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Lessons for locals on power of parents in schools

A community group in northwest Chicago has turned hundreds of hesitant parents into capable classroom helpers, role models and leaders by tapping into strengths many don't realize they have.



By Linda Shaw

Seattle Times education reporter



CHICAGO —

On their first day of training, one mother after another paused in the classroom doorway, unsure where to sit or whether signing up for this highly regarded parent program was a good idea after all.

Trainer Monica Soto-Espinoza had anticipated their doubts.



Six years ago, she was just like many of them — a mother with limited English skills who'd come to the U.S. as a teenager and never finished high school.

What, she wondered, could she possibly offer her child's school?

With humor and enthusiasm, Soto-Espinoza, now 35 and fluent in English, told them why she didn't quit on her first day — which is really the story of how a Chicago community group, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, has built one of the strongest parent-school partnerships in the nation.

A lot of research backs the notion that parents play an important role in the academic success



of their children, and their children's schools. While too much parent involvement can cause problems, as happens in some high-income schools, many other schools struggle to foster any ties with most of their families — especially in the growing numbers of neighborhoods where teachers and students don't share a language, a culture or a ZIP code.

Despite good intentions, many schools end up in what University of Washington assistant professor Ann Ishimaru calls a toxic cycle, where teachers organize events and if parents don't show, conclude they just don't care.

The Logan Square parent-mentor program shows it doesn't have to be that way.

The program is often held up as a model for how parents and schools can work together, with a community group, not the school district, shouldering much of the work and expense.

Over the past 18 years, the neighborhood association has recruited about 1,800 parents to spend two hours a day, five days a week for a semester or more in their children's schools.

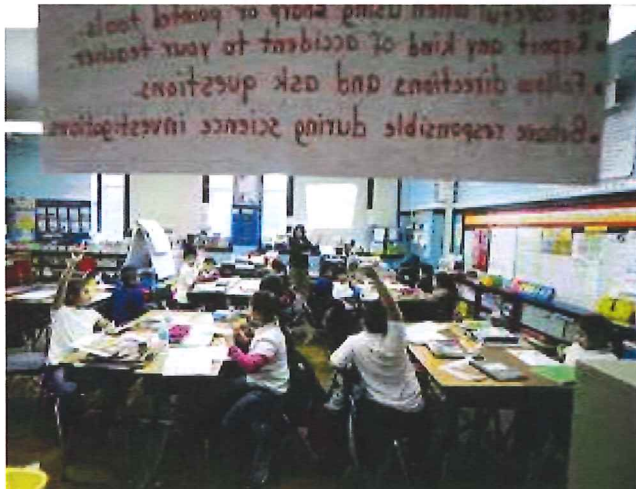
The program also encourages parents to further their own education, in the belief that better-educated parents lead to stronger students, and stronger communities.

Recruiters don't give up when parents, out of fear or insecurity, refuse the first time they are asked, or the second or third.

When Soto-Espinoza became a mentor, she didn't say yes until the fourth.

The program now operates in 65 schools throughout Illinois, with 14 run by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association and the others by other community groups. In 28 of the schools, the program started just last spring, with \$1 million in expansion funds from the Illinois State Board of Education.

In the Logan Square schools, where the program has the longest track record, principals and teachers credit the parents with helping many students improve in math and

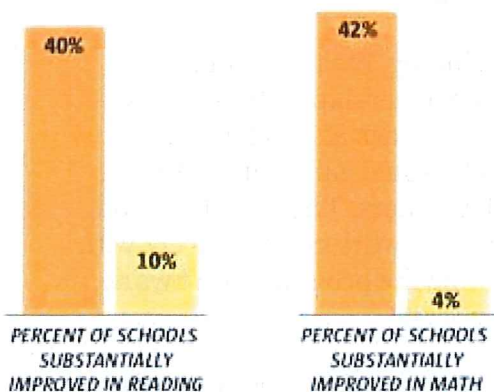




Strong parent participation a key to improving schools

After digging into years of data for 200 schools, researchers at the University of Chicago concluded, in a 2010 study, that strong parent involvement is one of five key elements in the schools where students made substantial improvement in reading and math. Schools with strong parent involvement were 10 times more likely to improve in math than those with weak parent involvement, and four times more likely to see reading scores go up.

