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# Rural Educator Perceptions of Parent Involvement in Public Schools: Perspectives from Three States

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*Rural educators in three states were surveyed regarding their perceptions of parental involvement in their schools. Significant indicators impacting student success included the expectation of parents and their attitudes toward education. Two strategies used to incorporate varying cultures and languages into the school community were creating a welcoming and open climate for parents and using parents' home languages to communicate key information. The greatest challenge to involvement in their children's education was parents' work schedules. Educators participating in this study rated their schools' level of success in engaging parents as somewhat successful.*

**Keywords:** family-school-community partnerships, redefining parental involvement, parental involvement, rural educators.

Historically, rural schools have been known for their active engagement with parents and communities as well as for smaller class sizes, safer school environments, a more individualized approach to learning, flexible scheduling, creative approaches to acquiring expanded curriculum offerings, and a lower rate of students dropping out of school (Chalker, 2002; Johnson, 2006; Keith, Keith, Quirk, Cohen-Rosenthal, & Franzese, 1996). Although some rural communities have experienced population decline in the last few years, others have experienced growth, with 13% of the population growth in rural schools consisting of other than Whites from European ancestry (Dougherty, 2012). Demographic trends indicate that ethnically diverse populations will continue growing in rural areas (Johnson, 2006). Some rural communities are culturally established with rich tradition, religion heritage, and unique social norms based on isolated location of these areas: Alaskan villages, Native American reservations, and Amish farming communities, to name but a few (Nelson, 2010).

Today, not all students enrolled in rural schools have the multi-generational involvement of their parents and grandparents experienced by students in past years (Bauch, 2000). Increasingly migrant

families, parents with limited education, and single-parent homes have become more prevalent in rural communities (Grey, 1997; Schafft, Prins, & Movit, 2008). Parents who come from non-rural areas, other parts of the country, different cultural and religious traditions, isolated locations, or other countries may need guidance in learning how to navigate the cultural, social, and linguistic norms of rural schools and their communities. With ongoing demographic changes in rural schools, it becomes important for rural educators to be culturally sensitive to the needs of their changing communities. This study explored the perceptions of rural educators regarding their understanding of parental involvement and their reflection of how parental involvement worked in their schools.

## Theoretical Framework

Through their meta-analysis of school leadership research, Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2005) affirmed parental involvement as one of several factors determining the capacity of schools to bring students to optimal levels of academic achievement. Students with involved parents, regardless of income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades,

achieve higher test scores, enroll in higher-level academic programs, attend school regularly, graduate from high-school, and enroll in postsecondary education programs (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Keith et al., 1996; Turney & Kao, 2009).

### **Traditional Perspectives: Parental Involvement in Children's Education**

In the United States, educators have typically viewed parental involvement as something occurring within the school: participation in parent-teacher conferences, volunteer activities or committee work at school, and/or involvement with fund-raising activities (Berger, 1991; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman-Nelson, 2010; Young, 1995; Zarate, 2007). For decades, school systems have struggled with involving parents in their children's education. At the same time, the real challenges affecting parental involvement and strategies that effectively engage parents have not been clearly identified (Anfara & Mertens, 2008; Semke & Sheridan, 2011). Too often, when educators address parental involvement, they assume that parents alone are responsible for connecting with schools while also providing follow-through support for their children at home including homework, monitoring student performance at school, and the use of other meaningful learning activities (Epstein, 2001; Jeynes, 2010). In some cases, teachers may judge parents based on misinterpretations about the motivation, interest, and support of specific parents (Cooper, Crosnoe, Suizzo, & Pituch, 2010; Turney & Kao, 2009; Zarate, 2007).

With the emergence of a new paradigm defining parental involvement, "Federal policies for family involvement established in various laws began to explicitly link families and schools" (Amatea, 2009, p. 25) as well as "encouraged educators to consider how school policies and practices influence their relationships with families" (Amatea, 2009, p. 25). Contemporary concepts of parental involvement include:

Systems, processes, policies, procedures, and practices that allow parents and family to be a credible component within the academic lives of their children. . . . [This] includes the engagement of families in the instructional and non-instructional (co-curricular, extracurricular) lives of their children as well as the family's educational experiences and values about the importance of education. (Constantino, 2003, pp. 9-10)

In addition, in efforts to increase student achievement into the future, the National Network of Partnership Schools [NNPS] (2014) encourages educators to intensify their focus to identify and capture community resources as well as to engage families with their schools and the community.

### **Paradigm Shift: Family-School-Community Partnerships**

Epstein and her colleagues (2009) and Cox-Peterson (2011) redefined parental involvement through a three-fold focus: (a) engagement of all families, (b) differentiated engagement based on the cultural and socio-economic contexts of the families, and (c) community engagement that maximizes resources in support of student learning. Although some traditional parent involvement activities may continue to exist within this paradigm shift, new strategies should also be implemented to ensure engagement of more families and their respective communities (Auerbach, 2012). Partnerships and collaboration among parents, schools, and local agencies in the community provide the adult support required for positive development of children. In reality, schools tend to lack clear organizational goals and objectives on how best to connect with families and communities (Zarate, 2007; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2001).

**Ecological perspectives.** Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, each child's cognitive and emotional growth, as well as success in school, is impacted through the positive strengthening of all relationships within the child's environments. Family, school, and community represent significant socializing agents in a child's education, each of which may represent differing viewpoints about what parental involvement is and what it should entail (Berns, 2009; Boethel, 2004; Epstein, 2001; Zarate, 2007). The relationships vary depending upon family, school, and community dynamics. In other words, each child's "development can be understood as a project of family, parents, communities, and children themselves to achieve goals and find meaning in some cultural community" (Weiss et al., 2010, p. 85). Family, as one of the smallest settings of this ecological system, has direct impact on each child's development. Contradicting aspects arise when discussing parental involvement from family, school, and community perspectives: (a) defining the concept of family involvement, (b) the value of parental involvement or how to best support it, (c) potential differences of perspectives that exist between teachers and parents, and (d) existing

differences between formal and informal parental involvement (Young, 1995).

