Effective School Parent Relations in High-Performing Schools in South Texas

Dr. George Padilla

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
1201 West University Drive Edinburg, Texas – USA 78539
george.padilla02@utrgv.edu
956-665- 3462

Dr. George Padilla was born in South Texas into poverty and earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, master's degree from the Pan American University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Texas in Austin. He has worked as a police crime scene technician, automobile accident researcher and re-constructionist, teacher, principal, and superintendent. He is currently an Assistant Professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley teaching educational leadership course, supporting doctoral students with their dissertations, and focusing on successful school leadership and high-performing schools.

Dr. Roberto Zamora

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
1201 West University Drive Edinburg, Texas – USA 78539
roberto.zamora@utrgv.edu
956-665-7831

Dr. Zamora serves as Associate Professor in the Department of Organization and School Leadership at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. His research interests include studying the impact of organizational health and leadership on student achievement and examining effective school characteristics and practices in high performing, high poverty schools. He acknowledges that school leaders must keep abreast of trends and issues that impact education and advocates for creating schools in which success is a reality for all students.

Abstract: *A research study was designed and conducted to identify effective school characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools. Four High-Performing Reward schools in South Texas were selected to study. An eleven effective school characteristics model including school processes was developed from the effective school research literature as the framework for the study: culture, leadership, instruction, improvement, home and community relations, curriculum, environment, professional development, vision/mission, resources, and staff. A mixed-research study was designed to collect data from professional school staff, principals, and parents related to the eleven effective characteristics and their processes used by the schools. Onsite data collection from each school included a staff survey, focus group session, principal interview, and a parent survey and focus group session. The eleven effective school characteristics were supported. An area of improvement identified among these already high-performing schools was parent relations. School staff and parent perceptions of the processes for effective Parent Relations were analyzed. Differences in perceptions suggest that school staff and parents must develop a unified understanding of Parent Relations to support effectiveness. The eleven effective school characteristics and processes may serve as a guide for improvement to other schools, especially high-poverty schools.*

Keywords: *Effective Practices, Effective Schools, High-performing Schools, Parents, Title I,*

I.   Effective School Parent Relations in High-Performing Schools in South Texas

Texas includes the second highest proportion of Title I schools in the United States, and Region One, an educational region in South Texas, includes the highest proportion of Title I schools among the twenty Texas educational regions (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2017). High-poverty schools are well documented in school research to face greater challenges in reaching student high academic performance (*American Psychological Association,* 2021; Jensen, 2009; Hoschild, 2003). This suppressive relationship between poverty and education has been studied since 1966 (Coleman et al., 1966; Malecki & Demaray, 2006) and is still "considered one of the strongest predictors of the child's academic achievement and educational attainment" (Reardon, 2011, p. 3). In the United States in 2016, about one-out-of-five young people 5-17 years of age lived in poverty, 20.3%. Texas, with the tenth highest poverty rate for this age group, 23.6%, and the second highest total state population, included the second most significant number of this age group living in poverty—1,199,348 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016a). The national and Texas challenges to educate children of poverty successfully are immense.

Poverty is geographically aggregated in neighborhoods, thereby, creating high-poverty Title I eligible schools. By federal definition, Title 1 schools, or a school-wide Title I school, have at least one demographic in common: higher than 40% of its students living in poverty (USDOE, 2021). Thus, Title 1 schools face tremendous academic challenges. In 2014-15, out of 98,373 total number of operating schools in the United States, 69,531 (70.7%) were identified as Title I schools (NCES, 2016b). During this timeframe, Texas included 7,055 Title I schools from a total of 8,798 schools (80.2%) in the state. Texas also was a close second (10.15%) to California (10.42%) in the state proportion of the total number of Title 1 schools in the country (USDOE, 2017).

High-poverty schools, as defined by the federal government—Title 1 schools—must serve as primary targets for school effectiveness. Title 1 schools that reach high student academic achievement are ultimate models of high-performing high-poverty effective schools. Fortunately, past effective school research has shown that students in Title I schools can reach high academic achievement (Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Ragland et al., 2002; Ali & Jerald, 2001; McGee, 2004; Lauer, 2001; Carter, 2000; Barth et al., 1999; Lein, Johnson, & Ragland, 1997).

