

LEADERS OF CHANGE: SUPPORTING SUCCESSFUL AND EQUITABLE FAMILY
ENGAGEMENT IN MIDDLE GRADES

by

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(Under the Direction of Jami Royal Berry)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to examine the impacts of implementing student led conferences at the middle school level aimed to increase parent engagement in one small, Catholic school in the southeast United States. The literature review examined middle school family engagement and leadership best practices for implementing change. Data collected from teacher interviews, parent focus groups, researcher notes, researcher observations, and reflection sheets showed several key findings. Using an adapted model of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Epstein's Spheres of Influence (Epstein, 1987) as the theoretical basis, the action research team examined impacts of implementation on students, families, teachers, and on the culture and climate in the school. Major findings include positive impacts on students, families, teachers, and on culture and climate. Action research team members benefitted from a connection to the project and evolved their definition of engagement. Several implications and recommendations for future research are given.

INDEX WORDS: Family engagement, Catholic Schools, middle school, student led conferences, action research

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DEDICATION

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Overview of the Case

This action research study took place during the 2021-2022 school year at Southeast Catholic School (SECS). SECS was a private, Catholic school serving 179 students in Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) through eighth-grade located in the northeast region of a southern state. SECS is located in Coopertown in Cooper County on a new, 57-acre campus which is shared with their church. Prior to the move to a new campus in 2012, SECS had been located in downtown Coopertown since its inaugural year of 1949. The 179 students at SECS in the 2021-2022 school year represented 128 families. Seventy-one families had students only in lower school (grades Pre-K through five), 20 families had students in both lower school and middle school (grades six through eight), and 37 families had students only in middle school. As of 2019, Coopertown had an estimated population of 128,000 people and was continuing to rise (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Most of the population was white, followed by black, then Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and other (County Website, 2019). Many types of people lived in Coopertown; from university students to young families to single retirees. The estimated median household income in 2019 was \$38,623 (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Major stable employers in the area at the time were The University, Area Regional Hospital/Healthcare, and The Cooper County School District.

SECS: Demographics and The District

In the 2021-2022 school year, SECS was part of The Catholic School District, which served 7,816 students in 18 schools: 15 elementary and middle (Pre-K-8th grade) and three senior high (grades 9-12) (District Website, 2021). Most district schools were located in the greater metro area. SECS was one of two outliers in the district. Catholic students made up 72.8% of SECS's population. This compared to 88% of all students throughout The Catholic School District (District Website, 2021). SECS's address was in Cooper County, but it is important to note that they served students from seven surrounding counties. Of SECS's 179 students, 131 (72.8%) of them lived in Cooper County. The student population was made up of 51.7% white students, 25% Hispanic/Latino students, 9.4% Asian students, 8.3% multi-racial students, 4.4% black students, and 1.1% of students identified their race as other. 35.2% of SECS students met eligibility for the national free and reduced lunch program in the 2021-2022 school year. This compared with 8% of all Catholic School District students (District Website, 2021) and an average of 79.8% of Cooper County students in public schools (State Department of Education, 2020). While many families at SECS spoke a primary language other than English in their homes, only one of the students from the 2021-2022 school year was an English-language learner. While SECS did not have a gifted program, the school did have a resource teacher who provided enrichment lessons to students who needed more of an academic challenge. These students were identified using a combination of data sets including teacher evaluations, grades, standardized test scores, reading inventory scores, and ranking for title funding services. Twenty students received enrichment services in the 2021-2022 school year. Forty-three students received tutoring services in reading and math provided by Title I tutors. The school's resource teacher also worked with all students with identified needs. SECS did not have special education

services, though they followed the Student Success Team (SST) model to provide support and accommodations for students. Approximately 35 SECS students had accommodations provided and were on an SST.

SECS Faculty and Staff Demographics

In the 2021-2022 school year, SECS had 29 faculty members. Fifteen faculty and staff members were full-time employees while 14 were part-time employees. SECS's 18 core teachers held a combined 271 years of experience overall with 102 of those years being served at SECS. All SECS teachers were certified and 33.3% held Master's degrees. Eight teachers served lower school students in the classroom and taught all subjects to their students. Non-Catholic teachers did not teach religion but switched with another lower school teacher to teach either science or social studies. Three teachers served middle school students and taught two core subjects each. SECS had seven enrichment teachers in 2021-2022 that served all grade levels. 76.7% of all faculty and staff members at SECS were Catholic. One was male and 28 were female. Four were Hispanic/Latino and 25 were non-Hispanic/Latino. The races represented were 79.3% white, 17.2% multi-racial, and 3.4% Asian.

Problem Framing in the Context

As students transition from lower school to middle school at SECS, family engagement decreases. Analysis of results of multiple surveys, family attendance at school meetings, and family participation in the required volunteer program illustrated that this was the case. Informal observations and conversations between middle school parents and administration also demonstrated that once their children enter middle school, engagement becomes more of a challenge. Conversations between teachers and administration, administration's observations of teachers, and administration's participation in select SST meetings and parent-teacher

conferences at all grade levels also helped to demonstrate that there is more of a disconnect between home and school once SECS students enter middle school.

District Comparisons

In order to place SECS's middle school family engagement in the context of the other district elementary schools, the researcher sent two questions to all of the elementary principals:

1. How does family engagement change in your school from elementary to middle school?
2. What strategies do you use to enhance family engagement at the middle school level?

Of 14 principals, 10 replied.

In comparing SECS with other schools in the district, it was clear that the other schools had more concrete strategies in place for engaging their middle school families even though they also see a drop in engagement from lower school to middle school. Analyzing the principals' responses made it clear that SECS had room for improvement in this area.

Problem Framing in Literature

When families are engaged with schools, there is no question that the family, the student, and the school see the benefits. Students see benefits through academic gains, better rates of attendance, higher high school graduation and college attendance rates, a more positive attitude about school, and more completion of homework. They also have better self-esteem and mental health (Davis & Lambie, 2005; DeSpain et al., 2018; "Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years," 2015; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Reinke et al., 2019; Tran, 2014). Schools benefit from lower instances of disciplinary action (Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018) and share many of the same social, emotional, and academic benefits with their students. With high levels of family engagement, teachers are able to focus on curriculum delivery and report higher morale (DeSpain et al., 2018).

Parent benefits include increased communication with their child(ren) and teachers, more confidence in their own abilities to help with school at home, and increased knowledge of school policy (DeSpain et al., 2018; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Reinke et al., 2019; Tran, 2014).

With so many benefits for all stakeholders, it is imperative that school leaders ensure their schools do everything possible to promote meaningful family engagement in their communities. This is especially important today as diversity in the United States continues to increase and schools must adjust to meet the needs of families from many different backgrounds and of varying socioeconomic levels (Baker et al., 2016; Brown & Williams, 2015; Hamm et al., 2016; Ishimaru et al., 2016; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009; Shorter-Gooden, 2013; Soutullo et al., 2016; Tran, 2014). Both of these groups are traditionally marginalized within school systems (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Ishimaru, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016; Schock & Lieny, 2021; Soutullo et al., 2016).

The Evolution of Family Engagement

The ways in which families are connected to schools have changed over time, especially in recent years. Existing literature is rich about the evolution from parent involvement to family engagement. When families are “involved,” they follow a more traditional, euro-centric, and school-centric model (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Ferrara, 2011; Hill et al., 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Schock & Lieny, 2021; Soutullo et al., 2016). Involved families may be present in the classroom, on a field trip, helping with homework, or attending conferences and back-to-school nights. Families who are involved behave in ways the school considers most important (Auerbach, 2009; Baker et al., 2016; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Ishimaru, 2019; Ishimaru et

al., 2016; Jensen & Minke, 2017). In a traditional involvement model, there also tends to be less emphasis on what is best for the student and more focus on making sure parents have specific information deemed most important by the school. There exists a deficit-mindedness about families who do not conform to the more traditional model of involvement (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2018; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Stefanski et al., 2016).

Engagement is a much more inclusive idea than involvement. Nowadays, when families are engaged with the school, the expectation is that the family-school relationship is bidirectional (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; Baker et al., 2016; Ferrara, 2011; Ishimaru, 2019; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Stefanski et al., 2016; Tran, 2014). Schools should be open to many ways a family can be involved with their child's education, whether it be through home-based strategies, school-based strategies, a combination of the two, or something new a school has never seen (Baker et al., 2016; DeSpain et al., 2018; Ferrara, 2011; Hill et al., 2018; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Schueler et al., 2017). Home-based strategies may no longer be just helping with homework, but include positive conversations about school, attending enrichment activities or events (Baker et al., 2016; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Mapp, 2003; Scanlan, 2008), or simply providing a space for a child to complete his or her homework. School-based strategies expand to include participating in school decision-making or in community-wide improvement efforts (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; Auerbach, 2009; Ferrara, 2011; Ishimaru, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Scanlan, 2008; Stefanski et al., 2016).

This evolved concept of engagement places the responsibility on the schools to create and nurture programs that best fit the needs of their community (Auerbach, 2009; Hill et al., 2018;

Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Ishimaru, 2019; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Mapp, 2003; Scanlan, 2008; Schock & Lieny, 2021; Tran, 2014). Every school, city, or district has its own uniqueness that should be recognized and celebrated in a way that is meaningful for its particular community (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; DeMatthews et al., 2016; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Scanlan, 2008; Stefanski et al., 2016). Schools need to look beyond the traditional actions of middle-class, white Americans they are used to constituting engagement in order to truly engage their families (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Flores et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2018; Ishimaru, 2019; Scanlan, 2008).

Family Engagement in Middle Grades

As children enter middle school, what family engagement looks like continues to evolve (Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Reinke et al., 2019). The developmental needs of adolescents add another layer of complexity to meaningful engagement for families and schools. This means engagement is no less valuable or necessary in the middle school years than it is in elementary grades or for traditionally marginalized students (Bachman et al., 2021; Davis & Lambie, 2005; DeSpain et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Reinke et al., 2019). In fact, it may be more valuable at such an important developmental stage in a child's life. However, research shows there is a dramatic decline in family engagement as students enter middle school (Davis & Lambie, 2005; DeSpain et al., 2018; "Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years," 2015; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Reinke et al., 2019) and that engagement becomes more difficult for both families and schools. (Hill et al., 2018; Reinke et al., 2019).

Reasons for Decline

Adolescence is a period of tremendous personal, physical, social, and emotional growth (Bachman, et al., 2021; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Jensen & Minke, 2017). Middle school students enter a phase where they desire more autonomy and independence (Bachman, et al., 2021; Davis & Lambie, 2005; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Reinke et al., 2019). Because of this, students at this age often discourage or specifically ask that their families not be involved with certain aspects of their lives, including school (Bachman et al., 2021; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Jensen & Minke, 2017).

Adolescents’ families typically recognize the importance of giving their students more responsibility for themselves and their learning (Bachman et al., 2021; Reinke et al., 2019). Family dynamics often shift during this time as parents renegotiate their own roles within their families as they begin to care for their own aging parents or navigate a career shift (Davis & Lambie, 2005). It is common for parents to be less able to help their students as curriculum demands increase in middle school (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jensen & Minke, 2017). It is important to note that just because adolescents desire more independence does not always mean they are ready for it, (Davis & Lambie, 2005) further underscoring that family engagement with the school is important in these formative years.

What Works: Academic Socialization

Traditionally, middle school families phase out school-based strategies and transition to engaging in more home-based engagement strategies, such as creating a school space for their child at home or communicating with their child about school (Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). Research consistently shows that, in the evolution of

engagement, what is most effective for middle school students is academic socialization (DeSpain et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). In this practice, parents and teachers emphasize the importance of receiving an education, focus on setting academic and future goals, communicate high expectations, and continue to build on positive conversations about school at home (Bachman et al., 2021; DeSpain et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). Academic socialization helps students build their decision-making skills and gradually build more independence (DeSpain et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018).

What Works: Cultural Responsiveness

Families engage when they feel welcome in schools (Baker et al., 2016; Davis & Lambie, 2005; DeSpain et al., 2018; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Mundt et al., 2015; Sebolt, 2018; Schock & Lieny, 2021). It is important for schools to remove barriers to engagement (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Ferrara, 2011; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Scanlan, 2008; Soutullo et al., 2016; Schock & Lieny, 2021) for the diverse groups of families they serve at all levels from elementary to middle to high school. Scanlan (2008) says, “to effectively involve caregivers in their children’s education, schools must use multiple strategies of communicating with caregivers, define caregiver participation broadly, and avoid deficit orientations” (p. 310). Schools need to create environments that are warm, welcoming, and inviting for all families (Baker et al., 2016; Davis & Lambie, 2005; DeSpain et al., 2018; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Scanlan, 2008; Sebolt, 2018; Shorter-Gooden, 2013; Tran, 2014) no matter the background or age of the child. Families

must be invited to engage themselves with schools in ways the family feels are most helpful and appropriate (Baker et al., 2016; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Sebolt, 2018; Tran, 2014) and that capitalize on their funds of knowledge: practices and traditions of the home that support learning in non-traditional ways (“Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Ishimaru, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Leo et al., 2019; Sebolt, 2018; Tran, 2014). Many forms of social and cultural capital should be valued and celebrated (“Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Scanlan, 2008; Stefanski et al., 2016).

Building relationships with families is recommended as a foundational strategy for effective family engagement programs that wish to engage all types of families. Multiple studies show that schools that are successful in engaging all of their families have a focus on relationship-building and emphasize two-way communication with their families (“Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Reinke et al., 2019, Scanlan, 2008; Stefanski et al., 2016; Tran, 2014). These schools genuinely get to know their students and families (Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Scanlan, 2008; Sebolt, 2018; Tran, 2014). Not only do they develop these relationships, but they also use what they have learned to create genuine partnerships that support the student (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Leo et al., 2019; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Sebolt, 2018; Stefanski, 2016; Tran, 2014). When schools and families communicate, agree on how to best support the student, and convey the same messages at home and at school, students have even greater success (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Reinke et al., 2019; Scanlan, 2008).

Barriers to Family Engagement

The age of their child, socioeconomic status, student ability, and the family's race and ethnicity all affect what family engagement looks like for any particular family. Schools that have high family engagement understand that all families have circumstances that influence their ability to be involved. In addition to barriers inherent in the traditional culture and climate of schools, older students, students who struggle, and traditionally marginalized students may encounter even more barriers (Hill et al., 2018; Schock & Lieny, 2021).

Middle school parents often struggle to connect with the school since their children have multiple teachers, making communication difficult (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Jensen & Minke, 2017). Families with lower socioeconomic status and that do not have a traditional nuclear family structure may work long or varying hours or lack reliable transportation, keeping them away from school-based activities (Baker et al., 2016; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018). Many Latino families believe the main responsibility of education lies with the school and the family's focus should be on the moral development of their children (Flores et al., 2019; Leo et al., 2019; Sebolt, 2018). They feel they should not interfere with what the school and teacher are doing and hold educators in high regard and respect (Sebolt, 2018). Language is often a major barrier for families who do not speak English (Baker et al., 2016; DeSpain et al., 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Mundt et al., 2015; Schock & Lieny, 2021; Soutullo et al., 2016). Some traditionally marginalized families may withdraw from engagement due to their own negative experiences in schools (Baker et al., 2016; "Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years," 2015; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Sebolt, 2018; Tran, 2014). Schools that understand their families, focus on relationship-building, and on communication understand that cultural differences and the barriers families face do not mean they do not care

about their children's success in school (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; DeSpain et al., 2018; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Sebolt, 2018).

Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) explain that there are underlying reasons for parents' levels of involvement with schools including their parental role construction and efficacy levels. Role construction helps determine what families believe about what level of involvement they should have with their child's education. Based on what each family feels is appropriate and necessary, engagement activities look different at home and at school. Efficacy refers to the belief parents have that their involvement will help their child and make a positive difference in educational outcomes (Hill, et al., 2018; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019). Generally, higher levels of role construction and efficacy are related with higher levels of family engagement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Leo et al., 2019).

Leadership for Change

In order to best serve the needs of socially, racially, and ethnically diverse families in schools, a shift from a deficit mindset toward a more relationship-oriented mindset is often necessary. Leaders have a responsibility to guide their faculty and staff toward an asset- and strength-based mindset. Because it has been found that most schools still practice school-centric strategies for family engagement (Baker et al., 2016; Ferrara, 2011; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Hamm, et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2018; Ishimaru, 2019; Leo et al., 2019; Stefanski et al., 2016), school leaders are responsible for making sure they stay committed to nurturing the shift in culture once it is introduced (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Culture and Relationship-Building

To most effectively lead change, leaders must first have a good understanding of their organization and the people that make it up. Successful leaders of change build a culture that focuses stakeholders on a higher purpose for greatness and building relationships, not just on higher achievement for students (Fullan, 2002; Ishimaru, 2019). If change is imposed and people do not have a clear understanding of why change is happening, they will resist it (Trybus, 2011). Empowering teachers to be involved in the decision-making process in schools leads to lasting change (Klingner, 2004). Leaders that involve themselves in the change process rather than impose it upon others participate as learners themselves. They ask questions and trust their employees (Ash & Persall, 2000; Bredeson & Johansson, 2000; Fullan, 2019). They succeed in creating a culture where change will be supported and sustained. It is imperative that school leaders be a model for the shared values they promote (Bredeson & Johansson, 2000). Schools must function as a “we,” not as an “I” (Leech & Fulton, 2008).

Remaining User-Centered and Student-Focused

Bryk et al. (2017) present best practices for leaders implementing change in their organization. The authors note that the specific problem must be identified first and that the point of view of those who are experiencing the problem firsthand must be considered. Spending time exploring the point of view that matters helps an organization effectively and efficiently move toward solutions versus diving into a quick fix that may not last. Investing time and analysis in understanding at the beginning is more effective for creating lasting change (Nolan, 2007). School leaders implementing change work intentionally to create and maintain a culture where teacher and stakeholder buy-in matters (Bredeson & Johansson, 2000; Lai, 2015). Involving

them at stage one of the change process and continuing to learn together as a group is a successful way to sustain their commitment and keep the focus user-centered (Nolan, 2007).

Conclusion

Culture shifts can potentially backfire if not overcome with support from school leaders. By examining proven practices for effectively engaging all types of families with schools, we can see that certain practices will increase family engagement. Baker et al. (2016) and Scanlan (2008) found that the attitudes and dispositions of school leadership and staff had the most influence on effectively engaging families. When staff members demonstrate a positive attitude toward involving all families, families are more likely to engage (Baker et al., 2016; Tran, 2014). Reinke et al. (2019) found in their analysis of several family engagement studies that focusing on family-centered interventions increased family engagement with schools regardless of class, race, or a student's age. Additionally, Flores et al. (2019) found that when engagement efforts in schools, specifically with Latino families, focused mostly or solely on student achievement and not on relationship-building or needs of diverse families, the efforts were not successful.

It is clear that family engagement should not be a one-size-fits-all approach (DeMatthews et al., 2016; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Leo et al., 2019). Engagement efforts are most effective when developed in the context of the school population (Auerbach, 2009; DeMatthews et al., 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016) and when schools recognize that needs change over time and as populations change.

School leaders have a responsibility to meet the needs of the many types of families they serve. Leadership behaviors have a significant impact on the success of change implementation (Bredeson, 2005; Dove & Freely, 2011; Lai, 2014, Prelli, 2016). When leaders intentionally create a collaborative culture where all stakeholders work toward a shared vision and a shared set

of goals, the difficult process of introducing change has strong potential to drive meaningful and sustainable improvement in family engagement.

Purpose of the Study

Because there is a decrease in family engagement from elementary to middle school at SECS, the goal of the action research team was to increase family engagement at the middle school level with a focus on sixth-grade. Prior to beginning this study, SECS had few formal structures for middle school family engagement in place. The purpose of this action research study was to implement a new strategy at SECS for increasing family engagement in one small, Catholic middle school as well as to monitor its effects on students, families, and the school.

Research Questions

To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

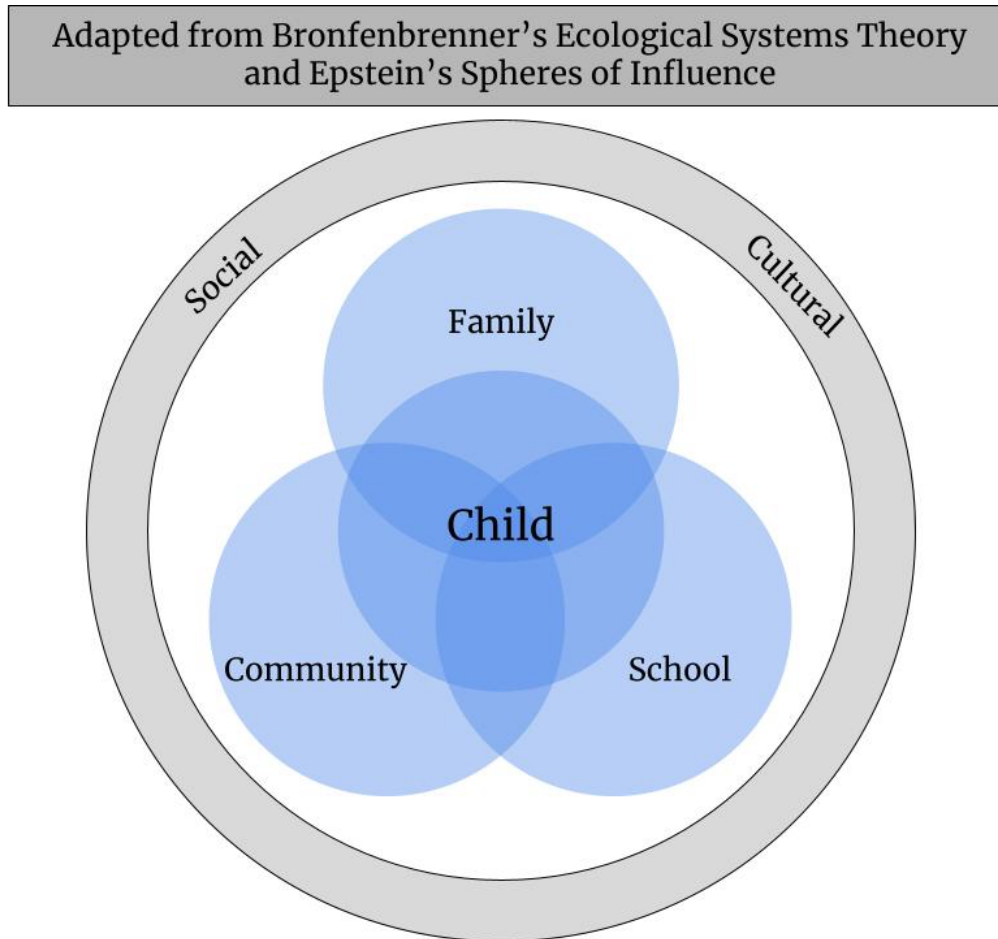
1. How do families describe the impact of family engagement strategies at the middle school level in one small, Catholic middle school?
2. How does an action research team describe the design and implementation process of a project focused on family engagement strategies in one small, Catholic middle school?
3. How does the implementation of family engagement strategies impact the culture and climate in one small, Catholic middle school?

Theoretical Framework

An adapted model that combines Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Epstein's Spheres of Influence (Epstein, 1987) was the theoretical basis for this action research. This adapted model is shown in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1

Theoretical Framework



Both models discuss the importance of outside factors at different levels and how they affect the development, growth, and success of a child. Both frameworks provide a solid theoretical framework for examining the relationship between the school, the family, the community, and the child. Taken alone, Bronfenbrenner's framework does not provide the overlapping nature of all areas of influence on the child. Epstein's spheres alone do not take into account some wider community and societal influences that Bronfenbrenner's framework does.

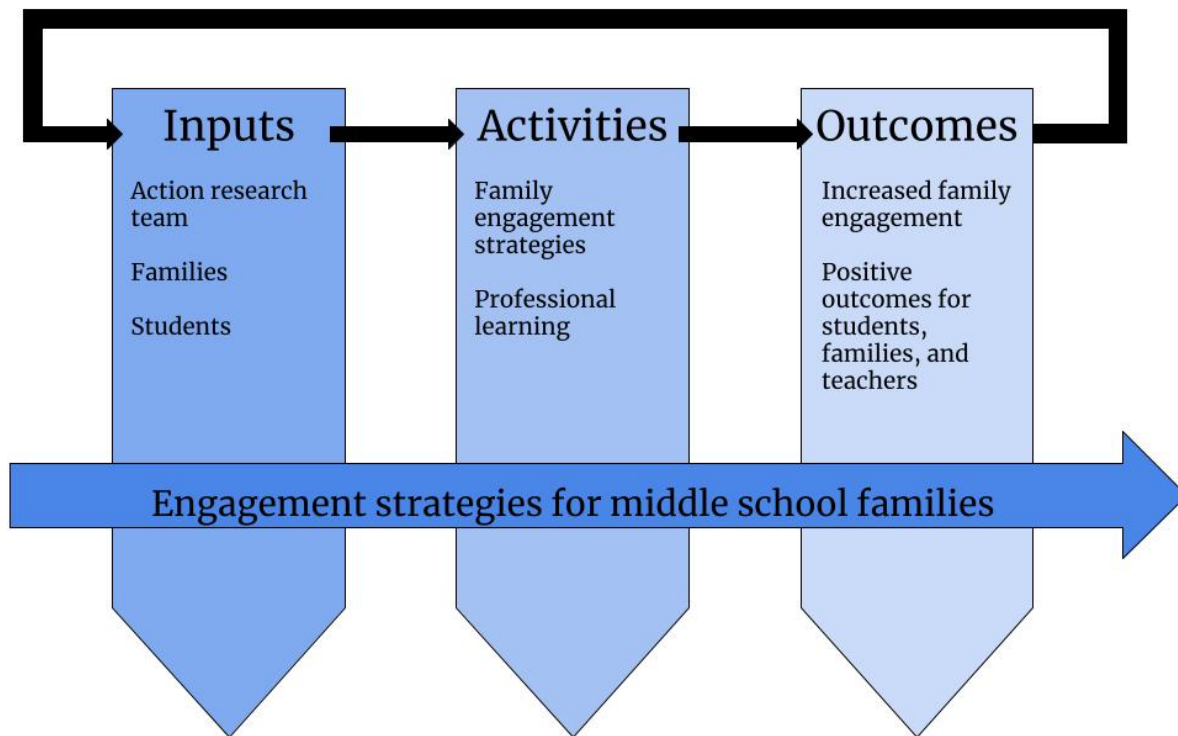
Theoretical frameworks as a basis of action research are important for providing structure to the researcher. Theories provide constructs, definitions, and help define relationships between variables in a study. Using a theoretical framework keeps the researcher focused on how their data fits within the framework and ensures a concentration on the research questions (Yamauchi et al., 2017). When considering family engagement at the middle school level, these theories both support that engagement between the child, the family, the school, and the community are important factors in student success. Because SECS, and Catholic schools in general, pride themselves on having strong relationships with families, the church, and the community, the adapted theoretical framework was a natural fit for understanding family engagement at the middle school level at SECS.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual frameworks used in research are structures used to explain the progression of research cycles. They provide a model for showing how different variables in the research are related and serve to show connections between phenomena being studied (Yamauchi et al., 2017). The conceptual framework used for this action research was designed around inputs, activities, and outcomes related to engagement strategies for middle school families. Inputs included action research teams, families, and students. Activities were professional learning on the chosen intervention as well as the implementation of the chosen intervention designed to increase family engagement at the middle school level at SECS. Figure 1.2 shows the conceptual framework used for this action research.

Figure 1.2

Conceptual Framework



Because the conceptual framework was designed to be reflective and cyclical in nature, outcomes were analyzed after each action research cycle. Reflection and evaluation drove the next cycle for improving practice in subsequent action research cycles.

Overview of the Methodology

This study used a qualitative action research approach to measure outcomes. Quantitative data measures were used to identify the problem and included; family attendance at school meetings, survey responses, and volunteer hours tracking. Qualitative data measures included; pre- and post-implementation interviews with teachers, focus group interviews with select sixth-

grade school parents, researcher notes, researcher observations, and reflection notes from families post-intervention. The reflection sheets were designed as part of the intervention by the action research teams. It was not initially planned for them to be used as data, but the reflections students made with their families were too rich and related directly to the research questions so they could not be ignored. All qualitative data measures helped to directly address all three research questions for the study.

Data Analysis

Pre- and post-implementation interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed for themes in family engagement and changes in attitudes about overall culture, climate, and communication as compared to initial data that identified the problem. Researcher notes and observations were analyzed, and connections were made to the themes identified from the action research team interviews and family focus groups. Interview and focus group data was most helpful in tracking changes in beliefs, attitudes, and practice of the intervention. The student-parent reflection sheets completed post-intervention in each action research cycle were reviewed and coded for themes related to the research questions.

Intervention

Engagement with The District

As principal of SECS, the researcher was positioned to lead meaningful change in the building. Improvement initiatives were driven by the SECS goals, mission, vision, and district goals. The following two district goals were addressed through the intervention of implementing a new strategy for increasing family engagement:

1. Goal 4: Increase student engagement through inquiry-based learning, projects, and portfolios.

2. Goal 5: Create and facilitate processes that support and formalize students' positive relationships with specific adults in the community.

Indirectly, each of the remaining district goals was addressed through the implementation of the new strategy. The goals were:

1. Goal 1: Continue to strengthen our schools' Catholic identity, developing new opportunities to engage students with their faith by infusing it into every aspect of school life.
2. Goal 2: Use formative and summative data to increase rigor and subject mastery, to monitor annual growth for students, and to engage in a broad range of learning styles.
3. Identify, recruit, enroll, and retain students from underserved populations to our Catholic schools.

No explicit permission from district leaders was needed to implement a new strategy for family engagement. Because principals and schools within the Catholic School District have autonomy when it comes to continuous improvement and meeting district goals, SECS was able to move ahead with implementing interventions. Catholic schools pride themselves on being communities that are like family (Miller, 2018), and SECS is no different. To lead a building change that includes more families and more types of families in new, meaningful ways had the full support of district leaders. District leaders included the superintendent, two associate superintendents, one school psychologist, and one director of marketing and enrollment. Additionally, many of the interventions researched by the action research design team were already in use by other Catholic schools within the district and had been in place prior to SECS's implementation. Because of this, SECS was able to use the experiences of other schools in the district to help guide their action research.

Action Research Approach

SECS decided to use an action research approach to implement a new strategy for family engagement at the middle school level. Action research, by design, allows for the exploration of an existing problem through experience, continued reflections, and continued adjustments or improvements. Action research is also collaborative and can lead to meaningful change in an organization (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). Because SECS wanted to see positive change through increased family engagement in middle grades, action research was chosen. The action research construction process of cycle one began in the spring semester of 2021.

In order to begin the action research cycles, a design and implementation teams were formed. The action research teams met to analyze existing data about the current state of engagement for middle school families at SECS. The teams were also presented research about family engagement, how it changes from elementary to middle school, what proven strategies work, and potential issues. Strategies in use at other district schools were discussed and then researched. Additional research was done on effective family engagement strategies for middle grades. Keeping the mission, vision, and district goals in mind, the action research teams decided to implement the intervention of student led conferences to aim to increase family engagement at the middle school level at SECS.

Action Research Design Team

The action research design team was made up of the following members:

Table 1.1

Design Team Members

Position	Connection to Project
Principal	Researcher
8 th grade teacher	MS teacher, MS coordinator, science and social studies teacher
7 th grade teacher	MS teacher, math and religion teacher
6 th grade teacher	MS teacher, English and literature teacher
5 th grade teacher	Link to engagement strategies from lower school to middle school
Technology Teacher	Enrichment representative on school leadership team, teaches all students, works with most families

These members were chosen because of their direct connection to the students and families that were participating in the action research cycles. Because this research was designed to meet a specific district goal of creating meaningful relationships with specific adults as well as to increase engagement, the involvement of the fifth-grade teacher and an enrichment representative was deemed important. The fifth-grade teacher was chosen for the purpose of ensuring the chosen intervention made the transition from fifth-grade to sixth-grade a smooth one. The three core middle school teachers were chosen for the design team in order to increase their investment in implementing a new strategy for engagement, as they were the ones who would lead and sustain it over time. Having the core teachers as key players was a priority for the researcher as new strategies brought a shift in thinking and practices.

Action Research Implementation Team

The action research implementation team was made up of the following members:

Table 1.2

Implementation Team Members

Position	Connection to Project
8 th grade teacher	MS teacher, MS coordinator, science and social studies teacher
7 th grade teacher	MS teacher, math and religion teacher
6 th grade teacher	MS teacher, English and literature teacher
Technology Teacher	Enrichment representative on school leadership team, teaches all students, works with most families
Counselor	Works with all students and most families
Resource teacher	Link to engagement strategies from lower school to middle school, works with many students

The core middle school teachers were chosen for the implementation team because they would be the primary players in implementing a new initiative for increasing engagement with middle school families. The technology teacher, resource teacher, and school counselor were chosen so that they could potentially aid in expanding the initiative to other grades in the future should it be found to be effective. It was the hope of the researcher that these members would also have served as a critical source for the core middle school teachers, as they could have provided a different perspective for them throughout the action research process. An implementation team made up of faculty and staff from different specialty areas also helped to expose middle school students and their families to more trusted adults than just their core teachers.