### **Ethnicity and Culture as a Form of Parental Involvement**

According to Banerjee, Harrell, and Johnson (2011), "Ethnicity is a form of parental involvement" (p. 596). From ecological perspectives, culture and ethnicity directly or indirectly influence how parents socialize their children and the consequent outcomes. In other words, each child is provided with a unique developmental pathway within the ecological-cultural context of the family (Berns, 2009; Weiss et al., 2010). Jeynes (2010) found a positive effect of parental involvement on student achievement across ethnic groups, especially in conjunction with poverty and low socioeconomic status. As an example, parents from all racial groups were able to positively impact their kindergarten children's achievement in reading through activities at home (Park, Endo, & Rong, 2009).

However, parental involvement activities across various racial groups may not always have the same impact on student achievement. Parents' expectations for their children's behavior and performance in school may differ widely (Park & Chi, 1999; Park et al., 2009). Differences also exist for ethnically diverse families based on geographic location, country of origin, circumstances involving their arrival and place of residence, and mobility factors, each of which has the potential to positively or negatively impact students (Park et al., 2009; Um, 1999; Yan, 1999). For immigrant families, race and language as well as cultural differences may provide additional barriers or challenges for parents to overcome (Turney & Kao, 2009).

### **Rural Schools**

Rural schools, their students, and their communities tend to face many challenges unique to their locations. Although rural schools have a tendency to emulate the culture, climate, and logistics of their larger urban counterparts, the context of their environment is uniquely different from urban communities and schools. This is especially true for rural schools that are also geographically isolated (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Bauch, 2000; Howley & Howley, 2004). Other challenges facing rural schools include: finding experienced staff, a high rate of teacher turnover, a high percentage of inexperienced or poorly prepared teachers, inadequate instructional resources, and poor facilities (Howley & Howley, 2004).

On the other hand, rural schools have many positive attributes. They tend to be the center of their communities. Sporting events as well as cultural and civic activities engage community involvement. Student accomplishments are a source of community pride (Carlsen & Dunne, 1981; Witte & Sheridan, 2011). A distinguishing factor in rural schools has been community support that offers students various opportunities at schools and gives them a sense of place and belonging (Bauch, 2000). These may include unique resources such as students working together with teachers on projects that impact the community; local curricular design that incorporates the uniqueness of place – fishing industry, mining, logging, subsistence living, etc.; and the flexibility of being small and with the capacity to make immediate changes or adjustments (Nelson, 2010).

### **Family-School-Community Relationships in Rural Schools**

With the recent demographic changes within rural communities, new challenges arise as rural schools address family-school-community relationships. On one hand, there is value in maintaining already existing traditions that actively and effectively engage parents with their children's education. On the other hand, for families new to or having difficulty fitting in with a particular rural community and its unique context, different approaches to connect with families may be required (Nelson, 2010). According to Jordan et al. (2001), many activities that connect families and communities with schools are lumped together as parental involvement when, in fact, they do not serve that purpose.

When discussing parental involvement in rural schools, the following aspects need to be addressed: (a) a clear definition of what parental involvement entails in specific rural settings, (b) clarity as to the value, purposes, and possible outcomes of parental involvement for students, teachers, families, and community, (c) identification of cultural influences and/or differences that exist between educators and families and among families, (d) development of varying types of authentic involvement activities to support children's learning in school, (e) understanding different types of parental involvement among diverse groups of families, and (f) appreciation for the cultural complexity of different types of parental involvement in relationship to their children's academic success (Baker & Soden, 1998; Ferguson, Jordan, & Baldwin, 2010; Young, 1995).

As rural schools redefine and/or clarify their expectations for family-school-community partnerships, they must also address the "divergent definitions and perceptions of parental involvement

in education existing among the different stakeholders” (Zarate, 2007, p. 7) and reach consensus. From a system’s perspective, rural schools should address their school district policies as well as their organizational goals and objectives to include family-school-community partnerships and their shared definition of parental involvement (Zarate, 2007).

In conclusion, traditional parental involvement activities and/or expectations in rural communities may not be appropriate or possible for today’s families, especially families with ethnically and culturally diverse learners. Twenty-first century rural educators need to redefine traditional parental involvement expectations based on the ecological perspectives that promote authentic family-school-community engagement. Presently, there seems to be a gap in the amount of contemporary research attributed specifically to family-school-community partnerships and involvement in rural schools (Semke & Sheridan, 2011).

The main purpose of this study was to investigate educators’ perceptions of parental involvement in rural schools in Idaho, Nebraska, and Wyoming. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How did rural educators define parental involvement in rural public schools?
2. What types of parental involvement did rural educators perceive as having the most impact on student success?
3. How did educators respond to the cultures and languages of students and parents into the overall culture of the school community?
4. What challenges and opportunities existed for rural educators when engaging parents in their children’s education?

### Method

This categorical survey research study investigated the perceptions of rural educators from Idaho, Nebraska, and Wyoming regarding definitions, expected outcomes, indicators and

predictors, impacts on student success, and types of parental involvement. Rural educators were asked their perceptions of opportunities and challenges impacting parental involvement. They were also asked to rate the level of success when attempting to engage parents in their children’s education. For the purpose of this study, rural educators were defined as teachers, principals, school district administrators, and superintendents employed as educators in rural and town school districts. Rural school districts and schools were defined using the New Urban-Centric Locale Codes from the Common Core of Data (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). The educators participating in this study worked in districts and schools in towns and rural areas with the following Locale Codes (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010): Town Fringe (31), Town Distant (32), Town Remote (33), Rural Fringe (41), Rural Distant (42), and Rural Remote (43).

