

Here are summaries of 2 studies that show that district-level leadership helps school teams improve the quality of their partnership programs, and engage more and different families.

Study 1

Epstein, J. L., Galindo, C., Sheldon, S. B. (2011).

Levels of Leadership: Effects of District and School Leaders on the Quality of School Programs of Family and Community Involvement.

Educational Administration Quarterly (EAQ), 47, 462-495.

SUMMARY

Purpose: This study tests key constructs of sociocultural and organizational learning theories with quantitative methods to better understand the nature and impact of district and school leadership and actions on the quality of programs of family and community involvement.

Research Methods/Approach: Survey data from a “nested” sample of 24 districts and 407 schools are used to measure theoretical constructs of district *assistance* to schools and *shared work* on partnership program development. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) analyses explore the independent and simultaneous contributions of district leadership and school teamwork on the implementation of basic structures and advanced outreach in partnership programs. Also, gap analyses compare supplementary data from 220 schools that had consistent district leadership for three years with 106 schools without this support.

Findings: HLM analyses show that **principals’ support** for family and community involvement and schools’ reports of district assistance contribute significantly to schools’ basic program implementation and to advanced outreach to involve all families in their children’s education. Over and above school measures, **district leaders’ direct facilitation** contributes to the quality of the school programs. Gap analyses indicate that schools with consistent district leadership take more basic and advanced actions to establish and improve their partnership programs.

Implications for Research and Practice: This study – with a large sample of districts and schools, appropriate quantitative methods, and a content focus on partnerships – provides strong empirical support for the importance of sociocultural and organizational theories in studying school improvement. Implications for improving district and school policy and practice are discussed.

Study #2

Epstein, J. L.. & Sheldon, S. B. (2016).

Necessary but not sufficient: The role of policy for advancing programs of school, family, and community partnerships.

Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences. 2, 202–219.

SUMMARY

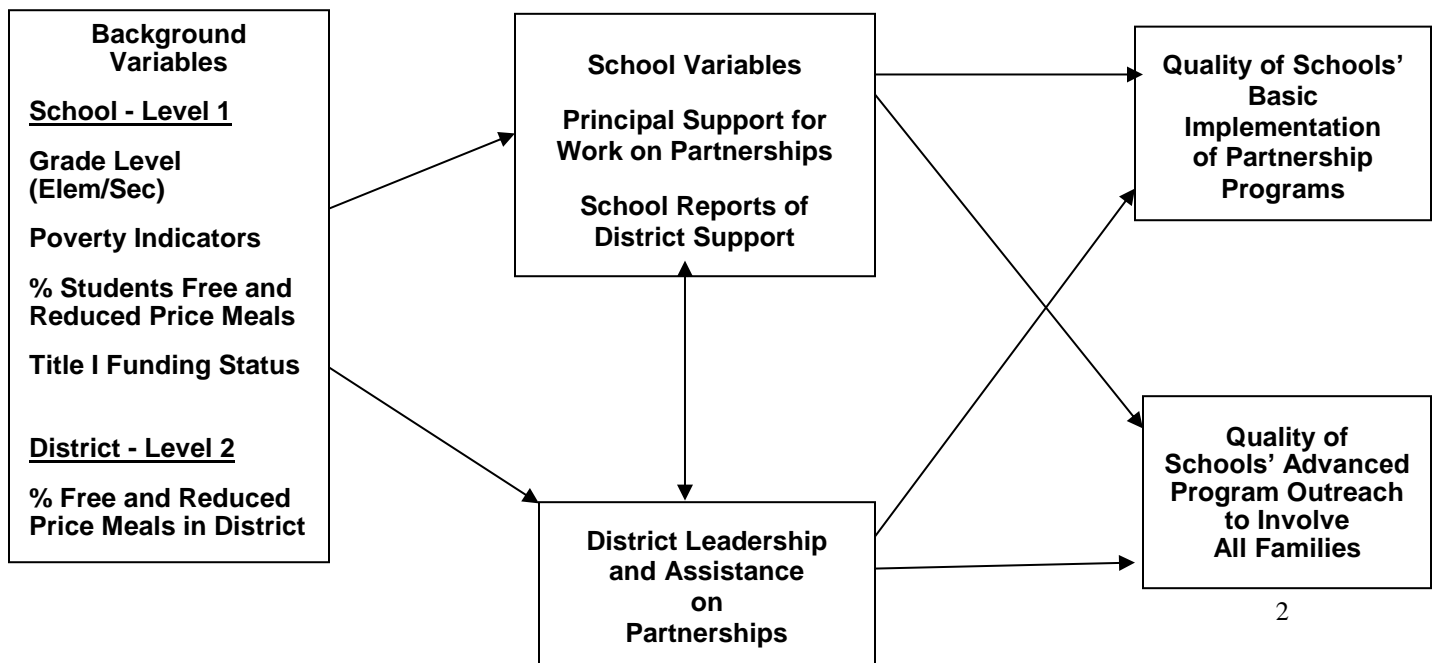
Since the release of *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, researchers have emphasized the importance of applying the results of research to policies for school improvement. Policies tell educators to do something, but not how to enact specific laws. This study analyzed data from 347 schools in 21 districts to identify variables that support the enactment of policies for parental engagement.