Action Research Cycles

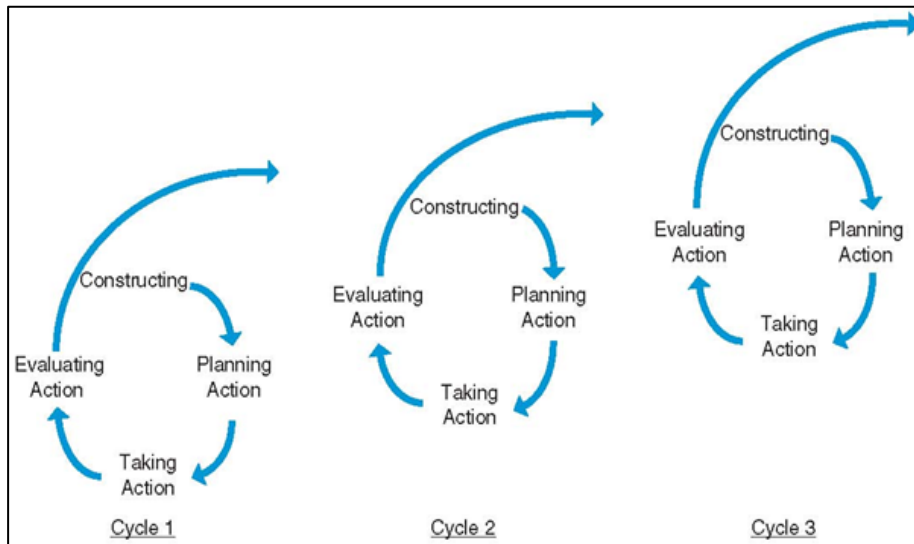
This action research was implemented by a team of educators at SECS during the 2021-2022 school year with a focus on increasing family engagement at the middle school level.

Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) model for conducting action research cycles served as the basis

for this study. At the end of each action research cycle, adjustments were made based on new understandings, discoveries, and reflections to inform the next implementation cycle.

Figure 1.3

Spiral of Action Research Cycles (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014)



Action Research Cycle One

The first action research cycle began in the spring and summer of 2021 with constructing and planning action, followed by the professional learning session on the chosen intervention. Implementation of the intervention, taking action, began in the fall of 2021. Action research cycle one focused on just the sixth-grade class and their families. The intervention was applied to this select group of students and families in order for the design and implementation teams to be able to best evaluate the intervention's effectiveness as well as to make necessary changes before bringing the intervention to the entire middle school. Evaluating action from cycle one and initial construction for cycle two began after the fall of 2021 implementation. The action research team met as needed to prepare for cycle two. They also utilized comments in Google Docs between cycles to discuss minor changes to any of their supporting documents.

Action Research Cycle Two

The second action research cycle began in the winter of 2021. Action research teams met to evaluate action research cycle one and begin to construct action research cycle two. The second implementation of the intervention took place in the winter of 2022 and included sixth-grade students and families. The action research teams had initially planned to expand the intervention to seventh- and eighth-grade but decided against expansion after action research cycle one. The teams felt there was not enough time to prepare two additional grade levels mid-year. They wanted to assess the results of action research cycle two with the improvements made from cycle one before expanding the intervention to the entire middle school, or even to one additional grade level.

Significance

The findings of this study have the possibility to influence an increase in family engagement at SECS and at other schools. This study will shape how SECS views and approaches family engagement and will hopefully have a positive influence on the culture and climate of SECS's middle school. Based on the findings of the action research teams, SECS's practices for conferences will change and evolve to include increased family engagement. SECS hopes to see a long-lasting, positive impact from their work. Findings from this study could influence other middle schools struggling with family engagement. While the data from this action research study may not be generalizable, it is possible it could be transferable to other schools: schools that are similar to SECS, but also larger, non-Catholic schools.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter one gives an overview of the study that includes identifying the problem and purpose of the study, the research questions, methods for the study, introduces the theoretical and

conceptual frameworks, and gives an introduction to the literature. Chapter two provides an in-depth review of the literature related to the evolution of family engagement in public and Catholic schools throughout history. It also explores family engagement literature specific to middle grades including; reasons for decline, cultural and instructional strategies proven to support increased family engagement at the middle school level, and barriers to family engagement. Chapter three describes the action research design and methodologies chosen for the study. It also discusses the theoretical and conceptual frameworks in depth and discusses intervention, data collection, and analysis methods. Chapter four revisits the problem framed in the context and has details about the data collection methods and materials. Chapter four also discusses the context in the time of COVID-19 and presents some preliminary findings from the two action research cycles. Chapter five examines the findings in detail from the action research cycles and overall case study. Chapter six summarizes the study, provides discussion about the findings based on the research, research questions, and offers implications for school leaders and for further research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of this action research study was to examine the impact of implementing a new strategy at Southeast Catholic School (SECS) for increasing family engagement in one small, Catholic middle school as well as to monitor its effects on students, teachers, and families. This chapter reviews literature on the evolution of family engagement in public and Catholic schools throughout history. It also explores family engagement literature specific to middle grades including; reasons for decline, cultural and instructional strategies proven to support increased family engagement at the middle school level, and barriers to family engagement. The chapter concludes with research on leadership for change and discusses how school administrators can support lasting positive impacts after implementation of new programs in their schools.

The Importance of Family Engagement

When families are engaged with schools, there is no question that the family, the student, and the school see the benefits. Students see benefits through academic gains, better rates of attendance, higher high school graduation and college attendance rates, a more positive attitude about school, and more completion of homework. Students also have better self-esteem and mental health (Davis & Lambie, 2005; DeSpain et al., 2018; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Reinke et al., 2019; Tran, 2014). Schools benefit from lower instances of disciplinary action (Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018) and share many of the

same social, emotional, and academic benefits with their students. With high levels of family engagement, teachers are able to focus on curriculum delivery and report higher morale (DeSpain et al., 2018). Parent benefits include increased communication with their child(ren) and teachers, more confidence in their own abilities to help with school at home, and increased knowledge of school policy (DeSpain et al., 2018; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Reinke et al., 2019; Tran, 2014).

With so many benefits for all stakeholders, it is imperative that educational leaders ensure their schools do everything possible to promote meaningful family engagement in their communities. This is especially important today as diversity in the United States continues to increase and schools must adjust to meet the needs of families from many different backgrounds and of varying socioeconomic levels (Baker et al., 2016; Brown & Williams, 2015; Hamm et al., 2016; Ishimaru et al., 2016; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009; Shorter-Gooden, 2013; Soutullo et al., 2016; Tran, 2014). Both of these groups are traditionally marginalized within school systems (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Ishimaru, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016; Schock & Lieny, 2021; Soutullo et al., 2016).

The Evolution of Family Engagement

The way families are connected to schools has changed over time, especially in recent years. Existing literature is rich about the evolution from parent involvement to family engagement. When families are “involved,” they follow a more traditional, euro-centric, and school-centric model (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Ferrara, 2011; Hill et al., 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Schock & Lieny, 2021; Soutullo et al., 2016). Involved families may be in the classroom,

on a field trip, helping with homework, or attending conferences and back-to-school nights.

Families who are involved behave in ways the school considers most important (Auerbach, 2009; Baker et al., 2016; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Ishimaru, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Jensen & Minke, 2017). In a traditional involvement model, there also tends to be less emphasis on what is best for the student and more focus on making sure parents have specific information deemed most important by the school. The literature highlights a deficit-mindedness about families who do not conform to the more traditional model of involvement (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2018; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Schock & Lieny, 2021; Stefanski et al., 2016).

Engagement is a much more inclusive idea than involvement. When families are engaged with the school, the expectation is that the family/school relationship is bidirectional (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; Baker et al., 2016; Ferrara, 2011; Ishimaru, 2019; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Schock & Lieny, 2021; Stefanski et al., 2016; Tran, 2014). Schools should be open to many ways a family can be involved with their child's education whether it be through home-based strategies, school-based strategies, a combination of the two, or something new a school has never seen (Baker et al., 2016; DeSpain et al., 2018; Ferrara, 2011; Hill et al., 2018; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Schueler et al., 2017). Home-based strategies may no longer be just helping with homework, but include positive conversations about school, attending enrichment activities or events (Baker et al., 2016; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Mapp, 2003; Scanlan, 2008), or simply providing a space for a child to complete his or her homework. School-based strategies expand to include participating in school decision-making or in

community-wide improvement efforts (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; Auerbach, 2009; Ferrara, 2011; Ishimaru, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Scanlan, 2008; Stefanski et al., 2016).

This evolved concept of engagement places the responsibility on the schools to create and nurture programs that best fit the needs of their school community (Auerbach, 2009; Hill et al., 2018; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Ishimaru, 2019; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Mapp, 2003; Scanlan, 2008; Schock & Lieny, 2021; Tran, 2014). Every school, city, or district has its own uniqueness that should be recognized and celebrated in a way that is meaningful for its particular community (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; DeMatthews et al., 2016; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Scanlan, 2008; Stefanski et al., 2016). Schools need to look beyond the traditional actions of middle class, white Americans they are used to constituting engagement in order to truly engage their families (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Flores et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2018; Ishimaru, 2019; Scanlan, 2008).

The History of Family Engagement Policy in The United States

Parents, families, and communities were the original educators of children. Before there was any formal education system, as early as the mid-1600s, families were responsible for making sure their children learned (Hiatt-Michael, 1994; Watson et al., 2012). Typically, more social-emotional lessons were taught in the home, and skills or trades were taught by a tradesman in the area a family lived. When colonies began to form, they were given control over education and adapted to meet local needs. Most “schools” at that time were run by religious leaders. Religion, reading, and writing were the only subject areas and students were grouped by social class (Hiatt-Michael, 1994). At the beginning of schools opening in America, parents had complete control.

As public education developed, the role of the parent changed. In the Revolutionary War Era, fiscal control of schools shifted from parents to the government. Leaders felt that education was a right for all children (Hiatt-Michael, 1994). A rising number of immigrant families who did not possess the skills to teach their own children reading and writing further drove the need for a public education system. By 1860, there was a public school system in nearly every state. The problem of families needing labor and their children to work in order to make money for the family continued until truancy laws were put in place: by 1918 in all states (Hiatt-Michael, 1994; Watson et al., 2012). As the overall population began to grow, so did attendance in schools. No longer could schools manage all students in multiple grades in one large classroom (Hiatt-Michael, 1994). Over time, schools began to bureaucratize and develop systems for grade levels, teachers, and administrators. During this time, teaching was developing as a profession with more requirements placed on teachers as well as teaching programs being added to college course offerings. As these systems developed, total control was given to and accepted by the schools for a child's education (Hiatt-Michael, 1994; Watson et al., 2012).

In 1897, a group of concerned mothers formed the National Congress of Mothers. They met to discuss concerns about the schools, study the curriculum, and work to encourage other parents to become involved. Their efforts led to the development of Parent-Teacher Associations, which were present in almost all schools by the 1940s (Hiatt-Michael, 1994; Watson et al., 2012). As research began to show the benefits of parent involvement and court rulings made this a forefront issue, parent involvement started to make its way into public policy and law (Hiatt-Michael, 1994).

Family Engagement Policies in Catholic Schools

Nearly every Catholic school has some written policy related to family engagement on their website, in their parent-student handbook, or as a part of their parent advisory council by-laws (School Website, 2021). Many Catholic schools also have a minimum volunteer hour requirement that their families must meet each school year. Research consistently shows that Catholic schools report a higher level of family engagement than their public-school counterparts (Mulligan, 2003). Having these policies in place may be why Catholic schools report higher engagement than other school systems. Catholic Schools repeatedly report higher family engagement as compared to public schools despite having fewer resources, fewer positions devoted to family engagement, and despite offering fewer on-site services for parents (Mulligan, 2003; US Department of Education, 2018). When compared to other religious schools, Catholic schools report offering more of these types of services, but still have fewer programs for family engagement than other, non-secular private schools (US Department of Education, 2018).

A study by Mulligan (2003) found that Catholic schools have higher family engagement than other private schools, but lower engagement than public schools in parent-teacher organizations, at conferences, at school performances, and in classroom activities. One area where Catholic schools reported higher engagement than other private schools as well as public schools was in social events and fundraisers. Results of this study were compiled from questionnaire responses of school administrators from a weighted sample of 866 schools.

Catholic Schools' Family Engagement Policy Influencers

While public education policy does not dictate what Catholic schools do, it certainly has an influence on the policy governing Catholic schools. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is an organization that guides the church's policies, including the policies of

Catholic schools. “The purpose of the Conference is to promote the greater good which the Church offers humankind, especially through forms and programs of the apostolate fittingly adapted to the circumstances of time and place” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020a). Resources for Catholic schools are regularly provided by the conference that explains how United States laws and policy affect their families and students. In a 2005 statement about the USCCB’s renewed commitment to Catholic elementary and secondary schools, the conference stressed how important Catholic school students are to the future of the church and the need to continue to support the accessibility of Catholic schools (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).

The Catholic church has long viewed its schools as an extension of the church and focused on the importance of the relationship between home and school to support the child. Frabutt et al.’s (2010) review of church documents revealed the following themes related to family engagement:

- Parents are primarily responsible for the love, care, and faith formation of their child which positively influences school experiences,
- Parents who continue to educate themselves in the faith serve as a model for their children,
- Collaboration between the home, school, and church are expected with parents taking an active role in this collaboration.

The USCCB’s document, *The Rights and Duties of Parents* (2020b), is rooted in Catholic doctrine and outlines the parents’ responsibilities as the primary educators of the child. The conference calls the duty of the parents to provide an education “essential” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020b). Education is defined as instilling the values of the

church and providing a model of faith in the home but also outlines the importance of partnering with schools to promote academic success for the child.

... on [the parents] lies the gravest obligation of educating their family. They must therefore be recognized as being primarily and principally responsible for their education. The role of the parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute.

This statement alone demonstrates the importance the role of the family plays on a child in the eyes of the Catholic church. Not only does the USCCB call for parents to take action, but it also states that society, community organizations, the church, and Catholic schools have an obligation to give parents the support they need to fulfill their role. Catholic doctrine has school and family partnerships at its core.

Shared Values Increase Engagement

Catholic schools pride themselves on being like family. Catholic schools have a major focus on relationships and social interaction in the community: the wider community as well as the church. Many of the church's teachings focus on social justice, the dignity of the human person, and service to the community. Catholic schools also have a reputation for high academic rigor and strong social-emotional support. Parents who send their children to Catholic schools tend to share these values, thus promoting parent-school partnership (Warren et al., 2003). The fact that parents are motivated enough to seek out a Catholic school is also an automatic form of increased engagement. Parents who pay for a return on their investment are more likely to contribute to a reciprocal relationship when they see their child benefitting from what the school offers (Mulligan, 2003). Shared goals make nurturing the family-school partnership more natural.

Catholic schools' policies reflect the idea of a collaborative culture and give families a voice, which is an important form of engagement. Teachers play a role in this community culture and have their own special relationships with families. The direct relationship between teachers and families opens up more opportunities for families to engage with the school (Warren et al., 2003). Catholic schools are less bound by the restrictions public schools have so are able to offer more flexibility in how and when their parents are in the building. The smaller size of Catholic schools also means there are fewer families to accommodate when it comes to engagement activities (Mulligan, 2003).

Warren et al. (2003) conducted a study that focused on what parents and teachers in Catholic schools felt the important characteristics were for successful parent-school partnerships, what parents think the key characteristics of a faith community are, and what parents and teachers do to support these values. Data from surveys and interviews from six Catholic schools in Australia show that overall parents feel two-way communication, shared values of respect, valuing one another, having shared goals, and a principal who is willing to listen are key to developing and sustaining solid partnerships. Teachers' replies fell into the same categories but had different focal points than the parents. In regard to characteristics of a faith community, parents focused heavily on the social-emotional aspects of the school, on teachings of the faith, and on community events of celebration. Teachers tended to favor the liturgical teachings and rituals the community participated in. Overall, nurturing a relationship with families made parent involvement successful. The alignment of values between Catholic schools and their families helps to increase family engagement.

Despite years of research and continued policy development, schools still struggle to increase family engagement in their schools. While Catholic schools may statistically

demonstrate higher levels of family engagement, there are many factors that influence this statistic, including a differing definition of what engagement is. While Catholic schools derive their policies from church doctrine and teachings, public school policy has an influence on their development. Public schools have a long history of developing policies to improve parental involvement in schools. Though both institutions demonstrate success in different areas of family engagement, it is clear there is room for growth in both private and public schools in this area.

Family Engagement in Middle Grades

As children enter middle school, what family engagement looks like continues to evolve (Bachman et al., 2021; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Reinke et al., 2019). The developmental needs of adolescents add another layer of complexity to meaningful engagement for families and schools. This means engagement is no less valuable or necessary in the middle school years than it is in elementary grades or for traditionally marginalized students (Bachman et al., 2021; Davis & Lambie, 2005; DeSpain et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Reinke et al., 2019). In fact, it may be more valuable at such an important developmental stage in a child's life. However, research shows there is a dramatic decline in family engagement as students enter middle school (Davis & Lambie, 2005; DeSpain et al., 2018; "Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years," 2015; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Reinke et al., 2019) and that engagement becomes more difficult for both families and schools. (Hill et al., 2018; Reinke et al., 2019).

Reasons for Decline

Adolescence is a period of tremendous personal, physical, social, and emotional growth (Bachman et al., 2021; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Jensen & Minke, 2017). Middle school students enter a phase where they desire more autonomy and independence (Bachman et al., 2021; Davis

& Lambie, 2005; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Reinke et al., 2019). Because of this, students at this age often discourage or specifically ask that their families not be involved with certain aspects of their lives, including school (Bachman et al., 2021; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Jensen & Minke, 2017).

Adolescents’ families typically recognize the importance of giving their students more responsibility for themselves and their learning (Bachman et al., 2021; Reinke et al., 2019). Family dynamics often also shift during this time as parents renegotiate their own roles within their families as they begin to care for their own aging parents or navigate a career shift (Davis & Lambie, 2005). It is common for parents to be less able to help their students as curriculum demands increase in middle school (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jensen & Minke, 2017). It is important to note that just because adolescents desire more independence does not always mean they are ready for it (Davis & Lambie, 2005), further underscoring that family engagement with the school is important in these formative years.

What Works

Academic Socialization

Traditionally, middle school families phase out school-based strategies and transition to engaging in more home-based engagement strategies such as creating a school space for their child at home or communicating with their child about school (Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). Research consistently shows that, in the evolution of engagement, what is most effective for middle school students is academic socialization (DeSpain et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). In this practice, parents and teachers emphasize the importance of receiving an education, focus on

setting academic and future goals, communicate high expectations, and continue to build on positive conversations about school at home (Bachman et al., 2021; DeSpain et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). Academic socialization helps students build their decision-making skills and gradually build more independence (DeSpain et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018).

Cultural Responsiveness and Family Engagement

Families engage when they feel welcome in schools (Baker et al., 2016; Davis & Lambie, 2005; DeSpain et al., 2018; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Mundt et al., 2015; Sebolt, 2018; Schock & Lieny, 2021). It is important for schools to make certain families do feel welcome and to remove barriers for engagement for the diverse groups of families they serve at all levels from elementary to middle to high school (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Ferrara, 2011; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Scanlan, 2008; Schock & Lieny, 2021; Soutullo et al., 2016). Scanlan (2008) says, “to effectively involve caregivers in their children’s education, schools must use multiple strategies of communicating with caregivers, define caregiver participation broadly, and avoid deficit orientations” (p. 310). Schools need to create environments for all of their students and families that are warm, welcoming, and inviting (Baker et al., 2016; Davis & Lambie, 2005; DeSpain et al., 2018; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Scanlan, 2008; Sebolt, 2018; Shorter-Gooden, 2013; Tran, 2014). Families must be invited to engage themselves with schools in ways the family feels are most helpful and appropriate (Baker et al., 2016; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Sebolt, 2018; Tran, 2014) and

that capitalize on their funds of knowledge: practices and traditions of the home that support learning in non-traditional ways (“Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Ishimaru, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Leo et al., 2019; Sebolt, 2018; Tran, 2014). Many forms of social and cultural capital should be valued and celebrated (“Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Scanlan, 2008; Stefanski et al., 2016). By widening the definition of family engagement and accepting more non-traditional ways families can show their commitment to their child and school, schools can keep up with the changing expectations of engagement and improve the overall culture of their school. This may mean that schools need to examine existing protocols and procedures to support their families.

Building relationships with families should be at the center of any effective family engagement program that wishes to engage all types of families. Multiple studies show that schools that are successful in engaging all of their families have a focus on relationship-building and emphasize two-way communication with their families (Bachman et al., 2021; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Reinke et al., 2019, Scanlan, 2008; Schock & Lieny, 2021; Stefanski et al, 2016; Tran, 2014). These schools genuinely get to know their students and families (Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Scanlan, 2008; Sebolt, 2018; Tran, 2014). Not only do they develop these relationships, but they also use what they have learned to create genuine partnerships that support the student (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Sebolt, 2018; Stefanski, 2016; Tran, 2014). When schools and families communicate, agree on how to best support the student, and convey the same messages at home

and at school, students have even greater success (Bachman et al., 2021; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Reinke et al., 2019; Scanlan, 2008).

Barriers to Family Engagement

The age of their child, socioeconomic status, student ability, and the family's race and ethnicity all affect what family engagement looks like. Schools need to understand that all families have circumstances that influence their ability to be involved. In addition to barriers inherent in the traditional culture and climate of schools, older students, students who struggle, and traditionally marginalized students may encounter even more barriers (Hill et al., 2018; Schock & Lieny, 2021).

Middle school parents often struggle to connect with the school since their children have multiple teachers, making communication difficult (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Jensen & Minke, 2017). Families with lower socioeconomic status and that do not have a traditional nuclear family structure may work long or varying hours or lack reliable transportation, keeping them away from school-based activities (Baker et al., 2016; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018). Many Latino families believe the main responsibility of education lies with the school and the family's focus should be on the moral development of their children (Flores et al., 2019; Leo et al., 2019; Sebolt, 2018). They feel they should not interfere with what the school and teacher are doing and hold educators in high regard and respect (Sebolt, 2018). Language is often a major barrier for families who do not speak English (Baker et al., 2016; DeSpain et al., 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Mundt et al., 2015; Schock & Lieny, 2021; Soutullo et al., 2016). Some traditionally marginalized families may withdraw from engagement due to their own negative experiences in schools (Baker et al., 2016; "Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years," 2015; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Sebolt, 2018; Tran, 2014).

Schools that understand their families, focus on relationship-building, and on communication understand that cultural differences and the barriers families face do not mean they do not care about their children's success in school (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; DeSpain et al., 2018; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Sebolt, 2018).

Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) explain that there are underlying reasons for parents' levels of involvement with schools including their parental role construction and efficacy levels. Role construction helps determine what families believe about what level of involvement they should have with their child's education. Based on what each family feels is appropriate and necessary, engagement activities look different at home and at school. Efficacy refers to the belief parents have that their involvement will help their child and make a positive difference in educational outcomes (Hill, et al., 2018; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019). Generally, higher levels of role construction and efficacy are related to higher levels of family engagement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Leo et al., 2019).

Student Led Conferences: A Successful Strategy for Increasing Family Engagement

Student led conferences (SLCs) are one strategy that has shown an increase in engagement in many types of schools. By design, student led conferences promote responsibility for learning as students reflect on their performance, set goals, develop strategies for improvement, and demonstrate their learning and understanding directly to their parents and teachers (Borba & Olvera, 2001; McManes, 2015; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004). SLCs promote what research shows works for increasing engagement with middle schoolers and their families – academic socialization (DeSpain et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018).

In a traditional parent-teacher conference, much time is spent talking about the student and setting goals for them (Conderman et al., 2000; Hackmann et al., 1998; Hawbaker, 2007; Kinney, 2005). Often a goal set by the adults at the conference is to give the students more ownership and responsibility for their learning. In a traditional SLC, students are in control of the conversation but are supported by the teacher who intervenes whenever necessary or requested (Goodman, 2008). They spend time with their teachers practicing for leading the conference and building their portfolio of work samples to share with their families (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Conderman et al., 2000; Goodman, 2008; Kinney, 2005; Little & Allan, 1989; McManes, 2005, 2015; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004).

Students leading conferences is not a new concept. Over the years, SLCs have been called “student-led parent conferences” and “student-led parent-teacher conferences.” Their design has evolved into the more structured one outlined above. As far back as the late 1980s, research shows the benefits of letting students lead their parent-teacher conferences. This practice alone makes students more invested in their own learning. Often, classroom performance improves simply because students are more engaged in their learning processes and are able to reflect on their own learning while preparing for the conference (Hackmann et al., 1998). Students are motivated and empowered to be a part of their own learning and assessment process (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Goodman, 2008; McManes, 2005 & 2015). Parents are informed of much more than the final grade; they get to understand how learning takes place for their child (Goodman, 2008; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004).

Advantages of Student Led Conferences

Many parents and teachers report that attending a student led conference builds better relationships between families and educators, and that these relationships are better sustained

throughout the year. (Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004). SLCs take away some of the anxiety associated with a traditional parent-teacher conference (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; Hawbaker, 2007; Little & Allan, 1989) where families traditionally take a backseat and the teacher drives the conversation. SLCs demonstrate that the family and the teacher are equal partners in the student's education and make the focus of the conference much more positive than negative. Families and teachers also report that communication improves between them after an SLC (Hackmann et al., 1998; O'Fee, 2012; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004). Students find that a benefit of leading their own conferences is that it leads to more open communication with their families about school at home (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; Goodman, 2008; O'Fee, 2012) as well as increased parent involvement in academics at home (Borba & Olvera, 2001). Because all parties are involved in an SLC, it creates an environment where everyone is on the same page and receives the same message about the student and their current progress and/or challenges at school (Conderman et al., 2000).

Families with English as their second language appreciate being able to better communicate with school personnel during an SLC (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Kinney, 2005; Little & Allan, 1989). Having the child present also helps families with cultural backgrounds that differ from the teacher be able to sort out any misunderstandings that may otherwise arise (Little & Allan, 1989; Quiroz et al., 1999). SLCs also promote communication skills in students. From learning to prepare for a conference, investing in their own work, having a better understanding of how they are assessed, and practicing presenting, students develop many of the life skills we hope they will. They learn to set goals for self-improvement, to reflect, to speak to an audience, and to self-advocate (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Conderman et al., 2000; Hackmann et al., 1998; Hawbaker, 2007; Juniewicz, 2003; Kinney, 2005; Tholander, 2009; Young & Behounek, 2006).

It has been shown that students are typically very honest about their strengths and weaknesses during their SLC (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; O’Fee, 2012; Young & Behounek, 2006), which reinforces the authenticity of the conference.

Much of the research on SLCs finds that there is a substantial increase in parent attendance compared to the traditional conference model (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Conderman et al., 2000; Goodman, 2008; Hackmann et al., 1998; Kinney, 2005; Little & Allan, 1989; O’Fee, 2012; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004). Perhaps the increase of parent and student involvement is what accounts for decreased discipline problems in schools that implement SLCs (Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004). Many schools have reported 100% attendance rates at SLCs.

In addition to traditional classroom settings, SLCs have proven to be effective across disciplines, for students with varied abilities, and for children of all ages. SLC presentations can take on multiple formats depending on the subject area and/or developmental level or the ability of the student. McManes (2005, 2015) has shown that SLCs are effective for demonstrating knowledge and mastery of skills in physical education while promoting all of the other benefits of SLCs. Young & Behounek (2006) show that even kindergarten students can be successful at “making sense of what they know and what they need to learn in school” (p. 24). These young children can successfully lead a conference by using a presentation template, using picture cues, and practicing with their teachers. Schools that use SLCs for students in inclusive settings have not only seen benefits for their students (Conderman et al., 2000; Hawbaker, 2007), increased parent involvement and understanding, and improved home-school relationships, but they have noticed that their students become more aware of their rights as a student with special needs (Hawbaker, 2007). A small study conducted in New Zealand by O’Fee (2012) showed that even without substantial preparation for an SLC communication at home and at school improved and

was sustained all year, family attendance at conferences increased significantly, student motivation and reflection practices increased, and students' honesty about their performance and abilities was high.

Disadvantages of Student Led Conferences

While the benefits of SLCs outweigh the disadvantages, some parents do say that they prefer one-on-one time with the teacher to discuss topics they do not want to discuss in front of their child (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; Hackmann et al., 1998; Juniewicz, 2003; Little & Allan, 1989), while others stated that the SLC felt no different than the daily recap their child gives at home (Goodman, 2008). Lack of time for planning and implementation can be an obstacle to implementing SLCs with fidelity (Juniewicz, 2003; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004). Scheduling SLCs, especially in larger schools where multiple conferences take place in one block of time, can be a reason SLCs are not successful as well (Goodman, 2008; Juniewicz, 2003). Just as in a traditional conference model, parents or families may have difficulty attending the SLC. A school representative can stand in, but not having a member of the family present makes the SLC less meaningful for both the parent and the child (Borba & Olvera, 2001). Juniewicz (2003) found that students who always express more motivation in the classroom generally have a more productive SLC than those who do not usually show high or intrinsic motivation. Often, preparing for the SLC means students follow a script. Some research has shown that students do not care for the script and would rather have more freedom to drive the discussion (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996). A Swedish study (Tholander, 2011) showed that despite calling conferences SLCs, one school did not follow SLC guidelines or implement them correctly. This study showed that students spoke 35% of the conference time, parents spoke 10% of the conference time, and teachers still dominated the

conference speaking 55% of the time. Traditional conferences show teachers speaking 65% of the time. A 10% decrease is not that significant when students are added as an important factor in the SLC.

Applying effective leadership practices when implementing SLCs for the first time would be no different than adopting a new curriculum. In order for SLCs to be effective, schools need to have teachers implementing the practice with fidelity who have support for continued development and from their leadership in many ways.

Leadership for Change

In order to best serve the needs of diverse families in schools, a shift from a deficit mindset toward a more relationship-oriented mindset is often necessary. Leaders have a responsibility to guide their faculty and staff toward an asset- and strength-based mindset. Because it has been found that most schools still practice school-centric strategies for family engagement (Baker et al., 2016; Ferrara, 2011; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Hamm, et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2018; Ishimaru, 2019; Leo et al., 2019; Stefanski et al., 2016), school leaders need to be sure they stay committed to nurturing the shift in culture once it is introduced (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Culture shifts can potentially backfire if not overcome with support from school leaders. By examining proven practices for effectively engaging all types of families with schools, we see that certain practices will increase family engagement. Baker et al. (2016) and Scanlan (2008) found that the attitudes and dispositions of school leadership and staff had the most influence on effectively engaging families. When the staff demonstrates a positive attitude toward involving all families, families are more likely to engage (Baker et al., 2016; Tran, 2014). Reinke et al. (2019) found in their analysis of several family engagement studies that focusing on family-

centered interventions increases family engagement with schools regardless of class, race, or a student's age. Additionally, Flores et al. (2019) found that when engagement efforts in schools, specifically with Latino families, focused mostly or solely on student achievement and not on relationship-building or needs of diverse families, the efforts were not successful.

It is clear that there should not be a one-size-fits-all approach to family engagement (DeMatthews et al., 2016; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Leo et al., 2019). Engagement efforts are most effective when developed in the context of the school population (Auerbach, 2009; DeMatthews et al., 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016) and when schools recognize that needs change over time and as populations change. School leaders have a responsibility to meet the needs of the many types of families they serve.

Leadership behaviors have a significant impact on the success of change implementation (Bredeson, 2005; Dove & Freely, 2011; Lai, 2014, Prelli, 2016). When leaders intentionally create a collaborative culture where all stakeholders work toward a shared vision and a shared set of goals, the difficult process of introducing change has strong potential to drive meaningful and sustainable improvement in family engagement. In order for any new program implementation in schools to be successful, leaders must support the initiative and stakeholders throughout the process. Many obstacles to implementing and maintaining new programs in schools can be overcome if a school leader's practices align with supporting new programs effectively. To lead meaningful change in schools, there are many practices and behaviors administrators must exhibit.

Culture and Relationship-Building

In order to most effectively lead change, leaders must first have a good understanding of their organization and the people that make it up. They must build a culture that focuses

stakeholders on a higher purpose for greatness and building relationships, not just on higher achievement for students (Fullan, 2002). If change is imposed upon people and they do not have a clear understanding of why change is happening, they will resist it (Trybus, 2011). Creating a shared vision among stakeholders is essential to ensure that all parties involved are working toward the same goal (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016; Leech & Fulton, 2008; Trybus, 2011). A shared vision of the expected outcome for the organization establishes a clearer purpose for those helping to reach the outcome (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016). Leaders who involve themselves in the change process rather than impose it upon others, participate as learners themselves, ask questions, and trust their employees (Ash & Persall, 2000; Bredeson & Johansson, 2000; Fullan, 2019) are successful in creating a culture where change will be more supported and sustained. It is important that a school leader be a model for these shared values they promote (Bredeson & Johansson, 2000). Bredeson & Johansson (2000) argue that “focusing on people is the most effective way to change an organization” (p. 389). Creating and maintaining a supportive environment filled with trust (Ash & Persall, 2000) is essential for leaders of change. Being encouraging, approachable, and open to all types of conversations and feedback are ways leaders can create this collaborative culture (Bredeson & Johansson, 2000). Learning and growing as a community is important in schools and especially important for groups hoping to implement change. Schools must function as a “we,” not as an “I” (Leech & Fulton, 2008).