### Participants and Contexts

This study was conducted in three northern U.S. states: Idaho, Nebraska, and Wyoming. These three states share similar characteristics including a high percentage of rural and town school districts (Idaho: 82.8%, Nebraska: 96.4%, and Wyoming: 97.9%) and similar racial and ethnical makeup. Even though the majority of the populations are White, the three states are ethnically diverse. Table 1 presents the racial makeup of the three states (United States Census Bureau, 2013).

Participants in this study were rural educators in Nebraska, Idaho and Wyoming. In Nebraska, eight of 12 randomly selected rural Nebraska school superintendents, representing three geographical areas (East, Central, and West), agreed to participate in the study. In spring of 2012, after permission was granted, principals within these districts were then asked to distribute an electronic survey to all administrators and teachers within their buildings. A total of 370 surveys were returned for a return rate of 39%.

Table 1  
*Racial Make Up*

Race	Nebraska %	Idaho %	Wyoming %
White	81.0	83.1	84.1
Black or African American	4.8	0.8	1.7
American Indian and Alaska Native	1.3	1.7	2.6
Asian	2.1	1.4	0.9
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	0.1	0.2	0.1
Hispanic or Latino	9.7	11.8	9.9
Two or more races	1.9	2.2	2.0

In Idaho, superintendents of school districts from Southeastern Idaho Region Four were invited to participate in this study at a regional meeting. The surveys were sent electronically to the rural school districts. A total of 53 surveys were returned, representing a 46% return rate. The responses of para-educators were excluded; as a result, 41 surveys were included in the summary of the results. Surveys were also distributed and collected in paper form at the Total Instructional Alignment (TIA) and Common Core Standards (CCS) Working Conference hosted by Idaho State University, in Pocatello, Idaho during June of 2012. Participation was voluntary. All participants were K-12 public school teachers and administrators in Southeastern Idaho. The total number of participants from the conference was 275, which represented a 79% return rate. The participants represented 27 school districts in southeastern Idaho. About half of the participants were from the larger cities in the region and about half were from smaller rural cities and towns. Only rural participants from 22 Southeastern Idaho school districts were included in this study with a total of 172 returned surveys.

In Wyoming, all 48 school districts were invited to participate in the study. Six districts volunteered to join the study and signed a collaborative agreement granting consent. During the spring semester, 2012, the surveys were sent electronically to the superintendent in each of the six participating school districts, representing 52 schools. They were asked to send the survey to all of their certified professional staff. The total number of participants was 256 with a return rate of 18%.

### Survey Instrument and Analysis

The survey instrument was developed based on the literature addressing parental involvement as well as family-school-community relationships. The same categorical survey instrument was used in all three states. Electronic and paper versions of the survey were used. Each version consisted of 20 identical questions. Some questions permitted only one choice while other questions allowed multiple responses by checking all of the choices that applied. The survey questions were directed to the following categories:

1. definition of parental involvement
2. expected outcomes of parental involvement
3. indicators and predictors of parental involvement

4. parental involvement as a predictor of student success
5. culturally responsive parental involvement
6. opportunities for parental involvement
7. challenges of parental involvement
8. success in parental involvement.

Each category consisted of three questions with the same multiple-choice options for those questions of the same specific topic. Survey questions asked participants to identify all the factors they thought were relevant and then to choose the most and least important factors from the list. For example, question 5 asked the survey respondents to indicate all of the factors listed that “predict positive parental involvement.” The participants also had the option to choose “other” and to write in another factor. Question 6 asked them to decide which “indicator most impacts parental involvement,” and Question 7 asked them to decide which “indicator least impacts parental involvement.” A summative item on the survey, “The following indicates my school’s level of success in engaging parents” used a five-point Likert scale that ranged from 5 (*extremely successful*) to 1 (*not successful at all*). The participants were also given an open-ended opportunity to comment on parental involvement at the end of the survey.

Participants’ responses were tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistics via IBM SPSS 20.0 software. These results are presented as frequency counts and percentages. Qualitative data were not analyzed due to limited responses by participants.

### Results

The findings of this study were organized based on the eight categories of the survey. The first categorical question addressed definitions of parental involvement. Rural educators were asked to choose a definition of parental involvement (Table 2). Choices ranged from traditional past definitions to a more contemporary comprehensive definition as defined through the literature. Across the three states, the definition of parental involvement selected by the highest percentage of rural educators was *Engaging parents in parent-teacher conferences, school-wide activities, volunteering at school, and discussing their personal goals and expectations for academic achievement* (69.2% in Nebraska, 81.4% in Idaho, and 72.1% in Wyoming).

Table 2

*Definitions: Frequency and Percent of Responses by Educator Population*

Survey Items and Response Choices	Nebraska ( <i>n</i> = 370)		Idaho ( <i>n</i> = 172)		Wyoming ( <i>n</i> = 129)	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<b>The definition of Parental Involvement is:</b>						
a. Engaging parents in parent-teacher conferences	2	0.5	1	0.6	1	0.8
b. Engaging parents in parent-teacher conferences and school-wide activities	20	5.4	11	6.4	5	3.9
c. Engaging parents in parent-teacher conferences, school-wide activities, and volunteering at school	77	20.8	9	5.2	22	17.1
d. Engaging parents in parent-teacher conferences, school-wide activities, volunteering at school, and discussing their personal goals and expectations for academic achievement	256	69.2	140	81.4	93	72.1
e. Other	15	4.1	11	6.4	8	6.2

### Expected Outcomes of Parental Involvement

When asked to select expected results of parental involvement, rural educators endorsed positively all of the listed options (see Table 3). The highest percentage of agreement (Nebraska 88.6%, 89.6% in Idaho, and 90.0% in Wyoming) was for the statement “parental involvement results in increased collaboration between parents and teachers that positively impacts student learning.” The least selected outcome was “parental involvement results in enrichment by parents in areas of interest for their child” (72.9% in Nebraska, 66.5% in Idaho, and 64.6% in Wyoming). Rural educators in all three states were in general agreement that all of the listed outcomes were expected positive results of parental involvement.