A study, with the purpose to identify effective school characteristic, processes and strategies in high-performing effective Title One schools in Region One, was designed and completed in 2017-2018—*Effective School Practices In Title I Schools Exceeding Educational Expectations (E3)* (Padilla et al., 2019). Four Title One schools in Region One, designated as "High-Performing" Reward Schools by Texas in 2015-16 (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2016d), received other state academic distinctions, had an enrollment of at least 400-student population, and did not include more than the 7.7% state average of students who qualified for Gifted and Talented (TEA, 2016b) were selected for the study. Further analysis showed these four "High-Performing Reward schools were in the top 20% academically-achieving schools among all schools in Texas (TEA, 2016c). Remarkably, not only were these high-performing Title I schools, they were also high-achieving among all Texas schools. The four schools selected were: Lincoln Elementary, Guerra Elementary, San Carlos Elementary, Anne L. McGee Elementary, and RC Flores-Mark A. Zapata Elementary—all in the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District. These schools were assigned random codes to ensure anonymity of the data collected from the four identified schools (Padilla et al., 2019).

An effective school model consisting of eleven characteristics was developed from 100 effective school characteristics models found in the research literature to guide the study. The eleven characteristics and their rates of inclusion in these models are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Eleven Effective School Characteristics

Characteristic	Percent Identified Across the Sets
Culture	86%
Leadership	79%
Instruction	75%
Improvement	71%
Home and Community Relations	66%
Curriculum	56%
Environment	60%
Professional Development	41%
Vision/Mission	41%
Resources	27%
Staff	24%
Other	14%
Total School Effective Sets:	100

"Other" was not included in the study's model because it reflected numerous factors each found very limited in the models analyzed. It is notable that "Home and Community Relations" was the fifth highest characteristic found among the many models analyzed, above Curriculum, Vision/Mission and Staff. Since the study's focus was on parents and not on the community-at-large, "Parents" is used interchangeably with "Home and Community Relations" as a characteristic.

II.   Effective School Characteristics Study: Parent Relations

The effective school characteristics study was a mixed methods case study that included school staff and parents completing surveys and participating in focus group sessions. The findings related to Parent Relations are the focus of this writing.

School Staff Survey Results

As part of the study, professional school staff rated each of the eleven characteristic's essentiality to school effectiveness and their level of application in their own school. The total surveys completed were 130 (83.9% participation rate), with 89.2% representing teachers. Table 2 shows "Parents" was the second to lowest essential and the lowest applied characteristic. More important, "Parent Relations" was the characteristic that exhibited with the greatest difference between essentiality and application, more than twice the next characteristic.

Table 2

Essentiality, Application and the Differences between Essentiality and Application of the Eleven Characteristics of School Effectiveness by School and Total

Characteristic	Essentiality of the Characteristics to School Effectiveness*					Application of the Characteristics to School Effectiveness*					Difference
	1	2	3	4	Total	1	2	3	4	Total	
Instruction	3.65	3.85	3.94	3.86	3.84	3.40	3.71	3.88	3.80	3.72	0.12
Staff	3.66	3.84	3.95	3.80	3.82	3.42	3.60	3.89	3.55	3.62	0.20
Environment	3.62	3.88	3.95	3.77	3.82	3.43	3.68	3.88	3.54	3.64	0.18
Professional Development	3.68	3.85	3.93	3.78	3.82	3.40	3.57	3.76	3.56	3.58	0.24
Curriculum	3.61	3.86	3.93	3.78	3.81	3.36	3.60	3.89	3.63	3.64	0.17
Resources	3.63	3.85	3.95	3.73	3.80	3.46	3.64	3.82	3.47	3.61	0.19
Leadership	3.59	3.86	3.95	3.67	3.78	3.28	3.65	3.87	3.38	3.56	0.22
Improvement	3.51	3.86	3.85	3.77	3.77	3.43	3.80	3.79	3.73	3.71	0.06
Culture	3.58	3.78	3.87	3.62	3.72	3.32	3.52	3.73	3.38	3.49	0.23
Parent Relations	3.57	3.70	3.88	3.57	3.69	2.95	3.12	3.50	3.09	3.18	*0.51*
Vision	3.44	3.77	3.84	3.49	3.65	3.44	3.77	3.84	3.49	3.65	0.00

