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School Improvement Ideas: Guidance From Parents and Students From Three Ethnic Groups

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Introduction

In this era of school reform or renewal, the target of reform activities is often the at-risk school enrolling a high proportion of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Most reform efforts mandate basic involvement and shared decision making of teachers in activities traditionally restricted to school and district administrators (Russell, Cooper, & Greenblatt, 1993). However, not all stakeholders have been equally included. A challenge rarely confronted by school reformers is how to involve parents and students from diverse ethnic groups in the restructuring process (SEDL, 1994). While the literature on minority parent involvement in school activities is expanding rapidly (SEDL & OERI, 1992), the literature on involving these same groups in systemic reform is slight (Oakes, 1986; Medina, 1990). We have expended more energy toward bringing minorities into the system than in involving minorities in rebuilding the system. Cummins (1986) postulates that "a major reason previous attempts at educational reform have been unsuccessful is that the relationship between teachers and communities has remained essentially unchanged" (p. 18). The new relationship invites stakeholders to be instrumental players in restructuring, not merely consumers of the educational product (Brandt, 1993).

Systemic school reform activities include diagnosing strengths and weaknesses of a school, goal-setting to help guide improvements, and monitoring goal attainment (Donaldson, 1993; O'Sullivan & Tennant, 1993). These first two activities, especially, offer an opportunity for involvement of the full range of stakeholder groups. Effective system diagnosis and goal -setting will consider perceptions of important stakeholders, namely students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other members of the community (Brinkerhoff, Brethower, Hluchyj, & Nowakowski, 1983; Herman, 1989). This is especially important when the

community or school atmosphere is laden with racial tension because failure to fully involve stakeholders is automatically regarded with distrust and suspicion.

Parents are more likely considered by school personnel to be willing or unwilling consumers than to be important stakeholders. Ortiz and Yates (1989) state that "school personnel commonly complain that parents of minority children do not care about their children and fail to take an interest in them...are not involved, supportive or helpful to the school or education professional" (p. 187). When tension exists between school and community, these assumptions can effectively prevent sincere outreach and listening by the school personnel.

In multiethnic schools, perceptions of schooling may differ or appear to differ by ethnic groups (Cassanova, 1990; Cooper, 1979). Whether real or apparent, these differences must be considered in school reform activities of system diagnosis and goal-setting. Ogbu (1987) argues that relationships between "involuntary" (i.e. Hispanic and African American) minorities and Caucasians in public schools are often typified by conflict and distrust. Due to this distrust, "involuntary minorities do not necessarily accept or interpret school rules of behavior and standard practices in the same way that white people ...do" (p. 332). Ortiz and Yates (1989) also state that parents may have "uncomfortable memories" about their school experiences which can affect their willingness to participate. In some communities these ethnic-based differences have become exaggerated through emotional and hyperbolic language. It remains, however, that where cultural differences in perception exist or are perceived to exist, they need to be acknowledged and addressed for school reform to succeed. In a climate of tension, involvement of all community groups in restructuring requires careful listening to various stakeholders' points of view, expressed constructively and thoughtfully.

More systematic school reform typically includes the methodology of "stakeholder survey" interviews and questionnaires for the purpose of needs assessment. Also common are examples of obtaining information separately from representatives of different ethnic groups. We were unable to find, however, procedures which (a) target respondents from specific ethnic groups, (b) yield quantifiable data, and (c) are designed to be constructively reactive, i.e. to lead to self-criticism, reduce tension, and are solution-oriented.

The first purpose of this study was to develop such an information-gathering procedure and to pilot the instrument with stakeholders of an at-risk school with multiethnic enrollment. The second purpose was to summarize data from this pilot assessment and assay its usefulness for school self-improvement.

Social and Educational Context

Rural southeast Texas contains numerous small school districts, each with only a few schools to cover grades K-12. These communities represent federal government poverty rates of 30% to over 80%. In this part of Texas, generations-old social patterns of Caucasians and African Americans have been influenced by a relatively recent influx of Hispanics from the south Texas border (Rio Grande) region, from Mexico (largely agricultural workers), and economic and political refugees from Latin America. In some communities, the Hispanic population has increased from 10% to over 30% in three years.

Two results from this recent change in ethnic composition are relevant to our study. First, the resulting tension between ethnic groups is often visible in small, rural schools, which contain children from all parts of the community, regardless of ethnic housing patterns. Second, the recent demographic changes have caused ethnic minorities to scrutinize more closely the quality of education in their schools. On a statewide basis, the data are disconcerting. Graduation rates for Hispanics are less than half of those for Caucasians, and graduation rates for African Americans are less than 25% of those of Caucasians (Texas Literacy

Council, 1989). On the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (math, reading, writing), separate norms show score spreads between Caucasians and minorities of 40 to 50 percentile points (Texas Education Agency, 1990). In Texas, 18% of all adults have not completed the 8th grade, and 36% have not completed high school. Generally, adult illiteracy is at 16% but jumps to 47% for African Americans and 56% for Hispanics (Texas Economic Council, 1989). These figures place Texas 47th among the nation in its literacy level and 41st in its ability to retain students in school. For those who do complete high school in Texas, SAT scores are 31 points below the national average (Texas Literacy Council, 1991).