We address research questions on how school and district practices affect the quality of school-based partnership programs. Our results indicate that a policy on parental involvement may be a good first step, but other factors—principals’ support for family and community engagement and active facilitation of research-based structures and processes by district leaders—are important for establishing a basic partnership program. These factors promote programs that engage all students’ families. Schools that take these steps have higher percentages of engaged families and report higher rates of average daily attendance among their students.

Figure 1 shows the research model that guided Study 1 and the connections of key variables that were tested. The figure shows the demographic variables that were controlled in all analyses, and the school and district factors were tested for their impact on the quality of schools’ basic program implementation and advanced outreach to involve more families.

Figure 1

HLM Model: School and District Effects on the Quality of Implementation and Outreach of School-Based Programs of School, Family, and Community Partnerships



Summary of Results and Discussion (Study 1, 2011)

This study tested key concepts of theories of leadership and program development for school improvement by exploring the impact of school-level actions and district-level assistance on the nature and quality of school-based programs of family and community involvement. Prior research on partnership program development analyzed data collected separately from schools and from districts. The previous studies showed that schools acknowledged the importance of district support (Sheldon, 2008), and district leaders who conducted more facilitative actions reported that their schools were making better progress in program implementation (Epstein, 2008). Such data, however, cannot tell if district leaders' assistance directly affected the quality of school-based partnership programs.

The innovative combination of sociocultural and organizational learning theories suggested that the connections of district and school leaders should be understood as a multi-level learning system (Honig, 2008; Knapp, 2008). Prior tests of the combined theories used observational and interview data with a few districts and schools to explain how shared leadership and shared work led to improvements in teaching and learning. This study aimed to extend the initial studies by using appropriate quantitative data and multi-level methods of analyses to test the usefulness of the combined theories for explaining district and school work on another school improvement component—programs of family and community involvement.

HLM analyses identified simultaneous, significant, and independent school-level and district-level influences on schools' implementation of basic structures of a partnership program (e.g., form a team, write a plan) and on advanced actions to meet challenges to involve all families (e.g., share best practices, connect with parents on homework). **At the school level, principals' support** and schools' acknowledgements of district assistance on partnerships contributed to both outcomes of interest. **At the district level, the extent of district leaders' direct facilitation of schools' Action Teams for Partnerships** contributed to the quality of schools' programs, over and above the influence of school-level measures.

The best-specified HLM model revealed that schools with stronger basic program implementations were significantly more likely to address advanced challenges to reach all families and to improve practices for six types of involvement. These results supported the likely temporal order of actions and influence – that is, strong basic program implementations are likely to precede and contribute to advanced outreach to involve all families. The results also informed the work of district leaders by suggesting that if they assisted schools to complete basic steps in program development, their schools would be ready to move forward in meeting challenges to involve more (or all) families.

This study also confirmed the basic assumptions of organizational learning theory that the flow of information and the use of evaluative data by district and school leaders should lead to program improvements. All parts of an organization are expected to “get smarter” if they use data as the basis for discussions, debates, decision, and next steps.