*The highest average possible was 4.00

The study's results demonstrate that although Parent Relations was the fifth highest characteristic found in the set of 100 effective school characteristics models, it was perceived as the second lowest essential and the lowest applied characteristic by staff in the study's four high-performing, high-poverty schools.

Additionally,

School Staff Focus Groups and Principal Interview Results

Group focus sessions for professional school staff were conducted at each school with 42 staff members participating. During these sessions, school staff identified school strengths and challenges. Staff identified school strengths focused on the school staff itself and the school's communication with parents.

However, school challenges included lack of parent support, parent attitude toward school, parents not understanding value of education, home language, family socioeconomics, lack of home resources, and a lack of good educational models at home. One participant commented, "Teacher becomes the parent." Many staff members openly shared the need to improve Parent Relations. This was consistent with the low application rating they gave Parent Relations in the surveys. Overall, however, school staff commented more positively about school matters and were more critical of parent matters related to Parent Relations—also consistent with survey responses.

All four school principals were interviewed. When asked what top five strategies or practices they wished they could implement more effectively to help all students learn successfully, the principals identified several areas including district professional development, more funding for tutorials, greater district guidance for lower grades, and more student interventions. However, the predominant areas identified involved Parent Relations: parent communication, parent involvement, parent trainings, and parents understanding the importance of education. Thus, the need to improve Parent Relations was also supported by the school principal interviews.

School Staff Parent Relations Processes Results

The eleven effective school characteristics were described and defined with processes also identified in the set of 100 characteristic models. Parent Relations included 18 processes. These 18 processes and how school staff perceived and rated both their essentiality as an effective school process and their application at the school are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Average School Staff Rating of Parent Relations Processes

Parent Relations Processes	Essentiality	Application	Difference
Parents take responsibility for student achievement at this school.*	3.51	2.68	-0.83
This school communicates positively and fully with parents.**	3.77	3.50	-0.22
School rules and procedures are shared with students and parents.**	3.89	3.78	-0.11
Parents support the school's discipline procedures.*	3.73	3.20	-0.53
Parents endorse and volunteer with the school's instructional activities.*	3.49	2.72	-0.77
Parents are greatly interested in their child's educational success.*	3.62	2.89	-0.71
Parents help their children at home in support of the school's program.*	3.56	2.48	-1.08
Staff at this schoolwork hard to build trusting relationships with parents.**	3.79	3.50	-0.29
Parents attend parent-teacher conferences when I request them.*	3.66	3.00	-0.66
Teachers really try hard to understand parents' problems and concerns.**	3.79	3.61	-0.18
Teachers work closely with parents to meet students' needs.**	3.79	3.50	-0.29
Teachers welcome contact from parents.**	3.84	3.74	-0.10
The school provides training and support to parents to enhance their communication with their children, their supervision of the children, and their parenting style.**	3.58	2.79	-0.79
The school responds positively to the needs of families and their children.**	3.77	3.53	-0.24

Parent Relations Processes	Essentiality	Application	Difference
Parents are welcome to visit the school and classrooms.**	3.66	3.28	-0.38
Community participation at school events is great.*	3.65	3.08	-0.57
In the school, parent advocates or liaisons are available to help parents meet with school staff.**	3.68	3.19	-0.49
I receive tremendous support from parents in helping all students maximize their success.*	3.51	2.54	-0.97
Parent/Community Relations Characteristic Average:	3.68	3.17	-0.51