As never before, communities are openly questioning the quality of education and the socializing influence of their schools. The State of Texas also has recently implemented an aggressive school accountability plan for identifying and intervening in the state's lowest achieving schools, where little or no academic growth has occurred over recent years (EEPC, 1993). The present study was conducted with an at-risk Junior High school with deteriorating performance in a social climate of ethnic tension and a political climate of increased accountability.

Community and School

This study occurred in the small, rural southeast community we will name *Barfast*. Fifty percent of Barfast families live below the national poverty level. The community has been in decline since the boom days of cotton. Barfast has no major industry it is a service and supply center to neighboring farm communities, depending largely on the railroad for employment. Barfast lacks a minority professional class, except for its teachers. Barfast's Hispanic and African American residents typically hold unskilled or semiskilled labor jobs (waitress, custodial, yard work, road crew, fry cooks) or operate small commercial interests (restaurants, produce sales). Until the recent influx of Hispanics, Barfast had seen little population change over several decades. Barfast residents have for decades lived in Caucasian and Black areas of town, with few exceptions. Hispanic residents do not adhere to this clear delineation.

The three Barfast public schools contain approximately 1,200 students (Grades 1-12), composed of 47% African American, 18% Hispanic, and 35% Caucasian. Thirty-seven percent of the district's teachers are African American the rest are Caucasian. On State of Texas mandated criterion-referenced basic skills tests, students in these schools score at the 10th-15th percentile on Texas norms. The average school dropout rate is at the 70th percentile based on Texas norms.

Barfast Junior High School, enrolling 170 students in 7th and 8th Grades, was marked by a high Grade 8 dropout rate, low achievement, low teacher morale, and escalating threats of violence. The school related poorly to the community, had little parental trust, and lacked strong school-based leadership and problem-solving expertise. Over the past two years, school board meetings erupted into shouting matches, the superintendent was fired, teachers began taking all allowed sick leave days, student absenteeism increased, and standardized test scores declined. In addition, students increasingly refused to complete assigned work, occasionally physically threatened teachers (as well as peers), and began to form local gangs. Parents refused to work cooperatively in a single P.T.O., instead aligning with ethnically-based pressure groups which insisted on separate meetings with the Superintendent of Schools.

The Barfast School Board requested assistance in making fundamental school change at Barfast Junior High School. Specifically, the Board sought help in the initial steps of identifying causes of school disintegration and ranking goals for improvement. The Board desired a process which would develop a positive solution orientation and help coalesce a group of stakeholders with the commitment to assist in improvement activities. The Board also sought the support of all major stakeholder groups: students, teachers, and parents.

The Board wanted to be responsive to perceptions of the major ethnic groups yet focus on commonalities and accord rather than on differences and disagreements.

A multiethnic evaluation team from two neighboring universities responded to the Board's request by setting out to accomplish two major tasks. The first task was to develop a procedure for identifying problems and potential solutions which would, (a) be perceived as fair by all stakeholders, (b) yield positive, solution-oriented ideas, (c) produce self-reflection and fair consideration of ideas, (d) be efficient to carry out, and (e) be easily summarized and interpreted by stakeholders. The second task was to use this procedure to collect, summarize, and communicate information on areas of needed school improvement and potential solutions.

To clarify and guide the second of these tasks, five evaluation questions were posed.

Evaluation Questions

What similarities and differences exist:

1. in *need for improvement* ratings among teachers, parents, and students?
2. in *need for improvement* ratings among students and parents of three ethnic groups (Caucasians, African Americans, and Hispanics)?
3. in the *number of potential solutions* by students and parents of three ethnic groups?
4. in the *nature of potential solutions* by students and parents of three ethnic groups?
5. in the *quality of problem solving* by students of three ethnic groups?

Method

Respondents

Information was collected from 70 students (37 Grade 7, 33 Grade 8), 30 homes (parents), and 10 teachers. Students were strategically sampled to produce nearly equal proportions from each ethnic group: 36% African American, 30% Hispanic, and 34% Caucasian. Because of scheduling, students in special education could not be included as respondents. All ten Barfast Junior High school teachers served as respondents. Half of the teachers were African American, and half were Caucasian.

The 30 homes selected were homes of the student respondents. The subsample of homes was roughly equal in ethnicity: 33% African American, 27% Hispanic, and 40% Caucasian.

Student academic performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) total score averaged 31st percentile for African Americans, 37th percentile for Hispanics, and 47th percentile for Caucasians. Only on the Vocabulary subtest did Hispanics score lowest among the three ethnic groups.

Parents were interviewed in their homes when the students were not present. We contacted parents in 40 homes and completed 30 interviews (eight were unable to schedule after repeated attempts, and two refused). Because of refusals, more Caucasian and fewer African American parents were represented.

Instrument Development

Over the past decade, criteria for effective problems and schools for at-risk youth have been gathered from evaluations of innovative programs and from testimony of program directors (Baker & Sansone, 1990; Bhaerman & Kopp, 1988; Gruskin, Campbell, & Paula, 1987; Hamby, 1989; Lesko, 1987; Orr, 1987; Slavin & Madden, 1987; Texas Education Agency, 1990; Weber, 1987). These criteria complement the somewhat narrower summaries of effective instruction for low achieving students (Benbow, 1980; Christenson, Yssldyke, & Thurlow, 1989). Additional research exists on effective instruction in schools with high minority populations (Carter & Chatfield, 1986; Carter & Maestas, 1982; Ochoa & Perez, 1992). Several of these effective schools criteria have helped guide individual school reform efforts. Together, the criteria served as the basis for the interview protocol used in this study. More useful was the comprehensive literature review by the Northwest Regional Laboratory (NWREL, 1990).