In this study, gap analyses showed graphically that schools in districts that provided assistance on partnerships and conducted evaluations of progress for at least three years, conducted more basic and advanced partnership activities than did schools in districts that did not give consistent attention to partnership program development. Schools that were supported over time by their districts were more likely to write plans for family and community involvement, identify a budget, and implement activities for the six types of involvement for basic partnership program

implementation. They also were more likely to recognize and report that their district leaders provided funding, technical assistance, and opportunities to share best practices with other schools. The patterns of results provided evidence of what Honig (2008) called a “developmental trajectory” in school improvement. Here, consistent assistance from districts and persistent work by school teams produced more specific activities for family and community involvement over time.

The results suggest how the theoretical constructs of shared leadership, shared work, and the use of evaluative data might promote partnership program improvements through active teamwork, principals’ support, and attention to equity issues.

Active teamwork. This study extended the concept of *teamwork* in shared work. In the early studies of sociocultural and organizational learning theories, shared work pertained mainly to the work that district leaders and school principals did together to improve teaching and learning. Here, shared work refers to the interactions of district leaders with school teams of principals, teachers, parents, and others—all working to improve schools’ programs of family and community involvement. When school teams rated district assistance as more helpful and when schools were assisted by district leaders consistently for three years, the school teams did more to organize their partnership programs and conducted more advanced activities to involve all parents in their children’s education.

Schools’ ratings of the helpfulness of their district leaders’ assistance reflects their *receptivity* to district assistance (Honig, 2008) and their readiness to conduct shared work with district leaders on partnerships. Valued district assistance and time to work together should increase team members’ interactions and discussions of goals, challenges, and accomplishments, and should lead to program improvements, as evidenced in this study.

Principals’ support. Sociocultural learning theory assumes that as district and school leaders work together toward a shared goal, their interactions and exchanges will reveal each partner’s knowledge and skills. New and useful ideas, then, will be applied to and improve program plans and practices (Honig, 2008, 2009; Knapp, 2008; Protin, 2009). This study suggests that these paths of influence were at work to improve partnership programs. For example, from the measure of principal support, we learn that active principals encouraged the school team to meet regularly, write plans, and evaluate their efforts, and encouraged other teachers and all families to participate in the planned involvement activities.

Principals’ active support for family and community involvement remained a significant predictor of the quality of school-based partnership programs, even after district leadership was taken into account. The results suggest that district leaders’ assistance on partnerships supported, but did not usurp, principals’ leadership of their schools.

More equitable partnership programs. It is important to note that school and district poverty levels measured by the percentage of students receiving free- or reduced-price meals did not predict the quality of basic partnership program implementation or advanced outreach to involve all parents. These findings confirm prior studies and field work that showed that leadership and actions on partnerships were more important than demographics in affecting whether and which districts and schools developed and improved programs of family and community involvement (Epstein, 2008; Sanders, 2008 a, b, 2009; Sheldon, 2005, 2007, 2008).

These results are important because districts and schools nationwide are becoming more diverse economically, racially, culturally, and linguistically (Fortuny & Hernandez, 2010), and educators are struggling to communicate with all families. Schools in this study served highly

diverse populations of students and families, and most were in high-poverty communities. Yet, they were able to establish basic program structures and increase outreach to all families *if* their districts provided direct assistance on partnerships, *if* their principals supported family and community involvement, and *if* school teams rated district assistance as helpful at the school level. These interactions and exchanges take time, however, but it appears that—in time—district and school leaders learn new skills and gather ideas from each other, and turn that information into actions to improve their school programs.⁶

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study supports the conclusions of other recent studies that district leadership is a vital resource for schools to improve teaching and learning (Protin, et al., 2009; Honig et al., 2009). Here, results indicate that district leadership is a persistent and significant variable for helping schools implement basic structures of partnership programs and increasing outreach to involve all families in children’s education. The findings suggest several policy-related actions that all districts and schools can take to increase the quality of leadership for developing effective programs and practices of family and community involvement.