■ Schools with strong parent involvement
■ Schools with weak parent involvement



Source: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago

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reading. They also believe parents contribute to harder-to-measure but equally important areas such as student motivation.

Students “are quite moved and inspired by having their parents being involved in the school,” said Soo Hong, an assistant professor at Wellesley College who wrote a book about the program.

“Sometimes it’s accountability, too,” she said. “Students know if they start messing up in the classroom ... sure, maybe it’s not their mother who’s there, but it’s their aunt’s neighbor or somebody they know.”

A new study, started this fall, will provide more concrete data on the academic impact of the parent program. In two schools, researchers plan to look closely at students the mentors are assigned to help, observing their behavior in classrooms and analyzing their test scores.

Parent programs exist in many Washington state schools, too. Seattle, Federal Way and Kent are among the districts with new efforts aimed at parents who usually don’t show up for PTA meetings. They are part of a national trend toward giving parents a bigger voice in school-improvement efforts.

But Logan Square’s program goes further, installing a cadre of 10 to 20 moms and dads in each participating school, giving them a substantive role helping students who need extra assistance.

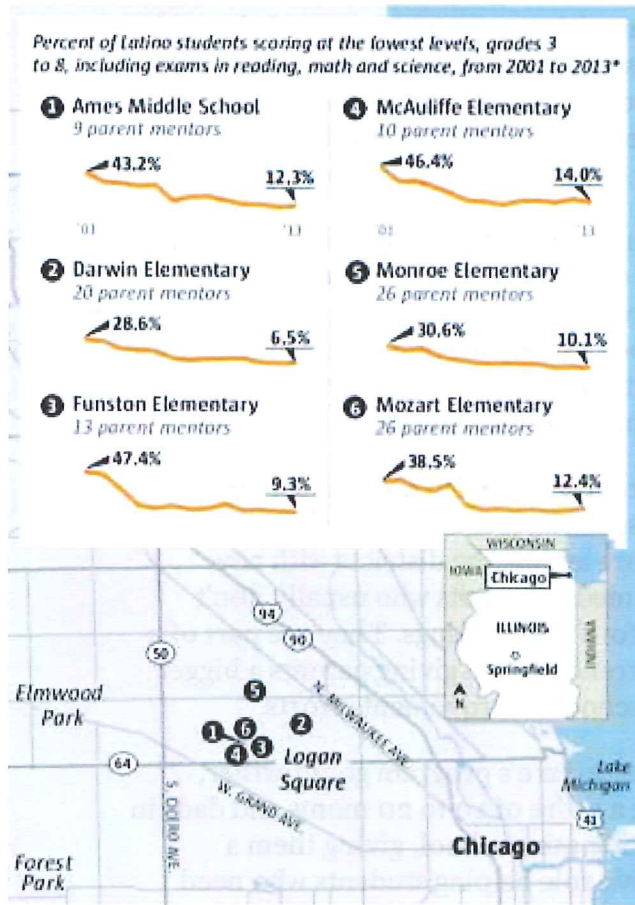
Parent mentors have gone on to lead school committees, earn college degrees and run five after-school centers that grew out of the parent mentor program.

The neighborhood association has helped start a teacher-training program, too. To date, 23 mentors have graduated, including Ebelia Mucino, who started as a parent mentor about 15 years ago and now works at Avondale-Logandale School in Logan Square, where she finds great joy in teaching kindergartners to read.

Mucino, who came to the U.S. from Mexico as a teenager, once saw herself as “just” a stay-at-home mom, with nothing to offer teachers, who she revered.

Chicago parents: a force for student learning

It's not yet clear how much impact Logan Square's parent-mentor program has had on student achievement, but participating schools in the heavily Latino neighborhood are improving. One example: At five of the six schools where the program has existed for at least a decade, the rate of Latino students scoring at the lowest level on state tests has declined faster than the district's average. A study is under way to measure more precisely what effects the program has had.



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"When you don't know the language, it is so difficult," she said. "You feel ... I don't want to say inferior, but it's difficult."

Though she's been a teacher for years now, and her youngest child is in high school, she still gets emotional describing how the program changed her life.

When she started working as a parent mentor, she found she had a knack for helping students. They listened to her. When the teacher had to leave the class briefly, he would tell her, "You know what to do." He and others encouraged her to pursue a career in education.