We found distinct advantages in linking our involvement to effective schools criteria: (a) they provide a positive, future-oriented description of a worthy outcome; (b) they are not a part of, nor produced by members of, the local problem situation; and (c) they lend a credibility of semiobjectivity to analysis of the problem situation. Thus, the use of effective schools criteria augmented three other important features of our methodology; perceived ethnic fairness (balanced ethnic membership of our intervention team); willingness to make home visits to ensure participation from all stakeholder groups; and perceived objectivity of our data collection, summary, and reporting.

From the effective schools summaries, we identified six major performance areas. These areas formed a content outline for an interview schedule, termed the School Improvement Interview (SII) (see Appendix I). The SII asks respondents to rate the need for improvement in each of six major school performance areas: (a) Relations with Community and Parents, (b) School-wide Functioning, (c) Motivating and Encouraging Students, (d) Classroom Structure and Teaching, (e) Testing, and (f) Physical Conditions. The interviewer provides several examples for each of the six areas. Respondents are asked to rate on a four point scale whether their school needs to improve a lot, some, a little, or not at all.

For each response of "a lot" or "some," the interviewer enters a problem-solving loop of the interview. In the problem-solving loop, the interviewer records responses to nine open-ended questions and a final categorical rating. The questions lead the respondent through a typical problem-solving sequence, ending in self-examination (Carkhuff, 1973; Koberg & Bagnall, 1981; Krulik & Rudnick, 1984): (a) generating ideas, (b) identifying who would benefit, (c) identifying who would be burdened, (d) identifying practical obstacles, (e) identifying those in agreement, (f) identifying potential collaborators, (g) obtaining personal commitment, (h) identifying how the respondent would help, (i) identifying how to judge if an idea works, and (j) reevaluating the idea.

Scoring / Coding. The open-ended responses (solution ideas) were initially classified by a doctoral student who permitted categories to emerge from the questionnaire results and continually revised (broadened, narrowed, merged, and divided) categories to fit new data. Several weeks later, two additional doctoral students independently coded the same solution ideas into the initial categories. Their agreement with the original coding was 96% (Kappa correction for agreement by chance: .72). Their agreement with each other on the same task was 94% (Kappa: .72).

Procedure

College of Education faculty from two universities, Texas A&M and Prairie View A&M, responded to the

School Board's request for assistance by creating a multiethnic evaluation team of graduate students. The team was composed of 3 faculty members (Caucasian, Hispanic, and African American) and 13 university students (4 Caucasian, 5 Hispanic, and 4 African American). Same-ethnicity data collectors have been recommended where personal contact is involved (Marín & Marín, 1991). Similarities in background can enhance the interviewee's trust and provide more accurate information (Bloom & Padilla, 1979). Our team composition ensured at least one same-ethnicity interviewer for each home visit.

Team members were trained to conduct and summarize the School Improvement Interview (SII) in training sessions at the two universities and in a joint session held on the Prairie View campus. At that combined session, team members practiced through role-playing the interviewing techniques for Junior High students and for any minority parents with little formal education, no literacy skills, and low language skills.

Students were first randomly selected for interviewing; then those parents with home phones were called for permission and to set an interview time. Homes without phones were visited briefly to set an interview appointment at a later time. Interviews were initially tape recorded, but the practice was discarded because of obtrusiveness and because interviewer field notes usually proved adequate. Most interviews were conducted by two interviewers, one interviewer from the same ethnic group as the parent. Two interviewers permitted one member to keep conversation going while the second took comprehensive field notes. Teacher and student interviews were completed by team members over a four-week period in any available nook or cranny in the small, crowded school building. Parent interviews continued well into a second month because of scheduling difficulties by interviewers.

Results

A major unanticipated result from interviews was encountering uniformly open, friendly, and receptive students and parents. Our home interviewers reported invitations to dinner and to sit out on the porch for a sip. In more than one case, parents called over next door neighbors to listen in and to meet these strangersour interviewers. Parents brought in Grandpa or Grandma to give an historical account of how the school had changed from the 1930s to 1960s to now. A handful of homes had no phone, no mail delivery, and were reachable only on foot after parking at the end of a lane. Outsiders who wished nothing more than to talk about the school were at first an object of curiosity and disbelief which soon turned to warm hospitality.

Turning next to data-based results, this study addressed five evaluation questions. The first two called for comparisons on school "need for improvement" ratings among teachers, parents, and students, and among three ethnic groups for the student and parent respondents. The second two questions called for comparisons on the quantity and type of solution ideas by type of respondent (parent or student) and by ethnic group membership. The final evaluation question addressed the quality of problem solving by students only by ethnic group membership.

QUESTION #1: What similarities and differences exist in "need for improvement" ratings among teachers, parents, and students?