The ratings of Parent Relations processes for the study schools in the table above indicate staff perceived the school's application average ratings less than the essentiality average ratings given. Additionally, in the table above the differences in average ratings for processes related to parent support of the school (-0.765) identified with one asterisk was much less than the average ratings differences for processes related to school support of the parents (-.309) identified with two asterisks. The perception by school staff of parent support for the schools is 2 ½ times less than their perception of school support for parents. Moreover, the highest essential and applied process related to providing parents with school rules and procedures—a very non-relational process. The second highest essential and applied process was teachers "welcoming" parents. There were three processes tied for third highest in essentiality: understanding parents, trusting relationship, and working closely with parents, in order of application from highest to lowest. Communicating positively with parents and responding positively to student needs were both tied for fourth in essentiality.

The three lowest Parent Relations processes applied at the school as perceived by school staff were directed at parent behavior: parents help their children at home to support the school program, teachers receive tremendous parent support in helping the student maximize their success, and parents take responsibility for student achievement. On the other hand, the school staff's top three ratings were for actions by the school to support Parent Relations. School staff perceive parents as less supportive of the school than they perceive the school supportive of parents.

Parent Survey and Focus Group Sessions Parent Relations Results

The processes related to the Parent Relations characteristic generated seven general themes that were used to develop a parent survey and a focus group session questionnaire to assess parent perceptions of the value of these themes and the school's implementation of them. Forty-four parents from the four schools participated in the sessions. Table 4 shows the rankings of how parents rated the importance and implementation of these themes.

Table 4
Parent Ranking of Value of Importance and School Implementation of Parent Relations Processes

Parent Relations Processes	Importance Value Rank	School Implementation Rank	Difference in Ranking
Understanding	1	6	-5
Collaboration	2	7	-5
Respect	3	3	0
Trust	4	1	3
Positive Attitude	5	2	3
Support	6	4	2
Communication	7	5	2

Although parents placed Understanding at the highest value of importance for effective Parent Relations, parents indicated it was the second lowest process implemented by the school. Trust and Positive Attitude were perceived as the two highest processes implemented by the school, although parents rated them in the middle in value of importance among the seven effective processes. Respect was number three in ranking for importance and school implementation by parents.

Parents were very complimentary of school staff in their relationships with parents. They stated there was an open-door policy for parent involvement, much parent recognition by the school, parents feel welcomed, caring, approachable, passionate, family like environment, highly motivated for student success, and their efforts come from the heart. These comments are similar to those stated by school staff about their own efforts. However, the parent focus groups provided vastly different perspectives of the school's parents than the school staff reported. The parent focus groups described parents as having high educational aspirations for their children and actively supporting the school program by helping their children with homework and motivating

them to succeed in school. Parent concerns focused on district support of the school. The parent groups expressed much support and recognition of the schools' efforts in teaching their children. However, unlike the school staff, they gave credit to parents for supporting the school program.

One limitation of the study was that the parents were not randomly selected to participate in the study but chosen by the school. Thus, parents involved may have been more positively oriented toward the school and more actively involved with the school as well. Nevertheless, differences between parent and school staff perceptions about effective school parent relations were highly notable.

III.   Findings

A study of four High-Performing Title I schools supported an eleven-characteristic model of effective schools. Each characteristic included processes that operationally defined the characteristic. Among these characteristics, Parent Relations was the second lowest essential characteristic and the lowest characteristic applied by the schools as perceived by school staff in a survey. Focus group sessions of school professional staff and principal interviews supported the schools' need to improve Parental Relations.

The four study schools' staff perceived Parental Relations processes directly related to parents more critically while holding the processes directly related to the school at a higher level. Thus, schools were perceived as doing much more of their part in establishing effective Parent Relations than parents.

A survey and focus group sessions targeting seven themes garnered from the Parent Relations characteristic's processes were completed with the parents of the study schools to assess their perceptions of importance and the implementation of these themes by the school. Parents were complimentary of both the school and parents in their responsibilities of establishing effective Parent Relations. Seven themes related to effective Parent Relations were identified. Parents rated Understanding and Collaboration as the two highest valued themes.