Building Capacity and Developing Investment

“Building school capacity has the meaning of strengthening different kinds of school resources to enable the school to respond to new demands arising from change” (Lai, 2015, p. 72). School capacity has been shown to be a major contributor to school success (Bredeson, 2005; Fullan, 2002; Lai, 2015). Lai’s 2015 study found that schools with high capacity worked to

make sure teachers were involved in decision-making and school improvement, not only within their departments but school-wide. In order to affect change, school leaders must be intentional in their actions to build capacity within their schools. The best way to do this is to involve teachers in the change process. As noted above, it is important to first establish a culture where involvement is expected and practiced regularly. When those who are expected to enact change initiatives are given the opportunity to understand the goals and basis for the change, they are better able to commit themselves to make change happen (Nolan, 2007). Teachers and staff should be encouraged to practice collaborative problem-solving and share their ideas, concerns, and solutions (Ash & Persall, 2000; Fullan, 2002; Leech & Fulton, 2008) Teachers who are involved in decision-making show much more investment in the long-term success of their change initiative and implement the actions needed for change with fidelity (Dove & Freeley, 2011; Leech & Fulton, 2008; Mullen & Jones, 2008). Change ideas are better received, actions are more productive, and efficacy in the organization increases. (Prelli, 2016; Stegall & Linton, 2012). Involving and empowering teachers to be a part of the decision-making process in schools leads to lasting change (Klingner, 2004).

Teacher input and involvement can be formal or informal. It can involve formal review boards, informal teacher committees, feedback surveys, or simply be discussions (Ash & Persall, 2000; Cheng & Szeto, 2016; Leech & Fulton, 2008; Mullen & Jones, 2008). Both formal and informal involvement actions have been shown to increase teacher buy-in and build capacity. Privatizing practice may be a foreign concept to some school systems, but teachers must not be working in isolation if systematic change is expected to take place (Ash & Persall, 2000; Leech & Fulton, 2008; Stegall & Linton, 2012). When teachers and administrators work together

to implement change, organizations are much more successful at improving overall (Mullen & Jones, 2008).

Fullan (2019) and Dove and Freeley (2011) tell us the importance of internal investments and accountability. Rather than relying on external factors from the district or the latest trend in education, it is important to first develop the internal motivation and capacity of an organization to achieve improvement. Using the collaborative ideas, feedback, and fears of the group builds the capacity of teachers and creates stronger buy-in for change initiatives. Rather than insisting upon a solution, a successful leader can guide and encourage the group to collaborate to reach a consensus that works for all or most of the group. Creating these collaborative communities and learning organizations is essential to have the support to effectively introduce and support change initiatives (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016).

Leadership Style

Cultures of change and sustained success in schools are not supported when the role of the principal is limited to the instructional leader (Fullan, 2002; Mullen & Jones, 2008). The principal's role has evolved to include a much wider range of responsibilities (Ash & Persall, 2000; Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016; Lai, 2015; Leech & Fulton, 2008; Prelli, 2016) which includes creating and sustaining the desired culture for collaboration and change. A few specific leadership styles have been identified in the research that promote sustained and meaningful change in schools. Often, multiple forms are needed in different contexts or should be blended together for best results (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016).

Adaptive leaders promote a healthy culture in schools with a focus on building capacity and moving all stakeholders toward the goals of a shared vision. They gather data and inform all invested stakeholders of findings, engaging them in the process of continuous school

improvement and decision-making (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016; Leech & Fulton, 2008).

Feedback, both positive and negative, is essential in the decision-making process for an adaptive leader. Adaptive leaders utilize the capacity of individuals in their organization to reach their goals (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016) and to effectively implement change.

Transformational leaders focus on communication and relationship-building to engage and involve their stakeholders in the change process and to create and maintain a healthy school culture (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016; Prelli, 2016). Transformational leaders encourage collaborative work, recognize people for their efforts, and are sure to point out a direct connection between success and the work being done by those in the field (Leech & Fulton, 2008; Prelli, 2016). Just like adaptive leaders, they use common goals to drive improvement and support the work of their teams by providing any resources needed to support change initiatives. Transformational leaders work with their group throughout the process to monitor progress (Prelli, 2016) and will involve groups or individuals outside of the school community to reach their goals (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016; Lai, 2015). In addition to working on school culture, they work with their constituents on examining existing structures in the organization and evaluate their effectiveness and relevance to the desired change (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016).

School leaders who practice shared or distributed leadership are far from the top-down model and include groups and individuals in school decision-making and in the change process (Ankrum, 2016; Ash & Persall, 2000; Cheng & Szeto, 2016; Leech & Fulton, 2008). They acknowledge that leadership is present in schools at many levels and throughout many different groups and individuals (Ankrum, 2016; Ash & Persall, 2000; Mullen & Jones, 2008; Taylor et al., 2019). Leaders who distribute responsibility acknowledge that they do not have all of the expertise or answers and that they need the collective group in order to be most successful

(Mullen & Jones, 2008). Using and celebrating the strengths of others empowers them to help the organization to move forward and to engage in the change process (Taylor et al., 2019). It also demonstrates that they have influence over and responsibility for the organization's success (Leech & Fulton, 2008). Shared and distributed leadership practices extend ownership and accountability to many stakeholders in and beyond the organization which increases efficacy, commitment to the organization's goals, and in turn, school success (Lai, 2015; Leech & Fulton, 2008).

Using Resisters as Change Agents

A leader who practices effective communication and collaboration strategies and follows leadership styles that support meaningful change in schools should also be sure to take into account the opinion of those who may oppose the change (Fullan, 2002, 2019; Nolan, 2007). Those who may oppose the system change should be able to share their concerns and reasons they oppose the change (Dove & Freeley, 2011; Fullan, 2002). Resisters can be extremely effective for ensuring the success of a new initiative. Resisters may expose the unintended consequences associated with a new program or practice and be able to point out potential issues before they arise (Nolan, 2007). Very often, resisters may also have ideas that are better than that of the leader, or at least ideas for implementing change that the leader may not have thought of because of their often-biased view of the new change (Nolan, 2007). Leaders in a collaborative environment should listen to the questions stakeholders have in order to involve them in the process and learn alongside the team (Fullan, 2019). In order for change to be most effective, Nolan (2007) says that there should be some initial opposition. If conflict does not arise, it could mean that people will rebel against the initiative later on or that they are silently opposing it hoping that the change will not last. When resisters bring their opinions up early, it is a positive

sign that change is being considered by the group. Leaders can use the resisters to their advantage to engage them in the change process (Nolan, 2007). When individuals are engaged in the change process, even if it stems from negative thoughts, their strengths are being utilized to engage and empower them, thus the leader builds capacity even for the resisters within their organization.

Remaining User-Centered and Student-Focused

Bryk et al. (2017) present best practices for leaders implementing change in their organization. They say that the specific problem must be identified first and that the point of view of those who are experiencing the problem firsthand must be considered. Spending time exploring the point of view that matters helps an organization effectively and efficiently move toward solutions versus diving into a quick fix solution. Investing in understanding at the beginning is more effective for lasting change (Nolan, 2007). As discussed, school leaders implementing change must work intentionally to maintain a culture where teacher and stakeholder buy-in matter (Bredeson & Johansson, 2000; Lai, 2015). Involving them at stage one of the change process and continuing to learn together as a group is a wonderful way to keep the focus user-centered and sustain commitment (Nolan, 2007).

Research shows that teachers are more invested in change in their schools when they can see the direct benefits for their students (Bredeson, 2005; Klingner, 2004; Nolan, 2007). Teachers who see that a new initiative will improve their teaching and their students' performance are much more likely to implement change with fidelity (Bredeson & Johansson, 2000; Klingner, 2004; Nolan, 2007). Without being involved from the beginning, teachers would not have the opportunity to come to understand the benefits of a new program for their students. Leaders must work to link research and practice for their faculty during the initial phases of

change implementation (Klingner, 2004). Klingner's study on sustained practice in the classroom (2004) shows that three years after the initial change was introduced, teachers who saw direct benefits to their students were continuing to support the change initiative and implement practices with fidelity. They also sustained practice if they could see that their students enjoyed and were excited about the new program. Teachers are highly motivated by the success of their students. Linking the benefits of change to what matters to them most is an important motivator for teachers involved in change (Bryk et al., 2017; Nolan, 2007).

Think Big, Start Small

All too often change is introduced to educators through a one-day workshop, and then schools are expected to implement new systems and processes immediately (Bryk et al., 2017; Klingner, 2004). Other times, change initiatives are presented as no big deal or promised not to disrupt existing programs too much. This can be detrimental for buy-in since people are less likely to get on board if they feel a new program is not much different than what they are already doing (Nolan, 2007). One strategy leaders can practice that often creates more investment from those expected to enact change is to start the process by introducing some low-stakes opportunities for success and build upon these positive experiences (Dove & Freeley, 2011). Opportunities like this allow teachers to see how easily practices can fit into their existing routine, show them the value of the practice, and demonstrate how new practices differ from old ones (Klingner, 2004).

In order to be sure large-scale changes are supported and practiced from the time of introduction, leaders should be prepared for some initial variation in performance (Bryk et al., 2017; Klingner, 2004). Teachers accept change more freely and develop more ownership when they feel they can make modifications that fit their individual classroom needs (Klingner, 2004).

At the same time, leaders need to be sure that any variation is still supportive of the collective goal(s) and redirect any teachers who may be too far off track. Implementers of change should feel free to take risks while knowing they will be supported if they fail (Bredeson & Johansson, 2000; Bryk et al., 2017).

Conclusion

With so much research conducted around family engagement throughout history, it is clear this is an important issue for students, families, and schools. Family engagement traditionally declines in middle grades for a variety of reasons related to the needs and wants of the adolescent child as well as changing family dynamics and demands. Schools have a responsibility to remove barriers to engagement for families as well as promote what works to increase family engagement. The research shows that academic socialization consistently works to improve engagement for middle schoolers and their families (DeSpain et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). Academic socialization also helps create some of the independence and autonomy in the student that both middle schoolers and their families desire. By talking about school in a positive manner at home, setting academic and personal goals, and communicating high expectations for success in school, parents, teachers, and families see greater successes in their middle school-aged children (DeSpain et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Hill et al., 2018).

Student led conferences are one strategy that is proven to increase academic socialization. Schools that implement student led conferences report increased positive communication with parents and better relationships (Hackmann et al., 1998; O'Fee, 2012; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004). Students find that leading their own conferences leads to more open communication with their families about school at home (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; Goodman, 2008; O'Fee,

2012) as well as increased parent involvement in academics at home (Borba & Olvera, 2001). SLCs remove many of the barriers that are known to exist in regard to family engagement. Creating a space where families can come to school to hear firsthand about their child's experiences gives them a space to feel comfortable and welcomed (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; Hawbaker, 2007; Little & Allan, 1989). Families who speak different languages in the home or have different cultural backgrounds than a majority of the school staff appreciate being able to better communicate and connect with school personnel during an SLC (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Kinney, 2005; Little & Allan, 1989; Quiroz et al., 1999). SLCs provide a space for both the family and the student to be successful and outline opportunities to continue to support further growth at home and at school.

By examining the proven practices for effectively leading change in schools, we can see that these practices would support the implementation of and help to maintain large-scale changes in any school. Leadership behaviors have a significant impact on the success of change implementation (Bredeson, 2005; Bredeson & Johansson, 2000; Dove & Freely, 2011; Lai, 2014, Prelli, 2016). When leaders intentionally create a collaborative culture where stakeholders work toward a shared set of goals and vision, change introduced within the context of school improvement has strong potential for being meaningfully sustained. It is important to remember that the leader is merely a facilitator and works within the group to effectively implement change in schools.

SECS worked to identify a strategy to implement that would support successful and equitable family engagement at the middle school level. The action research teams decided that SLCs was the intervention they would like to implement to try and increase family engagement

in their middle school. The next chapter outlines the research design and methodology for the action research implemented at SECS.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this action research study was to implement a new strategy at Southeast Catholic School (SECS) for increasing family engagement at the middle school level in one small, Catholic middle school as well as to monitor its effects on students, teachers, and families.

To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do families describe the impact of family engagement strategies at the middle school level in one small, Catholic middle school?
2. How does an action research team describe the design and implementation process of a project focused on family engagement strategies in one small, Catholic middle school?
3. How does the implementation of family engagement strategies impact the culture and climate in one small, Catholic middle school?

This chapter includes the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guided the study, an overview of the action research design, data collection methods, data analysis, and a discussion of the reliability, validity, and limitations of the study.

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Epstein's Spheres of Influence (Epstein, 1987) were the theoretical bases for this action research. Both models discuss the importance of outside factors at different levels and how they affect the development, growth, and success of a child. When considering family engagement at the middle

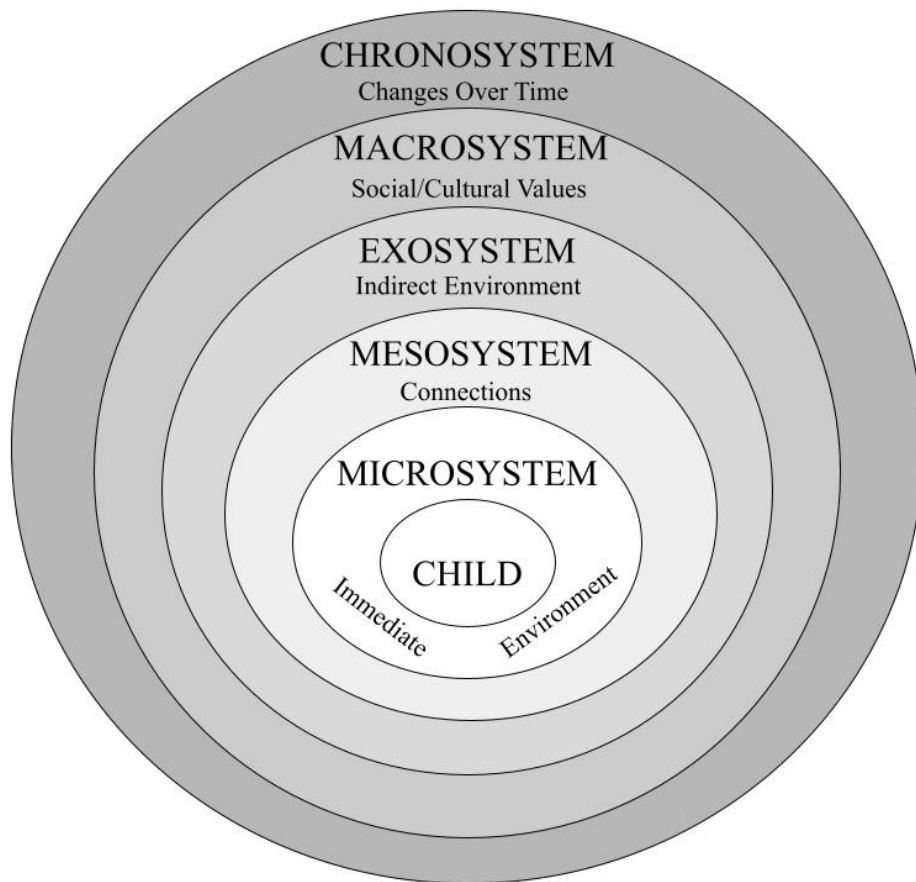
school level, these theories both support that engagement between the child, the family, the school, and the community are important factors in student success.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner originally introduced the ecological systems theory in the 1970s as a way to demonstrate the many influences children have on their socialization and development, including academics (Harkonen, 2007; Neal & Neal, 2013). Bronfenbrenner described the various systems of influence as nested in one another as layers that must be examined individually with the child at the center (Neal & Neal, 2013). The systems of influence have evolved from four originally to include the chronosystem, or changes over time, in later years (Harkonen, 2007). The four original systems are; the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner acknowledges the bidirectional relationship between each layer of influence (Harkonen, 2007). Figure 3.1 shows Bronfenbrenner's systems of influence.

Figure 3.1

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



The microsystem includes influences that have direct contact with the child and are in their closest surroundings. Examples include the family, classmates, church members, and sports team members. The mesosystem, which has a direct influence on the microsystem and an indirect influence on the child, is made up of direct relations between two or more members of the microsystem. An example would be a parent-teacher conference. The exosystem is defined by settings and experiences that influence the child but in which the child does not directly participate, for example, a parent's work environment or a new school policy. The macrosystem

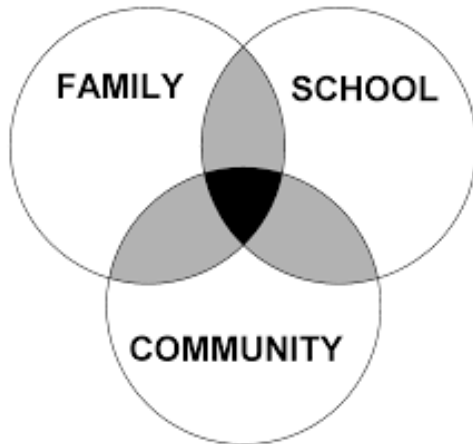
involves any larger social context such as culture, belief systems, ideals, and laws (Harkonen, 2007; Neal & Neal, 2013; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013; Yamauchi et al., 2017).

Epstein's Spheres of Influence

As research in the field of education began to further prove that the connection between home, school, and community was important for students' success, Epstein created her model for the overlapping spheres of influence on a child. The influence of each sphere can be thought of as fluid and have more or less influence on a child in any given circumstance. The overlapping model demonstrates that there is a shared responsibility for the child between all spheres (Epstein, 2011; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Yamauchi et al., 2017). When the school, community, and family are engaged in bidirectional relationships, experiences for the child are improved. It also demonstrates that there are multiple levels of influence on a child no matter the age, background, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status of a child. Within the spheres of influence lie Epstein's six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2011; Epstein & Sanders, 2000). Figure 3.2 shows Epstein's spheres of influence.

Figure 3.2

Epstein's Spheres of Influence



http://iapr.unl.edu/videos/ppts/1_Epstein.pdf

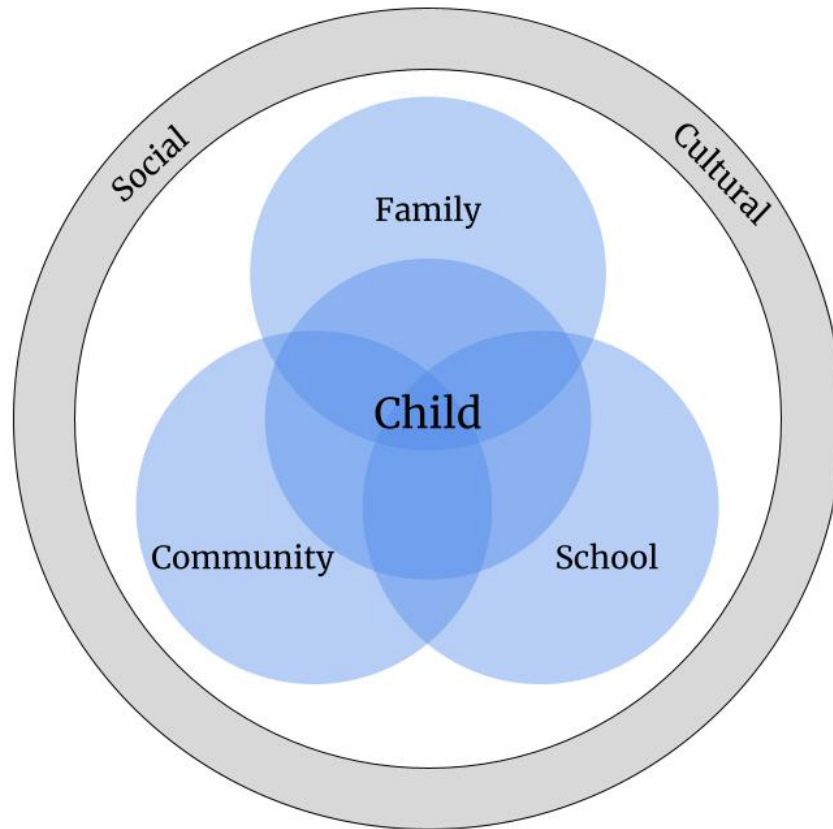
An Adaptation of Two Models

Both Bronfenbrenner's and Epstein's frameworks provide a solid theoretical framework for examining the relationship between the school, the family, the community, and the child. Taken alone, Bronfenbrenner's framework does not provide the overlapping nature of all areas of influence on the child. Epstein's spheres alone do not take into account some wider community and societal influences that Bronfenbrenner's framework does. An adapted model of the theoretical framework used for this action research is in Figure 1.1 from Chapter One.

Figure 1.1 from Chapter One

Theoretical Framework

Adapted from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Epstein's Spheres of Influence



Conceptual Framework

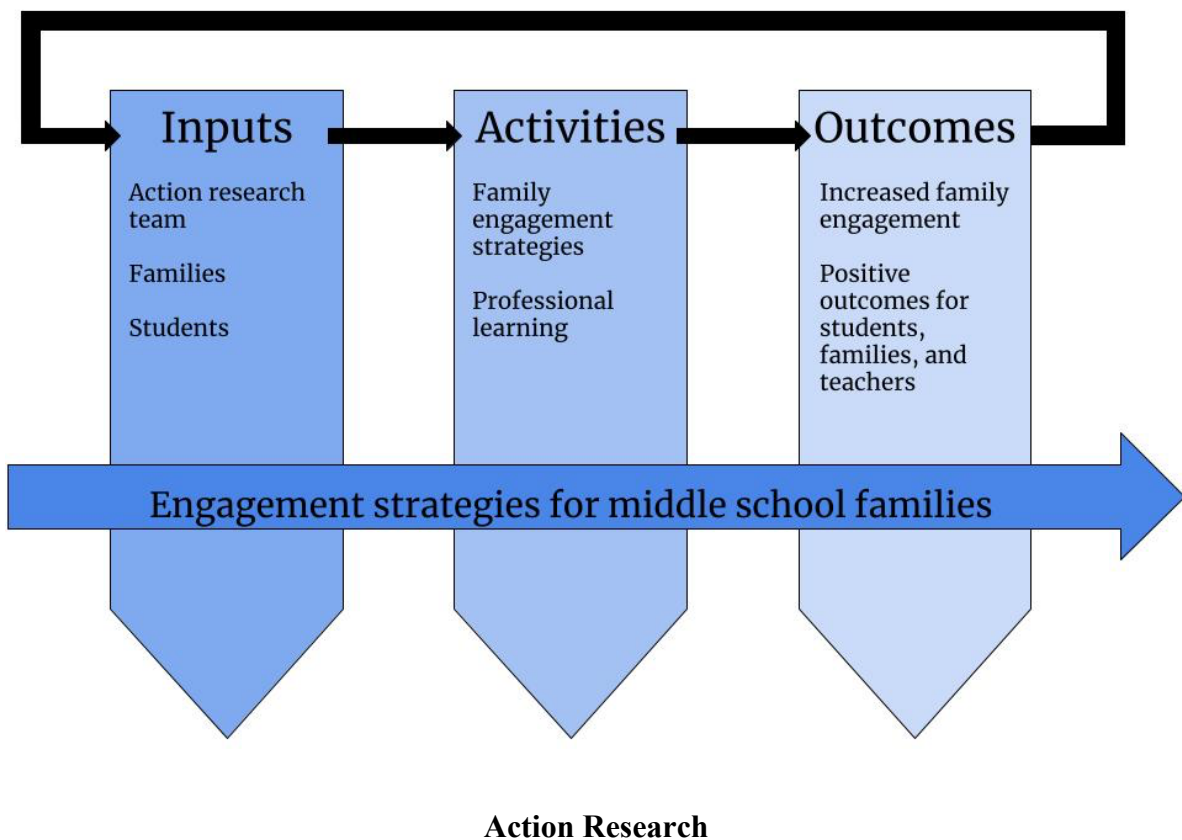
The conceptual framework used for this action research was designed around inputs, activities, and outcomes related to engagement strategies for middle school families. The action research team researched effective strategies to use with their middle school families. They participated in professional learning about the chosen strategy of student led conferences in

action research cycle one before implementation. After initial implementation, reflection and evaluation drove the next cycle for improving upon practice in action research cycle two.

The conceptual framework used to guide this study is shown in Figure 1.2 from Chapter One.

Figure 1.2 from Chapter One

Conceptual Framework



The researcher decided to use an action research approach to implement a new strategy for family engagement at the middle school level. Action research, by design, allows for the exploration of an existing problem through experience, continued reflections, and continued adjustments or improvements. Action research is also collaborative and can lead to meaningful change in an organization (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Ferrance, 2000). Because the process of

action research is cyclical and ongoing (Coughlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014), organizations utilizing this approach are set up for cycles of continuous improvement (Glanz, 2014). Action research is not a retroactive approach or a way to discover what is not working but is rather “a quest for knowledge about how to improve” (Ferrance, 2000, p. 8).

“Research is a major responsibility of any educational leader,” (Glanz, 2014, p. 4). Glanz (2014) states that school leaders are constantly faced with making decisions and that it is important to base these decisions on research and evaluation. Action research is often utilized by school leaders because of its collaborative nature and ability to focus on various areas of school improvement such as at the individual level, in the classroom, or even building- or system-wide (Ferrance, 2000; Glanz, 2014). Action research also puts those directly involved with the school as the ones doing the work versus relying on outside experts. Other benefits of engaging in action research in a school setting include creating a system-wide commitment to continuous improvement, promoting self-reflection, positive impacts on daily practices, and ultimately a stronger, more positive school culture and climate. Criticisms of the action research approach include the assumption that it is less sophisticated than other approaches and that results of action research are not generalizable to other groups or organizations (Glanz, 2014).

For a school looking to focus on a specific area of improvement, action research was a natural fit. Because the researcher wanted to see positive change at SECS through increased family engagement in middle grades using the collaboration of design and implementation teams, action research was chosen.

Action Research Design Team

To begin the action research cycles, a design team made up of SECS faculty and staff was formed. Table 3.1 provides a summary of the design team members, their role at SECS, their years of experience at SECS, and their connection to the research.

Table 3.1

Design Team Members with Years at SECS

Position	Years at SECS	Connection to Project
Principal	13	Researcher
8 th grade teacher	17	MS teacher, MS coordinator, science and social studies teacher
7 th grade teacher	4	MS teacher, math and religion teacher
6 th grade teacher	4	MS teacher, English and literature teacher
5 th grade teacher	19	Link to engagement strategies from lower school to middle school
Technology Teacher	22	Enrichment representative on school leadership team, teaches all students, works with most families

These members were chosen because of their direct connection to the students and families that were participating in the action research process at SECS. Because this research met a specific district goal of creating meaningful relationships with specific adults as well as increasing engagement, the involvement of the counselor and fifth-grade teacher was deemed important by the research team. Having the fifth-grade teacher on the design team served to help better aid the team in designing an intervention that would help students and families in their transition to middle school, as well as to help bridge the gap of engagement from lower school to middle school. Having design team members with a range of years of experience at SECS

offered the team multiple perspectives. Those who have been at SECS for all or most of their career have experienced the evolution of family engagement through the years and were able to share these past experiences. Those newer to SECS were able to offer a fresh perspective and outlook not influenced by past SECS experiences. In addition to the varied perspectives they provided, the three core middle school teachers were chosen for the design team to increase their investment in implementing a new strategy for engagement. These core teachers would be the ones who would lead and be charged with sustaining the outcomes of this action research over time. Having the core teachers as key players was a priority for the researcher as new strategies brought a shift in thinking and practices.

Action Research Implementation Team

When forming the implementation team, many members from the design team were also included. This was because SECS had a very small number of faculty and staff and an even smaller number who were directly involved with the middle school students and families. Table 3.2 provides a summary of the implementation team members, their role at SECS, their years of experience at SECS, and their connection to the research.

Table 3.2*Implementation Team Members with Years at SECS*

Position	Years at SECS	Connection to Project
8 th grade teacher	17	MS teacher, MS coordinator, science and social studies teacher
7 th grade teacher	4	MS teacher, math and religion teacher
6 th grade teacher	4	MS teacher, English and literature teacher
Technology Teacher	22	Enrichment representative on school leadership team, teaches all students, works with most families
Counselor	4	Works with all students and most families
Resource teacher	2	Link to engagement strategies from lower school to middle school, works with many students

The core middle school teachers were chosen for the implementation team because they would be the primary players in implementing a new initiative for increasing engagement with middle school families. The technology teacher, resource teacher, and school counselor were chosen so that they could potentially aid in expanding the initiative to other grades in the future should it be found to be effective. The counselor brought seven years of experience from public school to SECS and had specific experience implementing strategies aimed at increasing family engagement in middle school. These members were also chosen so that they could serve as a critical source for the core middle school teachers, as it was hoped that they would provide a different perspective for them throughout the action research process. An implementation team made up of faculty and staff from different specialty areas also helped to expose middle school students and their families to more trusted adults than just their core teachers. Having

implementation team members with a range of years of experience at SECS offered the team multiple perspectives. Those who have been at SECS for all or most of their career have experienced the evolution of family engagement through the years and were able to share these past experiences. Those newer to SECS were able to offer a fresh perspective and outlook not influenced by past SECS experiences.

Action Research Timeline

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) and District approval in the spring of 2021, the researcher met with the design and implementation team members to begin the action research process. A summary of the action research timeline is provided in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3*Action Research Timeline*

Action Research Cycle One		
What	Who	When
1. Presentation of the problem/research 2. Consent form collection 3. One-on-one interviews 4. Initial planning and research session	Design and Implementation Team Members	Spring 2021
1. Continued planning and research sessions/ target intervention chosen 2. Families chosen for participation in focus group 3. Professional learning received on target intervention 4. Intervention designed	Design Team Members	Summer 2021
1. Continued planning and research sessions/ target intervention chosen 2. Professional learning received on target intervention 3. Planning for implementation	Implementation Team Members + The Researcher	Summer 2021
1. Contact, information share, and consent form collection 2. Focus group conducted before intervention	SECS Families + The Researcher	Fall 2021
1. Intervention implemented	Design and Implementation Team Members + The Researcher + SECS Families	Fall 2021
1. Continued planning and research sessions 2. Reflection on action research cycle one 3. Changes, improvements, or modifications made in continued research sessions	Design and Implementation Team Members	Fall 2021
Action Research Cycle Two		
What	Who	When
1. Changes, improvements, or modifications made in continued research sessions	Design and Implementation Team Members + The Researcher	Fall 2021 – Winter 2022
1. Families confirmed for participation in focus group	Design Team Members	Winter 2022
1. Intervention implemented	Design and Implementation Team Members + The Researcher + SECS Families	Winter 2022
1. One-on-one interviews post-implementation	Design and Implementation Team Members	Winter 2022
1. Focus groups post-implementation	SECS Families + The Researcher	Winter 2022
1. Reflection on action research process 2. Evaluation of effectiveness of intervention and action research process	Design and Implementation Team Members	Winter 2022

After IRB (Appendix A) and District approval (Appendix B), the researcher met with the action research teams to present research related to family engagement in the middle school years, cultural responsiveness in family engagement, and leadership for creating and sustaining meaningful change in schools. They were presented with the research questions, conceptual framework, and theoretical framework that would guide the action research. The researcher presented information to the action research teams that defined the problem in the context of SECS. This included data from family attendance at school meetings, family responses to school surveys, and volunteer program participation statistics for the two previous school years. The researcher provided an overview of the action research process along with research about the action research process and cycles. Finally, the researcher presented a comparison chart that showed what strategies other schools in the district were currently using to engage their middle school families. After some time, the action research teams were presented with their consent forms to consent to participate in the action research at SECS. Once consent forms were obtained, the researcher began conducting one-on-one interviews with the design and implementation team members.

After the conclusion of the pre-implementation interviews with action research team members, the teams and researcher met for their initial planning and research session in the spring of 2021. Information and research that the teams were initially presented was reviewed and expanded upon. Design team members engaged in additional research on strategies for family engagement at the middle school level. Once the target intervention was chosen, the teams focused on research and information sharing about the chosen intervention only. The design team also identified a diverse group of sixth-grade families who had experience with family-school engagement in SECS's lower school grades as well as middle school grades and

currently had at least one sixth-grade student. At their final planning session, the teams referenced the district comparison chart of engagement activities and the researcher identified another district principal to deliver a professional learning session for the researcher and the design and intervention teams on the chosen intervention. The design team met one final time after receiving the professional learning to make final adjustments to their design. This work took place throughout the spring and summer of 2021. This initial phase took place during three separate meetings that lasted no more than one hour each. The professional learning session was one two-hour session.