On a 4-point scale, respondents rated "need for improvement" (1=not at all, 2=a little, 3=some, 4=a lot) in each of six areas of school performance derived from the effective schools literature. Table 1 presents mean score results for the three groups of respondents.

Table 1

Teacher, Parent, and Student Ratings of Need for Improvement in Six Areas of School Effectiveness

School Effectiveness Area	Teachers		Parents		Students		ANOVA	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F Ratio*	Effect Size**
(a) Relations with Community and Parents	3.2	.9	3.4	.7	2.9	1.0	2.5	.59
(b) School-wide Functioning	3.0	.9	3.3	.9	2.6	1.0	2.7	.74
(c) Motivating and Encouraging Students	3.0	.9	3.3	.7	2.9	1.0	.98	.47
(d) Classroom Structure and Teaching	3.0	.9	3.1	1.2	2.6	1.1	1.1	.43
(e) Testing	2.7	.7	2.7	.9	2.3	1.1	.95	.40
(f) Physical Environment	3.3	.8	2.8	1.4	3.0	.95	1.0	.57
Average of Six Areas:	3.0		3.1		2.7			.53

* No F values were significant at $p < .05$.

** d Statistic (Hedges & Olkin, 1985) between highest and lowest mean ratings.

"Need for improvement" scores ranged from 2.3 (between "a little" and "some" needed) to 3.3 (between "some" and "a lot" needed). No significant differences in ratings were found among respondents in any of the six areas. To help judge the meaningfulness of the size of these differences, effect sizes were calculated for differences between the highest and lowest ratings (Hedges & Olkin, 1985; Wolf, 1986). Effect sizes ranged from .40 to .74, averaging .53. These scores indicate between-group differences of 20-30 percentile points, which were considered "medium-size" (Cohen, 1977), and which were large enough for practical educational significance (Rossi & Wright, 1977).

Although differences were not large enough for statistical significance, similarities in response patterns among respondents were noted. Teachers and students believed that "some" improvement was needed in the following areas: (a) Relations with Community and Parents, (b) School-wide Functioning, (c) Motivating and Encouraging Students, and (d) Classroom Structure and Teaching. Teachers and students both rated as needing most improvement the area of (f) Physical Environment, whereas parents rated (a) Relations with Community and Parents as needing most improvement. All three respondent groups expressed most satisfaction with the (e) Testing area. In general, parents saw the greatest need for change ($M = .31$), followed by teachers ($M = .30$), and students ($M = .27$).

Table 2
Parent Ratings of Need for Improvement in Six Areas of School Effectiveness, by Ethnic Group Membership

Area of School Improvement	African American		Hispanic		Caucasian		ANOVA	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F Ratio*	Effect Size**
Relations with Community and Parents	3.6	.5	3.6	.5	2.6	1.1	2.36	1.25
School-wide Functioning	3.6	.5	3.2	.8	3.1	1.7	.59	.45
Motivating and Encouraging Students	3.5	.8	3.2	.4	3.3	1.1	.20	.17
Classroom Structure and Teaching	3.3	1.6	3.0	1.0	3.0	1.0	.11	.23
Testing	3.3	.52	2.4	1.1	2.1	.3	3.6	1.71
Physical Environment	2.1	1.7	3.4	.8	3.3	1.1	1.3	1.04
Average of Six Areas:	3.2		3.1		2.9			.81

*No F ratios were statistically significant at $p < .05$.

** d Statistic (Hedges & Olkin, 1985) between highest and lowest mean ratings. QUESTION #2: What similarities and differences exist in "need for improvement" ratings by students and parents of the three ethnic groups?

Ethnic group results were computed separately for parents and students. Ethnic group membership data were not collected on teachers, at their request, because they felt with small numbers their individual identities could be deciphered. Tables 2 and 3 present ethnic group data for parents and students, respectively.

Table 3
Student Ratings of Need for Improvement in Six Areas of School Effectiveness, by Ethnic Group Membership

Area of School Improvement	African American		Hispanic		Caucasian		ANOVA	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F Ratio*	Effect Size**
Relations with Community and Parents	2.8	1.0	2.9	.9	2.7	1.0	.24	.21
School-wide Functioning	2.6	1.0	2.4	.9	2.9	1.1	1.1	.50
Motivating and Encouraging Students	2.81	1.1	3.1	.7	2.9	1.0	.49	.33

Classroom Structure and Teaching	2.5	1.1	2.7	1.1	2.7	1.1	.21	.18
Testing	2.2	1.1	2.5	1.0	2.3	1.0	.34	.29
Physical Environment	2.9	.9	3.0	1.1	3.2	.8	.50	.35
Average of Six Areas:	2.6		2.8		2.8			.31

*No F ratios were statistically significant at $p < .05$.

** d Statistic (Hedges & Olkin, 1985) between highest and lowest mean ratings.

No parent ratings differed significantly by ethnic group membership. The largest mean score differences were generally between African American parents and others. African American parents rated five of the six areas of school effectiveness as needing some to lots of improvement, and their mean scores indicated less satisfaction with these areas than was indicated by Hispanic or Caucasian respondents. Physical Environment was an exception; African American parents rated this as a lower need than the other two ethnic groups. African American and Hispanic parents both cited the area Relations with Community and Parents as needing "lots" of improvement, whereas Caucasian parents indicated "a little" to "some" improvement needed in this area. Effect sizes were large (>1.0), equaling more than a 34 percentile point average difference in comparing responses of Caucasian parents with others on Relations with Community and Parents, Testing, and Physical Environment.

