectation to meet academic standards, teachers may also be placed in the position to support students' socio-emotional needs (Monk, 2007; Sheridan et al., 2017).

The strain on rural educators to meet the many demands of their diverse communities makes it difficult to develop and sustain community partners (Casto, 2017). Quality community partners enhance academic achievement, strengthen student and family well-being, and improve student attendance and graduation rates (e.g., Sanders, 2009; Sheldon, 2007). Specifically, universities as rural school community partners allow opportunities for the integration of resources for to achieving positive student outcomes. Due to approximately 57% of U.S. school districts and 21% of students residing in rural communities (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), school-university partnerships can impact schools and individual student success. The purpose of this chapter is to showcase the University of Alabama's (UA) Middle School Parent-Teacher Leadership Academy (MPTLA), an innovative leadership training program that equips parent-teacher school teams to enhance school and student outcomes by facilitating effective family-school partnerships. MPTLA's leadership provides the logistical and content structure of the program, with the middle school parent-teacher Partnership Teams adapting the training to their idiosyncratic school context. We provide an overview of family-school involvement during middle school, describe the overall framework that underlies MPTLA structure and goals, outline the research on school-university and family-school partnerships in rural areas, and give an overview of the MPTLA program and exemplify how two specific projects—developed and implemented by MPTLA participants—are enriching their respective rural schools, its students, and families. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for universities who are considering implementing similar programs.

MIDDLE SCHOOL CONTEXT

Family-school involvement and school-family partnerships can predict student success during the middle school years (i.e., Hill & Tyson, 2009). Compared to elementary school, caregivers are likely to become less involved in their child's school during this time (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Attitudinally, caregivers believe that by not participating, they are supporting their child's normal developmental trend toward autonomy (Halsey, 2005; Lam & Ducreux, 2013). This, combined with the increasing likelihood that students do not want caregivers to participate in school activities as often, may contribute to decreased involvement. Other factors that inhibit involvement also include the caregiver's own negative middle school experiences and the lack of confidence in the learning content during the middle grades (Lam & Ducreux, 2013).

Relationships between teachers and caregivers also affect parental-school involvement during middle school. The middle school structure provides many challenges. Students may have a different teacher for each core academic and elective classes, which further complicates building relationships with their

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