IV.   Discussion

While Parent Relations is considered an essential effective school characteristic, processes related to this characteristic were valued very differently by parents and school staff. The top-ranked processes by parents were the lowest ranked by school staff—Understanding and Collaboration. Trust was ranked number one by school staff, but only number four by parents. One possible explanation for these differences may be school staff and parents perceive parent relations from quite different perspectives.

Thus, a teacher may want Trust to be the highest characteristic among parents toward the school and teacher. Since parents, to a large part, leave their children's education and success in the hands of teachers, it is important to teachers that parents trust them. However, as a parent, you can only trust someone with your child's future to a certain point. It is this point of trust teachers perceive at a different and higher level of importance than parents.

Parents, on the other hand, perceive Understanding and Collaboration to be the highest processes. Thus, parents may want to be perceived as a greater participant in their children's education beyond just trusting teachers. Parents prefer schools to understand what they want for their children and serve as true collaborators in decisions impacting their children's education.

School staff and parents perceive parent relations from their perspective rather than from the other's perspective. Therefore, one key to effective Parent Relations is for school staff and parents to understand and embrace each other's needs within that relationship, so that muc overlap exists in both perspectives (Figure 1). When there is little or no overlap, perceptions are strikingly different, and even if each understands the other's perceptions without embracing them, then the lack of unity undermines effective Parent Relations.

Figure 1

School-Parent Relations Perspective Overlap
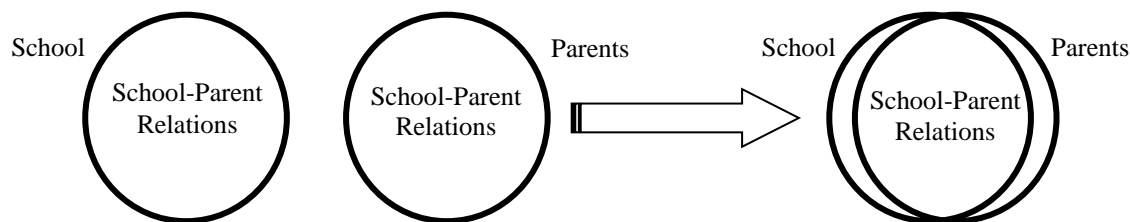
V.   Conclusion

Although good Parent Relations is a long-running effective school characteristic in the literature (Lezotte, 1991), staff in the four effective study schools perceived its essentiality and application relatively low, number 10 of the study's eleven effective school characteristics. Moreover, in comparing perceptions of the importance of Parent Relations processes, there was much difference in their ranking between parents and school staff. Thus, Parent Relations processes were valued very differently by school staff and parents. The low value of importance in essentiality and application of Parent Relations as perceived by school staff may well reflect these differences. While these effective study schools may achieve high academic performance without strong Parent Relations, they may not be achieving their maximum level of success possible with effective Parent Relations.

It is critical that schools understand what is important for parents in Parent Relations in order to ensure school strategies align with parent expectations for this relationship. Schools must not perceive Parent Relations only through their lens of needs and values. Therefore, schools must continually monitor and assess their Parent Relations from both school staff and parent perspectives.

Schools must also understand the need to develop a unified understanding among school staff and parents on the goals and strategies of Parent Relations. It is important to note that school leaders are not necessarily strongly versed in developing strong Parent Relations (Lezotte, 1991). For some schools to achieve effective Parent Relations, they may have to seek support from community social agencies that are better prepared to develop strong parent/community support and mobilization.

Effective Parent Relations is critical, but more importantly, they must be sensitive to the needs of parents who send their precious children to school while recognizing school staff needs as well. Parents too must work toward understanding school needs for Parent Relations, and often, this must be a function of the school. Dissonance in understandings may yield division and diminish success. When parents and schools communicate and collaborate in a trusting manner, they move toward effective Parent Relations and maximum school effectiveness for every staff member and, most importantly, for every child, family, community, and the future. Together, parents and school staff can create a learning environment where all students achieve at high levels.

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