For student ratings, no significant ethnic response differences were found. In general, students did not communicate a serious need for improvement in any of the six areas of school effectiveness. Nor were there evident any marked mean score differences among ethnic groups. Effect sizes for the most disparate scores averaged only .31, a borderline or marginally important difference. All students rated the area of Physical Environment as most in need of improvement (mean scores 2.9 -3.2) and Testing (mean scores 2.2-2.5) as least or nearly least in need of improvement.

QUESTION #3: What similarities and differences exist in the number of potential solutions by parents and students of three ethnic groups?

For each of the six areas rated as needing lots of improvement, respondents were queried further and asked to generate solution ideas. Fluency of idea generation was calculated by simply counting the number of distinct relevant solution ideas generated. Results were calculated separately for parents and students. Teachers were not asked to generate solution ideas; rather they later were asked to respond to ideas generated by others. Table 4 presents ideational fluency results for parents.

Table 4 indicates the frequency of idea generation per parent respondent. For example, the 2.3 for Relations with Community and Parents indicates that, on the average, each African American respondent provided between two and three ideas in this area. Nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis tests for differences among multiple groups were conducted for each of the six areas and then for all areas together. The Kruskal-Wallis tests yield an "H" statistic, an omnibus test for overall differences among groups.

Table 4
Percent of Parents Who Generated Solution Ideas, by Ethnicity

School Improvement Area	African American	Hispanic	Caucasian	H
Relations with Community and Parents	2.3	1.6	2.5	1.2
School-wide Functioning	1.7	.8	2.0	1.5
Motivating and Encouraging Students	1.3	1.4	1.5	.21
Classroom Structure and Teaching	2.0	1.4	1.0	3.2
Testing	1.0	.2	.0	4.7
Physical Environment	1.0	1.2	1.0	.41
Average of Six Areas:	1.5	1.1	1.3	7.8*

* p<.05

Among parent respondents, most ideas were generated by African Americans, followed by Caucasians, and then Hispanics, who generated significantly fewer ideas than the other two groups (p<.05). No statistically significant response differences were found among ethnic groups for any of the six areas of school effectiveness. All three groups generated the most solution ideas for the area of Relations with Community and Parents, and fewest for Testing.

Results on idea generation by students are presented in Table 5. As with Table 4, Table 5 indicates idea generation rates. For example, the .4 for Relations with Community and Parents indicates that fewer than half of African American respondents generated an idea in this area. The Kruskal-Wallis "H" statistic tested differences among the three ethnic groups. Overall, Caucasian students generated significantly more solution ideas per person than Hispanic students (H=7.7, p<.05). Within the six areas of school effectiveness, ethnic group differences occurred only for the area of Testing, where Hispanics (.1) generated significantly fewer solution ideas than either Caucasians (.5) or African Americans (.6) (H=5.16, p<.05). In general, students generated fewer than half the number of solution ideas than did parents.

Table 5
Percent of Students Who Generated Solution Ideas, by Ethnicity

School Improvement Area	African American	Hispanic	Caucasian	H
Relations with Community and Parents	.4	.3	.7	.05
School-wide Functioning	.6	.5	.6	1.01

Motivating and Encouraging Students	.5	.3	.8	.93
Classroom Structure and Teaching	.7	.5	.8	.93
Testing	.6	.1	.5	5.16*
Physical Environment	.7	.4	.7	3.4
Average of Six Areas:	.6	.4	.7	7.7*

* p<.05

QUESTION #4: What similarities and differences exist in the nature of potential solutions by students and parents of three ethnic groups?

Solution ideas generated by students were written in situ by the interviewer in most sessions; the remaining sessions were audio-taped and later transcribed. A graduate student research assistant read through all ideas and created a classification scheme, modifying the categories as needed to fit all ideas. This procedure was independently duplicated by a second research assistant. The two independently created classification schemes were then compared, and differences were reconciled by the team leader. Fewer than 5% of categories in the two independently created classification schemes needed to be rewritten to reconcile differences.

From 70 students, a total of 247 ideas were obtained, 72 of them unique. These ideas fell into 32 main categories. The ideas were sorted by overall popularity (across all ethnic groups). A full two-thirds of the ideas could be captured in only 12 categories. These idea categories are ranked by overall popularity in Table 6, with data on their popularity for each ethnic group.

Table 6
Percent of Students Generating Six Classes of Solution Ideas, by Ethnic Group

Area	Idea Categories	African American	Hispanic	Caucasian
Relations with Community and Parents	More personal contact among parents, teachers, administration, & general community: Conferences/Meetings. Open houses. In-class visitations by parents. Telephone contacts. Encourage participation in school activities such as band. Publicize school events in community.	22%	26%	35%
Motivating and Encouraging Students	More variety in teaching methods: More active student participation. Tie lessons to daily events reality. More experiments in science. Use role-playing, e.g. job hunting. Have teacher share personal, relevant life experiences. Use humor.	13%	17%	30%

Worksheets optional, extra credit only.