The most important outcome of parental involvement identified by the highest percentage of rural educators (56.5% in Nebraska, 43.3% in Idaho, and 61.2% in Wyoming ) was “increased collaboration between parents and teachers that

positively impacts student learning”. This was followed by “increased student motivation to learn” rated the most important by 13.9% in Nebraska, 18.3% in Idaho, and 15.5% in Wyoming. It can be concluded that rural educators across the three states held similar opinions regarding the most important outcomes of parental involvement.

When asked to select the least important outcome of parental involvement, there was less consensus among the educators overall; however, the two outcomes most often rated as least important were consistent across rural educators from the three states. These were: “parents providing additional learning resources for their child outside of school” (endorsed by 25.3% in Nebraska, 21.8% in Idaho, and 18.3% in Wyoming), and “enrichment by parents in areas of interest for their child” (endorsed by 23.2% in Nebraska, 18.8% in Idaho, and 18.3% in Wyoming).

Table 3

*Expected Outcomes: Frequency and Percent of Responses By Educator Population*

Survey Items and Response Choices	Nebraska ( <i>n</i> = 370)		Idaho ( <i>n</i> = 172)		Wyoming ( <i>n</i> = 129)	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<b>Parental involvement results in:</b>						
a. Appropriate school-age behavior	291	77.4	136	77.3	96	73.8
b. Enrichment by parents in areas of interest for their child	274	72.9	115	66.5	84	64.6
c. Improved grades and academic achievement	331	88.0	141	81.5	112	86.2
d. Improved parent-child relationship	316	84.0	124	71.7	100	76.9
e. Improved teacher-child relationship	297	79.0	126	72.8	97	74.6
f. Increased collaboration among parents, teachers, and staff	321	85.4	133	76.9	101	77.7
h. Increased collaboration between parents and teachers that positively impacts student learning	333	88.6	155	89.6	117	90.0
i. Increased student motivation to learn	305	81.1	142	82.1	105	80.8
j. Increased completion rate of homework	317	84.3	145	83.8	109	83.8
k. Parents providing additional learning resources for their child outside of school	281	74.7	128	74.0	96	73.8
l. Other	16	4.3	14	8.1	5	3.8
<b>The most important result:</b>						
h. Increased collaboration between parents and teachers that positively impacts student learning	212	56.5	71	43.3	79	61.2
i. Increased student motivation to learn	52	13.9	30	18.3	20	15.5
<b>The least important result:</b>						
a. Appropriate school-age behavior	54	14.3	10	6.1	23	18.3
b. Enrichment by parents in areas of interest for their child	86	23.2	31	18.8	23	18.3
j. Increased completion rate of homework	49	13.2	30	18.2	27	21.4
k. Parents providing additional learning resources for their child outside of school	94	25.3	36	21.8	23	18.3

Note: In the final two sections of the table only the highest scoring items are included.

### Predictors of Positive Parental Involvement

Educators were asked to indicate the best predictors of positive parental involvement. Their responses are presented in Table 4. The predictor receiving the highest degree of endorsement from the rural educators was “parents’ expectations for their child’s academic achievement.” This was endorsed by 88.6% of the Nebraska educators, 83.4% of the Idaho educators, and 95.4% of the Wyoming educators. This was followed by “parents’ educational background,” (endorsed by 71.3% in Nebraska, 67.4% in Idaho, and 77.7% in Wyoming), and “teacher and school attitude toward parents” (endorsed by 73.7% in Nebraska, 64.6% in Idaho, and 70.8% in Wyoming).

When asked to identify the indicator that most impacted parental involvement, the majority of the educators across all three states said (see Table 4), “parents’ expectations for their child’s academic achievement.” The percentage endorsing this

statement was 60.9% in Nebraska 51.2% in Idaho, and 55.0% in Wyoming. This means the populations of educators held similar views regarding the most important indicator of the impact of parental involvement in rural schools.

When asked to select the least important impact of parental involvement from the same set of indicators (see Table 4), the “family’s length of residence in the U.S.,” and the “parents’ ethnic background” were rated as the least important indicators. The statement regarding length of residence of the parents was endorsed as least important by 32.4%, 33.9%, and 28.9% of the educators in Nebraska, Idaho, and Wyoming, respectively. The statement regarding parents’ ethnic background was endorsed as least important by 25.1%, 25.6%, and 21.1% of the educators in Nebraska, Idaho, and Wyoming respectively. Thus, although none of the indicators were endorsed by a majority of the educators, the populations of educators held similarly patterned opinions about the impacts of the various indicators.