Following the completion of the professional learning session and finalization of the plan from the design team, the implementation team began to meet to plan implementation of the chosen intervention at SECS. These meetings took place during two separate sessions, that lasted no more than one hour each, through the summer and early fall of 2021. The implementation team spent no more than three hours per week performing any extra activities related to implementation of the target strategy. Most of the activities concerning implementation were embedded into their school day or planning periods. During this period, the families identified by the design team were contacted by the researcher and asked to participate in the research. They were given an overview of action research, some background and statement of the problem, and alerted that the goal of the research was to increase family engagement at the middle school level at SECS. If families consented to participate, they were asked to come by the school to sign their consent forms. The initial focus group with families was then conducted.

The target strategy was implemented with the sixth-grade and their families in the fall of 2021 with action research cycle one. The intervention was applied to only the sixth-grade class. After the initial implementation, the action research teams convened to evaluate action research

cycle one and construct action research cycle two. The action research teams then met periodically, as needed for short periods of time, or shared feedback to documents via Google Docs to make necessary refinements and adjustments to the design and implementation plans for action research cycle two.

The target intervention was implemented for action research cycle two for sixth-grade families in the winter of 2022. After this implementation, the action research teams convened to evaluate action research cycle two. The action research teams then met for a one-hour session to reflect on the action research process and make any necessary changes to the process and/or documents. Post-implementation interviews with action research team members and the post-implementation focus group with families were also conducted by the researcher during the period following the second implementation of the target strategy.

It is important to note that although SECS continued to offer in-person instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, all activities were conducted via Zoom to minimize interaction and to follow IRB approval permissions.

Intervention

According to Glanz (2014) an intervention is a specific treatment implemented by the researcher in order to “investigate its effect on behavior or achievement of an individual group” (p. 64). Researchers should understand the multiple ways an intervention may influence a target group (Glanz, 2014). Choosing one target intervention for SECS directly supports the action research design. SECS was able to focus on the effects of the intervention to see how they addressed the research questions and to see how they impacted family engagement at the middle school level. In order to choose an intervention, the action research design team started by reviewing existing literature on family engagement in middle school and by referencing the

district comparison chart. They were sure to use the theoretical and conceptual frameworks as well as the mission, vision, school goals, and district goals as guides for their research. The researcher had gathered feedback from other elementary principals in the district and asked the following two questions:

1. How does family engagement change in your school from elementary to middle school?
2. What strategies do you use to enhance family engagement at the middle school level?

Of 14 principals, 10 replied. A summary of their responses showed that other schools in the district had set systems in place to address family engagement at the middle school level. Before the study, SECS had few formal systems in place. Their responses, combined with the initial research presented to the action research design team by the researcher, were a starting point for the design team. After further research sessions, the design team decided on student led conferences as the primary intervention. After research sessions and meetings that took place throughout the late spring and summer of 2021, the intervention was implemented for action research cycle one in the fall of 2021.

Research Design

This study used qualitative data measures within a case study to address the three research questions guiding the study. The purpose of this action research study was to implement a new strategy at SECS for increasing family engagement in one small, Catholic middle school as well as to monitor its effects on students, families, and teachers. A qualitative case study research design best supported the targeted, in-depth understanding the researcher was hoping to gain. Qualitative case study research is designed to help researchers gain deep knowledge and insight into an identified problem (Creswell et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2020; Tomaszewski et al., 2020) rather than work to predict specific outcomes (Johnson et al., 2020; Powell & Single,

1996; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Because it is focused on gaining the perspective of its participants, qualitative research helps to answer questions about people, their beliefs, and their actions (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Qualitative case studies investigate problems within their real-life contexts in a specific system and are commonly used in educational settings (Creswell et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2020; Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

The qualitative measures used for this research were; semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations, and researcher journals and notes. Some quantitative measures were used to identify the problem. Survey participation and attendance at school meetings were analyzed before research began. Reflection sheets that students and families filled out together after their conference became another source of qualitative data that the action research team and researcher did not originally plan for, but that provided great insight into the process for students and for parents not involved in the parent focus group. An in-depth description of data collection methods is outlined below.

Contextual Setting

Overview of the Case

Southeast Catholic School (SECS) has been providing a quality Catholic education to families in the northeast region of a southern state for 70 years. SECS is located in Cooper County on a new, 57-acre campus which is shared with the church. In the fall of 1949, Southeast Catholic Church opened the school with 35 students in grades one through six on the bottom floor of the church's rectory. Religious sisters staffed the school until 2005. By then, the school's enrollment had increased to over 400 students. In 2004, a new pastor arrived to lead Southeast Catholic Church. SECS spent eight more years at its original location in downtown Coopertown, and in 2012 opened the doors of its new campus and started the school year with 237 students

(School Website, 2019). SECS had fairly high leadership turnover. Enrollment had been falling for quite some time and a move to a new campus farther from the center of town made SECS less visible in Coopertown. Table 3.4 shows enrollment trends for the last twelve years at SECS. Change in principal leadership is also indicated by a color code. A new pastor of Southeast Catholic Church was also named in January of 2017.

Table 3.4

Enrollment and Leadership Turnover at SECS

2010 - 2011	2011 - 2012	2012 - 2013	2013 - 2014	2014 - 2015	2015 - 2016	2016 - 2017	2017 - 2018	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022
275 (est.)	254	237	220	200	181	174	154	143	153	175	180

SECS and Cooper County

As of the 2021-2022 school year, SECS was a private, Catholic school serving 179 students in grades Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) through 8 located in Coopertown. The 179 students at SECS represented 128 families. Seventy-one families had students only in lower school (grades Pre-K through five), 20 families had students in both lower school and middle school (grades six through eight), and 37 families had students only in middle school. As of 2019, Coopertown had an estimated population of 128,000 people and was continuing to rise (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Most of the population was white, followed by black, then Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and other (County Website, 2019). Many types of people lived in Coopertown; from university students to young families to single retirees. The estimated median household income in 2019 was \$38,623 (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Major stable employers in the area at the time were The University, Area Regional Hospital/Healthcare, and The Cooper County School District.

Problem Framing in the Context

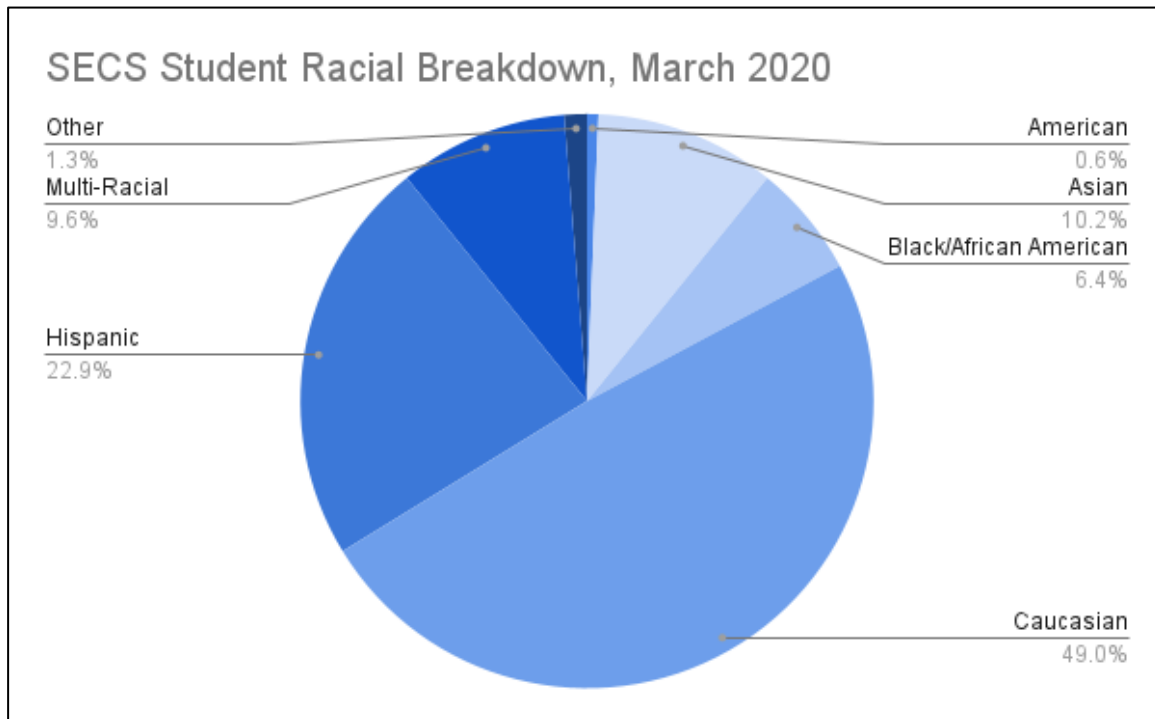
As students transitioned from lower school to middle school at SECS, family engagement decreased. Analysis of multiple different survey results, family attendance at school meetings, and family participation in the required volunteer program showed that this was the case. Informal observations and conversations between middle school parents and administration also demonstrated that once their children enter middle school, engagement became more of a challenge. Conversations between teachers and the administration, the administration's observations of teachers, and the administration's participation in select SST meetings and parent-teacher conferences at all grade levels also helped to demonstrate that there was more of a disconnect between home and school once SECS students entered middle school. This action research was designed to address the problem of decreasing family engagement with middle school families at SECS.

COVID-19 School Closure of March 2020

On March 13, 2020, SECS announced that it would be closing for in-person instruction and make the transition to digital teaching and learning until further notice. At the time of the COVID-19 closure, SECS had 156 students in grades Pre-K through eighth. Thirty-five percent of SECS students qualified for free and reduced lunch. A breakdown of the races and ethnicities represented by the student body at that time is shown in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3

Racial Makeup of SECS Students in March of 2020



Prior to schools closing due to COVID-19, all of the schools in the Catholic School District had done some planning and preparation. Schools were required to submit Home Learning Plans to the superintendent for approval. Home Learning Plans identified which platforms would be used for student learning, attendance policies, and other expectations for students learning from home. They also outlined when teachers were available to families for support. When closures were announced, SECS was on its spring break holiday. On Monday, March 16, 2020, and Tuesday, March 17, 2020, teachers from SECS had workdays in the building to finalize each grade level’s plan for digital teaching and learning. SECS also hosted a materials pickup day so that students could come to get all of their textbooks and supplies. The first day of digital instruction began on Wednesday, March 18, 2020.

SECS Families' Need for Device and Internet Access

When the school closure announcement was made, SECS included information in the email that asked families to let the school know about their need for a device and/or internet access. On the supply pickup day, SECS loaned 20 devices accounting for 13% of students. Three families replied that they had connectivity issues. Two of those families were provided equipment for hardwiring the devices to their home internet. The third family made arrangements with the administration to come and use a space in the school for three days per week. By the end of the second week of digital teaching and learning, SECS loaned nine more devices for a total of 29, increasing the total to 19% of students with a loaner device.

Working closely with families, trial and error, and a short window of experience gave SECS the insight that families with only a phone or tablet at home were not able to be as successful with the digital learning experience as those with a desktop or laptop. While research shows that at least 72% of children as young as eight have used mobile devices and at least 88% of adults use the internet, access to only mobile devices is a form of under-connectedness (Guernsey & Levine, 2017). Without a laptop or desktop, SECS students were not able to access all of the apps and programs assigned for use. It quickly became apparent that device access was a great need once SECS made the transition to digital teaching and learning.

SECS and Family Engagement During Digital Teaching and Learning

Making the transition from online to in-person instruction was not an easy one for a school that was used to having their families in the building as often as SECS. Catholic schools' policies reflect the idea of a collaborative culture and give families a voice, which is an important form of engagement (Fussell, 2020; Warren et al., 2003). Teachers play a role in this community culture and have their own special relationships with families. The direct relationship

between teachers and families opens up more opportunities for families to engage with the school (Warren et al., 2003). “Community is central to the mission of Catholic education” (Fussell, 2020, p. 150). SECS had a parent volunteer program and families were required to log at least twenty volunteer hours each school year. While some opportunities were defined by the school, parents had the freedom to propose or participate in additional projects that supported the school or their child’s classroom.

Most Catholic schools pride themselves on being “like family” and SECS was no different. There was a focus on relationships and social interaction in the community as well as in the church. Many church teachings focus on social justice, the dignity of the human person, and service to the community. Catholic schools also have a reputation for providing strong social-emotional support to their students and families. Parents who choose to send their children to Catholic schools tend to share these values, thus promoting family-school partnership (Warren et al., 2003). Shared goals make nurturing the family-school partnership more natural.

SECS worked to live its mission of being “a family of learners” (School Website, 2021) and did not want to lose its sense of community during the COVID-19 closure. SECS teachers stayed open and available for their students and families during digital teaching and learning. Every teacher held two open help sessions per day: one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Teachers also gave extra time to those students who were struggling with a particular concept or were on a Student Support Team (SST) plan that gave them accommodations in the classroom. These extra sessions were held either one-on-one or in small groups. SECS faculty and staff made themselves available to families when they needed them. They hosted Zoom sessions or replied to emails at all hours of the day and night. The administration made weekly announcement videos to share with families that had students participating in daily prayer,

celebrating birthdays, and reciting the mission statement. Every grade level hosted at least two social Zoom sessions during the last few months of school.

Selection

Patton (2002) and Curtis et al. (2000) explain that purposeful sample selection in qualitative research is essential. Selecting participants who have a deep knowledge of and connection to the case helps researchers gain a more in-depth understanding of their study (Patton, 2002). Purposeful selection also helps the researcher generate a larger amount of and more meaningful information as it relates to the case (Curtis et al., 2000). For this action research study, members of the design team, implementation team, and parent focus groups were all chosen because of their close connection to the study.

The action research design team was made up of the researcher (principal), fifth-grade teacher, technology teacher, and the three core middle school teachers. The core middle school teachers were chosen so that they would be invested in the project since the goal of the research was to have a positive impact on the families of their students specifically. These teachers would be the ones implementing the intervention, and the researcher felt it was imperative to have their voices represented throughout the action research process. They would also be the ones sustaining any successful interventions over time. The technology teacher was chosen because they worked with students at all grade levels. They served as a member of the school leadership team and was a strong teacher with a good understanding of SECS. Their entire twenty-two-year career had been spent there. The fifth-grade teacher was chosen as a key player of the design team to help offer the perspective of the lower school when designing the intervention. This teacher had also previously taught middle school at both public school and SECS. Because of their experience, they served as a crucial player in designing the intervention so that SECS was

most successful in transitioning families from lower school to middle school. The researcher was included on the design team because of their role as principal to ensure that the design of the intervention aligned with the school's and district's goals, missions, and values.

The action research intervention team was made up of a team of teachers and staff who were likely to support intervention at the middle school level at SECS aimed at increasing family engagement. The intervention team consisted of the three core middle school teachers, the technology teacher, the school counselor, and the resource teacher. The counselor and resource teacher were chosen because they also worked closely with the middle school students at SECS and often served in support roles to the middle school families.

Families who participated in focus groups were identified by the design team for both action research cycles one and two. The groups chosen had to meet the criteria of being racially and gender diverse. Families identified also had to have had experience with engagement in SECS's lower school. This meant that they either had a younger child enrolled in lower school during the time of the study or that their current middle schooler had attended SECS for lower school. For both action research cycles, families had to have at least one student enrolled in sixth-grade. It is important to note that the action research team specifically chose one family, Family R2, to participate in the focus group because they were perceived to be less engaged than some other families. The design team thought their participation in the action research process might help increase their engagement, but also offer a perspective that might be different from other parents chosen, and one that SECS may need and want to hear to improve. The researcher reached out to Family R2 a total of three times with no response. After it was clear they were not interested in participating, the team decided to ask Family N2 to take the place of Family R2.

All action research team and focus group participants were presented with initial information about the research including literature about family engagement, cultural responsiveness, and change leadership; the research questions; theoretical and conceptual frameworks; and school data that identified the problem of decreased family engagement with middle school families. They were all given consent forms (Appendix D and Appendix E) to be reviewed, signed, and returned. The consent forms addressed issues of potential risks and benefits of the study, potential privacy concerns, and outlined the procedures in place for protecting the participants' information. The researcher made it abundantly clear that their participation would in no way affect their standing as an employee at SECS or their child's enrollment at SECS.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative case studies use multiple sources of information to deepen understanding of the case within its specific context (Creswell et al., 2007; Tomaszewski, 2020). To ensure that the rigor of the research was high and that data were triangulated, the researcher used multiple forms of data collection. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were used with the action research design and implementation team members. These interviews took place before action research cycle one and after action research cycle two. Focus groups were held with parent participants and took place before action research cycle one and after action research cycle two. All interviews and focus groups were conducted via Zoom due to restrictions related to COVID-19 and IRB permissions. The interviews and focus group sessions were recorded and downloaded on an external hard drive to ensure the researcher was the only one with access to the recordings. Prior to engaging the participants in interviews and focus groups, the researcher had their dissertation chair review the questions. The researcher field-tested the questions with

three of their district office supervisors: two associate superintendents and one director of marketing and enrollment.

The researcher kept detailed notes throughout the process that included observations from parent meetings with SECS teachers and staff, notes on emails received from parents with content related to the research, and observations about other interactions or conversations that were related to family engagement at the middle school level at SECS. These notes were kept confidential and only the researcher had access to them.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a primary data collection method for this study. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher has some predetermined questions but also can probe further as the participants respond (Alshenqeti, 2014; Gill et al., 2008; Peters & Halcomb, 2015). Semi-structured interviews “can produce powerful data that provide insights into the participants’ experiences, perceptions, or opinions” (Peters & Halcomb, 2015, p. 6). Because the researcher wished to address how the culture and climate were affected by family engagement strategies, how stakeholders described the impact of family engagement strategies, and how the action research team described the design and implementation of specific strategies, one-on-one interviews were conducted with the action research teams. This data collection method afforded the ability for the team members to discuss their own thoughts and beliefs and allowed the researcher to make connections between these and the research (Alshenqeti, 2014; Gill et al., 2008). Interviews also provided a more natural way to gain deeper understanding (Alshenqeti, 2014; Gill et al., 2008). Responses given before action research cycles were compared to those given after both implementations of the target strategy.

Focus Groups

In order to address the research questions of how the implementation of strategies aimed at increasing family engagement in middle school at SECS are described by families and affect the culture and climate, the researcher chose to conduct focus groups with SECS families.

“Focus groups are used for generating information on collective views, and the meanings behind those views” (Gill et al., 2008). Focus groups can also help to uncover participants’ experiences and give the researcher a deeper understanding of their beliefs as they discuss these experiences with the group (Gill et al., 2008; Powell & Single, 1996). Focus groups provided SECS families with a safe space to discuss their thoughts and opinions. The researcher chose focus groups as opposed to one-on-one interviews with families to gain perspective on the many different experiences families had with the school and to facilitate more meaningful conversations related to their experiences with family engagement in middle school.

Observation Notes

Observation notes are a common way for researchers to capture the social phenomena they are studying in their specific populations and contexts (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). For this action research study, the researcher kept notes and wrote down observations throughout the action research process of anything that transpired related to the research topic of family engagement in middle school at SECS. Notes were taken and observations were made at parent meetings, grade level meetings, faculty meetings, throughout the school day, and during intervention implementation. If a family member contacted the researcher about any issue related to the research, the researcher kept detailed notes about the conversation. This was the same for any email received related to the research. These notes were taken before action research began, during the action research cycles, and after the cycles had concluded. The researcher acted as an

overt observer. Those participating in the research knew the researcher was taking notes to collect data for the action research teams (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). To use observation notes as a qualitative data source, the researcher made every attempt to record anecdotal notes and remove any assumptions or draw any conclusions (Glanz, 2014). Trends throughout the evolution of the action research process were analyzed to help address the research questions.

Additional Qualitative Data: A Result of the Design Process

In the design team meetings, the action research team members took resources they had researched and been given in their professional learning session to create supporting documents for SECS's implementation of student led conferences. One of these forms, the Post-Conference Reflection Sheet, (Appendix F) ended up being rich in information for the action research team members and researcher. The Reflection Sheet was to be completed the evening after the conference by the student and the parent. It was designed for both students and parents to answer the following reflection questions or sets of questions:

1. What did you enjoy most about the conference and why?
2. How are you feeling about your action plan? What might be the easiest step to accomplish? The hardest? If you find yourself struggling, who can you ask for help with revisiting your action plan?
3. How did you feel before, during, and after the conference? Do you feel more motivated to reach your goals (or help your child reach their goals) for the next quarter?
4. I feel this helped (or will help) me talk about school more at home: Yes or No and why or why not.

The purpose of the document was to have the team reflect on the process, but also to serve as a reminder that all parties have some accountability for helping the student be

successful. The answers to these questions were simply too rich for the action research teams to ignore. Because they saw that student and parent answers to these questions helped to directly address the research questions, the Post-Conference Reflection Sheet data was reviewed and analyzed.

Data Analysis

At the conclusion of each pre- and post-interview and focus group session, the data were analyzed. Analyzing data as it is being collected is a common method used in action research and qualitative data analysis (Glanz, 2014). Since all sessions were held via Zoom and recorded, the researcher was able to re-watch each session to work to develop a coding system for the data. Interviews and focus groups were analyzed and themes were identified that directly addressed the research questions. The action research teams reviewed the themes identified by the researcher to ensure they were accurate representations of the interview and focus group data and that they worked to answer the research questions.

Coding is a way for researchers to take their vast amounts of data from qualitative collection methods and reduce them to categories or themes and identify patterns (Glanz, 2014). “Coding involves attaching meaning to a particular scene, document, or event” (Glanz, 2014, p. 166). Interview and focus group questions' answers for families and SECS faculty were coded by theme. Pre- and post-implementation trends were noted and compared to measure the impact of implementation of the target strategy. Data from researcher observations, researcher notes, and post-conference reflection sheets were analyzed and connections were made to the themes identified from the focus groups and interviews. These qualitative data measures helped triangulate the data.

Reliability and Validity

Collecting multiple forms of data for qualitative research contributes to the reliability and validity of a study (Morse, 2015; Powell & Single, 1996). With more data collection methods comes more natural overlap of the data, thus increasing the rigor of the study (Morse, 2015). This action research project used four types of qualitative data collection to increase its reliability and validity. The research questions, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework kept the action research teams focused on addressing the specific phenomenon it was designed to investigate (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Morse, 2015), thus increasing the credibility of the data. The researcher acknowledging their biases served as another way to ensure trustworthiness (Alshenqeeti, 2014).

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the small sample size of the families participating in the research. SECS was a small school and therefore had small class sizes. At the time this research was conducted, the average class size in middle school was twenty-one. A fewer number of families overall equated to a smaller sample size for family participants. In future research, a larger sample size could provide better information in the area of family engagement at the middle school level.

Another limitation was the small number of faculty and staff. Because SECS had only one class at each grade level, many members of the action research design team were also members of the action research implementation team. Ideally, there would not have been so much overlap in these two groups. Additionally, the researcher, who was the principal of SECS at the time this research was conducted, was an active member of the design team. The researcher would have ideally served solely in the role of the researcher. If SECS had additional

administrators, the principal would not have been a member of the action research design team. Because this action research had impacts on overall school culture and climate, the researcher felt it was important to have an administrator included as a member of the action research design team.

Researcher Subjectivity

While I never taught middle school myself, I do have eight years of experience teaching in lower elementary grades at SECS. Now that I am a principal of a school with students in grades Pre-K to eighth, I have a deeper understanding of instruction in middle grades. Because I have experience in this context teaching elementary school and now have a deep knowledge of leading a middle school, I can see the differences in the relationships with families at the different levels firsthand.

The decrease in family engagement as students rise in grade level is not a new phenomenon and not one that is exclusive to SECS. While there are many contributing factors to the decrease, I do feel strongly that teachers at all grade levels at SECS should work to promote the values that Catholic schools are most known for, including building meaningful relationships with all types of families to best support the learning and needs of the students.

Privileges, Power, Point-of-View

As the principal of SECS, I realize that I have the power to influence participants in the action research, including both families and teachers. Because of the privilege of my position, both groups are used to valuing what I say, asking for my guidance in any given situation, or even used to having to do as I say. I had to balance the roles of principal and researcher delicately and be aware of the fact that I was still in both roles.

I acknowledge a bias I have is that prior to the action research process, I did not necessarily agree with the more school-centric ways some teachers choose to engage the families of their students. There is clear data that shows families are less involved as their children rise in grade level at SECS. I let that information speak for itself instead of using my observations and certain conversations with middle school families to present the case to the action research team and participating families as a problem that exists in our school.

Growing up as a middle-class white female, I was in the minority of my school population. Our schools' students were approximately 50% African American or Black. White students comprised the majority of the remaining 50% of students, followed by Hispanic/Latino, and all other races. While my life has had more privilege than others, yes, my position does not necessarily influence my views and opinions on family engagement and relationships with families in schools. I feel the same about more traditional views of family involvement versus engagement no matter what the socioeconomic status or demographic makeup is of a family. All families deserve the right to partner with their child's school to make their child as successful as they can be no matter what that looks like from family to family. Having parents who were by no means engaged with my schooling is not where this study gets its influence, but from my professional experiences at SECS.

Chapter Summary

This chapter addressed the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis for this action research study. An overview of the action research design was given, and a rationale was provided for the use of qualitative research. Data collection methods were outlined and research was provided to support their use in the study. The action research timeline was described in detail. A rationale for why each member of the action research teams was chosen

and their roles and responsibilities were described. The chapter also included the context in the time of COVID-19. Reliability and validity of data collection, limitations of the research, and researcher subjectivity were also addressed. The next chapter gives a detailed overview of the case and defines the problem within the context of the site and district. The story of the action research process is also outlined in detail.

CHAPTER 4

THE CASE

The Context

Southeast Catholic School (SECS) has been providing a quality Catholic education to families in the northeast region of a southern state for 70 years. SECS is located in Cooper County on a new, 57-acre campus which is shared with the church. In the fall of 1949, Southeast Catholic Church opened the school with 35 students in grades one through six on the bottom floor of the church's rectory. Religious sisters staffed the school until 2005. By then, the school's enrollment had increased to over four hundred students. In 2004, a new pastor arrived to lead Southeast Catholic Church. SECS spent eight more years at its original location in downtown Coopertown, and in 2012 opened the doors of its new campus and started the school year with 237 students (School Website, 2021). SECS had fairly high leadership turnover. Enrollment had been falling for quite some time, and the move to a new campus farther from the center of town made SECS less visible in Coopertown. Table 3.4 from Chapter three shows enrollment trends for the last 12 years at SECS. Change in principal leadership is also indicated by a color code. A new pastor of Southeast Catholic Church was also named in January of 2017.

Table 3.4 from Chapter Three

Enrollment and Leadership Turnover at SECS

2010 - 2011	2011 - 2012	2012 - 2013	2013 - 2014	2014 - 2015	2015 - 2016	2016 - 2017	2017 - 2018	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022
275 (est.)	254	237	220	200	181	174	154	143	153	175	180

SECS and Cooper County

As of the 2021-2022 school year, SECS was a private, Catholic school serving 179 students in grades Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-k) through eight located in Coopertown. The 179 students at SECS represented 128 families. Seventy-one families had students only in lower school (grades Pre-K through five), 20 families had students in both lower school and middle school (grades six through eight), and 37 families had students only in middle school. As of 2019, Coopertown had an estimated population of 128,000 people and was continuing to rise (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Most of the population was white, followed by black, then Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and other (County Website, 2019). Many types of people lived in Coopertown; from university students to young families to single retirees. The estimated median household income in 2019 was \$38,623 (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Major stable employers in the area at the time were The University, Area Regional Hospital/Healthcare, and The Cooper County School District.

SECS: Demographics and The District

In the 2021-2022 school year, SECS was part of The Catholic School District, which served 7,816 students in 18 schools: 15 elementary and middle (Pre-K-8th grade) and 3 senior high (grades 9-12) (District Website, 2021). Most District schools were located in the greater metro area. SECS was one of two outliers in the district. Catholic students made up 72.8% of SECS's population. This compared to 88% of all students throughout the district (District Website, 2021). SECS's address was in Cooper County, but it is important to note that they served students from seven surrounding counties. Of SECS's 179 students, 131 (72.8%) of them lived in Cooper County. The student population was made up of 51.7% white students, 25% Hispanic/Latino students, 9.4% Asian students, 8.3% multi-racial students, 4.4% black students,

and 1.1% of students identified their race as other. A breakdown of how the student population compared to the overall racial makeup of Cooper County is included in Figure 4.2. 35.2% of SECS students met eligibility for the national free and reduced lunch program in the 2021-2022 school year. This compared with 8% of all Catholic School District students (District Website, 2021) and an average of 79.8% of all Cooper County students (State Department of Education, 2020). While many families at SECS spoke a primary language other than English in their homes, only one of the students from the 2021-2022 school year was an English-language learner. While SECS did not have a gifted program, the school did have a resource teacher who provided enrichment lessons to students who needed more of a challenge. These students were identified using a combination of data sets including teacher evaluations, grades, standardized test scores, reading inventory scores, and ranking for title funding services. Twenty students received enrichment services in the 2021-2022 school year. Forty-three students received tutoring services in reading and math provided by Title I tutors. The school's resource teacher also worked with all students with identified needs. SECS did not have special education services, though they followed the Student Success Team (SST) model to provide support and accommodations for students. Approximately 35 SECS students had accommodations provided and were on an SST.

Figure 4.1

SECS Student Races by Percentage 2021-2022

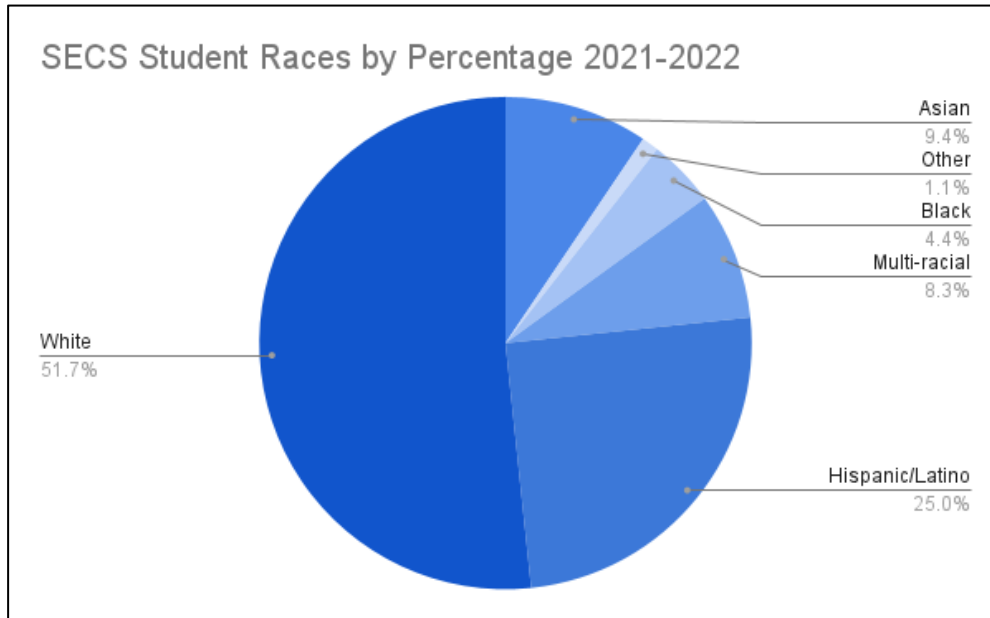
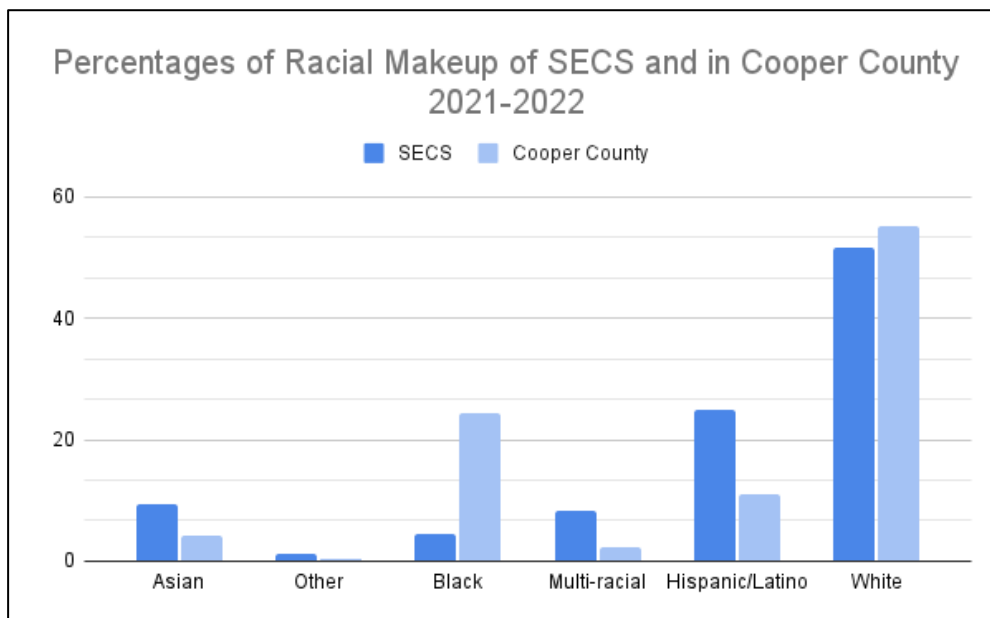


Figure 4.2

Percentages of Racial Makeup of SECS and in Cooper County 2021-2022

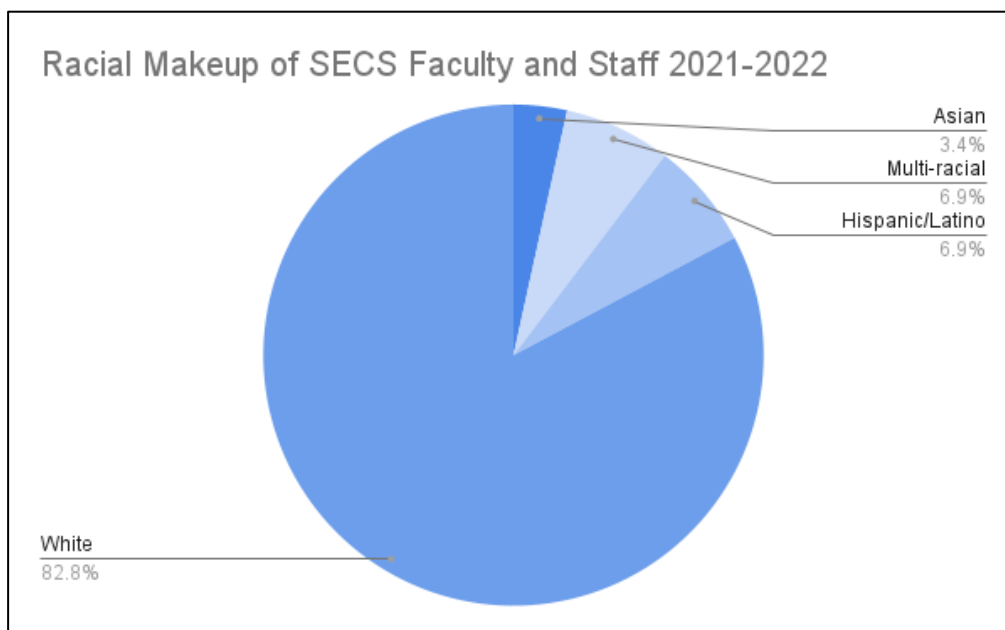


The Faculty and Staff

In the 2021-2022 school year, SECS had 29 faculty members. Fifteen faculty and staff members were full-time employees while 14 were part-time employees. SECS's 18 core teachers held a combined 271 years of experience overall with 102 of those years being served at SECS. All SECS teachers were certified and 33.3% held Master's degrees. Eight teachers served lower school students in the classroom and taught all subjects to their students. Non-Catholic teachers did not teach religion but switched with another lower school teacher to teach either science or social studies. Three teachers served middle school students and taught two subjects each. SECS had seven enrichment teachers in 2021-2022 that served all grade levels. 76.7% of all faculty and staff members at SECS were Catholic. One was male and 28 were female. Four were Hispanic/Latino, and 25 were non-Hispanic/Latino. The races represented were 79.3% white, 17.2% multi-racial, and 3.4% Asian.