Classroom Structure and Teaching	Use resources other than the class text for lessons & homework: Use current events. Use discussion in addition to lecture. Have educational field trips for applied learning. Vary pattern/order/sequence of class activities.	13%	13%	26%
School-wide Functioning	More uniform and consistent discipline & rule structure: School-wide concrete behavior rules. Uniform discipline among teachers. Put discipline in the hands of the vice principal.	13%	22%	9%
Classroom Structure and Teaching	Reteach students who don't understand: Use "within class" ability grouping to assist lower students. Have higher students work with lowest to help explain assignments.	13%	13%	17%
Motivation and Encouraging Students	Use more positive feedback/reinforcement: Wall chart for names of those who do well. More verbal praise. Compliments for improvement/effort. Provide more opportunity for positive punches on behavior cards (activities which don't require staying after school). Have free day at end of semester for those who earn it.	13%	9%	17%
Classroom Structure and Teaching	Provide more thorough, clear instructions for assignments: Give examples of problems or questions. Check for understanding. Write down assignments.	17%	9%	9%
Physical Environment	Provide a school security guard: Monitor halls. Reduce littering, vandalism, and stealing. Control drugs, weapons, and noise.	9%	9%	17%
Motivating and Encouraging Students	Provide tutoring: Sometimes bilingual skill is essential in tutoring. Set up tutoring groups. Teachers provide tutoring aids. Use peer tutors. Help for all courses after school.	13%	4%	17%
Physical Environment	Provide a new building.	4%	4%	26%
Relations with Community and Parents	Directly and immediately notify parents of discipline problems.	4%	0%	22%
Testing*	More extensive review of material before testing: More than one day of review. Provide notes, study guides.	17%	0%	9%

The "Area" heading indicates the school performance area under which the idea was classified. All of the original six areas of school performance identified from the effective schools research were used to classify these most popular ideas. The percentage scores in the first row in Table 8 indicate that 22% of African Americans, 26% of Hispanics, and 35% of Caucasians volunteered solution ideas categorized under "More personal contact among parents, teachers, administration, and the general community." This particular idea category was the single most popular for all students. Overall, the greatest number of ideas fell within the category "Motivating and Encouraging Students."

Considerable agreement was evident among students from different ethnic groups. These 12 most popular groups of ideas included all of the most popular 12 ideas from Hispanic respondents, 9 of the most popular ideas from Caucasian respondents, and 8 from African American respondents.

Solution ideas generated by parents (see Table 7) were classified and coded according to the same procedure. For parent results, the classification scheme used for student ideas was repeated, with new categories formed in only four cases.

Table 7
Percent of Parents Generating Six Classes of Solution Ideas, by Ethnic Group

Area	Ideas by Area	African American	Hispanic	Caucasian
Relations with Community and Parents	More personal contact among parents, teachers, administration, and general community: *Teacher/parent conferences. *Parents monitoring detention or I.S.S. *Use town paper more. *Start school paper/ newsletter. *Publish menus. *Publish test dates. *Use professionals as role models. *Use parents as aides/monitors. *Notify parents by phone or mail (rather than relying on students to carry information).	90%	81%	89%
School-wide Functioning	More uniform and consistent discipline and rule structure: *Firmer reinforcement. *Constructive consequences (e.g. community work on Saturday). *Hold I.S.S. at Junior High. *More opportunities for positive punches on cards (things that don't require staying after school). *Make I.S.S. less desirable. *Broad, long-term discipline program not just react to brush fires.	42%	48%	55%
Classroom Structure and Teaching	Use ability grouping (by class): *Re-evaluate students frequently to allow flexible movement among groups.	13%	10%	42%
Physical	Encourage better eating habits: *Limit access/get	30%	16%	45%

Environment	rid of snack machines. *Provide less fat and sugar in cafe food. *Provide fruit, milk, juices in snack machines. *Improve/alternate cafeteria menus. *Food should be cooked on campus.			
Motivating and Encouraging Students	Use more positive feedback/reinforcement: *Use more rewards for improvements in achievement and social behavior (including teacher praise). *Use high school band as a reward.	19%	16%	19%
Classroom Structure and Teaching	Reteach students who don't understand: *Academic assistance class/workshop for parents (provide parents with skills to help students with homework). *Offer help from bilingual teachers.	19%	6%	10%
Relations with Community and Parents	Involve parents in homework: *Provide parents with skills to help students with homework.	6%	6%	10%
Relations with Community and Parents	Involve students in community volunteerism: *Let students do work around town (i.e. plant flowers in town gazebo; do yard work for senior citizens).	6%	0%	10%
Classroom Structure and Teaching	Use resources other than the class text for lessons and homework: *Use educational field trips (e.g. to county courthouse to see trials).	10%	0%	0%
Relations with Community and Parents	Periodic Progress Reports to Parents: Mail them, and more frequently.	10%	6%	10%
Testing	Testing* Set test schedule early, with parent notification.	10%	0%	10%
Motivating and Encouraging Students	Set career goals for students: *Encourage student success in life and career through academic success.	10%	0%	0%
Physical Environment	Decorate halls: *Provide space for personal creativity: *Bulletin boards for student art or writing. *Murals. *Provide art supplies and encouragement for creativity.	6%	0%	0%

The tabulated parent data in Table 7 are interpreted in the same manner as for Table 6. Many fewer solution ideas came from parents because of the smaller sample. However, as noted earlier, individual parents were ideationally more fluent than students. All ideas generated fit within 13 idea categories, which again represented all of the original six areas of school performance. The most popular solution ideas fell within

"Relations with Community and Parents."