"I saw a window opening," she said. "I saw a million windows opening."

Neighborhood beginnings

The parent-mentor program began in 1995 at Funston Elementary on the west side of Logan Square, a longtime immigrant neighborhood where most students in regular public schools are from Latino families with little money.

Before the program started, a few Funston parents would show up to help each day, but the principal wanted to attract those who dropped off their kids each morning and never ventured inside.

She turned to the neighborhood association, which had, not long before, fought alongside principals to build annexes to relieve overcrowding rather than continue to bus their students across town.

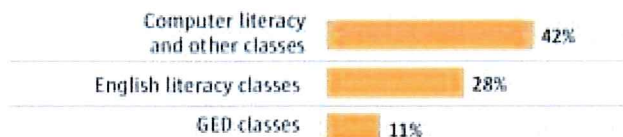
From the beginning, the program was designed as a partnership, with the hope that teachers would learn as much from parents as parents would gain from watching and talking with teachers. The neighborhood association strives to work cooperatively with principals, knowing the program won't work unless they support it.

"It's all about mutual respect among people, many of whom feel ... they haven't been respected, and that's true if they're teachers or low-income, immigrant parents," said Joanna Brown, the neighborhood association's lead education organizer.

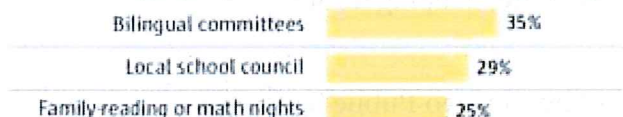
From parent to mentor to leader

The Logan Square parent-mentor program takes a holistic approach. Along with training parents as classroom helpers, it encourages them to further their own education and become leaders in their school and community. Many do one or both, taking English classes, working to earn a GED and taking part in school committees and events.

Parent mentors enrolling in courses in 2012-13 school year:



Parent mentors playing other roles in their child's school in 2012-13 school year:



Source: Logan Square Neighborhood Association

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Still, teachers were at first as hesitant as parents, fearful that opening their classrooms would cause trouble, or at least require a lot of work.

But it didn't take long for many to see how much help parents could offer — giving more time and encouragement to students than teachers could do on their own.

Studies going back 30 years support the notion that schools can benefit from the presence of parents, whether through traditional activities like PTA meetings or in deeper relationships established in programs such as Logan Square's.

The studies make it clear that what parents do at home to encourage learning is most

beneficial, but say participation at school helps, too.

In one 2002 review, for example, two well-known scholars looked at 50 studies and concluded most showed a relationship between parent involvement and student gains in math and reading.

And in 2010, a group of researchers at the University of Chicago, after examining seven years of data from 200 schools, concluded that strong parent involvement was one of five best predictors of whether reading and math scores would rise significantly.

Most of the studies use different, and sometimes very broad, definitions of what parent involvement means, which makes it hard to pinpoint exactly what kind of parent involvement is best. And some studies have failed to find any benefits.

Yet scholars continue to dig into different models, and some hypothesize that programs like Logan Square's will prove to be the most effective.

That's based in part on the belief that parents are often overlooked in efforts to improve the nation's schools.

"The folks who have the most at stake, and sometimes the most expertise on their own children and communities, are left out of the conversation," said Ishimaru, the UW professor who is studying a number of parent-involvement programs here.

Anne Henderson, one of the authors of the 2002 review, said Logan Square's program "is pointing the way for how schools can build much deeper, richer, more productive relationships with parents as collaborators in improving student success."

"It's not just a series of random acts of family engagement, which is what you often see."

Training parents

Parent mentors start off with a week of training designed to chip away at their unease and encourage them to become leaders.

At Burbank Elementary, where she led a training session in October, Soto-Espinoza started by telling the story of how she came to the United States at age 17, learning English from watching subtitles on movies. On her own first day of training, she admitted with a laugh, she was so

intimidated she thought about excusing herself to use the restroom, then heading for the door.

She asked the group to write a list of their strengths, reminding them not to forget simple ones like patience. Each of the women set a personal goal, and all but one declared they wanted to improve their English or go back to school.

Instruction in academic strategies comes later, in sessions that take place each Friday throughout the school year. The whole first week is largely devoted to building what scholars call social capital, the network of relationships that research suggests helps people get jobs, solve problems — and help their children succeed at school.