Figure 4.3

Racial Makeup of SECS Faculty and Staff in 2021-2022



Problem Framing Based on the Site

As students transitioned from lower school to middle school at SECS, family engagement decreased. Analysis of multiple different survey results, family attendance at school meetings, and family participation in the required volunteer program showed that this was the case. Informal observations and conversations between middle school parents and administration also demonstrated that once their children enter middle school, engagement became more of a challenge. Conversations between teachers and administration, administration's observations of teachers, and administration's participation in select SST meetings and parent-teacher conferences at all grade levels also helped to demonstrate that there was more of a disconnect between home and school once SECS students enter middle school.

Volunteer Program Participation

Each family enrolled at SECS was required to participate in 20 volunteer hours annually. Hours were tracked through verified reporting forms and then logged in the student information system. The school provided many opportunities for families to get involved with the school. Families could choose to help with major fundraisers, chair a committee, assist in the classroom, bring supplies needed, host classroom holiday parties, assist at sporting events, chaperone field trips and dances, present to classes in their area of expertise, and so much more. In analyzing the volunteer hours report generated for the 2018-2019 school year, a total of 2,153.8 hours were reported representing 83 families. Families with students in lower school represented 76.4% of total volunteer hours. Families with middle school students only were recorded as attending meetings about 50% of the time, whereas families with only lower school students attended meetings over 70% of the time. Their attendance at other school events was much higher than

families with only middle school students. Middle school only families had a higher participation in volunteering at sports events and middle school specific events, such as dances.

When reviewing the volunteer hours report for the 2019-2020 school year, lower school families heavily outweighed middle school families in volunteering their time. Lower school families were more present in the school and at events, whereas middle school families tended to do more donating or sending in items. For the 2019-2020 school year, a total of 2,116.5 hours were reported for 106 of SECS’s 109 families.

In the 2020-2021 school year, families were not held to the 20 hour requirement due to restrictions put in place because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 1,200.5 total hours were logged with an average of 9.85 hours per family. Many families chose not to participate at all and did not log any hours. In 2020-2021, middle school families showed a higher average number of volunteer hours, although 52% of the total hours for middle school were contributed by only three families. A breakdown of participation for each year is included in Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3.

Table 4.1

Family Volunteer Hours 2018-2019

2018-2019			
Family Type	Number of Families	Total Volunteer Hours	Average Number of Volunteer Hours Per Family
Middle School Students Only	23	509	22.1
Lower School Students Only	48	1218	25.4
Middle School and Lower School Students	12	427	35.6

Table 4.2*Family Volunteer Hours 2019-2020*

2019-2020			
Family Type	Number of Families	Total Volunteer Hours	Average Number of Volunteer Hours Per Family
Middle School Students Only	33	595	18
Lower School Students Only	55	1718	31.2
Middle School and Lower School Students	18	398.5	22.1

Table 4.3*Family Volunteer Hours 2020-2021*

2020-2021			
Because of COVID-19 restrictions, SECS did not enforce volunteer requirements this year			
Family Type	Number of Families	Total Volunteer Hours	Average Number of Volunteer Hours Per Family
Middle School Students Only	30	312.5	10.42 <i>162/312.5 hours comes from 3 families</i> 13.33% of MS only families had 0 hours
Lower School Students Only	71	608.5	8.57 7% of LS only families had 0 hours
Middle School and Lower School Students	21	280.5	13.36 14.29% of MS and LS families had 0 hours

The data in Tables 4.1 and 4.2 clearly shows how many more hours lower school families were volunteering at SECS. Even families with students in both lower school and middle school had a higher average amount of volunteer hours than those with just middle school students. It is also important to note that 42% of the 595 volunteer hours for middle school only families from 2019-2020 is made up of just five families' hours. The remaining 58% of hours for middle

school only families in 2019-2020 was distributed between the remaining 28 families. Hours for lower school only families from 2019-2020 were much more evenly distributed, excluding one outlier family that contributed 101.5 hours. The data from the 2020-2021 school year does not present a good picture of a typical school year because of so many restrictions due to COVID-19 that caused SECS to temporarily suspend the volunteer hour requirement.

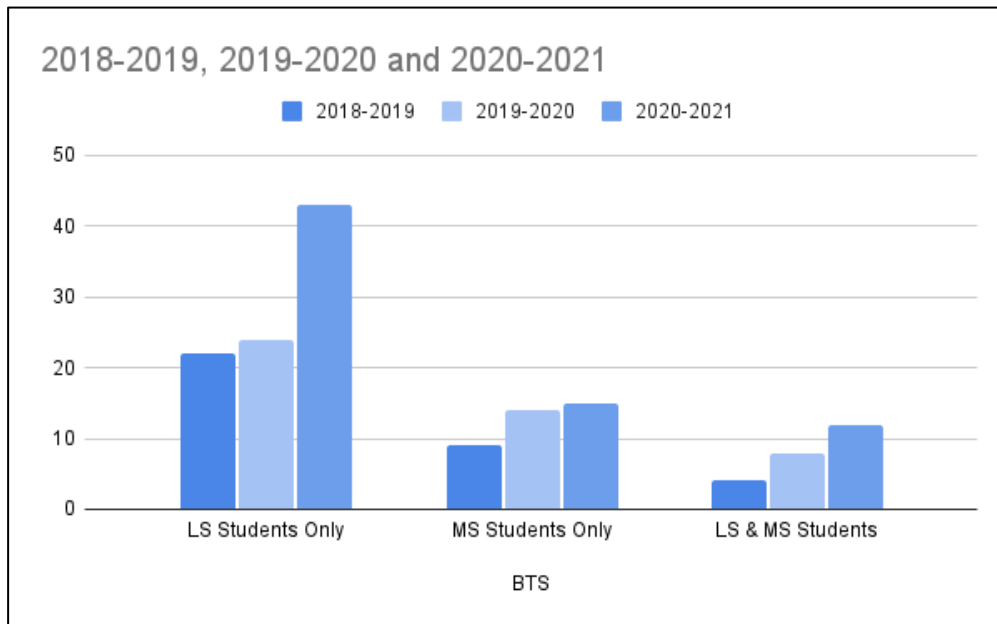
Attendance at School Meetings

Back-to-School Night

A total of 35 families attended the 2018-2019 Back-to-School Night. Twenty-two of the 35 families had students in lower school only. Nine attendees had only middle school students and four had both middle school and lower school students. A total of 46 families attended the 2019-2020 Back-to-School Night. Twenty-four of the 46 families had students only in lower school. Fourteen attendees had only middle school students, and eight had students in both lower school and middle school. In 2020-2021, Back-to-School Night was hosted online via Zoom. A total of 70 families attended. Forty-three families had students in lower school only. Fifteen attendees had only middle school students, and 12 had both middle school and lower school students.

Figure 4.4

Family Attendance at Back-to-School Night



Family and School Association (FASA) Meetings

In the 2018-2019 school year, FASA hosted three regularly scheduled meetings: one on October 2, 2018, one on February 26, 2019, and one on May 14, 2019. Of 22 families that attended the October meeting, 13 had only lower school students, four had only middle school students, and five had both lower school and middle school students. Of 32 families that attended the February meeting, 22 had only lower school students, four had only middle school students, and six had both lower school and middle school students. Of 27 families that attended the May meeting, 14 had only lower school students, 10 had only middle school students, and three had both lower school and middle school students.

FASA was able to host two of its three scheduled meetings for the year in 2019-2020. The meeting in May was canceled due to COVID-19 and school closings. The first meeting was on October 1, 2019, and the second meeting was on February 25, 2020. Twenty-one families

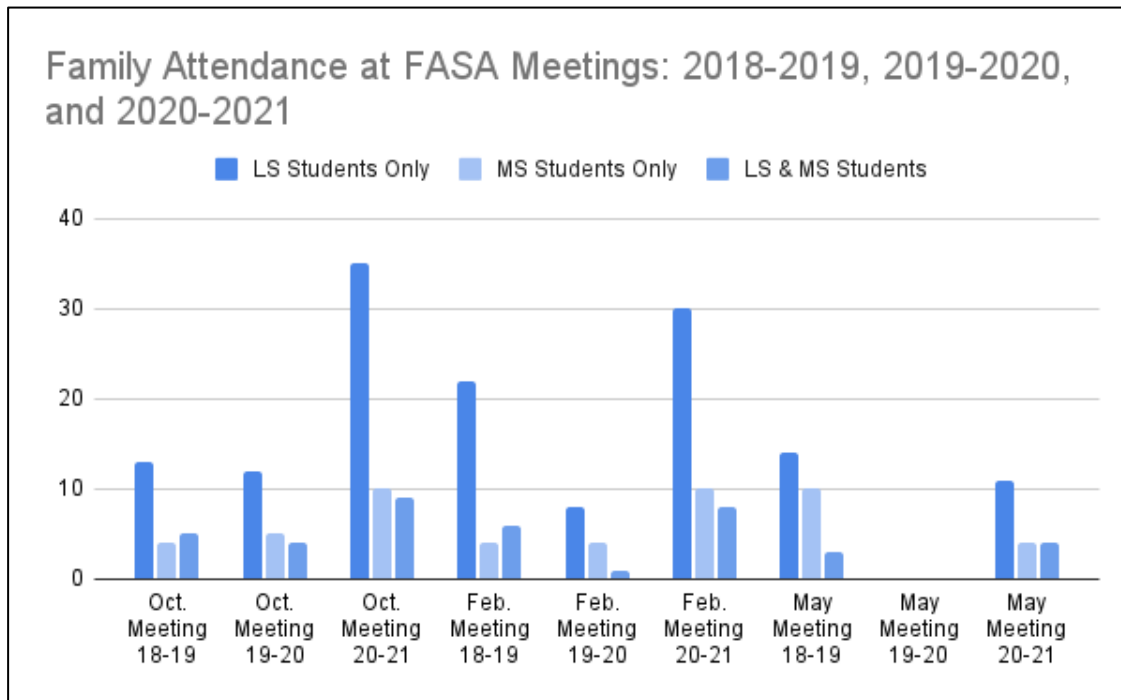
attended the October meeting. Of the 21 families, 12 had only lower school students, five had only middle school students, and four had both lower school and middle school students.

Thirteen families attended the February meeting. Of the 13 families, eight had only lower school students, four had only middle school students, and one had both lower school and middle school students.

In the 2020-2021 school year, all three FASA meetings were hosted online via Zoom. Attendance rose at every meeting of the year while offered online. Fifty-four families attended the October meeting. Of the 54 families, 35 had only lower school students, 10 had only middle school students, and nine had both lower school and middle school students. Forty-eight families attended the February meeting. Of the 48 families, 30 had only lower school students, 10 had only middle school students, and eight had both lower school and middle school students. Of 19 families that attended the May meeting, 11 had only lower school students, four had only middle school students, and four had both lower school and middle school students.

Figure 4.5

Family Attendance at FASA Meetings



Strategic Planning Survey Responses

In 2018, SECS conducted a survey to help inform a new strategic plan. Faculty and staff, families (including grandparents), community stakeholders, and middle school students were surveyed. While the survey focused on each section of the strategic plan, for the purposes of this research, only responses to the following three questions were analyzed:

1. What do you perceive are the needs of our school in the area of culture and community?
2. What do you perceive are the needs of our school in the area of communication?
3. What would you like to see changed in our school?

A summary of responses is included in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4*Summary of Strategic Planning Survey Responses*

Question	Faculty Responses	Family and Stakeholder Responses	Middle School Student Responses
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on family engagement - Increase efforts to be more inclusive to new, non-Catholic, and non-white families - More community outreach - Modify or introduce new ways for different grade levels to connect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engage families more with the school - Do a better job of engaging families - More focus on engaging non-English speakers - More community involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More activities out in the community - Have more parents help
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More community outreach - Bring back traditional printed newsletter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Publish event details sooner - Consider more print options - Bring back weekly video announcements made by kids 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need more help from teachers - Need to know about things sooner - Bring back video announcements
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>It is the parents' responsibility to learn about requirements</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase family involvement - Be more welcoming to different types of families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More teachers than we have now - Different teachers

Faculty Responses

There were 11 responses to the question about improving culture and community. Of the 11 responses, three mentioned focusing on family engagement and increasing efforts to be more inclusive to new, non-Catholic, and non-white families. Other responses included more community outreach as well as some suggestions for changing current systems for cross-grade level connections. Three responses were “NA” or “We are doing great.” Family involvement was the most prominent theme in the teachers’ responses to improving culture and community, demonstrating they were aware SECS could improve in this area.

There were nine responses to the question about improving communication. Five responses were “NA” or that communication was adequate. Other responses included more community outreach and the suggestion for a traditional printed newsletter. Responses to this question showed that faculty and staff felt SECS’s communication practices were meeting families’ needs.

Of 10 responses to the question about what they would like to see changed in our school, four were directly related to enrollment, two were directly related to the physical space, and three were “NA.” The reply that stood out during the analysis was, “Parents need to become more aware of what is required for each student in each grade.” This reply made it clear that this responder felt gaining knowledge was the responsibility of the families.

Family and Stakeholder Responses

Of 22 responses to the question regarding needs in the area of culture and community, eight were directly related to engaging families more or better with the school. Of those eight responses, four were focused on suggesting SECS improve its efforts to involve our non-English speaking families. Four responses suggested more community involvement, eight were “I don’t know,” “NA,” or “We are fine,” and two were targeted at specific current programs or practices. A high response from families that suggested SECS could improve on involving all families further demonstrated there was an existing problem in this area.

Most of the responses from families and stakeholders to the question about improving communication were not relevant to family engagement. Relevant suggestions were to publish event details sooner and to consider more print options. Of the 23 responses to this question, 12 were “NA,” “No suggestions at this time,” or “We are informed.” One reply did request that

SECS bring back the weekly video announcements its students used to film and were then shared with the community.

The 25 responses to the question about what families and stakeholders would like to see changed varied from building an awning over the carpool line, uniform complaints, grievances about sharing space with the church, and included many other personal suggestions. Five responses were either “NA” or “No suggestions.” Two responses related to family engagement mentioned being more welcoming to different types of families and increasing family involvement. Of the 20 given suggestions for changes, the two involving family engagement were the only recurring suggestions. Every other reply was about a different, singular issue.

Middle School Student Responses

While responses from sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders were less specific than those of the adults surveyed, their answers still offered great insight into areas where there was room for SECS to improve its family engagement strategies in middle school. Though response numbers were high and ranged from 44 to 45 responses for each of the three questions, most responses were “NA” or “I don’t know.”

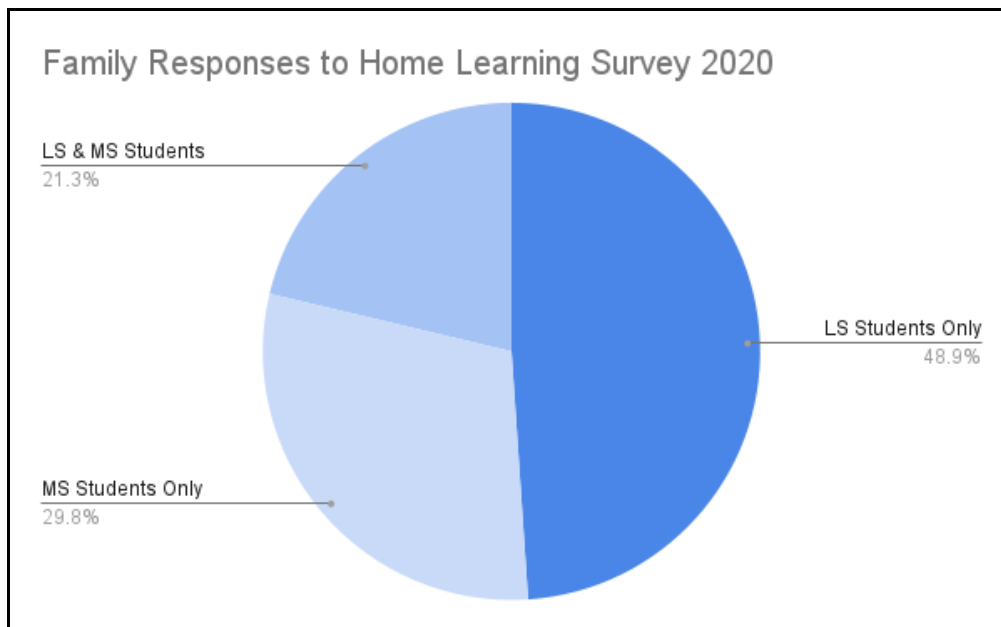
In the area of culture and community, middle school students suggested more activities to get them involved with the wider community such as service projects and field trips. One student responded that they would like to “Have more parents help.” In the area of communication, students expressed a need for more help from their teachers, more timely communications, and stated that they missed making video announcements. Several students noted that they would like to see the middle school teachers change or that they would like to have more teachers than they currently had.

Home Learning Survey Responses

At the conclusion of the 2019-2020 school year, SECS families were sent a survey to gather their feedback on their experiences with home learning due to school closures and COVID-19. Of 109 total families, 47 responded. Of the 47 responses, 14 families had only a middle school student. Twenty-three had only a lower school student, and 10 had both a lower school and middle school student.

Figure 4.6

Family Responses to Home Learning Survey 2020



A much higher response rate was expected to a survey about such an important topic and one that families had plenty of opinions about during the process. Even for such an important time to offer feedback, middle school families fell short on participation. Further analysis of participation results shows that family participation decreases from sixth-grade to eighth-grade, demonstrating that engagement decreases the older students get.

Table 4.5

Family Responses to Home Learning Survey 2020 by Grade Level

Grade	Total Number of Students	Number of Survey Responses	Percent Participation in Survey
6	19	12	63.2%
7	20	8	40.0%
8	19	6	31.5%

Catholic Identity Survey Responses

Each year, SECS’s district asks specific stakeholder groups to complete a survey that reflects on each school’s Catholic Identity. The survey was not sent intentionally from the district during the 2019-2020 school year but was sent at the end of the 2020-2021 school year. Of 114 total families, there were 64 responses. 65.6% of the families who responded had a student in lower school only. Middle school grades had participation above 25% at all three grade levels. Figure 4.7 and Table 4.6 show the response distribution of each group.

Figure 4.7

Family Responses to Catholic Identity Survey 2021

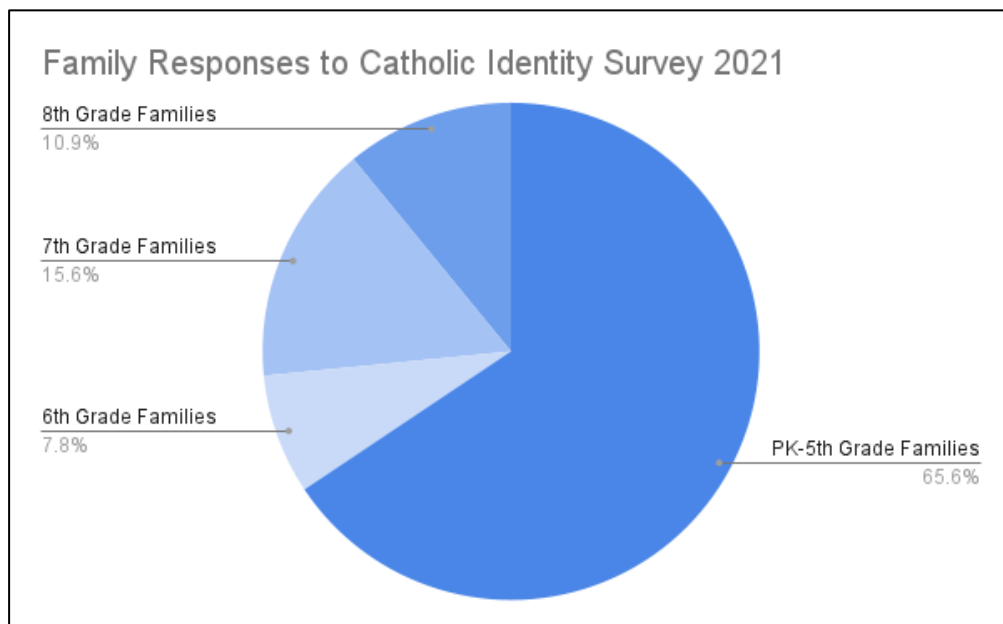


Table 4.6*Family Responses to Catholic Identity Survey 2021 by Grade Level*

Grade	Total Number of Students	Number of Survey Responses	Percent Participation in Survey
Pre-K through 5	114	42	36.8%
6	18	5	27.8%
7	20	10	50.0%
8	20	7	35%

District Comparisons

In order to place SECS’s middle school family engagement in the context of the other district elementary schools, the researcher sent two questions to all of the elementary principals:

1. How does family engagement change in your school from elementary to middle school?
2. What strategies do you use to enhance family engagement at the middle school level?

Of 14 principals, 10 replied. A summary of their responses is in Tables 4.7 and 4.8. Strategies that SECS already had in place are highlighted.

Table 4.7*District Comparisons for Middle School Family Engagement, Schools 1-3*

School	Does engagement drop from LS to MS?	Is the drop significant?	Other factors?	Specific MS Strategies?
School 1	Y	N	Non-working parents are more involved Offer a lot of opportunities to appeal to all	Clubs, active HSA, parent coffee before retreats, dances, Christmas party
School 2	Y	Y	Birth order matters, first or only child = more involved family	Social media, student led conferences, research on the MS-aged child shared weekly, hosting speakers on MS issues, adjust times to accommodate, e-communication for grades, contact phone call week 1 of school
School 3	Y	Y	Less in person/ at school for MS families	MS students serve breakfast for parents, graduation family breakfast, student led conferences, concerts and plays, weekly MS newsletter

Table 4.8

District Comparisons for Middle School Family Engagement, Schools 4-10

School	Does engagement drop from LS to MS?	Is the drop significant?	Other factors?	Specific MS Strategies?
School 4	Y	N		Service opportunities LS is too young for, overnight retreats with parent chaperones, dances, graduation breakfast, parents for career day, MS committee, monthly MS-only communications
School 5	Y	Y	Students don't want their parents around as much in MS	STREAM night, curriculum night, student led conferences, come in as experts/ presenters, regular email updates
School 6	Y	Y	Family concerns shift in MS to grades and peers Still committed parents, just a smaller number in MS	Student led conferences, goal setting, service projects, competitions for fundraisers, etc.
School 7	N	N	Less in person/at school for MS families Parents who have been enrolled longer lead larger events Family concerns shift in MS to grades Less communication goes home in MS MS parents are highly active in MS athletics	Concerts and plays, each grade represented on advisory council, e-communication for grades/behavior, research on MS-aged child shared regularly, student led conferences
School 8	Y	N	LS is more in the class/school and MS is more outside the class/ school Parents want more independence for their child	Mandatory volunteer hours/program, academic nights
School 9	Y	N	MS students take more responsibility (e.g. the teacher emails the student and copies the parent)	Students involved in conferences, students have Google accounts, 8 th grade parent committee for special events for 8 th graders, training for parents on school programs, etc., specific events for MS parents to chair
School 10	Y	Y	Birth order matters, parents most engaged when events are specific to MS or when their child is very interested in it	Parents chair MS specific events, MS only drama performance, MS Stations of the Cross, MS only dances, retreats, and class Mass, student led conferences

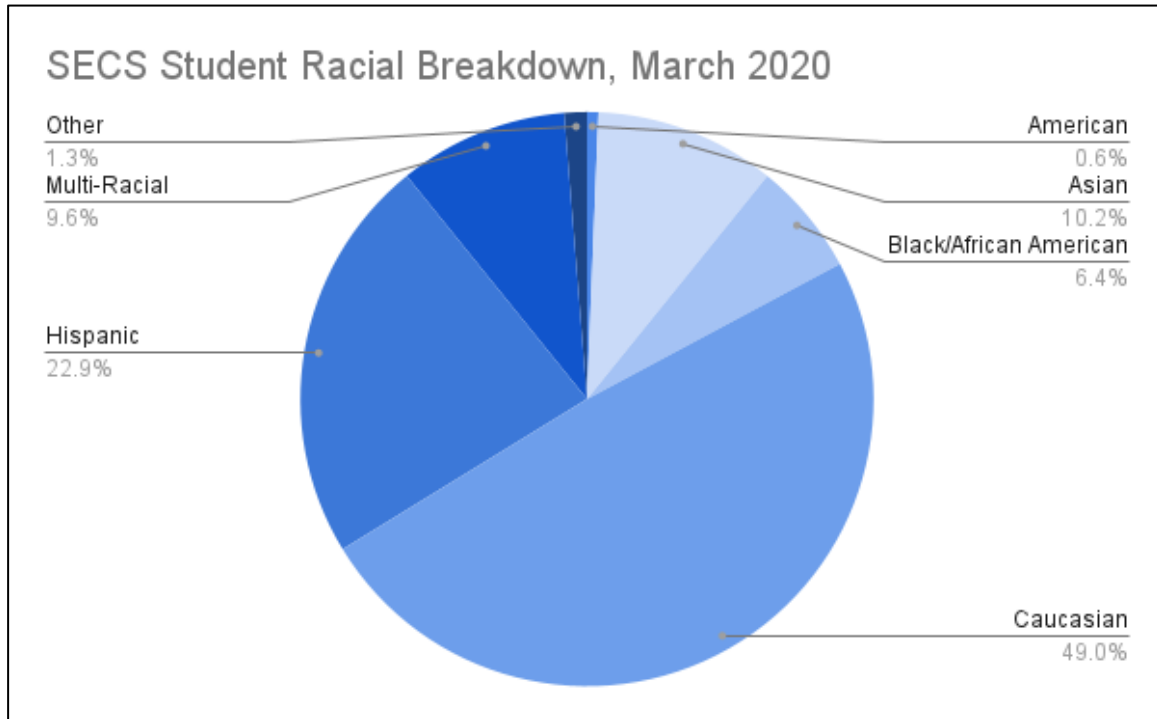
In comparing SECS with other schools in the district, it was clear that the other schools had more concrete strategies in place for engaging their middle school families even though they also saw a drop in engagement from lower school to middle school. Analyzing the principals' responses made it clear that SECS had room for improvement in this area.

Problem Framing Based in the Context of COVID-19

On March 13, 2020, SECS announced that it would be closing for in-person instruction and would make the transition to digital teaching and learning until further notice. SECS was located in Cooper County on a new, 57-acre campus which was shared with the church. At the time of the COVID-19 closure, SECS had 156 students in grades Pre-K through eighth. Thirty-five percent of SECS students qualified for free and reduced lunch. A breakdown of the races and ethnicities represented by the student body at that time is shown in Figure 3.3 from Chapter Three.

Figure 3.3 from Chapter Three

Racial Makeup of SECS Students in March of 2020



Prior to schools closing due to COVID-19, all of the schools in the Catholic School District had done some planning and preparation. Schools were required to submit Home Learning Plans to the superintendent for approval. Home Learning Plans identified which platforms would be used for student learning, attendance policies, other expectations for students learning from home, and outlined when teachers were available to families for support. When closures were announced, SECS was on its spring break holiday. On Monday, March 16, 2020 and Tuesday, March 17, 2020, teachers from SECS had workdays in the building to finalize each grade level’s plan for digital teaching and learning. SECS also hosted a materials pickup day so that students could come to get all of their textbooks and supplies. The first day of digital instruction began on Wednesday, March 18, 2020.

Making the transition from online to in-person instruction was not an easy one for a school that was used to having their families in the building as often as SECS. The first thing SECS acted on was making sure families without access to technology at home were granted it. A total of 21% of families required a device at home or equipment to hardwire their existing device. Because there would be little to no face-to-face interaction, SECS wanted to be certain their families had everything they needed to stay connected to the school for the remainder of the year.

Once SECS began online instruction, they did not require families to continue submitting volunteer hours. They also did not require, though strongly encouraged, Volunteer Program participation in the 2020-2021 school year. Though this was the case, trends of attendance and participation continued as noted above.

The Story and Outcomes

This action research study began in the fall of 2021 and ended in the winter of 2022. The fall of 2021 was spent gathering research, framing the problem in the context of the site, and placing SECS's level of family engagement in the context of the rest of the Catholic School District. In the spring of 2021, the researcher sent interest emails to those faculty and staff members who had been identified as ideal members of the design and implementation teams. Once interest was confirmed, the researcher sent consent forms to all action research team members. When all consent forms were signed collected, the researcher hosted an initial informational meeting for the action research team members. This meeting took place on May 12, 2021, and presented national research about family engagement at the middle school level, identified the research questions, and explained the conceptual and theoretical frameworks for the study. The problem within SECS was identified as longitudinal data on parent participation

in surveys as well as attendance at school meetings was presented to the action research team members. Team members also shared their own experiences and perceptions of different engagement levels of parents at SECS. The teams were given an overview of action research and how data collection and intervention for SECS would fit into the continuous action research cycles of construct, plan, take action, and evaluate action as outlined by Coghlan and Brannick (2014). The action research teams were also presented with the district comparison chart that summarized Catholic School District principals' responses to two targeted questions about the level of family engagement in their middle schools and specific strategies they had in place aimed to increase middle school family engagement at their respective schools.

Action Research Cycle One

Action Research Team Interviews: Pre-Implementation

The first action research cycle began with one-on-one interviews between the researcher and each design and implementation team member. The interviews took place between May 18, 2021, and May 26, 2021. The researcher used the interview protocol as shown in Appendix G. Initial interview questions were designed to get an idea of where action research team members stood in regard to their understanding of family engagement, what they felt the roles of parents, teachers, and students were in regard to family engagement, what they thought the school did well to promote family engagement, and what they felt the school could improve upon in regard to family engagement. Once all interviews were complete, the researcher coded for themes that would help guide the action research process. The researcher reviewed each interview three times to help identify these themes. The first pass was during the initial interviews. The researcher actively took notes during each session. Then, the .mp4 file was played while Google Voice Typing was used to transcribe the interviews. Themes were identified from conducting

and initially transcribing each interview. After the initial transcription, the researcher listened to the interview while actively typing corrections in the original transcription. This process allowed the researcher to narrow and/or group the themes identified after conducting the interviews and after the first transcription. A summary of the themes is outlined in Table 4.9.