Table 4

*Positive Parental Involvement: Frequency and Percent of Responses by Educator Population*

Survey Items and Response Choices	Nebraska ( <i>n</i> = 370)		Idaho ( <i>n</i> = 172)		Wyoming ( <i>n</i> = 129)	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<b>Items predicting positive parental involvement:</b>						
a. Family's cultural values	269	71.5	100	57.1	92	70.8
b. Family's length of residence in the U.S.	85	22.6	22	12.6	30	23.1
c. Family's social networks	167	44.4	57	32.4	71	54.6
d. Family's socio-economic status	178	47.3	69	39.4	58	44.6
e. Parents' educational background	268	71.3	118	67.4	101	77.7
f. Parents' English proficiency	163	43.4	63	36.0	53	40.8
g. Parents' ethnic background	71	18.9	27	15.4	25	19.2
h. Parents' expectations for their child's academic achievement	333	88.6	146	83.4	124	95.4
i. Parents' home language literacy	149	39.6	51	29.1	52	40.0
j. Teacher and school attitude toward parents	277	73.7	113	64.6	92	70.8
k. Other	5	1.3	4	2.3	6	4.6
<b>Most impacts parental involvement:</b>						
a. Family's cultural values	24	6.5	7	4.2	9	7.0
e. Parents' educational background	37	9.8	23	13.9	14	10.9
h. Parents' expectations for their child's academic achievement	226	60.9	85	51.2	71	55.0
j. Teacher and school attitude toward parents	55	14.8	36	21.7	19	14.7
<b>Least impacts parental involvement:</b>						
b. Family's length of residence in the U.S.	120	32.4	57	33.9	37	28.9
c. Family's social networks	55	14.9	21	12.5	22	17.2
j. Teacher and school attitude toward parents	23	6.2	6	3.6	13	10.2

Note: In the final two sections of the table only the highest scoring items are included.

### Predictors Impacting the Likelihood of Student Success

In this section, educators were asked to select all of the predictors they felt significantly influenced the likelihood of student success. Available choices were derived from the literature. Table 5 presents the frequency counts and percentages of educators' responses. All of the listed predictors were thought to impact the likelihood of student success by 50% or more of the educators in all three states, with the exception of "parents' employment status."

The predictor that was selected by the highest percentage of educators was "parents' expectations and attitudes toward education" (97.9% of the Nebraska educators, 92.0% of the Idaho educators, and 97.7% of the Wyoming)

When asked to select the indicator that most impacted student success, 87.4% of the educators in Nebraska, 81.4% of the educators in Idaho, and

82.7% of the educators in Wyoming selected "parents' expectations and attitudes toward education." Educators perceived that "parents' employment status" had the least impact on student success. This statement was endorsed by 33.8% in Nebraska, 35.3% in Idaho, and 36.5% in Wyoming.

### Culturally Responsive Parental Involvement

In the next section of the survey, the educators were asked to respond to questions about incorporating the cultures and languages of students and parents into the overall culture of the school community. They were first asked to indicate all of the methods that applied to their school. The frequency counts and percentages of responses are presented in Table 6. The predominant method endorsed by educators (82.2% in Nebraska, 82.4% in Idaho, and 77.7% in Wyoming) was "creating a welcoming and open climate for parents to visit the school." Another statement receiving high endorsement (60.9% in Nebraska, 85.1% in Idaho,

and 77.7% in Wyoming) was “translating/interpreting key information using parents’ home language(s).” The only other statement endorsed by more than 50% of educators in each state was “coordinating social services to support families and children in-need.” The percentages in Nebraska, Idaho, and Wyoming were 56.6%, 60.2%, and 55.4% respectively.

The indicator that most impacted incorporating varying cultures and languages of students and parents into the overall culture of the school community (see Table 6) was “creating a welcoming and open climate for parents to visit the school” (48.6% in Nebraska, 45.8% in Idaho, and 46.4% in

Wyoming). The indicator that least impacted incorporating cultures and languages into their school community was “providing transportation for school events for parents living in outlying areas” (32.0% Nebraska, 35.2% Idaho, and 25.0% Wyoming). Overall, the response patterns among the various choices varied slightly by state. With regard to “adjusting the school calendar to meet varying cultural needs of the community,” Wyoming, 32.5% of the educators thought had the least impact in their school community, while 28.5% in Nebraska and 21.2% in Idaho agreed.

Table 5  
*Predictors of Student Success: Frequency and Percent of Responses By Educator Population*

Survey Items and Response Choices	Nebraska ( <i>n</i> = 370)		Idaho ( <i>n</i> = 172)		Wyoming ( <i>n</i> = 129)	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<b>Predictors impacting the likelihood of student success</b>						
a. Children’s English proficiency	257	68.4	116	66.7	94	72.3
b. Children’s home language literacy	214	56.9	91	52.3	78	60.0
c. Family’s cultural values	231	61.4	87	50.0	87	66.9
d. Parents’ behaviors	310	82.4	122	70.1	109	83.8
e. Parents’ employment status	157	41.8	60	34.5	58	44.6
f. Parents’ expectations and attitudes toward education	368	97.9	160	92.0	127	97.7
g. Parents’ involvement in school activities	285	75.8	102	58.6	86	66.2
h. Other	4	1.1	4	2.3	2	1.5
Most impacts the likelihood of student success:						
f. Parents’ expectations and attitudes toward education	325	87.4	136	81.4	105	82.7
g. Parents’ involvement in school activities	9	2.4	3	1.8	4	3.1
Least impacts the likelihood of student success:						
b. Children’s home language literacy	61	16.5	29	17.4	17	13.5
c. Family’s cultural values	63	17.0	25	15.0	19	15.1
e. Parents’ employment status	125	33.8	59	35.3	46	36.5
g. Parents’ involvement in school activities	8	21.9	33	19.8	32	25.4

Note: In the final two sections of the table only the highest scoring items are included.