The mothers shared fears and hopes, pledged to support each other, and met the school's vice principal, who went over the rules of mentoring — to keep in mind they are role models whether at school or in the supermarket, and they must always act professionally, keeping information about students confidential.

After the training ends — and once background checks required by Chicago Public Schools are completed — parents are matched with teachers who request mentors, although never their own child's instructor.

Those who speak little English often work in dual-language classes. Those with little formal education are placed in kindergarten or preschool. If they complete 100 hours in a semester, they receive a stipend of \$500.

The only requirement is that the parents work with students — not photocopy work sheets or cut shapes from construction paper.

Sometimes, school principals want only parents with a lot of formal education, but the neighborhood association points out this means overlooking families with the most to gain. Organizers believe all parents have something to offer.

In a survey of teachers in parent-mentor programs across the state — even the new ones — three-quarters of those who responded said their mentors helped them better understand and connect with their students' families and communities.

In the classrooms

One recent morning at Avondale-Logandale School, Pete Rodriguez, a dad with a deep but gentle voice, sat at the back of a first-grade classroom with four boys who jumped up from his table at nearly every distraction.

As other students worked independently and teacher Jessica Dye sat with another small group, Rodriguez patiently worked to keep the four focused on the task at hand: a sentence about a grandma, her grandson and a teddy bear.

Each day, Dye wrote Rodriguez a note about what she'd like him to do. Each afternoon, Rodriguez, who is studying to become a preschool teacher, replied with observations about the boys' progress.

Across the hall, parent Mayra Guzman spent two hours working one-on-one with several second-graders in reading.

Together, she and teacher Ramonita Gouveia had come up with a list of words the students needed to practice. So while Gouveia gathered the class together for a writing lesson, Guzman called her charges over, quizzing them on the problem words.

One was a pensive girl with dimples, who swung her legs nervously back and forth, guessing at some of the words Guzman held before her.

“Remember, the sounds will make the words easier,” Guzman admonished gently.

Before she became a mentor, Guzman, who is from El Salvador, said she often criticized teachers, especially when she felt one of her sons wasn’t getting the help he needed in reading.

From the outside, she said, it is easy to think the teachers were failing to do their jobs. Once inside, she realized it’s difficult for teachers to meet all the needs of 25-30 students.

“I saw sometimes they can’t,” she said. “Even though they want to, they can’t.”

Taking no shortcuts

One other nonprofit, Chicago’s Southwest Organizing Project, started its own mentor program in 2005, and just last spring, 11 other Illinois groups joined the program’s expansion in that state. In Michigan and Colorado, a couple of other organizations have started similar programs in a handful of schools as well.

But a number of other nonprofits, impressed with what’s happened in Logan Square, have backed off after realizing how much is involved.

The program involves a lot of organizational work — recruiting and training parents, arranging for background checks, mediating conflicts that arise and raising money to cover the parents’ stipends, their training and to hire a part-time coordinator for each school.

The neighborhood association advises there are no shortcuts. The program centers on relationships with principals, teachers and parents, all of which take time to develop and maintain.

Participating Logan Square schools contribute \$5,000 to \$10,000 a year, but the neighborhood association adds another \$40,000 to \$45,000, which comes from government agencies and foundations.

Despite the program’s success, the organization often has to scramble to raise enough. Soto-Espinoza said she has traveled to the state capitol at least 11 times, where, sometimes in tears, she has pleaded with legislators to continue support.

Over the years, one principal shut down the program at her school for reasons the neighborhood association’s leaders still don’t fully understand.

From time to time, critics question whether the parents should be paid to help out. The neighborhood association defends the practice, saying the stipends are small given the time parents put in, while still sending an important message to parents about their value.

Parents and teachers express a desire for even more training and more time to plan together.

But more and more principals are clamoring to bring the program in.

The neighborhood association’s leaders are a little apprehensive, worrying whether other groups will understand that it’s much more than a simple parent-volunteer program, and that’s what makes it effective.

Yet they are confident the program can work in any community, believing parents everywhere have strengths that many schools have yet to tap.

“You hear it again and again,” said Susan Yanun, a longtime Logan Square staff member. “People

think, 'I don't have anything to offer, I felt so isolated, I didn't know how to help my child.' ”

Through the parent-mentor program, they find they can help, and do.

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