1. Designate a district leader for partnerships to assist all schools in fulfilling the district policy for partnerships and in continually improving their programs of family and community involvement. Most districts and most schools have policies and mission statements on family and community involvement, but not all districts have designated leaders for partnerships to assist every school to enact the district policy. This study confirmed that district leaders for partnerships played important roles in whether and how well schools developed site-based partnership programs. A designated leader who becomes expert in understanding and managing partnership programs sends a clear message that family and community involvement is an official district policy that must be enacted in every school. Schools assisted by effective leaders implemented stronger basic partnership programs and addressed more advanced challenges than schools that worked alone.

Early studies found that “boundary spanners” held marginal positions in districts and lacked support from the superintendent and colleagues that might have strengthened their legitimacy in assisting schools (Honig, 2006). This study focused on district facilitators who had official collegial support and who were required to collect and use data to evaluate their own and their schools’ progress on partnerships each year. These leaders for partnerships made significant contributions to the quality of their schools’ programs of family and community involvement, even after the schools’ progress in establishing the basic program structures were accounted for.

2. Strengthen district leaders’ skills in facilitating schools on partnerships. Professional development and experience matter. Although all districts joined NNPS to improve their partnership programs, leaders for partnerships varied in how much and how well they assisted schools in developing knowledge, skills, and programs of family and community involvement. This variation permitted the HLM and supplementary data analyses of the impact of district leadership on the quality of school programs. The district leaders’ expertise also may have affected whether school teams welcomed assistance and saw the value of the district leaders’ guidance.

The study showed that district and school leaders who worked on partnerships for at least three years increased the number, kind, and quality of specific actions to organize programs of family and community involvement. Targeted professional development in NNPS for district leaders may have helped them improve their knowledge and skills. The data from school teams showed that when they received assistance from their districts for at least three years, they not only

recognized and reported the district leaders' work, but also conducted more activities to organize their programs and to reach out to involve more families in their children's education.

3. Strengthen principals' support for partnerships. HLM analyses showed that, at the school level, principals' support for partnerships consistently, significantly, and positively influenced schools' basic program implementation and advanced outreach to involve more parents. School teams' reports confirmed that district leaders' who provided consistent support were more likely to meet with their principals to strengthen support for the teams' work and for the school's partnership program. It seems that when district leaders for partnership gain expertise on partnerships, and, in effect, speak for the superintendent about the importance of family and community involvement, more principals support their Action Teams for Partnerships and work with others to strengthen and sustain activities that engage all families in their children's education (Sanders & Sheldon, 2009).

4. Extend concepts of distributed or shared leadership. This study helped to open the "black box" of shared leadership – also called distributed, democratic, collaborative, participatory, and transformational leadership (Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009; Mayrowitz, 2008). The key constructs of sociocultural and organization learning theories explored in this study – *assistance*, *shared work*, and *on-going program evaluations* – illustrated how leadership may be shared across district and school levels to help improve partnership programs.

Most studies and discussions of shared or distributed leadership have been descriptive (Spillane & Diamond, 2007) or focused on how principals shared responsibilities with teachers for improving curriculum and instruction (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). This study provided initial empirical evidence that district leaders and school teams of teachers, principals, parents, and others contributed, simultaneously, to the implementation of basic and advanced structures and actions for developing school-based programs of family and community involvement.

5. Facilitating partnership program development is not the same as monitoring schools for compliance with federal funding requirements. In this study, direct assistance by district leaders for partnerships helped school teams organize and conduct their own partnership programs and practices. This kind of capacity-building contrasts sharply with typical monitoring of school programs. Traditionally, district monitors checked whether or not schools conducted a list of required practices. The monitors may or may not have had the knowledge, tools, and strategies needed to guide schools to improve their programs over time. By contrast, district facilitators are expected to have and gain content knowledge, access to tools and materials, and other expertise on how to help schools improve the organization of their partnership programs and outreach to families. The study suggests that district leaders no longer should only monitor schools for compliance with NCLB requirements for federal funds for parental involvement, but also must take the challenge outlined in NCLB and in state and district policies to guide and assist schools to improve the quality of their partnership programs.

For all analyses and full list of references, see the published article.

NOTE: Study 2 (Epstein and Sheldon, 2016) added the "ultimate" path to the outcome of student attendance. This permitted us to study the paths of influence from school and district programs to the engagement of parents and to impact on rates student attendance.

Contact Joyce Epstein for a reprint of Study 1 and/or Study 2 (jepstein@jhu.edu).