To look at similarities of response patterns among students and parents of the three ethnic groups, categorized solution ideas from all six subgroups were subjected to Multidimensional Scaling, a nonparametric technique for displaying respondents on a two-dimensional space (Schiffman, Reynolds, & Young, 1981). Results are displayed in Figure 1.

Kruskal's Monotonic scaling was used to successfully plot respondents with final stress $< .006$. Physical proximity on the two-dimensional map signifies similar response patterns. Physically close triangles in Figure 1 indicate that those respondent groups provided similar types of solution ideas. The encircling boundary lines indicate order to clustering from a supplemental Hierarchical Cluster Analysis of the same data. Figure 1 indicates two dyads of similar response patterns: (a) African American parents and Caucasian parents, and (b) Hispanic parents and Caucasian students. Hispanic students were relative unique scorers from the preceding four types of respondents. Finally, African American students were the most extreme unique scorers, producing patterns of solution ideas which were different from other respondents.

QUESTION #5: What similarities and differences exist in the quality of problem-solving by students of three ethnic groups?

Part 2 of the interview followed up on each area which the respondent rated as needing to change a lot or some. When respondents provided such ratings, they were then led through a ten-step process: (a) generate ideas, (b) identify who would benefit, (c) identify who would be burdened, (d) identify practical obstacles, (e) identify those in agreement, (f) identify potential collaborators, (g) obtain personal commitment, (h) identify how respondent would help, (i) identify how to judge if idea works, and (j) reevaluate idea.

No formal analysis was performed on how respondents proceeded through these steps, but the following informal observations are made. In identifying who would be burdened by a school-improvement idea, parents proved practical and generous-spirited. They quickly brought out details such as dates for Bingo night, whose car would not run, who was out of work and available for babysitting, who was a great cook but too modest to offer her talents, who were having a "rift," and who would have to be taken as inseparable partners in any school service. They also knew and freely related which parents were "calling the shots," and which could organize. Details often came out slowly and indirectly as our interviewers found their way into the screen doors of this town.

Question (g), Obtain personal commitment, received positive results in the main. Exceptions were those cases in which parents wanted to "wait to see if Harriett would do this with me." In more than one interview, the parent became galvanized into action and was ready to start "right now." At times our interviewers had difficulty in communicating that we needed to wait for others' ideas as well and then would recommend action on high-agreement, high-success probability ideas only.

Responses to the ten-step sequence were rated (for each major school improvement area) on four qualitative criteria:

(1) Relevant: Were the responses relevant to the question?

(2) Constructive: Were responses positive, solution-oriented, and fair-minded, rather than blameful or ego-inflating?

(3) Thoughtful: Did responses show reflection or careful, strategic thinking?

(4) Realistic: Were responses practical, recognizing obvious constraints and limitations?

Ratings were performed on a three point scale (0=no, 1=partially, 2=yes) by two graduate students, after reaching 89% agreement (Cohen's Kappa: .68). Ratings were all reasonably high for the four areas, ranging from 1.9 (Relevant & Constructive) to 1.5 (Thoughtful & Realistic). No significant differences in quality ratings were apparent by student ethnic membership.

Discussion

This study had two purposes. The first was to develop and pilot a procedure for involving parents and students of ethnic minority groups in the early stages of systemic school reform. The immediate need was an at-risk Junior High school in a poor, rural, southeast Texas community. The school was marked by a high dropout rate, low student achievement and teacher morale, racial tension, and poor community relations. Although the literature on parent involvement is burgeoning, little guidance is available on involvement of minority parents in fundamental school restructuring, particularly in the early stages of diagnosis and goal setting. The second purpose was to apply the procedure to this school situation and summarize resulting information on areas of needed school improvement and potential solutions in a clear and useful manner.

Regarding the first purpose, the procedure was to (a) be perceived as fair by all stakeholders, (b) yield positive, solution-oriented ideas, (c) produce self-reflection and fair consideration of ideas, (d) be efficient to carry out, and (e) be easily summarized and interpreted by stakeholders.

We assured fairness of the evaluation procedure by forming a multiethnic interview team, and by interviewing parents in their own homes. Within the interview, we solicited and accepted only positive, solution-oriented ideas. Self-reflection and fair consideration of ideas were ensured by a scripted interview guide. The interview procedures proved only somewhat efficient to carry out. Initial training of interviewers required approximately two hours, and each interview required 20-45 minutes. The interview results were easily summarized and interpreted by sorting responses into categories and then counting frequencies within categories.

The second purpose was to use this procedure to collect, summarize, and communicate information on areas of needed school improvement and potential solutions. This purpose was focused by five evaluation questions: What similarities and differences exist (a) in "need for improvement ratings" among students, teachers, and parents, (b) in "need for improvement ratings" among students and parents of three ethnic groups, (c) in the number, (d) in the nature of potential solutions by students and parents of three ethnic groups, and (e) in the quality of suggested solutions by students of three ethnic groups.