Table 4.9

Pre-Implementation Action Research Team Interview Themes

Theme Identified (and by how many team members) <i>n</i> = 7	Sub-categories <i>n</i> = 7
There is room for improvement in the area of family engagement at the middle school level at SECS (7/7)	- None
Relationships are an important piece of family engagement (6/7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establishing and maintaining two-way communication is important (4/7) - The primary responsibility rests with the school (4/7) - More positive things should be communicated to families than are currently (6/7)
There should be a gradual release of responsibility from the parents/teachers to the student throughout middle school (5/7)	- The expectation of the increase in student responsibility from 5 th grade to 6 th grade is shocking for the students (3/7)
Highlighting the strengths of our students would be a good way to engage families in a positive way (5/7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More “fun” opportunities should be provided for families (3/7) - Conferences serve as a good way to have face-to-face time with families (5/7)
Family engagement looks different for different families based on their willingness, availability, and specific family needs (4/7)	- There is less engagement with the school from our Hispanic/Latino families (5/7)

From the initial findings from the first round of interviews, the researcher inferred that the action research team members were looking forward to working to improve family engagement in middle school at SECS. All team members recognized that there was room for improvement in this area. A majority of them recognized that relationship-building and communication were important and that they held the primary responsibility in this area. In

regard to the roles and responsibilities of the students, five of seven action research team members noted that there should be a gradual release of responsibility from the adults to the student over their three years in middle school. Team members recognized that engagement may look different for families based on specific family circumstances, but noted a lower amount of engagement with our Hispanic/Latino families. Five of seven interviewees stated that highlighting the strengths of our students could be a way to engage SECS middle school families in a positive way.

Action Research Teams Meeting Two

On July 1, 2021, the action research teams held a meeting where they reviewed the information presented at the initial meeting in May. Some additional longitudinal data was included since the 2020-2021 school year had ended and more was available at that time. The themes identified after the initial interviews in May, as well as the group's definitions of engagement, were shared with action research teams at this time. Connections to research and the literature review were noted. The group had an open discussion about what resonated with them about the themes. The teams reviewed the next steps, including an update that the team would only be implementing two action research cycles instead of three.

After the review and updates, two members of the action research implementation team who were not members of the design team left the meeting. The design team remained and talked about potential interventions that would address increasing family engagement in middle school at SECS while keeping their initial identified themes in mind. They started by reviewing the district comparison chart to see what other schools in The Catholic School District were implementing to help meet the goal of increased family engagement in middle school. During

this meeting and based on all current information, including the collective results of each interview, the action research design team chose the intervention of student led conferences.

Professional Learning for the Action Research Teams

On July 28, 2021, the action research teams participated in a professional learning session with Dr. B on student led conferences. Dr. B was a principal in The Catholic School District who had previously worked for a company that provided professional learning to teachers and school administrators across the country. Dr. B's school was one of those identified in the district comparison chart that used student led conferences as well. Dr. B began the session by showing a video of successful implementation of student led conferences. Action research team members were then asked to note what they saw during the sample video that covered standards in their curriculum. The action research teams learned about successful implementation of student led conferences as well as what is important to do to prepare before, during, and after the conference. The teams were provided multiple resources: videos, handouts, exemplars, portfolio samples, etc., that were intended to help SECS design how best student led conferences would work for them.

Action Research Design Team Meeting One

On August 3, 2021, the design team had a meeting where they designed what student led conferences would look like at SECS. During this meeting, the team completed the first version of the Student Led Conferences Responsibilities and Protocol document (Appendix H). This document outlined what should happen before, during, and after each conference for all parties: student, family, and SECS/teacher/facilitator. The team designed and built the first version of the Presentation Template that would guide their students through each conference. They also designed the Notes/Action Plan Template (Appendix I) which was for note-taking for all parties

during the conference. The final document designed was the Post-Conference Reflection Sheet for students and families (Appendix F) to complete together after the conference.

Parent Focus Group: Pre-Intervention

The initial parent focus group was held on September 17, 2021. A group of diverse sixth-grade mothers and fathers that had been identified by the action research design team met with the researcher to answer the initial focus group questions (Appendix G). These questions were designed to help the researcher understand how parents at SECS defined family engagement, how they felt connected to the school and why, how they felt the school defined family engagement, what strengths the school had in this regard, how they felt the school might be able to improve their efforts, and what families were currently doing at home to support their student's learning. After the conclusion of the meeting, the researcher identified and coded themes from the parent focus group and related them to the research and research questions. The same system that was used to code the action research team interviews was used to code themes from the initial parent focus group. The researcher actively took notes during the initial focus group. She then listened to the .mp4 and pulled initial codes while Google Voice Typing transcribed the focus group. The researcher then listened to the recording again while fixing typos from the initial transcription and solidifying themes. A summary of the findings is in Tables 4.10 and 4.11.

Table 4.10*Pre-Implementation Parent Focus Group Themes*

Theme Identified (and by how many focus group members) <i>n = 6</i>	Sub-categories <i>n = 6</i>
Parents feel connected to the school community because they feel welcomed into the school (6/6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - COVID-19 has affected this but beginning to open back up in the 2021-2022 school year (3/6) - Communication from the school is strong and consistent (5/6) - Parents are comfortable reaching out to teachers/administration (5/6)
There are a variety of ways for families to be engaged with the school (6/6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Volunteer program required, but many opportunities to meet family need/ability/availability (4/6)
Parents feel that SECS views family engagement in multiple ways (6/6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Volunteering, coming to events, etc. (5/6) - Keeping communication with the school open and following up with your child at home (3/6) - Participating in school activities related to our faith/talking about the faith at home (4/6)
Parents feel they do their part at home by staying aware of what is going on in the child's classes (5/6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They check Google Classroom/agendas (2/6) - They help with homework (3/6) - The follow up if contacted by a teacher (6/6) - They ask about their child's day/what they learned (3/6) - They advocate for their child if they see they need it (3/6)
It is important for parents to be connected to one another (4/6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Through social activities/school events (4/6) - Through sports/athletic events (3/6)
Things change as children age (4/6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They want parents around less (4/6) - Kids and parents get busier and it becomes harder to meet everyone's needs in the family (2/6) - It becomes harder for parents to help with schoolwork/homework (3/6)
The expectations of the middle school faculty are consistent and clear (3/6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - None
Administration sets an example for the teachers by being available, present, and communicative (3/6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - None

Families participating in the initial focus group all agreed that they felt welcomed to be in the school and that there were a variety of ways to be engaged with the school that met varying

abilities, availabilities, and needs. Focus group participants also all agreed that SECS viewed family engagement in multiple ways. Though this was the case, when probed for specific examples, almost all of their answers were more traditionally school-centric thoughts: coming to events, volunteering, responding to emails, and participating in school-organized faith formation activities with their child. Half of the participants noted that the administration sets the tone for culture and communication expectations and that they felt the expectations of the middle school faculty were clear and consistent across grade levels and enrichments. A majority of parents in the focus group stated that they do their part to stay connected at home by talking about and asking about school at home, following up with assignments, and keeping open communication with the teachers.

Table 4.11

Pre-Implementation Parent Focus Group Suggestions for Improvement

Ways Parents said SECS could Improve Engagement	
Related to Adult Social Events	Not Related to Adult Social Events
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easier access to one another’s information • Events like “moms’ night out” • An event that is specifically for middle school parents • Class socials • Adult service projects • Events where parents do not need to volunteer/where they can be hosted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After school activities other than sports/programs through extended day • Utilize the strengths of the Hispanic/Latino community and families • School performances • Career day to have parents in the building/somehow highlight the strengths of our parents • Having more events on nights and weekends so more people can come

Table 4.11 shows examples of what parents noted could be ways to improve family engagement in middle school at SECS. The researcher found it interesting that many of the suggestions were about how adults in the school community could be connected to one another.

Four of six participants noted that they felt a connection to other parents in their child's grade level, or in seventh- and eighth-grade, was highly important.

Intervention Implementation: Cycle One

The first round of student led conferences was implemented on September 30, 2021, and October 1, 2021. Due to scheduling conflicts, the initial student led conferences were led by the core middle school teachers only. If available, the three other implementation team members dropped in to observe a conference. The researcher observed six conferences facilitated by each of the three core middle school teachers. All conferences were held on the two scheduled conference days except for one. Family R2 did not show up for their scheduled conference time initially. The teacher rescheduled with the family and they did not show up a second time. The team was finally able to get them in on October 28, 2021. The three action research team members facilitating the conferences used initial versions of the SECS student led conferences documents and the Presentation Template to implement their conferences.

Action Research Teams Meeting Three

The action research teams came together to debrief action research cycle one and the implementation of student led conferences on November 30, 2021. At this meeting, the researcher shared her observations of the student led conferences with the team. They had an open discussion about what they felt worked well and what they might like to improve. Action research design team members reviewed all of the documents they had created and made changes as needed based on their reflection of the implementation of the conferences. The team reflected on their own roles related to the responsibilities that had been defined and noted specific areas that needed improvement as they moved into cycle two. They made a concrete plan for moving into action research cycle two that included the changes and improvements to the

Responsibilities and Protocols document. They decided it was best to create a Script for Facilitators (Appendix J). This was created by the researcher using team member feedback from this meeting, then reviewed and signed off on by the team members. The action research teams decided that they would not expand to seventh- and eighth-grade in cycle two at this time. The team did not feel there was enough time to prepare two additional grades and preferred to go through another action research cycle to be sure their changes had made improvements to the process before expanding to more grades.

Post-Conference Reflection Sheet Review

It was at this meeting that the team realized how much data the Post-Conference Reflection Sheet (Appendix F) completed by the parent and student together after the conference gave the team. The reflections made proved to give the action research teams great insight into how SECS sixth-grade families felt about and were affected by the student led conferences. Narrative results were read, reviewed, and grouped into positive, negative, neutral, or no response. After round one of implementation, of 25 sixth-grade families, 20 returned their post-conference reflection sheet. A summary of the findings from these reflection sheets is in Table 4.12.

Table 4.12*Post-Conference Reflection Sheet Answer Summary: First Implementation*

<i>n</i> = 20	Positive Student Response	Negative Student Response	Neutral Student Response	No Student Response	Positive Parent Response	Negative Parent Response	Neutral Parent Response	No Parent Response
Reflection Question 1	19	1	0	0	20	0	0	0
Reflection Question 2	18	0	2	0	18	1	0	1
Reflection Question 3	20	0	0	0	18	0	2	0
Reflection Question 4	17	1	2	0	17	1	2	0

Overall, families and students felt positive about their experience with the student led conferences. One student stated that they were relieved the presentation was over because they did not like talking in front of a group or about school. One of the 25 parents gave negative feedback and expressed their desire for the traditional parent-teacher conference model. A couple of families and students in each case had neutral responses like, “We already talk a lot about school at home.”

Researcher Notes, Cycle One

Throughout action research cycle one, the researcher took notes in a research journal. Notes were collected on anything the researcher felt could relate to or help inform the research process. This included interactions in person and via email with faculty and parents that did not happen within the scheduled interview or focus group sessions. These notes were coded in a way similar to that of the focus groups and interviews in that there were three reviews made to narrow down initial themes. The first review took place after initial themes from interviews and focus groups had been completed. Big ideas were pulled and highlighted. The second review of the

notes led to narrowing down and grouping similar ideas. The third review resulted in the final themes which are shown in Table 4.13.

Table 4.13

Researcher Notes: Themes from Action Research Cycle One

Theme from Researcher Notes: Cycle 1	Evidence
Teachers self-reflected on the role they played in family engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers noted that they “could/should communicate more,” especially about positive things about their students - Teachers noted that they held the primary responsibility to establish and maintain open communication with families - Responses to parent questions changed from redirecting to online resources to more direct communication
Teachers’ idea of engagement was beginning to evolve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers mentioned and suggested ways parents could support from home (designated study spot free of distractions, check agendas, etc.) during SST update meetings - Teachers began to recognize that engagement may look different for different families
Parents’ definition of family engagement follows a more traditional, school-centric model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents feel that those who are in the school a lot or bringing things to school are the most engaged - Parents made statements about not being able to always “attend things” because of work schedules, etc. - Parents who could not always attend events expressed concerns about meeting their volunteer hours requirement

Researcher Observations, Cycle One

The researcher was able to observe six conferences in action research cycle one facilitated by each of the three core middle school teachers. Detailed notes about actions and statements made by students, parents, and facilitators were typed as the student led conferences were taking place. These notes were coded by hand using the same process of three reviews as

the researcher had done to code themes from the researcher notes. Table 4.14 shows the overview of themes from researcher observations during cycle one.

Table 4.14

Researcher Observations: Themes from Action Research Cycle One

Theme from Observations: Cycle 1	Evidence
Students seemed confident leading their conferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continually used words like “proud” and phrases like “I have improved...” - Students were direct in saying what they needed from parents and teachers
Parents seemed pleased with their role in the conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents participated by asking questions and asking for clarifications from both the student and the teacher - Parents noted that they enjoyed that all parties had a responsibility that was clearly defined to help the student reach their goals - Parents made specific comments at the end of the conference about how proud they were of their child and that they were excited to help them
Teachers/facilitators had varying ways of facilitating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2/3 facilitators stopped after each growth area to discuss while 1/3 waited until the end of the conference to discuss both - 1/3 set a physical timer while 2/3 discreetly kept track of the time - 1/3 reviewed the expectations for the Action Plan document before the conference began - 1/3 recapped the action items for all parties at the end of the conference - There were varying expectations about a writing sample and what qualified as a quality work sample

After Cycle One, Before Cycle Two

Upon return from the Christmas holidays, the sixth-grade homeroom teacher met with the sixth-grade students for a session to review and adjust their goals. The teacher also discussed goal-setting with the students, focusing on educating them more about how their goals need to be measurable. The resource teacher led the sixth-graders in a lesson on choosing strong work

samples during their exploratory period on January 6, 2022. Action research team members continually reminded the students what they should be doing to prepare for the conference, including collecting meaningful work samples. One thing the action research team reflected on during their November meeting was that the students did not use writing in their presentations as the team had initially hoped. During sessions with students, the action research team was sure to reiterate the expectations for including a writing sample to the students. This important change was reflected in the next versions of the SECS student led conferences documents and on the students' Presentation Template.

The action research teams reviewed the updated SECS student led conference documents once again via Google Docs. Some comments were added that required clarifications, but the team all signed off on the existing version of the protocol and prepared to implement action research cycle two.

Action Research Cycle Two

Intervention Implementation: Cycle Two

The second round of student led conferences took place on January 26, 2022. All members of the implementation team facilitated conferences in this action research cycle. Each of the six facilitators had three or four conferences. They all used the most current versions of the SECS student led conferences documents for implementation, including the newly designed Script for Facilitators (Appendix J). The researcher was able to observe four conferences. She attempted to observe each of the new facilitators since she was unable to do so in the first round, but was only able to observe the technology teacher and resource teacher. The counselor had different start times which made it difficult for the researcher to add them in the observation schedule. Three families were unable to participate in conferences on the scheduled day. The

mother and father of Family G were both out of the country through February 3, 2022. Family H had a scheduling conflict and Family T was in quarantine due to two positive cases of COVID-19 in their home. All three conferences were rescheduled and implemented after the time the researcher wrote this dissertation.

Action Research Team Interviews: Post-Implementation

Post-implementation one-on-one interviews were conducted with each of the action research team members on January 27, 28, and 31, 2022. The researcher used the interview protocol in Appendix G. These questions were designed to assess if any changes had occurred for the action research team members in regard to their definition of family engagement; their relationship with families; and the roles and responsibilities of families/parents, students, or themselves. They were also asked to make specific personal reflections as well as to reflect on how the action research process had influenced them. Once all interviews were complete, the researcher transcribed and coded for themes using three reviews, just as she had done in the pre-implementation process. Notes were taken during the actual interviews. Next, a recording was played while Google Voice Typing transcribed the interviews. Finally, the researcher listened to the .mp4 while typing corrections in the original transcription. This process allowed for a thorough review of the interview data. A summary of the themes is outlined in Table 4.15.

Table 4.15

Post-Implementation Action Research Team Interview Themes

Theme Identified (and by how many team members) <i>n = 7</i>	Sub-categories <i>n = 7</i>
The action research process impacted the action research team members and their understanding of family engagement (7/7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The team members' definitions evolved to include home-based strategies (7/7) - The professional learning piece of the action research process impacted the team members (6/7) - The data identifying the problem impacted the team members (3/7) - The research surrounding the problem impacted the team members (4/7) - The action research cycles impacted the team members (4/7)
Relationships were positively affected by the action research process and implementation of student led conferences (7/7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The process and SLCs opened communication and either strengthened relationships or formed new, positive ones (7/7) - The process gave shared accountability (7/7) and helped to clarify roles and responsibilities to support engagement for parents, teachers, and students (5/7) - Students were honest and open with their teachers and families about their strengths and weaknesses (5/7) - The student led conferences provided more exposure to different students and/or their families (5/7)
Action research team members reflected on their own practice because of the action research process and implementation of student led conferences (5/7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Team members felt an increased sense of responsibility to help the student be successful (4/7) - Team members felt they wanted to improve teaching practices for their students based on what they learned from them in conferences (5/7)

All of the action research team members felt that their relationships with students and/or parents improved because of the action research process and implementation of student led conferences. They felt that it opened communication and clearly defined action steps to help the students, making it clear everyone was on the same page. They also all noted that the action

research process impacted their understanding of family engagement. Action research team members said that the professional development, research presented, and data presented to them helped their definition of family engagement evolve to include more home-based strategies. Five of seven participants stated that they reflected on their own practice because of the intervention of the target strategy and because of being a part of the action research process.

Parent Focus Group: Post-Intervention

The final parent focus group was held on January 28, 2022. The same group of parents from the pre-intervention focus group all attended this meeting. The researcher used the post-intervention focus group questions as shown in Appendix G. These questions were designed to see if parents' understanding of family engagement had changed as a result of the implementation of student led conferences at SECS. Parents were asked if they felt the school had made any changes in its efforts to engage families and if they felt connected to the school community and why. They were also asked to reflect on any changes in relationships or changes in behaviors of their students or teachers as a result of the process. Parents were also asked if they had made any changes to the way they engage with their child and the school from home.

After the post-intervention focus group, the researcher used the same method to code for themes as she had with the pre- and post-action research team interviews and pre-intervention parent focus group. Notes were taken during the initial meeting, the recording was played and transcribed using Google Voice Typing, and then the researcher played the .mp4 while making corrections to the transcriptions and finalizing themes. A summary of the post-implementation focus group findings is in Table 4.16.

Table 4.16*Post-Implementation Parent Focus Group Themes*

Theme Identified (and by how many focus group members) <i>n = 6</i>	Sub-categories <i>n = 6</i>
Student led conferences led to multiple positive benefits for students (6/6)	- None
Relationships between teachers and parents were not affected by the implementation of student led conferences (6/6)	- No drastic changes in connectedness with the school after implementation (3/6) - (2/6) parents did feel more connected because they could see and experienced more teacher support
Parents changed the way they supported their child at home because of their student's goal-setting and the team action plan (5/6)	- None

All parent participants stated that the conferences were beneficial to their children in a variety of ways. Five of six parents in the focus group noted that they changed how they supported their child at home because of the goals their child had set and because of the action plan created at the conference that defined their role in supporting their child. All of the participants stated that they did not feel their relationship with the teachers or facilitators had changed as a result of the implementation of student led conferences. Half of them did not feel any changes, positive or negative, in their connectedness with the school. Two parents did note that they felt a bit more connected because they could see the work and care the teachers had done to plan and prepare for the conferences.

Final Action Research Teams Meeting

The action research teams met one week after their second implementation of student led conferences on February 1, 2022, to complete their second cycle of action research. All members of the design and implementation teams were present. The teams invited four additional special

area teachers to observe the meeting. Of these four, three were able to attend. These teachers were invited because the team knew it would need more facilitators if student led conferences were expanded to include more grade levels and wanted them to understand more about the process for their future involvement.

At this meeting, the researcher started by sharing the themes identified from the post-implementation action research team interviews and post-implementation parent focus group. The team members discussed their reflections on both sets of outcomes. Together they reviewed all of the SECS student led conferences documents and templates and made final changes that reflected everything they had learned and adjusted throughout the action research process. Redundant information was removed from the Responsibilities and Protocols document to create the final version (Appendix K). Additional duties were also assigned in that same document to the teachers for after the conference to ensure that the facilitators come together to debrief action plans and goals in the future. A parent signature line was added to the goal-setting template (Appendix L). The last slide of the Presentation Template (Appendix M) was broken up into fewer slides, and the final prayer was written out so that families could participate in reciting it at the end of the conference. The team also wished to have the Notes/Action Plan (Appendix I) document be on one page instead of two. They felt that this would help families keep this a focus in their home if all of the information was on one side. That way, they could post it and be able to see all of the important information at once. The team also decided to take a suggestion from the parent focus group and add a spot for the student's current number/letter grade in each class to the Presentation Template (Appendix M).

A portion of the meeting discussion was centered around how the team could make this process more meaningful for our families who do not speak English. It was observed by those

facilitators who were in conferences with parents that did not speak English that much of the student’s time was spent translating and that there was minimal participation of the family member. The team discussed that a presentation template needed to be created in Spanish for Spanish-speaking families. They also decided that the middle school Spanish teacher would be assigned as the facilitator for future conferences with Spanish-speaking families so that the entire conference could be in their native language.

The group session closed with the final decision to continue to support the expansion of the program into the 2022-2023 school year. The teams decided that they would continue student led conferences with the current year’s sixth-graders when they were in seventh-grade, and introduce student led conferences to the rising sixth-graders when they enter middle school. The teams were excited about continuing expansion to even more grades in the coming years.

Post-Conference Reflection Sheet Review

An analysis of the Post-Conference Reflection Sheet after action research cycle two produced the results in Table 4.17.

Table 4.17

Post-Conference Reflection Sheet Answer Summary: Second Implementation

<i>n</i> = 19	Positive Student Response	Negative Student Response	Neutral Student Response	No Student Response	Positive Parent Response	Negative Parent Response	Neutral Parent Response	No Parent Response
Reflection Question 1	18	0	0	1	19	0	0	0
Reflection Question 2	18	0	0	1	17	0	1	1
Reflection Question 3	17	0	2	0	18	1	0	0
Reflection Question 4	13	0	1	5	11	1	0	7

After the second round of implementation, families and students again generally felt positive about their experience with the student led conferences. The number of negative student responses decreased and were still tied to being relieved that the conference was over. The same parent who had answered with negative responses after the first round of implementation again gave negative feedback and expressed their desire for the traditional parent-teacher conference model. A couple of families and students again answered neutral responses to the question about whether or not the conferences would help them talk about school at home more because they felt they already talk about school a lot at home. There was an increase in the number of no responses because there was a printing error that caused question four to print on the back of the page.

Researcher Notes, Cycle Two

The researcher continued to take researcher notes in a research journal throughout cycle two on interactions that took place in person or via email outside of the scheduled interviews and focus group times. The notes were again coded by hand with three reviews to identify themes. A summary of themes from the review of researcher notes from cycle two is in Table 4.18.

Table 4.18*Researcher Notes: Themes from Action Research Cycle Two*

Theme from Researcher Notes: Cycle 2	Evidence
Teachers self-reflected on the role they played in family engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers felt more like a part of a team working for the success of the student - Teachers wanted to improve their practices to benefit the students - Teachers communicated more positive experiences to families
Teachers' idea of engagement evolved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers' definitions of family engagement changed to include more home-based strategies - Teachers developed a deeper understanding of and appreciation for varying homes' abilities and circumstance
Parents reflected on the role they played in family engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents noted they were pleased to have specific ways to help their child - Parents followed up with goals and action plans at home, even if just asking about them/checking in - Parents communicated to teachers about specific goals and action plans
Student led conferences led to benefits for the students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students noted how their goals and action plan from cycle one influenced their behaviors in the next quarter of school - Students were proud to showcase their work - Teachers and parents noted positive outcomes including; increased accountability and ownership, more confidence, increased organizational skills, etc. - Many students showed improvement in their growth areas between cycles one and two

Researcher Observations, Cycle Two

The researcher was able to observe four conferences led by three of the six facilitators in implementation cycle two. Detailed notes were taken during each conference. As in cycle one, these notes were coded by hand with three reviews to narrow down themes. A summary of the themes from researcher observations in cycle two is in Table 4.19.

Table 4.19

Researcher Observations: Themes from Action Research Cycle Two

Theme from Observations: Cycle 2	Evidence
Students' confidence increased from cycle 1 to cycle 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Students easily navigated the technology and were familiar with the order of the presentation- Students were upfront and honest about what they needed from their parents and teachers- Students were honest in their reflections about what they needed to improve
Parents were more confident in their role at the conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Parents spoke up about what they felt their child needed to do to improve- Parents asked questions during group discussions that sought to clarify the teacher's role
Teachers/facilitators were more confident and consistent in their role at the conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 6/6 facilitators used the script and followed all of the steps- The flow of the conferences was much more fluid and natural than in cycle 1- Teachers were more open to feedback from the parents and the students
Relationships were impacted by the student led conferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Parents, teachers, and students were all on the same page- Parents were more open to their child's responsibility vs. wanting all responsibility to fall on the teacher- Students and parents were connected in a different way to their core teachers, and some for the first time to the enrichment teacher, counselor, and resource teacher

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the contextual setting of SECS in detail and framed the problem based on the site. Specific measures were shared that identified the problem of decreased engagement at the middle school level at SECS. The context surrounding the school closures in March of 2020 due to COVID-19 was explained. This chapter addressed the steps the action research teams took in detail through two complete action research cycles. Some initial data

collection was presented from each cycle. The next chapter presents the findings in greater detail and relates the findings of the action research cycles to the research questions.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

The purpose of this action research study was to implement a new strategy at Southeast Catholic School (SECS) for increasing family engagement at the middle school level in one small, Catholic middle school as well as to monitor its effects on students, teachers, and families.

To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do families describe the impact of family engagement strategies at the middle school level in one small, Catholic middle school?
2. How does an action research team describe the design and implementation process of a project focused on family engagement strategies in one small, Catholic middle school?
3. How does the implementation of family engagement strategies impact the culture and climate in one small, Catholic middle school?

This chapter describes how the data collected addresses each of the research questions that guided the study. Findings are identified in the context of the research question they address and then discussed in detail. Results from each action research cycle are described. Table 5.1 shows how the findings from the action research process address each research question. Findings were identified by cross-referencing the themes identified from coding parent focus groups, action research team member interviews, researcher notes, and researcher observations. Additional qualitative data from the Post-Conference Reflection Sheet (Appendix F) was used to help support these findings.

Table 5.1*Findings Related to Research Questions and Theoretical Framework*

Research Question	Findings	Source of Data	Connection to the Theoretical Framework
1. How do families describe the impact of family engagement strategies at the middle school level in one small, Catholic middle school?	<p>1. Student led conferences were beneficial for the student in many ways</p> <p>2. Student led conferences had a positive impact on the relationship between the student and family</p> <p>3. Student led conferences impacted the relationship between family and school in different ways for students and parents</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parent focus groups - Researcher notes - Researcher observations - Post-conference reflection sheet 	<p>Finding 1: When the school and family come together, there are direct positive impacts on the child</p> <p>Findings 2 and 3: When the school and family operate within the bidirectional relationship keeping the child at the center of focus, there are direct positive impacts for parents, students, and the school</p>
2. How does an action research team describe the design and implementation process of a project focused on family engagement strategies in one small, Catholic middle school?	<p>1. Being a part of the action research process created a connection to the work and helped team members to implement student led conferences with fidelity</p> <p>2. Being a part of the action research process helped action research team members' definition of family engagement evolve from a traditional school-based model to include more home-based strategies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Action research team interviews - Researcher notes - Researcher observations 	<p>Findings 1 and 2: Participating in the action research process made the influence of the school and the family on the student more equitable. Both the school and families learned more about one another's relationship with the child and their respective impacts</p>
3. How does the implementation of family engagement strategies impact the culture and climate in one small, Catholic middle school?	<p>1. Student led conferences improved the culture and climate for students and teachers</p> <p>2. Parents had varied perceptions on the impact the implementation of student led conferences had on culture and climate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parent focus groups - Action research team interviews - Researcher notes - Researcher observations - Post-conference reflection sheet 	<p>Findings 1 and 2: Because the school and family came together with the student as their central focus, culture and community improved</p>

Data Collection Connected to Research Questions

Research Question One: Impact on Stakeholders

Parent focus groups, researcher notes, researcher observations, and responses from the post-conference reflection sheet helped to identify the three themes related to research question one: students benefitted from student led conferences, the intervention had a positive impact on the relationship between the student and the family, and student and parent stakeholders felt differently about the impact of student led conferences on the relationship between school and family.

Theme One: Student Led Conferences were Beneficial for Students

Students and parents noted that student led conferences had direct positive impacts on the student. Students themselves reflected that they had improved in school because of intentional goal-setting and the accountability of having to present to their teacher and parents. Parents enjoyed seeing the students advocate for themselves, work on their public speaking skills, show confidence, increase their responsibility for their academic performance, and actively work to take steps to reach a goal.

Students' reflections on the post-conference reflection sheet were overwhelmingly positive after both rounds of student led conferences. One student's reply to what they enjoyed most about the conference was, "I got to tell my parents about my achievements and that made me proud." Another student most enjoyed, "Getting more motivated because I had no motivation." A third student responded that what they enjoyed most about the conference was, "My subject highlights because they made me feel proud of myself." Finally, a student reflected that they enjoyed, "Figuring out what I should do about bringing up my grades." Researcher notes and observations highlighted that students made improvements in their academics from

round one of implementation to round two that were directly related to their goal-setting. Students felt proud of the hard work they had done on the presentation and generally felt pleased with their presentation skills. When asked about how they felt before, during, and after the conference, one student stated, “I feel good about the conference and learning about the things I need to work on and I want to reach my goals so bad.” Another shared, “Before I was scared/nervous, during the conference I felt that I was awesome, after I felt accomplished. I feel that I am motivated and confident.” Another student said, “I think it helps because a lot of students gain confidence after doing something like this.”

Five of six of the parent participants noted benefits to the student during the post-implementation focus group. When asked if they had noticed any changes, either positive or negative, in their student after the implementation of student led conferences, one parent said:

Yes, definitely. I have noticed that he is really trying to check Google Classroom very, very diligently and hopefully write in his agenda, but that doesn't always happen, but Google Classroom is, he's checking that daily. His goal was to be more organized and I think that really has improved a great deal.

Another parent shared:

I do see some differences in [my daughter] as well. I think because she knows in her head that she will have to present at another conference so she kept that in mind and she knows that everything that she does in class, every grade that she has, and the final results of all of her efforts, she will have to present it to the parents so that keeps her focused more and I think makes her become more responsible.

One mother stated, “I like it that the kids [are] doing this type of conference. They are more responsible for their work. They take ownership of their efforts and the results.”

Theme Two: Student Led Conferences Positively Impacted the Student-Family Relationship

Students and parents both made reflections indicating the positive impact student led conferences had on the student-family relationship. Students liked that they had a voice and were able to tell adults their experiences. They also felt that the conferences opened up lines of communication at home for them to be able to talk more about school with their parents. Parents also felt that the conferences helped open lines of communication for discussions about school at home. They felt the action plan and goal-setting were both especially helpful before and after the conference.

One student noted on their post-conference reflection sheet that the most enjoyable thing about the conference for them was, “My mom being there. It was cool.” Another child stated, “I enjoyed the conference because I got to lead it and I was able to show where I stand in my academics.” When answering the question about whether or not they felt the student led conference helped (or would help) them talk more about school at home and why students overwhelmingly answered yes. The reflection of one student was, “I feel it has helped me because I have my family support and help.” Another shared, “It has helped because now that mom knows more, it was easier to talk about.” Another participant shared, “I think this will help because now my parents know the subjects I am doing good in and bad in.” Students also noted that the student led conferences helped them feel more comfortable talking about academics at home and reaching out to their families when they were struggling. One student stated:

I think this will help me to talk about school more at home because since I'm not confident enough to talk about school to my parents at home, the conference made me feel more confident about talking about school at home.

Parents also felt that the student led conferences opened up ways for them to talk about school at home with their children and give them the support they needed. One respondent stated, “It helped me know where to ask about his progress and what subjects he struggles with.” Another response from a parent was, “Keeping an open dialogue when we go over homework assignments, tests, projects will help keep this in the forefront and us accountable.” One parent noted how hopeful they were that this process would aid in at-home discussions. They shared, “[My son] is not very open to talking about anything. I would love for him to talk more about school.”

In addition to increased communication at home, parents made specific changes to how they supported their children in their academics from home. In the post-implementation focus group, when asked if they have made any adjustments to how they engage with the school at home, one parent shared:

Yes, we talk more about it at home now because before with the conventional parent conference where the teachers gave us the update of where the kids are going and then we acknowledged it and then we go home and we talk about it maybe one time and then that's it. But with this type of conference and then with notes for parents to take home it's kind of a reminder for us as well. So, for me it's definitely helped remind me to talk to my kids about their goals as well as ask them, check in with them and see if they need any help to achieve the goals.