Table 6

*Culturally Responsive Parental Involvement: Frequency and Percent of Responses By Educator Population*

Survey Items and Response Choices	Nebraska ( <i>n</i> = 370)		Idaho ( <i>n</i> = 172)		Wyoming ( <i>n</i> = 129)	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<b>My school incorporates varying cultures and languages of students/parents into the overall culture of the school community through</b>						
a. Adjusting the school calendar to meet varying cultural needs of the community	64	17.0	35	20.1	16	12.3
b. Coordinating social services to support families and children in-need	213	56.6	106	60.2	72	55.4
c. Creating a welcoming and open climate for parents to visit the school	311	82.7	145	82.4	101	77.7
d. Home visits to understand family background and cultural values	66	17.6	19	10.9	19	14.6
e. Integrating cultural values into curriculum	164	43.6	77	44.3	37	28.5
f. Inviting parents to school as guest speakers	97	25.8	49	28.2	39	30.0
g. Involving parents in cultural or holiday celebrations/activities	140	37.2	84	48.3	59	45.4
h. Providing transportation for school events for parents living in outlying areas	37	9.8	7	4.0	16	12.3
i. Translating/ Interpreting key information using parents' home language(s)	229	60.9	148	85.1	101	77.7
j. Other	15	4.0	5	2.9	6	4.6
<b>Most impact</b>						
c. Creating a welcoming and open climate for parents to visit the school	179	48.6	76	45.8	58	46.4
i. Translating/ Interpreting key information using parents' home language(s)	106	28.2	49	29.5	36	28.8
<b>Least impact</b>						
a. Adjusting the school calendar to meet varying cultural needs of the community	103	28.5	35	21.2	39	32.5
f. Inviting parents to school as guest speakers	59	16.3	38	23.0	25	20.8
h. Providing transportation for school events for parents living in outlying areas	116	32.0	58	35.2	30	25.0

Note: In the final two sections of the table only the highest scoring items are included.

***Opportunities for Parental Involvement***

Educators were asked to identify opportunities for parental involvement in their schools by selecting all that applied from a list that included more traditional to more contemporary activities. Table 7 presents the responses by educator population. With the exception of parental education programs, classes, or workshops (14.4%, 25.7%, and 29.2% of the educators in Nebraska, Idaho, and Wyoming respectively), all of the other listed opportunities were endorsed by a majority (50% or more) of the educators. The opportunities that received the highest endorsements were “parent teacher conferences” with 97.9% in Nebraska, 79.4% in Idaho, and 96.9% in Wyoming, and “communication between parents and school via newsletters, email,

social media, etc.” with 96.3% in Nebraska, 90.9% in Idaho, and 93.1% in Wyoming.

When asked to indicate the opportunity that most impacted parental involvement in their school (see Table 7), “communication between parents and school via newsletters, email, social media, etc.” received the highest percentage of endorsement overall in all three populations of educators (51.9% in Nebraska, 40.0% in Idaho, and 50.0% in Wyoming). When asked to indicate the opportunity that least impacted parental involvement in their school (see Table 7), the highest percentage of responses in all three states was “fundraising activities for school/program/class events” (30.3% in Nebraska, 38.8% Idaho, and 40.3% Wyoming).

Table 7

*Opportunities: Frequency and Percent of Responses By Educator Population*

Survey Items and Response Choices	Nebraska ( <i>n</i> = 370)		Idaho ( <i>n</i> = 172)		Wyoming ( <i>n</i> = 129)	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<b>Opportunities that are available for parental involvement in my school</b>						
a. Communication between parents and school (newsletter, email, social media, etc.)	362	96.3	159	90.9	121	93.1
b. Family learning activities (math, literacy, back-to-school, curriculum, etc.)	201	53.5	96	54.9	89	68.5
c. Fundraising activities for school/program/class events	312	83.0	119	68.0	96	73.8
d. Parent education programs, classes, or workshops (ELL, computer skills, etc.)	54	14.4	45	25.7	38	29.2
e. Parent-teacher conferences	368	97.9	139	79.4	126	96.9
f. Parent-teacher organization/association	269	71.5	135	77.1	0	0.0
g. School/program /class volunteers	220	58.5	112	64.0	81	62.3
h. Translation and interpretation for key school activities (newsletter, conferences, learning activities, etc.)	191	50.8	125	71.4	91	70.0
i. Other	7	1.9	5	2.9	4	3.1
<b>Opportunities that most impact parental involvement in my school</b>						
a. Communication between parents and school (newsletter, email, social media, etc.)	193	51.9	66	40.0	64	50.0
h. Translation and interpretation for key school activities (newsletter, conferences, learning activities, etc.)	36	9.7	14	8.5	12	9.4
<b>Opportunities that least impact parental involvement in my school:</b>						
c. Fundraising activities for school/program/class events	112	30.3	64	38.8	50	40.3
d. Parent education programs, classes, or workshops (ELL, computer skills, etc.)	58	15.7	25	15.2	24	19.4
g. School/program /class volunteers	46	12.4	17	10.3	15	12.1
h. Translation and interpretation for key school activities (newsletter, conferences, learning activities, etc.)	67	18.1	20	12.1	13	10.5

*Note: In the final two sections of the table only the highest scoring items are included.*

### Challenges for Parental Involvement

Rural educators were also asked about their perceptions of the challenges experienced by their school when involving parents in school related activities by choosing all that applied from a list of challenges (Table 8). The challenge receiving the highest endorsement varied by state. In Nebraska, 85.9% of educators selected “parent’s socioeconomic status.” However, this challenge was selected by only 43.1% of the educators in Idaho and in Wyoming. In Idaho and Wyoming, the highest rated challenge was “parents’ work schedules”

(84.5% in Idaho and 91.5% in Wyoming). In Nebraska, this challenge received the second highest endorsement with 76.1%. In general, the pattern of other responses was similar across the educator populations.