Regarding the first evaluation question, no significant differences were evident in the concerns identified by the Barfast Junior High School teachers, their students, and parents. Teachers, students, and parents agreed in rating some areas as high-priority for improvement (Relations with Community and Parents) and others low priority (Testing). On other school improvement areas (e.g. Physical Environment), only students and teachers agreed. Given the general divisiveness and poor communication among respondents at Barfast, this amount of agreement was a pleasant surprise to everyone. The superintendent and school board recognized this as a new foundation for further agreement and as a foundation of relatively objective and quantifiable data. The results also provided a common terminology for further discussions. The terminology was goal-oriented and positive rather than deficit-focused.

Regarding the second question, ethnic membership of parents and students did not play a significant role in "need for improvement" ratings, although responses by African American parents indicated generally less satisfaction with most areas. One high priority area for improvement (Motivating and Encouraging Students) was identified by parents and students from all three ethnic groups. This area alone helped set the initial agenda for discussions about school reform. In a climate where parents from the three ethnic groups previously would not meet together, these objective results showed that common ground still exists. Follow-up discussions of Testing, which was identified as a concern by only African Americans, were led by members of that ethnic group. Parent ratings were generally more negative than students' which may further indicate the need for communication between school and home about what actually occurs on a typical day.

The third question, on student and parent fluency in generating solution ideas, was posed not for the school district, but to explore the validity of this approach in obtaining equal participation from all classes of respondents. We were concerned that this solution-oriented interview approach might fail because of communicative hesitancy or paucity of ideas among the least -educated parents or less-skilled students, especially members of ethnic minorities. This concern was not borne out, giving us more confidence that our procedure afforded all ethnic groups equal roles in solution development. All parent groups were prolific in generating solution ideas--an average of six to nine ideas per respondent. The most prolific parent solution-generators were African Americans. Our interviewers were overwhelmed with the creativity and the positive nature of the ideas. A minor finding was the difference in ideational fluency between African Americans and Hispanics, despite more than half of the interviews with Hispanic parents being conducted by Hispanic team members speaking Spanish. Our Hispanic team members felt this was due to the greater respect or deference with which parents in Mexico and Central America hold public schools and teachers. Students generated approximately half the number of ideas per respondent as did parents, but still a large number--three to five each. Again, Hispanics contributed significantly fewer--three per respondent--but certainly enough to help build a consensual agenda for school change.

The fourth evaluation question related to the nature of potential solutions generated by students and parents from three ethnic groups. Commonalties in this arena could greatly accelerate the process of school improvement. Again, the commonalty of solutions among different respondent groups was remarkable. Students from all three ethnic groups shared at least eight of the most frequently occurring solution ideas. Despite the "us versus them" talk common among the students, individual guidance toward positive and thoughtful problem-solving tended to produce similar results. Agreement among parents from different ethnic groups was even stronger than among students. The picture of a fractious parent community was difficult to maintain in light of these results. A list of the shared concrete ideas was prepared, along with names of individual parents from all ethnic groups who expressed commitment to help realize improvement. These individuals became members of project groups, working toward common effective school goals.

The multidimensional scaling map of respondents accentuates the congruence of ideas among respondents and helps to identify potential allies in school reform. It also can help identify those most alienated from popular opinion. The map displayed some similarity clusters which would seem unlikely, given the recent history of the Barfast school and community (African American parents and Caucasian parents). The map also indicated some isolation from popular opinion by Hispanic students and greater isolation by African American students. The map indicates the need for special developmental efforts toward these two groups to bring them to a shared vision with other stakeholders.

The fifth and final evaluation question asked about the quality of problem-solving by students from three ethnic groups. This question was raised to help validate the usefulness of the procedure for school

improvement. Students' ideas were rated as relevant, constructive, thoughtful, and realistic, with no significant quality differences evident among ethnic groups. As with parent respondents, our interviewers informally commented on being impressed with the quality of student responses.

In a poor, rural community torn along ethnic lines, between school and home, and between teachers and students, common ground is desperately needed to begin the constructive process of finding and implementing solutions while healing intergroup relationships. Perhaps only quantitative data, as we gathered from interviews, can appear objective enough to rise above the negative and hyperbolic exchanges and accusations which were passing for communication. While acknowledging the need to attend to and respect ethnic differences in point of view, our data indicated that these differences can easily become exaggerated or even fabricated and obscure similarities in points of view.

Efforts to gather information must reduce, not raise, tensions. We encouraged the creative flow of ideas through open-ended questions, while strictly ensuring that the nature of all responses was positive. Parent survey questionnaires about expectations for public education are of little use in a situation like Barfast, where many parents lack basic literacy skills, where the context is tense and reactive, where the need is urgent, and where the school needs active support for fundamental solutions.

This pilot study demonstrated that even within a hostile, divisive environment, parents from various ethnic groups can and should be provided a role in early systemic school reform efforts. These initial reform efforts of diagnosing strengths and weaknesses of a school and goal-setting to help guide improvements can effectively involve ethnic minority parents if the information collection process is sensitive to ethnic differences, is positive, and leads to quasi-objective, quantifiable results. Our study revealed an unexpected and rewarding stakeholder response. Responses were positive, and suggestions for improvement were realistic. Furthermore, in this poor, racially divided community, those concerns and solution ideas were found to be similar across teachers and students and across lines of ethnicity.

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