Another stated:

I think, too, with [my daughter] just being more proactive, instead of waiting until the day before, just working ahead. We've seen that she, in her action plan, and I've been trying to get her to too, do your homework at the table at this desk versus in the bedroom.

It gives us the idea that she's doing homework, she's getting on top of it, she's not waiting until the last minute.

Another parent shared the way that the student led conferences inspired them to make changes at home to support their child:

The last time, I had problems with [my child] because she had late homework. In the last conference with [the teacher], my husband and we was surprised! The conference was good help because we talk about this. [My daughter] made this goal in her action plan, [my daughter] work for this, for change this problem. I was so excited for this! When we go home, she makes homework first, then it's ok for her to play. [My daughter] experimented with this and it's so good, it's so nice!

Theme Three: Student Led Conferences and the Impact on the School-Family Relationship

Parent Thoughts: Focus Group

According to the responses of the six parents involved in the family focus groups, there was no change in their relationship with teachers or the school due to student-led conferences. When asked if they felt there had been any changes in the middle school faculty or changes in their relationship with the middle school faculty since the implementation of student led conferences, all of the participants said there was no change. The findings from the pre-implementation focus group showed that most parents felt comfortable with the teachers and felt there was an open line of communication for positive and negative discussions. One parent explained her thoughts on the change in connectedness to the school:

I like it that she had a way to speak her mind about something she didn't like. It gave her a time to set aside and do that. I don't know personally that it did that much. I don't

know, I can't really say that there was like a drastic feeling of change of that for me, other than I think it was different for her.

When probed for what they wished they would have seen, two parents shared that they would have liked to have seen some feedback from all of their subject area teachers, those teachers that parents typically have less interaction with. One of these parents shared:

I would love to hear not even just from the core teachers but just like the Spanish teacher or band I mean a lot of times you don't get to hear - other than a little comment on the report card - but just like a one or two sentence, a little blurb or something just you know I always like to hear information from the teachers.

Student Thoughts: Post-Implementation Reflection Sheet

While parent responses from the post-implementation focus group indicated their relationship with the school was not impacted by the implementation of student led conferences, students had a different perspective. A majority of the students indicated on their post-conference reflection sheet that they could now go to the teachers or their parents for help. This indicated that the students saw home and school as a team united to help them reach their goals. One student reflected on what they enjoyed most about the conference: "I liked making the plan. It made me feel like the school cared about my grades." Another student shared that this experience opened the door for them to be able to talk with their family about school at home. They said, "I feel this will kind of help me talk about school at home because I'll get to talk to my family about the stuff now." Another student reflected on the fact that the conference brought everyone to a common understanding. They said, "I enjoyed that I could talk with my teacher and my mom at the same time so I could figure out my action plan."

Research Question Two: The Action Research Process and the Action Research Teams

The action research team members were asked to reflect on how the action research process influenced their understanding of family engagement and to reflect on the intervention of student led conferences. All of the participants said that being a part of the action research process impacted their understanding of both. All interviewees mentioned that at least one of the aspects of the action research process affected them: professional development on student led conferences, the research presented about family engagement in middle school, the data shared that framed the problem in the school context, and being involved in the action research cycles. A summary of responses by category is in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2

Influence of Action Research Process on Action Research Team Members

Aspects of the Action Research Process that Influenced Action Research Team Members (<i>n</i> = 7)			
Professional Development	Research on Family Engagement	Data Framing the Problem in Context	Participating in Action Research Cycles
6	4	3	4

Action research team interviews, researcher notes, and researcher observations helped identify the two themes related to research question two: that being a part of the action research team created more connection and dedication to the work, and that the understanding of family engagement had evolved for the action research team members.

Theme One: Increased Dedication and Fidelity

Investment in the Action Research Process

Teachers reflected in their post-implementation interviews and team meetings that being a part of the action research process from the beginning helped them be more connected to and

buy into the work. They felt that they were an important part of the solution and that their opinions were valued. One teacher stated:

It helped me take the whole process more seriously too. It wasn't just like something where it's like 'okay this is something that you're doing as a teacher go do it,' like I knew all along the way what the purpose was for doing it and that helped me be more on board with it.

Another teacher reflected that being a part of the process from the beginning helped the whole implementation seem less challenging:

That we had a model given to us and adjusted it for us definitely helped make the whole process easier and it made it, definitely helped make the process feel less daunting and overwhelming where you know if somebody would have just walked in and said 'you're going to do a student led conference, good luck.'

In an action research team meeting, one teacher shared that they enjoyed going through the learning process with the sixth-grade students. They felt it made it more meaningful for them and the student. Another teacher described how some of their worries were eased by being a part of the action research process:

I was concerned just because I don't see them as much. My subject is not one of the core subjects so you know how is that going to work, but everything worked out fine once I realized we were facilitators and they were driving it and it was very good, it felt good.

Another participant shared the following thoughts about the action research process: "I loved it, I did, I loved it. I thought that it was great design, implementation, reflection, tweaking, and re-execution."

Teacher Self-Reflections on Professional Practice

Five of the seven action research team members reflected on their professional practice in the post-implementation interviews and team meetings. When asked in post-implementation interviews what they felt their role or responsibility was regarding family engagement, they all made some connection between the action research process and wanting to improve their practice to better support the student. They were inspired by the process to make changes in their own teaching that would help students meet their goals and fulfill their action plan items. One teacher noted:

It was very nice listening to the students' goals and really, then you can really try to help them specifically in what their goals are, so I think that is how that's changed for me is when I work with the students, I will try to focus on some of those goals or talk to them more about what their goals are and then find strategies that I can use with them to help them reach their goals... now that I know that about the student.

Another teacher, when reflecting on how the relationship with families has changed since implementing student led conferences said that:

Really education is supposed to serve the child. So, I mean obviously we have to make the hard calls and do discipline and make assignments and stuff like that but [this has] sort of emphasized the fact that education is at the service of the child and at the service of the family and not self-serving for the teacher.

Theme Two: The Evolution of the Definition of Family Engagement

Because of the action research process and the team members' involvement with data, research, and reflection, every action research team member broadened their definition of family engagement after both action research cycles. Five of seven action research team members had a

definition post-implementation that was different from their definition pre-implementation. Two action research team members kept some more traditional, school-centric engagement ideas in their definition post-implementation, but expanded their definitions to include more home-based strategies.

Pre-Implementation Definitions of Family Engagement

Initial interviews with and observations including action research team members showed that a majority of them felt that families who helped their child with homework, came to school, participated in events, attended school meetings, and volunteered were those families they considered engaged. Only one of seven team members mentioned families being proactive in regard to academics as the definition of engagement pre-implementation. They said, “I would say making sure that the parents are informed as far as where their child stands and what their child's needs are basically, and that can be both academically and personally.”

One teacher had a definition that included both school-centric and home-based examples in their pre-implementation definition. They stated:

To me family engagement is being involved in the school at an academic level, meaning at least you are connecting with the teachers and the kids as far as where they are academically. You're also coming and you're able to volunteer if we, you know, like I said, I keep just going back to any of the school events - you're just coming and coming together. You are socializing with your other families; you're socializing with the teachers and the faculty.

The other teachers defined family engagement in much more traditional, school-centric ways. One teacher's definition was about trusting the school, but coming together in a constructive way when needed. Four of the interviewees said the main way for families to be

engaged was to be informed about what goes on at school: to read and respond to teacher communication. One team member stated:

Family engagement to me is being able to pull them in and get them to be a part of our classroom, and whether it's a student sharing their work with their parent or I'm sending them questions or my parent letter and they respond back.

Another defined family engagement by saying:

It's responsiveness when there is a need or even responsiveness when you make contact when you are trying to address some issue with their child even if it's just an acknowledgment that 'okay, yes I received your email thanks for letting me know,' you know versus just crickets, and then also to some extent I would say participation in school events.

Post-Implementation Definitions of Family Engagement

In post-implementation interviews and team meetings, all seven action research team members had a new, evolved definition of family engagement. One teacher who had previously said that helping with projects at home was their primary definition now said that their definition was:

Everybody being knowledgeable about as much as possible going on in that student's life, and you know, the parent and the teacher working together as a team to help their child be as successful as we possibly can in the classroom.

The teacher who had previously defined engagement as based on mutual trust evolved their definition to include family investment in academic success and working with the school to give the student what they need most. They stated, "Family engagement is [being] actively engaged in the child's educational process and maybe working with the teacher too at the same time you

know so they can better support their child.” Another action research team member shared, “Just because we don't see them necessarily around the school doesn't mean they're not really engaged with their student and their learning in our school.”

One teacher stated that their definition had not changed, but their new definition included many more aspects of home-based strategies than their initial definition of being informed and communicative. They said:

I don't know that my definition has changed, but are the parents involved? Do they seem to care about their child's progress? You know, do they respond or you know push their child if something happens to go wrong you know and then for those kids where nothing ever seems to go wrong are they at least you know saying hey do you need anything or you know is there's stuff I can help with.

Another action research team member reflected on what they had seen from being a part of the action research process to frame their new definition:

Engaged on a more personal level with their child, so engagement is different in that they're not just invested in the school maybe as they were, but they're really invested in their student and what their student is learning, and so their engagement is more involved but just on a different level than it was before just attending meetings or sending in an item for a collection or those types of things. They seem much more involved in more of the day-to-day and in what their student's learning and their academics.

Another team member shared the evolution of their definition:

I would say that before my definition would have primarily centered around communication and family involvement in the student's activities. Where I would adapt it

now would be that two-way communication along with everyone buying into the student and their success and everybody investing in the action plan.

Research Question Three: Impact on Culture and Climate

Theme One: Student Led Conferences Improved the Culture and Climate for Students and Teachers

One-on-one interviews, post-conference reflection sheets, researcher notes, and researcher observations all demonstrated that students and teachers felt there was a positive impact on the culture and climate at SECS due to the implementation of student led conferences.

Student Thoughts

Students liked that they had a platform to discuss their strengths and weaknesses with adults. Observations proved that students were not shy about asking for what they needed from either their parents or their teacher. The design of the conference allowed for students to be supported in this way and they were encouraged to share openly. Students were able to see that they had support from both the school and their families. When reflecting on what they enjoyed most about the conference, one student noted:

What I enjoyed most was being able to tell the teacher what I wanted to focus on other than them guessing what I wanted to focus on. I enjoyed leading the conference because at regular conferences the teachers make very educated guesses at what the student is good at and not good at, but I think the student knows themselves better than the teacher. I think this helped me talk about school more at home because it helps my parents get caught up with my school work.

Another student shared that their favorite thing about the conference was, “That the teachers and my mom were helping me figure out what is better for me.” Researcher notes documented an

interaction where one parent explained that their child was so happy to have been able to tell a teacher what more they needed from them. Students were able to see that parents and teachers were working together to help them reach their goals. One student reflected, “My favorite part of the conference was the areas of growth because I got a lot of helpful suggestions. I got insight from my parents and teachers.”

Students continually reflected that both their parents and teachers were a critical part of their action plan. One student said:

I think that the conference is a great idea. I felt a little nervous before, but during it I felt confident. After the conference I felt motivated to reach my goals. I can always turn to my dad or [my teacher] for help.

One student, when reflecting on their favorite part of the conference, said, “I enjoy how proud [my teacher] was.” The same student described how their teacher’s motivation and support helped them work to reach their goals by explaining, “I felt worthless in my work at first, but now that I have put in more work in my classes and homework and now my teachers have said how much I have improved.”

Teacher Thoughts

Teachers felt that their students opened up and they were able to see a whole new side of them while they presented their conference. Teachers were proud of their students’ abilities to present, to reflect, and to be honest with themselves enough to make the conference meaningful. They were proud of the confidence they saw in their students during and leading up to their presentations. One teacher noted, “Both parents and teachers can be surprised by what the students have to say and I think just giving them that opportunity and hearing them out [is important].” Another teacher stated, “I felt like the students took ownership. I feel like their

reflection was very sincere, very genuine.” A third interview participant said, “I loved it! I think it was awesome and I really enjoyed seeing the student shine like that and the parents - just so much love from the parents to the students. That was just a great, great thing to see.”

When one action research team member was discussing roles and responsibilities of families regarding family engagement, they said:

I think maybe they may have tried, from what I gathered, but the students before just didn't really want their help like 'yeah, I got it, leave me alone,' but now I think the students are realizing that the parents want to be there and support them and help them with their goals and so they're more likely to listen and let the parents be involved.

Teachers saw a change in their relationship with families and reflected that the action research process and implementation of student led conferences brought them closer to the families and their students. It helped participants see families in new ways. A teacher shared that, “Through the conferences, I was able to see parents and kids interact in a way that I wouldn't otherwise have been able to observe.” One interviewee shared:

Another thing I noticed, the parents had a good opportunity right then to say how proud they were of their student and what they're accomplishing. They just seemed happy and proud to show their work and the parents were so complimentary. That was another thing I really saw that they just seemed - everybody just seemed happy and wanting to work together. I got to see/learn a little more about the parents and see their relationship with the child and see how they work together.

Another teacher noted that:

It was really nice to see some of the parents like really have some electrical, educational, conversations with their kids in front of the teacher where you know I don't know if that

fully would have happened at home looking at the report card or if it would have happened seeing a grade come across [online] or even if the parent would have just come in for the conference and then went home and talked to the kid.

A majority of the action research team members shared that they felt the process made school and home more of a team. Teachers felt like they were on the same page with parents.

One teacher stated:

When the students are up there and telling the teachers and their parents what they need from them and then also what their plan is to do in order to help them continue to grow it helps everybody be on the same page. I don't think anybody who was involved in this, especially directly in the implementation process, I don't think any of us could come away from this saying this was a terrible idea. I've only seen positives come out of it. The kids are taking more ownership, it feels significantly less like the kid pitting the parents against the teacher, and I think it's helping to get us all on the same side.

Another echoed the sentiment by saying:

I think really it was a more enjoyable experience and less stressful experience and it's not about teacher versus parents you know it's about everybody being on the same page with the same goal and figuring out how to get there.

Teachers also enjoyed the exposure that facilitating the student led conferences gave them to either new members of a family they did not know well previously, or to new families altogether. Four of the seven action research team members noted that they established new relationships because of their role in the conferences. All participants said that the process had a positive impact on their existing relationships with families as well. The conferences gave those action research team members who were not core teachers more of a connection to the students.

Core teachers as well as special area teachers also reflected on their professional practice and wanted to use these connections and newly learned information to improve. One teacher stated, “I think that [it] will build a better rapport between me and the students as well and I’m just really wanting to work on that, just how I can be a better teacher for them.”

Theme Two: Student Led Conferences’ Impact on the Culture and Climate for Families

Parent Thoughts: Focus Group

When parents in the focus group were asked if they felt the school had made efforts to improve family engagement, even when probed with additional follow up questions about the Action Plan document and Goal Setting Template for their students, they all answered no. This was a surprise to the researcher, especially since these six families had been involved in the action research process from the beginning. They also stated that there was no drastic change in their relationships with the middle school faculty. As noted above with evidence from research question one, they did see positive outcomes in their relationships with their children, but overall, there was no impact for them on the culture and climate at SECS.

Parent Thoughts: Additional Focus Group Discussions

Though a majority of the parents’ post-implementation reflections were focused on their relationship with the child, the researcher noted certain responses to different questions that indicated some parents may have had slight changes in their relationship with the school. One parent said:

One thing that was different for me was it was fun to see [my daughter] talk about some of the specific projects or assignments she was proud of. That specific question was maybe not one I would have thought to ask just in normal conversation about school work.

This comment indicated that participating in student led conferences exposed a parent to a new side of their student they had not previously explored with them. It also indicated that channels of communication were opened between the student and their family because of the action research process. Another parent noted that because of their child's action plan and their participation in the conferences, they had begun to pay closer attention to emails from the school in order to stay more connected and help their daughter. Both of these instances indicate positive outcomes on culture and climate for parents, students, and teachers. One parent also noted a change in their relationship with the school when answering the question about adjustments they had made at home. They stated:

In the whole process of preparing for the presentation I know that the teachers are also involved teaching them or with helping them with the technology, how to do the slideshow and probably a read-through or help them with how to present their point, too. So, this is a great exercise for students in terms of public speaking and being organized, so I could see the effort behind the scenes of the teachers, so for me I feel a little bit more connected because of the support that the teacher behind the scenes, work that the teacher did to prepare.

Another parent noted that both he and his wife had made an extra effort to attend the conference since they knew their daughter was leading the conference, whereas before they would have simply caught one another up on what the teacher reported. Gaining confidence in teachers and being excited to show up to support your child at school were also positive outcomes for parents, students, and teachers due to the implementation of student led conferences.

Parent Thoughts: Post-Implementation Reflection Sheet, Notes, and Observations

Parent comments the researcher received after action research cycle one included, “I loved, loved, loved it! It teaches them so many skills. I love to see how much [my daughter] has grown up!” Another parent stopped the researcher and said, “I loved that it prepares them for life skills and presentations and self-reflection.” Other parents simply noted, “I’m proud of him,” and another said, “I learned a lot.” On the post-implementation reflection sheet, one parent said, “I feel more informed of [my daughter’s] progress and areas that she needs to improve.” Most parents reflected that the experience of student led conferences opened up ways for them to talk about school at home because they were able to learn firsthand from their children. They also noted that it helped them be able to discuss progress with the teachers because they were all on the same page about the student’s goals and action plan.

Concluding Thoughts for Theme Two, Research Question Three

While feedback from the post-implementation focus group did not show a direct connection to improvement on culture and climate at SECS for those parents, the focus group participants repeatedly mentioned the positive impact it had on their students. Other comments made throughout the focus group about the school-family relationship also showed that they felt the process was beneficial. These unexpected findings show a discrepancy in how parents felt the implementation of student led conferences impacted culture and climate at SECS. While focus group participants felt they were highly engaged before implementation and did not see any direct impact on themselves, overall, the researcher and the action research team felt that there was a positive impact on culture and climate for parents. One parent’s reflection from the post-conference reflection sheet summed this up perfectly: “I think the student led conference is an

excellent addition to the middle school. It helps the student, family, and staff stay connected and learn from one another!”

Connections to the Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this action research study was adapted from Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Epstein’s Spheres of Influence (Epstein, 1987). When working through the action research process to address the research questions, this theoretical framework kept the action research teams and the researcher focused on how their data fit within the framework. Findings were connected to the framework in that the bidirectional relationships between; school and student, school and family, and student and family all had a positive impact on all parties, as well as on culture and climate. When the overlapping spheres of school, community, and family are in agreement about how to best support the student, there are direct positive impacts on not only the student, family, and school but on the wider school community and culture. Student led conferences allowed all stakeholders to see that they each have an important influence on one another and that when they work together toward a common goal, there are improvements and positive impacts for everyone.

Results from Action Research Cycles

Results from Action Research Cycle One

The action research teams began the construction phase of cycle one in the spring of 2021. They continued constructing and planning action through spring and summer. In the fall of 2021, they implemented the first round of student led conferences at SECS. Throughout the fall of 2021, the action research teams worked to evaluate action research cycle one. The team made changes to some of the processes and protocols created in their initial planning sessions. These changes reflected improvements to the implementation process and design of the facilitation of

student led conferences. Changes were influenced by information learned from the professional development session, team meetings, themes identified from initial action research team interviews and parent focus groups, student and parent feedback, and from reflecting on the process as an action research team. The results of action research cycle one served to improve implementation in cycle two.

Pre-implementation, initial findings showed that action research team members and parent focus group participants generally had a more traditional, school-centric view of family engagement. Action research team members stated that they felt there was room for improvement in the area of family engagement in middle school at SECS. Parent focus group participants felt that engagement was strong pre-implementation. This is likely because they defined, and that they felt the school defined, family engagement in ways more focused on what the parent can do for the school.

Post-implementation findings from cycle one showed generally positive impacts on students and families. Action research team members were still in evolution. They were continuing to reflect not only on the action research process and student led conferences, but also on their professional practice.

Results from Action Research Cycle Two

The action research teams began constructing and planning action for cycle two in the fall of 2021 and the winter of 2022. The second round of student led conferences was implemented in the winter of 2022. At the action research team meeting following implementation, the team reviewed themes from the post-implementation parent focus group as well as themes from their post-implementation interviews. Using these reflections, minor changes were made to the SECS student led conferences Process and Protocols document that ensured the facilitators would come

together after conferences to share and debrief in the future. Minor formatting changes were made to the student Presentation Template and Action Plan document. The team held a discussion about the implementation process and its impact on families who do not speak English. A plan was made for improvements including creating a Spanish presentation template and having the middle school Spanish teacher facilitate these conferences in the future. The team discussed expansion to include multiple additional grades in the following years.

Findings of the positive impact of student led conferences on students, families, and the school were supported by action research team interviews, parent focus group discussions, researcher notes and observations, and comments from the Post-Conference Reflection Sheet filled out by parents and students. While participants from the parent focus group stated that they saw no changes in efforts from the school and did not experience changes in their relationships with the middle school faculty, responses to other discussion questions yielded different results. Their positive comments about the process within the focus group, on their post-conference reflection sheets, and combined with other parents' feedback led to varying impacts for parents on culture and climate. Students and teachers had an overwhelmingly positive experience with the process. After action research cycle two, action research team members' definition of family engagement had evolved. Every team member had home-based strategies for engagement in their definition post-implementation.

Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the findings of this action research study. Findings were presented as they related to the research questions and theoretical framework. Findings supported that the action research process and implementation of student led conferences had positive impacts on students, parents, teachers, and on the culture and climate at one small, Catholic middle school.

The next chapter presents the findings as they relate to the research questions. It also relates the findings to the existing literature. Limitations and implications are discussed.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Research shows there is a notable decrease in family engagement and that family engagement becomes more difficult as students enter middle school (Davis & Lambie, 2005; DeSpain et al., 2018; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Reinke et al., 2019). Southeast Catholic School (SECS) noticed this trend in their school and sought to address it through an action research case study. SECS implemented a new strategy for increasing family engagement: student led conferences. The action research team aimed to monitor the effects of implementation on students, teachers, and families. To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do families describe the impact of family engagement strategies at the middle school level in one small, Catholic middle school?
2. How does an action research team describe the design and implementation process of a project focused on family engagement strategies in one small, Catholic middle school?
3. How does the implementation of family engagement strategies impact the culture and climate in one small, Catholic middle school?

Findings Related to the Research Questions

The major findings related to the research questions were:

1. Student led conferences had a positive impact on students, families, and the school.

2. Participation in the action research process and with an action research team led to a deeper understanding of and connection to the project which resulted in an evolution of thinking about family engagement for action research team members.
3. The implementation of student led conferences led to strengthened relationships and had positive impacts on culture and climate for students, families, and the school.

Through the action research process and two full cycles, the action research team found that the implementation of student led conferences showed benefits for students, families, and teachers. Students and teachers experienced more dramatic changes in relationships and on culture and climate than families. Families had more varied perceptions of the impact student led conferences had on culture and climate and did not seem to make a connection from these experiences to an increase in family engagement. The action research team members found that being a part of the action research process helped them be more connected to the work and to implement the intervention with fidelity. Their understanding of family engagement evolved, and by the end of the process, they had new definitions that met the less traditional model of family involvement. Through the process of implementing student led conferences relationships were positively impacted and the culture and climate improved for students, families, and the school.

Findings Related to the Literature Reviewed

The Decline in Engagement at the Middle School Level

SECS showed a trend in decreased engagement with families once their child entered middle school. This followed the trend in the literature reviewed that family engagement declines dramatically as children enter middle school (Davis & Lambie, 2005; DeSpain et al., 2018; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Reinke et al., 2019). The literature also shows that family

engagement becomes more difficult for families (Hill et al., 2018; Reinke et al., 2019) for a variety of personal, physical, social, and emotional reasons (Davis & Lambie, 2005; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Reinke et al., 2019) as children enter adolescence. The findings of this action research study were related to the impact the implementation of student led conferences had on students, parents, and teachers related to family engagement in one small, Catholic middle school.

From Involvement to Engagement

Action Research Team Members

Throughout the action research process, the action research team experienced their own evolution from involvement to engagement that mirrors the way this idea has changed over time in schools. The literature reviewed discusses family involvement as a more euro- and school-centric model (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Ferrara, 2011; Hill et al., 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Soutullo et al., 2016). In this more traditional view, there tends to be less emphasis on what is best for the child and more on making sure families receive information the school feels is most important. “Involved” families may assist in the classroom, chaperone a field trip, regularly attend school meetings, or help with homework at home. They are seen as engaged because they perform tasks the school feels are important (Auerbach, 2009; Baker et al., 2016; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Ishimaru, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Jensen & Minke, 2017).

The idea of family engagement is much broader than involvement. When families are engaged, schools see that parents are involved with their child’s education in many ways: some of which schools have never even seen or would not normally consider to be engagement (Baker et al., 2016; DeSpain et al., 2018; Ferrara, 2011; Hill et al., 2018; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Jensen &

Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Schueler et al., 2017). For families to be truly engaged, a bidirectional relationship between family to school must exist (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; Baker et al., 2016; Ferrara, 2011; Ishimaru, 2019; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Stefanski et al., 2016; Tran, 2014). From post-implementation interviews, it was clear that action research team members had made this leap from involvement to engagement by the new definitions of family engagement that were given. Participants' definitions included more home-based strategies for engagement and acknowledged that parents who were less visible in the school could still be considered engaged based on the support they were giving at home.

Families

The findings show that the parents who participated in the focus group did not change their definition of family engagement due to the implementation of student led conferences. In the pre-implementation focus group parents stated that, to them, family engagement meant; paying attention to communications from the school and responding when needed, volunteering at school fundraisers, attending school meetings and athletic events, being connected to other parents, and staying informed of what their child should be doing in their classes. They also thought this is what the school felt an engaged family looked like. In the post-implementation focus group, parents said they experienced no change in their connection with the school or relationship with the middle school faculty after the implementation of student led conferences. They also did not feel the school had made changes in their efforts to better engage the middle school families despite being involved in the parent focus group for this action research project.

Strategies that Support Family Engagement in Middle Grades

Relationship-Building and Cultural Responsiveness

Research on family engagement at the middle school level has shown there are strategies proven to increase engagement between the family and the school. Schools that have high family engagement keep a focus on building relationships with their families (Abrego & Abrego, 2010; DeSpain et al., 2018; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Mapp, 2003; Sebolt, 2018). They emphasize two-way communication and work to deliver the same messages about school to the student at home and at school (“Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Reinke et al., 2019, Scanlan, 2008; Stefanski et al, 2016; Tran, 2014). Successful schools use what they learn about families to not only establish but to nurture relationships that enable them to work together to best support the student (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Scanlan, 2008; Sebolt, 2018; Stefanski, 2016; Tran, 2014). Getting to know families, their needs, their abilities, and their limitations, allows schools to understand how a family may be supporting their child from home in less traditional ways (“Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Ishimaru, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Leo et al., 2019; Sebolt, 2018; Tran, 2014). Being culturally responsive to varying family needs is an important way to make sure families feel welcome in the school (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Ferrara, 2011; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Scanlan, 2008; Soutullo et al., 2016). When barriers to family engagement are removed, families feel comfortable establishing and maintaining a relationship with those in the school who serve their students.

The findings of this action research study showed that implementing student led conferences as a strategy to increase family engagement improved relationships for students, the

school, and for most families. While the parents who participated in the focus group said that their relationship did not change with the school after implementation, many other parents noted that they felt more connected to the school and that they enjoyed being on the same page with teachers to support the success of their child. Students were pleased to have their families and teachers working together to support them. They also enjoyed being able to speak up to adults about what they needed to be successful. Teachers felt that after the implementation of student led conferences, they were more of a team with family members. They were able to see their students and their families in new ways. Teachers changed their definitions of family engagement to include the more non-traditional, home-based strategies after the implementation of student led conferences.

Academic Socialization

Academic socialization is a practice that schools and families engage in to support student success that has repeatedly been shown to be most effective in increasing engagement at the middle school level (DeSpain et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). In this practice, both the school and the family speak to the student about the importance of receiving an education. They work on setting goals with the student to reach future successes and expect students to meet high expectations. An important aspect of academic socialization includes extending positive speech about school to the home (DeSpain et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018).

The results of this study showed that parents and students noted an increase in communication at home about school. Because student led conferences brought the student, family, and teacher to a mutual understanding, all parties felt more comfortable having further discussions about school either at home or continued at school. Through the action research

process, the action research team discovered that SECS parents engaged in fewer school-based engagement strategies because of the changing needs of their child and family. This trend follows what research has said about the shift in family needs as parents and children age (Davis & Lambie, 2005) and about their decreased ability to help with academics as curriculum becomes more complex (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jensen & Minke, 2017). SECS families also noted that their students either did not want them to be as involved as they were when students were younger (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Jensen & Minke, 2017), or simply that their children were more independent (Davis & Lambie, 2005; “Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education Through High School Years,” 2015; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Reinke et al., 2019). These trends also follow major findings of the literature reviewed. Student led conferences gave parents a way to overcome some of these obstacles and support their children through academic socialization at home.

Benefits of Student Led Conferences

Findings of this action research study echoed findings in the literature reviewed and showed that students, parents, and the school benefitted from the implementation of student led conferences. Not only do student led conferences promote academic socialization (DeSpain et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018) and more communication about school at home (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; Goodman, 2008; O’Fee, 2012), they improve relationships and open channels of communication between the school and the home (Hackmann et al., 1998; O’Fee, 2012; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004).

Students also learn important life skills preparing for and leading their student led conference. They learn to; set and work toward goals, increase their communication and presentation skills, reflect on their learning, self-advocate, and learn to do all of these things in

front of adults (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Conderman et al., 2000; Hackmann et al., 1998; Hawbaker, 2007; Juniewicz, 2003; Kinney, 2005; McManes, 2015; Tholander, 2009; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004; Young & Behounek, 2006). Because of their active work in goal-setting, preparing work samples for the conference, and reflection, students' classroom performance often improves (Hackmann et al., 1998). SECS saw this type of improvement in their students after action research cycle one. Academic improvement was linked to growth areas where students had set specific goals for improvement and constructed an action plan with their parents and teachers. Research shows that students are typically very honest and forthcoming about their strengths and weaknesses during a student led conference (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; O'Fee, 2012; Young & Behounek, 2006). SECS also noted this about their students and felt that their honesty led to a very authentic experience for students, parents, and teachers.

SECS saw increased parent attendance at their student led conferences. They also found that if there was a scheduling conflict, more efforts were made both by the school and the parents to reschedule a time to hold the conference. This aligns with research about student led conferences leading to increased, and often 100%, parent attendance (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Conderman et al., 2000; Goodman, 2008; Hackmann et al., 1998; Kinney, 2005; Little & Allan, 1989; O'Fee, 2012; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004).

Research on the benefits of student led conferences consistently says that a student led conference leads to a more equal partnership in the child's education than a more traditional conference model (Hackmann et al., 1998; O'Fee, 2012; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004). Student led conferences ensure that all participants are on the same page when it comes to the academic needs, strengths, and goals of the student (Conderman et al., 2000). They also create a space where the anxieties of the teacher being the one to deliver negative feedback about the

child to the family are removed (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; Hawbaker, 2007; Little & Allan, 1989) thus creating more of a partnership between school and home while keeping a focus on the child and their plan for success. Findings from the action research study show that teachers and students especially felt that student led conferences created this type of equitable relationship.

Supportive Leadership Practices

Research shows that schools still practice more traditional, school-centric models of family engagement (Baker et al., 2016; Ferrara, 2011; Gokturk & Dinckal, 2018; Hamm, et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2018; Ishimaru, 2019; Leo et al., 2019; Stefanski et al., 2016). Before beginning the action research process at SECS, information gathered from researcher notes, researcher observations, the pre-implementation parent focus group, and pre-implementation action research team interviews, it was clear that members of the SECS community followed this trend. They defined engagement as ways parents were expected to engage with the school that benefitted the school the most. Throughout the action research process, there was a positive change in the culture and climate. SECS faculty began to change their thinking and evolve their definitions of family engagement. It was important for the researcher to continue to nurture this positive change at SECS, just as it is important for leaders of organizations to do (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Leadership behaviors have a significant impact on the success of change implementation in an organization (Bredeson, 2005; Dove & Freely, 2011; Lai, 2014, Prelli, 2016). Research reviewed shows the importance of the leader's role in enacting change in schools. Leaders who involve themselves in the change process rather than impose it upon others, participate as learners themselves, ask questions, and trust their employees (Ash & Persall, 2000; Bredeson &

Johansson, 2000; Fullan, 2019) are successful in creating a culture where change will be more supported and sustained. The action research process at SECS created an environment for successful implementation that could lead to lasting change.