When asked to indicate the challenge most experienced by their school when involving parents in school related activities (see Table 8), 33.3% of educators in Nebraska, and 36.7% of educators in Wyoming chose “parents’ work schedules.” This challenge was endorsed by only 20.1% of the educators in Idaho. Instead, 29.9% of educators in Idaho selected “recruitment of all parents to get involved in children’s education” as the challenge they experienced most often. When asked to indicate

the challenge least experienced by their school when involving parents in school related activities (see Table 8), “transportation” was most endorsed in Idaho at 33.2%, while “techniques for parental

involvement” was most endorsed in Nebraska at 39.7%. Due to an error in the electronic survey software, the responses to this question were not available from the Wyoming educators.

Table 8  
*Challenges: Frequency and Percent of Responses by Educator Population*

Survey Items and Response Choices	Nebraska ( <i>n</i> = 370)		Idaho ( <i>n</i> = 172)		Wyoming ( <i>n</i> = 129)	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<b>Challenges experienced by my school when involving parents in school related activities:</b>						
a. Communication between parents and schools	184	48.9	91	52.3	63	48.5
b. Family structure (single-parent family, nuclear family, extended family, etc.)	278	73.9	99	56.9	89	68.5
c. Parents’ educational background	193	51.3	78	44.8	64	49.2
d. Parents’ socio-economic status	323	85.9	75	43.1	56	43.1
e. Parents’ work schedules	286	76.1	147	84.5	119	91.5
f. Recruitment of all parents to get involved in children’s education	132	35.1	125	71.8	82	63.1
g. School-home cultural differences	166	44.1	55	31.6	45	34.6
h. School-home language differences	156	41.5	86	49.4	63	48.5
i. Techniques for parental involvement	83	22.1	69	39.7	46	35.4
j. Transportation	8	2.1	46	26.4	33	25.4
k. Other			3	1.7	5	3.8
<b>Challenge is most experienced by my school when involving parents in school related activities:</b>						
e. Parents’ work schedules	122	33.0	33	20.1	47	36.7
f. Recruitment of all parents to get involved in children’s education	13	3.5	49	29.9	35	27.3
<b>Challenge is least experienced by my school when involving parents in school related activities:</b>						
g. School-home cultural differences	52	14.1	17	10.2		
j. Transportation	3	0.8	54	32.3		

Note: In the final two sections of the table only the highest scoring items are included.

### Success in Parental Involvement

Finally, the educators who participated in this study were asked to rate their school’s level of success in engaging parents (Table 9). The most frequent response of the educators in all three states was “somewhat successful” endorsed by 46.8% of educators in Nebraska, 47.0% of educators in Idaho, and 39.4% of educators in Wyoming. The second

highest response was “mostly successful.” This response was endorsed by 30.6% in Nebraska, 35.7% in Idaho, and 33.9% in Wyoming. Few of the educators thought their schools were “extremely successful in engaging parents” (5.6% in Nebraska, 5.4% in Idaho, and 7.1% in Wyoming) and few thought their schools were “not at all successful” (2.2% in Nebraska, 1.8% in Idaho, and 3.9% in Wyoming).

Table 9

*Success: Frequency and Percent of Responses By Educator Population*

Survey Items and Response Choices	Nebraska ( <i>n</i> = 370)		Idaho ( <i>n</i> = 172)		Wyoming ( <i>n</i> = 129)	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<b>My school's level of success in engaging parents is</b>						
a. Extremely successful	21	5.6	9	5.4	9	7.1
b. Mostly successful	114	30.6	60	35.7	43	33.9
c. Somewhat successful	174	46.8	79	47.0	50	39.4
d. A little successful	55	14.8	17	10.1	20	15.7
e. Not successful at all	8	2.2	3	1.8	5	3.9

### Discussion

A concerning issue expressed throughout the literature on parental involvement is the lack of a common definition. The majority of rural educators selected the same comprehensive definition: "Engaging parents in parent-teacher conferences, school-wide activities, volunteering at school, and discussing their personal goals and expectations for [their children's] academic achievement." This shared definition provides a good starting point for school efforts to develop programming that actively engages parents. However, when dealing with parents and families, rural educators should also be mindful of their community demographics. In rural communities experiencing an influx of ethnically and culturally diverse families, newcomers may not have the same understandings or expectations of parental involvement that have prevailed in their schools in the past.

### Parental Involvement Activities

Findings from the survey items addressing parental involvement activities revealed one promising result and several issues that are contradictory to contemporary research. "Parents' expectations for their child's academic achievement" received the highest degree of endorsement from the educators. This result is consistent with the findings of a meta-analysis on parent involvement drawn from 77 studies that indicated parents' expectations have the greatest impact on their children's academic achievement and cognitive development (Jeynes, 2005). Based on this finding, it can be assumed that rural educators believe parents already know the potential impact their involvement has on the academic success of their children and that they have knowledge of how to get involved. Rural educators need to carefully avoid this assumption. Parents, especially those with limited educational experiences, those who are new to American educational systems, or those who are new to rural communities, may not

always know: (a) what to expect for their children in terms of academic achievement; (b) how to effectively engage in their children's education through the school; or (c) what resources are available to them (Cooper et al., 2010; Jeynes, 2010; Epstein, 2001; Turney & Kao, 2009). Just as teachers need professional development to support their work with students, parents need up-to-date information and guidance to best understand how to support their children in schools. They need to know how to get involved in their children's education, how to define and share expectations they have for their children's success in schools, and how to better understand and support the expectations of teachers and schools.

Rural educators reported using a variety of activities to engage parents. The listed activities receiving moderate or higher endorsement (over 50%) from educators included: "communication such as email and newsletter between parents and schools," "parent-teacher conferences," "parent-teacher organization/association," "fundraising activities for school/program/class events," "volunteers for school/program/class events," "family learning activities," and "translation and interpretations for key school activities." "Parent education programs, classes, and workshops" were the activities least used by schools and teachers in engaging parents in this study. It appears that educators viewed parental involvement as something that occurred within the school: participation in parent-teacher conferences, volunteer activities or committee work at school, and/or involvement with fund-raising activities, which reflects a more traditional perspective of parental involvement. These responses indicated that although rural educators preferred a more contemporary definition of parental involvement, they still relied on more traditional activities and strategies when working with parents. Contemporary research on parental involvement has indicated that traditional approaches are not enough for helping students achieve what schools, parents, and community expect, especially in

rural communities with culturally diverse students and their families (Epstein, 2001; Nelson, 2010). Educators may need to re-conceptualize their strategies for parent involvement and align them with the goals of engaging parents in their children's education and seeking innovative and differentiated ways to engage all parents as well as the community.

In addition, communication is often identified as an issue involved in effective parental involvement (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012; Cox-Petersen, 2011). This study found that various types of communication are already being utilized by teachers to connect with parents: Among the three states, 90 percent or more of study participants indicated that multiple opportunities for communication with parents have been utilized. Rural educators need to keep in mind that effective communication should be two-way, from school to home and home-to school (Epstein, 2001). To effectively engage active parent involvement requires educators to promote parent-teacher communication as well as teacher-parent communication.

### **Culturally Responsive Parental Involvement**

With respect to the third research question addressing culturally responsive parental involvement, two additional concerns may be drawn from the findings of this study. The first concern is the effect of ethnicity on positive parental involvement. Most rural educators indicated "parents' ethnic background was not a predictor for positive parental involvement, which is contradictory to the research indicating that ethnicity and culture do impact children's socialization from the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and, therefore, function as a form of parental involvement (Banerjee et al., 2011). The fact that rural educators perceived ethnicity as having less impact on parental involvement may imply their intention to provide equitable education for all children across varying ethnic groups. However, this kind of intention may minimize the capacity of parents to learn more about their children's education and incorporate cultural adaptations they may need to make in their family environments. At the same time, rural schools and educators may need to further develop their own cultural sensitivity to bridge these transitions.

The majority of rural educators in this study indicated that "creating a welcoming and open climate for parents to visit the school" and "translating/interpreting key information using parents' home language(s)" were two of the strategies used for "incorporating varying cultures and languages of students/parents into the overall culture

of the school community." This poses a second concern as well. Educators need to partner with their families and communities to capitalize on existing resources, knowledge, and skills and to fully support student learning in the culturally diverse classroom. For example, inviting parents to schools as guest speakers to share their experiences should be organized in a way that not only connects to the curriculum but also enriches it and adds value. Parental and family involvement is likely to positively impact student achievement when that involvement is connected to academic learning and the rural environment where they are currently living and going to school (Allen, 2008; Nelson, 2010).

### **Challenges and Opportunities Impacting Parental Involvement**

Concerning the third survey theme addressing challenges and opportunities, "parents' work schedule" and "recruitment of all parents to get involved in their children's education" were perceived to be the greatest challenges experienced by educators in engaging parents. These two challenges indicate a need for educators to consider using different types of activities or techniques to effectively engage all parents. These challenges may involve a paradigm shift from traditional parent involvement to a focus on partnership with parents and the community. To be effective, engaging parents requires various types of activities and techniques in terms of parents' time, needs, interests, values as well as their knowledge and skills. Furthermore, each community has unique ways to support its schools, parents, and students. Rural schools and educators should think about how to capitalize on the community's assets and how to build partnerships within the community for the well-being of all children.

### **Study Limitations**

This study was implemented in three northern states, Idaho, Wyoming, and Nebraska. These three states shared many similar characteristics. In particular, most of their school districts are classified as rural and town districts (Idaho, 82.8%; Nebraska, 96.4%; Wyoming, 97.9% vs. National average: 74.7%), and most of their public school educators are White (Idaho, 94.6%; Nebraska, 97.4; Wyoming: 95.5%). Therefore, some of the findings of this study may be unique to the particular rural circumstances and populations, which may not be directly applicable to other states and their rural communities.

## Conclusion

This study makes valuable contributions to the research on parental involvement in rural schools. Findings from this study revealed insights and perceptions as to how rural educators perceived parental involvement, the type of challenges and opportunities they experienced when attempting to engage parents, types of parental activities they used, and the strategies used to engage parents of ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

The most obvious disparity revealed through this study involved rural educators' use of more traditional approaches for engaging parents when, in fact, the educators were looking for more contemporary outcomes from their efforts to involve parents: parents who are actively engaged in their children's education and who articulate their expectations for their children's achievement and success in school.

It is important for educators in rural areas, who are mostly from the dominant cultural background, to remind themselves of the concepts related to parental involvement. Effective parental involvement requires teachers and administrators to re-examine existing concepts and structures as well as strategies used to engage parents. In doing so, they must also address existing assumptions about engaging parents in student learning and development particularly when dealing with parents from culturally diverse backgrounds who may have differing concepts and expectations of parental involvement.

Effective parental involvement has long-lasting effects on student learning and development and is important in all stages of the educational process (Patrikakou, 2004). In order for children to receive maximum benefit, families, parents, teachers, school staff and other community members must be in agreement as to the value of the parental involvement program and find ways to work together, as a team, with two-way, active communication. When educators work together to engage families and parents, they create a safe environment for student learning and improved student performance.

In order to effectively engage ethnically and culturally diverse parents, additional research is needed in the following areas:

1. How do parents in rural communities perceive effective parental involvement?
2. What type of activities may be important for schools to provide to parents so they may be better able to help their children in school?
3. What type of activities and strategies can be used by educators to effectively engage all parents within rural communities: those who come from a long-time tradition of rural education and those who are new to schools in rural communities?

Ultimately, educators, parents, and communities should seek ways to define a shared vision of parental involvement and to work collaboratively to provide an equitable education and resources for all children in rural schools.

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