By involving key faculty and staff in the action research process from the very beginning, the researcher built investment in the work. Nolan (2007) says that investing participants in understanding at the beginning of the change process is more effective for lasting change. Given the chance to understand goals and the basis for change, those who are expected to be a part of the change process are better able to commit themselves to making change happen (Nolan, 2007). When participants are involved in decision-making, they show much more investment in the long-term success of their change initiative and implement the actions needed for change with fidelity (Dove & Freeley, 2011; Leech & Fulton, 2008; Mullen & Jones, 2008). Involving and empowering teachers to be a part of the decision-making process in schools also leads to lasting change (Klingner, 2004).

Research also shows that teachers are more invested in change initiatives when they can see the direct benefits for their students and improvements to their own teaching practices. When these connections are made, they are much more likely to implement change with fidelity (Bredeson & Johansson, 2000; Klingner, 2004; Nolan, 2007). Findings from this action research study showed that teachers felt being a part of the action research process from the beginning helped them to implement student led conferences with confidence and excitement. They reflected that they appreciated being a part of the process versus being told they were going to be doing something new. Hooper & Bernhardt (2016) state the importance of creating these collaborative communities for leading change rather than insisting on one solution. The positive

attitude about increasing family engagement meant that more families would be likely to engage with the school (Baker et al., 2016; Tran, 2014).

Limitations of the Current Study

This action research study took place in one small, Catholic middle school, so the results may not be generalizable to different school settings or schools that are much larger than SECS. The small sample sizes of parent focus groups and action research teams were also limitations to the current study.

This action research took place with only sixth-grade. Initially, the action research team had planned to expand to include seventh- and possibly eighth-grade in action research cycle two. After completing the evaluating action step of action research cycle one, the team decided they were not ready to include additional grade levels. After experiencing how important the beginning stages of implementation were with the students, they felt there was not adequate time to prepare the older grades before cycle two. The fact that this action research took place with only 25 sixth-grade students and their families is a limitation to the current study.

Finally, the makeup of the parent focus group provided a limitation to this action research study. All six parents were parents that overall had a good relationship with the school and the teachers. They felt connected to the school community and were generally happy with their experiences at SECS. The parents who participated in the focus group were not all originally identified by the action research teams. Initially, one different family was asked to participate. This family was one the team considered less engaged than other families. After multiple attempts, this family never replied to the request to participate in the action research process as part of the parent focus group. The team was hoping to have more variety of families who exhibited different types of engagement, but they ended up with a group that was all at least

moderately engaged with the school already. Including parents who were not seen as typically engaged could have offered an important perspective to the study.

Implications and Recommendations for Practitioners: Local Schools and School Districts

Local schools and school districts could learn from the gaps in this action research project and make improvements to their own implementation process. It is recommended that schools and/or districts plan for accommodating families with English as a second language before implementation. SECS realized that though their design was based on research, simply having the student as a translator at the conference was not an effective way to engage the family. In future implementations, SECS will plan to use Spanish teachers as facilitators for Spanish-speaking families and a staff member who speaks Vietnamese to facilitate conferences with Vietnamese-speaking families.

Schools and school districts should also keep in mind specific, site-based needs. Just as there should be no one-size-fits-all model for family engagement, there should be no one-size-fits-all model for the implementation of student led conferences. Schools and districts may have different time or scheduling restraints, they may have limited technology, or a desire to use different facilitators. Practitioners should also remember that student led conferences are just one strategy used to address family engagement.

Implications and Recommendations for Researchers

Future studies could benefit from replicating the current study in different contexts: larger schools, public schools, or non-faith-based private schools. Doing this could help researchers understand if the results of this study are generalizable. Future studies could also replicate this action research project in a similar context to compare results.

Any studies performed in the future could benefit from intentionally including more direct feedback and data collection from the students themselves. While the current study included some student reflections, these were unexpected data points that evolved from the action research design process and were not initially planned. To better understand the impacts on students, they could be included in the research design and data collection methods. It may also be beneficial to include either one-on-one interviews or a survey for parent feedback versus a parent focus group.

Future action research studies could benefit from educating the parent participants by presenting problem-framing data and literature on the topic. The researcher found that while parents were involved from the beginning of the action research process, they did not experience change in the way students and teachers did. During pre-implementation focus group discussions, parent participants felt they were highly engaged and connected to the school community even though their definitions and views followed a more traditional involvement model. When asked about the impact the action research process had on them in post-implementation focus group discussions, they still felt they were highly engaged, but their definition of engagement had not changed. This is very likely because they did not receive the same information as the action research team members as they worked through each action research cycle.

Implications and Recommendations for Policymakers

Policymakers should continue to evolve their definition of family engagement as the population of our nation and in our schools continues to change to include more diverse groups of families. They should involve families and school personnel in decision-making and get their perspectives on family engagement. Those who have had bad experiences should have just as

much input as those with positive ones. Policymakers should keep in mind that every school community is unique when providing recommendations for increasing family engagement.

There could be more of an emphasis on creating and sustaining relationships with families for preservice teachers and leaders. This could include courses and professional development for new teachers. There could also be site-specific training sessions.

Catholic Schools could adopt additional positions related to family engagement using public schools as a model. Doing this would demonstrate the importance of the family-school partnership for Catholic Schools. Catholic Schools could also begin to expand the ways they define family engagement to move toward a less school-centric schema. This might include expanding opportunities for parents to fulfill their volunteer hours and involving all types of families in a review of family engagement policies.

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this action research study was to implement a new strategy at SECS for increasing family engagement in one small, Catholic middle school as well as to monitor its effects on students, teachers, and families. The chosen intervention was student led conferences.

To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do families describe the impact of family engagement strategies at the middle school level in one small, Catholic middle school?
2. How does an action research team describe the design and implementation process of a project focused on family engagement strategies in one small, Catholic middle school?
3. How does the implementation of family engagement strategies impact the culture and climate in one small, Catholic middle school?

The Conceptual Framework's Support of the Findings

The conceptual framework was designed around inputs, activities, and outcomes related to engagement strategies for middle school families. Inputs included action research teams, families, and students. Activities were professional learning on the chosen intervention as well as the implementation of the chosen intervention designed to increase family engagement at the middle school level at SECS. Following the cyclical nature of the conceptual framework, outcomes were analyzed after each action research cycle. Reflection and evaluation drove the next cycle for improving upon practice in subsequent action research cycles.

The Theoretical Framework's Support of the Findings

The theoretical framework used for this action research study was adapted from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Epstein's Spheres of Influence (Epstein, 1987). Findings and conclusions were directly connected to the adapted framework because they showed the benefits of bidirectional and mutually influential relationships on relationships between; school and student, school and family, and student and family.

Major Findings

The action research process and two complete action research cycles led to the following conclusions regarding family engagement and the implementation of student led conferences at SECS:

1. Student led conferences had a positive impact on students, families, and the school.
2. Participation in the action research process and with an action research team led to a deeper understanding of and connection to the project which resulted in an evolution of thinking about family engagement for action research team members.

3. The implementation of student led conferences led to strengthened relationships and had positive impacts on culture and climate for students, families, and the school.

Implications for local schools and districts include:

1. Planning for families whose first language is not English before implementation.
2. Planning implementation of strategies aimed to increase family engagement with site-specific needs in mind.

Future researchers may want to take the following recommendations into consideration:

1. Replicating the study in a different context or in a similar one to compare results as well as to test their generalizability.
2. Including students as part of the data collection process.
3. Collecting data from parents in ways other than a focus group.
4. Sharing the same information action research team members receive with parent participants.

Policymakers in public, private, and Catholic schools might want to consider the following:

1. Continuing to change the definition of family engagement as families continue to evolve while keeping in mind that each school and community has its own uniqueness that should be celebrated.
2. Including families and teachers in policy-making decisions.
3. Preservice training and development in building and nurturing relationships with families.
4. Adopting or expanding positions within schools and districts related to family engagement.

Overall, the implementation of student led conferences at SECS using the action research process had positive effects on the students, families, and the school. Relationships were strengthened between all participants, positively impacting the culture and climate at SECS. Though families were not as involved in the action research cycles and therefore not able to articulate the change in their understanding of true engagement as the teachers were, through describing their experiences and ways they support their children at home post-implementation, it is clear their understanding did evolve. The results of this study, including implications and limitations, could be used to further explore meaningful family engagement strategies at the middle school level in hopes of strengthening the home and school relationship to best support all types of students in all types of schools.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a discussion of the findings that were detailed in chapter five. Summaries of the findings as they related to the research questions and the literature reviewed were given. Limitations of the current study were discussed. Ways in which this action research case study could influence local schools and districts were presented. Recommendations were made for future researchers and policymakers.

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Appendix A
Empirical Findings Table

Author, Year	Title of Study	Purpose	Method(s)	Sample	Result(s)	Conclusion(s)	Implication(s)
Gokturk, S. & Dinckal, S. (2018)	Effective parental involvement in education: experiences and perceptions of Turkish teachers from private schools	To understand how teachers working with middle class families define, implement and evaluate parent involvement	Collective case study – in depth interviews	Private middle schools selected by maximum variation – 5 key players interviewed first who identified further participants	Themes (forms of involvement, parents involving differently, territorial tension) and subthemes (theme 1: communication, volunteering, collaborating) emerged, but did not align for parents and school	Effective involvement does not have the same meaning to parents, teachers, or administrators: teachers felt parents should be more responsible, parents felt teachers should expand what they define as involvement	Pre-service training for teachers should focus on an expanded view of what involvement can look like Parents’ needs should be considered when thinking about involvement
Leo, A., Wilcox, K.C., & Lawson, H.A. (2019)	Culturally responsive and asset-based strategies for family engagement in odds-beating secondary schools	To analyze how educators in odds-beating schools approach engagement	Case study of 2 schools identified as odds-beating from another larger, mixed method multiple case study	Sherburne-Earlville High School, NY Freeport High School, NY	Both schools shared similar approaches to engagement including: culturally responsive approaches that involve the local community, willingness to share power with parents, collaborating with families, and rejecting deficit perspectives	Approaches and attitudes that these schools have adopted can lead to increased family engagement	A one-size-fits-all model rarely works for family engagement Engagement at the school level can lead to benefits beyond school, such as empowering community involvement
Baker, T.L., Wise, J., Kelley, G. & Skiba, R. J. (2016)	Identifying barriers: creating solutions to improve family engagement	To demonstrate how schools can move from involvement to engagement by identifying barriers to engagement, and continue to see benefits for students,	Focus groups	50 parents and 76 staff members from 6 schools in one midwestern state	5 themes emerged for teachers and families: providing opportunities for involvement, improving communication, welcoming families into the building, time conflicts/ making time, moving from involvement to engagement 2 additional themes emerged for teachers only: overcoming	Families were able to identify barriers and suggest solutions, where teachers often could not propose solutions that directly addressed the barriers, suggesting there is a disconnect between how schools and parents see engagement	Engagement should be defined in a broad context of how parents can be involved Often a change like this requires an attitude shift of the school

		schools, and families			negative school experiences, breaking down barriers to access		
Hill, N., Witherspoon, D. P. & Bartz, D. (2018)	Parental involvement in education during middle school: perspectives of ethnically diverse parents, teachers, and students	To gather perspectives of middle school students, parents, and teachers about their goals for parental involvement/to gauge what works/ to support student achievement	Focus groups, quantitative surveys measuring parental involvement, satisfaction with school, and other characteristics	7 th grade students, their parents, core teachers and guidance counselors from 2 ethnically diverse schools	Common themes/strategies for all ethnicities and groups that meet everyone's needs: communication, scaffolding independence, linking to future, school-based involvement, familial experiences, providing structure at home	Supporting middle school students needs to take into account the developmental needs they have and is possible when schools and families are willing to work together	Providing appropriate support for middle school students relies heavily on the communication and partnership between family and school
Ishimaru, A. M. (2019)	From family engagement to equitable collaboration	To examine strategies used in 3 organizations to improve family engagement through an equitable collaboration lens specifically connected to the wider community and the district	Nested, comparative, qualitative case study Interviews, focus groups, observations, document analysis	3 schools participating in The Pathways Project, chosen because of: current efforts to improve engagement, rapid population growth, and increasing diversity within an area of poverty	More conventional approaches to engagement were found to be in place, but broader strategies existed: parent capacity-building, relationship-building, systemic capacity-building efforts	While schools seemed to understand there should be a shift in engagement (from school-centric and deficit-based) and employed the noted strategies, they were not as successful as hoped in their efforts yet	There is potential for success in cross-sector collaboration models given time and support that may increase parent engagement in schools Schools must drop the school-centric expectations and empower their families and build relationships with them
Scanlan, M. (2008)	Caregiver engagement in religious urban elementary schools	To examine how Catholic school leaders serving traditionally marginalized populations improve their	Multi-case case study design Interviews, observations, archival research	75 administrators, faculty, staff members, and school board members from 5 Catholic elementary	Results were focused on one school (SJA): SJA took intentional measures to reduce barriers to family engagement and cultivate positive relationships with them	Focus on communication, culture and community, following a mission that supports families and believes that all students are capable of learning, as well as	Critical care theory can build social justice in schools Leaders and teachers focusing on positive relationship-building and removing barriers positively impacted engagement and school culture

		communities through intentional focus on caregiver engagement		schools serving traditionally marginalized populations		remaining solution-oriented and (mostly) open to different models for engagement based on family need made for high engagement	
Mapp, K. L. (2003)	Having their say: parents describe why and how they are engaged in their children's learning	To analyze parent responses to learn how and why they are involved in their children's education and to identify what leads to successful family-school partnerships	Qualitative case study 1:1 in-depth Interviews, memos, field notes	18 parents from Patrick O'Hearn Elementary School in Boston, MA, which boasts high family engagement	Parents understand that their involvement has a positive impact on their child and parents have a desire to be engaged to help their children succeed Families are involved in school and at home in ways the school might not recognize, and often students are supported by people other than the parent(s) Past, personal experiences and other social factors affect family involvement	Engagement for families increases when schools: welcome families in, honor family contributions, connect with the community for the benefit of their child Specific strategies for POH Elementary were discussed	A trusting, caring relationship with parents facilitates increased motivation for them to engage with the school The school (and school leaders) have a big responsibility to increase engagement and need to let go of the notion that parents do not care just because engagement does not look exactly how the school wants it to
Harknoen, U. (2007)	The Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory of human development	Details Bronfenbrenner's history, development of the theory, and explains each system in detail	NA – presenting research, not a study	NA	NA	The model is key to understanding social theory and is prevalent in education	Could be a “road to more generalized systems thinking” across subject areas and contexts
Epstein, J. L. & Sanders, M. G. (2000)	Connecting home, school, and community: New directions for social research	To explain the overlapping spheres of influence on a child's development and learning	NA	NA	NA	The school, family, and community have a profound impact on a student and their connections cannot be overlooked	Further research into the sociology of education could lead to findings that positively affect school improvement and connection to communities/families

Appendix B
IRB Approval

**Leaders of Change: Supporting Successful and Equitable
Family Engagement in Middle Grades**

ID:
PROJECT00002965

Principal Investigator: Berry	Contacts: Napoli
Reviewer: Pooser	Review Level: Exempt
Funding Source:	Approved Date: 2/9/2021
Committee:	Expiration Date:
Review Category:	Project Status: Approved

Appendix C
District Approval

October 5, 2020

To Whom It May Concern,

I hereby grant permission to Theresa Napoli to conduct research for her doctoral dissertation as part of her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership program through the University of Georgia. Theresa currently serves as principal of [REDACTED]

It is hoped that her study, *Family Engagement in Middle Grades*, will provide a valuable contribution to this important topic.

Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Superintendent of Schools
[REDACTED]

Appendix D
Action Research Team Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM
LEADERS OF CHANGE: SUPPORTING SUCCESSFUL AND EQUITABLE FAMILY
ENGAGEMENT IN MIDDLE GRADES

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jami R. Berry
Lifelong Education,
Administration & Policy

Co-Investigator: Theresa Napoli
Lifelong Education,
Administration & Policy

We are doing this research study to learn more about family engagement at the middle school level at St. Joseph Catholic Parish School (SJS). SJS wishes to learn more about current strategies we use to engage families and their level of effectiveness. SJS also hopes to improve existing practices by implementing a new target strategy for increasing family engagement at the middle school level. The questions guiding this action research are:

1. How do stakeholders describe the impact of family engagement strategies at the middle school level in one small, Catholic middle school?
2. How does the implementation of family engagement strategies impact the culture and climate in one small, Catholic middle school?
3. How does an action research team describe the design and implementation process of a project focused on family engagement strategies in one small, Catholic middle school?

You are being invited to be in this research study because you currently work at SJS and have been identified by the researcher as someone directly involved with influencing middle school family engagement. You either work directly with middle school families, have prior experience working directly with middle school families, or are involved in program(s) that have a direct impact on family engagement at the middle school level at SJS.

Due to COVID-19, all group research activities/interviews/interactions will take place via Zoom or other online platforms versus in person.

If you agree to participate in this study:

The research activities will involve:

- The design and implementation teams participating in initial planning and research sessions. There will be 3 sessions at one hour each. After choosing the target strategy, there will be one additional one-hour research session.

- No more than 3 one-hour planning sessions with the implementation team to plan implementation of the target strategy.
- Implementation team members will spend no more than four hours per week in related activities to the target strategy for the entire time action research cycles are being implemented.
- The action research team will also meet monthly for one hour between action research cycles to plan for the next cycle.
- Interviews will be conducted with design and implementation team members at various points throughout the action research cycles. Interviews will last no longer than 30 minutes and there will be no more than 4 total interviews.

Additional activities and commitments:

- Receiving a two-hour professional development session on the chosen target strategy.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your decision to participate will have no impact in your participation in any programs at SJS, nor on your performance evaluation.

If there are any questions that make you uncomfortable, you can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

Your responses may help us understand how to better engage families at the middle school level at SJS. They may also show gains for students and families. The relationships between family and the school may also improve. Families may benefit from increased awareness/knowledge regarding the benefits family engagement in middle school has on their child, family and school. They may also learn new strategies for supporting their child at home. Staff may benefit from an increased awareness of research-based strategies which increase family engagement in middle school as well as an increased awareness of the ways families engage at home that may be different from the school-centric "engagement" strategies.

We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could be accidentally disclosed to people not connected to the research. To reduce this risk, we will identify you using a number code only. We will only keep information that could identify you in a locked cabinet in the principal's office for which the researcher is the only key holder. If Google Forms are used for any data collection, IP addresses could be identified, but the researcher has no plans to explicitly gather that information. Email addresses would be collected via Google Forms to ensure/verify who has completed the survey, but only the researcher will know that information and it will be linked to family member ID. When/if responses are presented to the action research team, no direct identifiers will be used. If data from Google Forms is exported to a table for analysis, the email address column will be replaced with number identifiers for both family members and teachers. This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure

the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

De-identified information obtained from this research may be used for future studies or shared with other researchers without obtaining additional consent.

Audio/Video Recording/Photographs

Interviews and focus group sessions will be recorded for reference after the initial interview/focus group in order to ensure accuracy of responses. Recordings will be archived and destroyed after 3 years.

Participant relationships with Researchers

A decision to participate or not participate in the study will have no impact on the participant’s status at SJS or in the Archdiocese of Atlanta.

Group Activities

Even though the investigator will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the group activities or interview sessions should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future.

Withdrawal from the research study

If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study or the investigator terminates your participation, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed.

Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Jami Royal Berry at [redacted] or the Co-Investigator, Ms. Theresa Napoli at [redacted]. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

Appendix E
Focus Group Member Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM
LEADERS OF CHANGE: SUPPORTING SUCCESSFUL AND EQUITABLE FAMILY
ENGAGEMENT IN MIDDLE GRADES

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jami R. Berry
Lifelong Education,
Administration & Policy

Co-Investigator: Theresa Napoli
Lifelong Education,
Administration & Policy

We are doing this research study to learn more about family engagement at the middle school level at St. Joseph Catholic Parish School (SJS). SJS wishes to learn more about current strategies we use to engage families and their level of effectiveness. SJS also hopes to improve existing practices by implementing a new target strategy for increasing family engagement at the middle school level. The questions guiding this action research are:

1. How do stakeholders describe the impact of family engagement strategies at the middle school level in one small, Catholic middle school?
2. How does the implementation of family engagement strategies impact the culture and climate in one small, Catholic middle school?
3. How does an action research team describe the design and implementation process of a project focused on family engagement strategies in one small, Catholic middle school?

You are being invited to be in this research study because you currently have a middle school student at SJS and have been identified by the action research design team to participate.

Due to COVID-19, all group research activities/interviews/interactions will take place via Zoom or other online platforms versus in person.

If you agree to participate in this study:

- We will collect information about your experience with engagement with SJS.
- We will ask you to participate in focus groups. It will take no longer than 45 minutes each session.
- We will follow up at the end of each action research cycle to have a post-implementation focus group.
- At most, families will participate in 6 focus group sessions.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your decision to participate will have no impact on you or your child's participation in any programs at SJS.

If there are any questions that make you uncomfortable, you can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

Your responses may help us understand how to better engage families at the middle school level at SJS. They may also show gains for students and families. The relationships between family and the school may also improve. Families may benefit from increased awareness/knowledge regarding the benefits family engagement in middle school has on their child, family and school. They may also learn new strategies for supporting their child at home.

We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could be accidentally disclosed to people not connected to the research. To reduce this risk, we will identify you using a number code only. We will only keep information that could identify you in a locked cabinet in the principal's office for which the researcher is the only key holder. If Google Forms are used for any data collection, IP addresses could be identified, but the researcher has no plans to explicitly gather that information. Email addresses would be collected via Google Forms to ensure/verify who has completed the survey, but only the researcher will know that information and it will be linked to family member ID. When/if responses are presented to the action research team, no direct identifiers will be used. If data from Google Forms is exported to a table for analysis, the email address column will be replaced with number identifiers for both family members and teachers. This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

De-identified information obtained from this research may be used for future studies or shared with other researchers without obtaining additional consent.

Incentives/compensation for participation

Parents will receive volunteer hours for the time they commit to the study. The hours will be logged in FACTS and count toward the requirement for the school year.

Audio/Video Recording/Photographs

Interviews and focus group sessions will be recorded for reference after the initial interview/focus group in order to ensure accuracy of responses. Recordings will be archived and destroyed after 3 years.

Participant relationships with Researchers

A decision to participate or not participate in the study will in no way impact the family's status at SJS. It will also have no impact, either negative or positive, on the family's student.

Focus Groups or Other Group Activities

Even though the researcher will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future.

Withdrawal from the research study

If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study or the investigator terminates your participation, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed.

Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Jami Royal Berry at [REDACTED] or the Co-Investigator, Ms. Theresa Napoli at [REDACTED]. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

Appendix F
Post-Conference Reflection Sheet

Student Name:

Family Member Name:

Date:

What did you enjoy most about the conference and why?

Student response:

Family response:

How are you feeling about your action plan? What might be the easiest step to accomplish? What might be the hardest step? If you find yourself struggling, who can you ask for help with revisiting your action plan?

Student response:

Family response:

How did you feel before, during, and after the conference? Do you feel more motivated to reach your goals (or help your child reach their goals) for the next quarter?

Student response:

Family response:

I feel this helped (or will help) me to talk about school more at home: yes or no and why or why not!

Student response:

Family response:

Appendix G

Interview and Focus Group Protocol

Interview and focus group questions may lead to other topics of discussion/information to be shared. The questions below will serve as a guide for gathering core information but will not limit any meaningful discussion that may arise as a result of questioning.

Research Questions:

To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do stakeholders describe the impact of family engagement strategies at the middle school level in one small, Catholic middle school?
2. How does the implementation of family engagement strategies impact the culture and climate in one small, Catholic middle school?
3. How does an action research team describe the design and implementation process of a project focused on family engagement strategies in one small, Catholic middle school?

Before Action Research:

Families: FOCUS GROUPS

Basic facts about the family will be gathered – how long they have been attending the school, how many children they have, the grades/ages of the children

1. How connected do you feel to the school community and why?
 - Probe for what makes them feel connected, what actions, events, communications, etc.
 - Probe for/additional question: Describe your relationship with the middle school faculty
2. How do you think the school defines engagement at the middle school level?
 - Probe for specific examples and how parents perceive teacher definitions
3. What do you feel the school's strengths, if any, are in engaging middle school families?
 - Probe for specific differences in lower school vs. middle school
4. How do you feel the school could improve, if at all, in engaging middle school families?
 - Probe for what they feel may be limiting their engagement
5. In what ways, if any, do you wish you could be engaged with the school that you are currently unable to do?
 - Probe for specific examples
6. What do you do at home as a family, if anything, that connects your home to school?
 - Probe for specific examples
7. Is there anything else you would like to discuss in regard to family engagement at the middle school level within our school?

Teachers: INTERVIEWS

Basic facts about the teachers/faculty will be gathered – how long they have been working/working at our school, and in what roles, etc.

1. Describe your relationship with our middle school families.
 - Probe for how teachers stay connected, what they feel constitutes a “good” relationship
2. How do you define family engagement?
 - Probe for specific examples
3. What do you feel is your role/responsibility, if at all, in regard to family engagement?
 - Probe for strategies already in use
4. What role do you think the family should play, if at all, in family engagement? What do you think the responsibilities, if any, of the families are?
 - Probe for specific examples
 - Additional question: When thinking about our families, who would you say is the “most engaged” and why?
5. What do you think the responsibilities of the students, if any, are in regard to family engagement?
 - Probe for specific examples
6. What do you think the school does well, if anything, to engage families at the middle school level?
 - Probe for specific examples
7. What do you think the school could do to improve, if anything, family engagement at the middle school level?
 - Probe for specific examples
8. Is there anything else you would like to discuss in regard to family engagement at the middle school level within our school?

After Action Research/Intervention Implementation:

Families: FOCUS GROUPS

Basic facts about the family will be gathered – how long they have been attending the school, how many children they have, the grades/ages of the children

1. How connected do you feel to the school community and why?
 - Probe for if they have noticed a change after implementation of target strategy
2. Do you feel the school has made changes in their efforts to better engage families? Why or why not?
 - Probe for what worked, what didn’t, and why
3. Have you made adjustments to how you engage with the school (either at home or with staff, etc. at school)?
 - Probe for how their own definition of engagement has changed/note any alignment with school efforts

4. Have you noticed any changes (either positive or negative) in your student after the implementation of the target strategy?
 - Probe for examples of academic changes as well as social/emotional changes
5. Have you noticed any changes (either positive or negative) in the middle school faculty after the implementation of the target strategy?
 - Probe for specific examples/changes
6. How do you feel your relationship with the middle school faculty has changed, if at all, since implementing the target strategy?
 - Probe for specific examples
7. Is there anything else you would like to discuss in regard to family engagement at the middle school level within our school?

Teachers: INTERVIEWS

Basic facts about the teachers/faculty will be gathered – how long they have been working/working at our school, and in what roles, etc.

1. How has your definition of family engagement changed, if at all, since implementation of the target strategy/research conducted/action research cycles?
 - Probe for specific examples
2. What do you feel is your role/responsibility, if at all, in regard to family engagement?
 - Probe for how this has changed
3. What role do you think the family should play, if at all, in family engagement? What do you think the responsibilities, if any, of the families are?
 - Probe for changing beliefs/attitudes
 - Additional question: Now, when thinking about our families, who would you say is the “most engaged” and why?
4. What do you think the responsibilities, if any, of the students are in regard to family engagement?
 - Probe for specific examples/note any changes
5. How do you feel your relationship with families has changed, if at all, since implementing the target strategy?
 - Probe for specific examples
 - Probe for specific self-reflections
6. Describe specifically how the action research process influenced, if at all, any of your answers above.
7. Is there anything else you would like to discuss in regard to family engagement or the action research process?

Appendix H

Student Led Conferences Responsibilities and Protocols: Version One

Roles and Responsibilities		
Presenter- Student	Facilitator – Teacher/Advocate	Stakeholder- Parent/Guardian
<p>Before the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify goals/learning targets for areas of strength and areas of challenge as they understand them at the beginning of each quarter. ● Students will identify a goal in each of the following areas: Spiritual, Academic, and Personal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide students with examples of possible goals ○ Rationale: narrowing too much limits students to focusing on one standard, etc. ○ They can narrow the goals they think they need to work on during this particular 9 weeks ○ The goal categories are the same as the faculty are required to set ○ Spiritual and Personal will incorporate writing but not be the writing sample ● Build and review digital portfolio and identify work that shows growth and those that may indicate a new goal that needs to be set (growth is ongoing process) ● Students choose a piece of writing and one work sample 	<p>Before the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teach children about Student Led Conferences (SLCs) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Set the stage and goal for this process from the beginning of the year ● Communicate with the parents about this new process and their roles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Mention during orientation ○ Letter as time gets closer clarifying parent role ● Create a process for students to identify goals at the beginning of each quarter that are reviewed by the teacher for best fit ● Share a model portfolio with the students and let them know you will be collecting work in which they can select pieces for their portfolio and the portfolio will be the focus of the conference ● Build portfolio days into the schedule and practice conferences (small groups) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Exploratory period 	<p>Before the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ask children about their goals and their progress <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SECS has responsibility to remind ○ After goals are set, give students the assignment to share them with parents & email parents to expect it ● Set time and date for the conference <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SECS sends sign up

<p>from each content area to include in their digital portfolio</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students reflect and complete a reflection sheet to guide them during their conference <p>During the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Student leads the entire conference using a protocol agreed upon by the team <p>After the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflects on the conference in writing using the template ● Takes deliberate actions to continue to work toward achieving goals ● Student confers with teacher to review the progress of the developed goals ● Student discusses reflections with small group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Exploratory period ● Revise/add goals as necessary ● Compose email of updated goals/action items between conference times (each quarter) to parents as they change/ evolve <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Student send email body to teacher who then forwards to parent 	<p>During the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teacher prompts or guides the student if needed <p>After the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teacher works with class to complete their individual reflections on the conference <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Class/exploratory time ● Discuss reflections and what changes they might make before next conference ● Sets up timelines and plans for follow-up check-ins with students on their goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Progress report time, plan for check-ins ○ Trial and error on when exactly ● Forward students email 	<p>During the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listens carefully to their child, takes notes, asks clarifying questions ● Note action items decided for parent support at home <p>After the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Parents review action plan and determine steps to help their children at home <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Copy conference report for parents ● Be responsive to student check-in and updates discussing progress toward the goals
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Appendix I
Action Plan Template

Action Plan: _____
(Student name)

Who	Growth Area 1: _____	Growth Area 2: _____
TEACHER/ SECS Action Items		
STUDENT Action Items		
FAMILY Action Items		

General notes and thoughts:

Please feel free to jot down any thoughts/ideas/questions/concerns/etc. you have during the conference in the space below!

Appendix J

Script for Facilitators

CONFERENCE FACILITATOR:

- Please keep an eye on the time (without setting a timer publicly and risking making the child/family nervous etc.)
- Make sure to have your own personal note-sheet on hand, as well as one for each set of parents. You will take your own notes as the child presents.
- Ask clarifying questions or guide the child IF NEEDED without doing their presentation for them. Families and teachers are supposed to remain silent a majority of the time during presentation slides, not during open discussion of course :)
- If parents want to ask questions after every slide, kindly remind them to use their note-taking sheet and that there will be time for questions near the end of the presentation. This is the student's time to shine!
- Additional Notes for Facilitator:
 - The PURPOSE of the adults' response is:
 - To expand on the student's thinking about his or her specific strengths and areas of improvement
 - To provide an additional perspective to the presented strengths and areas of improvement
 - To clarify the student's thinking about specific strengths and areas of improvement
 - When setting action items:
 - Keep the student's goals and learning targets in mind
 - Make sure there is a relevant connection to all the work they did to prepare for the conference

Overview: 30 seconds - student briefly discusses what the conference plan is

Prayer: 45 seconds - student asks everyone to join them and leads the prayer

Expectations for when the student shares a writing sample:

This could be for any subject of their choice, but they need to cover the following -

- ***The student describes, with direct references to their writing, their strengths as a writer by explaining how their work displays evidence of a particular learning target. Students are encouraged to read aloud a short section from the writing piece as they describe how it connects to the learning target. The student then shifts to discuss a learning target for writing that needs more time and work. The student reads and displays a section of their writing they want to work on in the future.***

Growth Highlight: 2 minutes - student discusses their growth highlight and accompanying image/work sample

ELA: 1 minute - student presents, adults listen and take notes if needed

- Similar structure to writing: present areas of strength and mention something that could be improved / work samples for at least an exemplary area & would like to also see work samples for areas that need improvement

Science: 1 minute - student presents, adults listen and take notes if needed

- Similar structure to writing: present areas of strength and mention something that could be improved / work samples for at least an exemplary area & would like to also see work samples for areas that need improvement

Religion: 1 minute - student discusses, adults listen and take notes if needed

- Similar structure to writing: present areas of strength and mention something that could be improved / work samples for at least an exemplary area & would like to also see work samples for areas that need improvement

Math: 1 minute - student discusses, adults listen and take notes if needed

- Similar structure to writing: present areas of strength and mention something that could be improved / work samples for at least an exemplary area & would like to also see work samples for areas that need improvement

Social Studies: 1 minute - student discusses, adults listen and take notes if needed

- Similar structure to writing: present areas of strength and mention something that could be improved / work samples for at least an exemplary area & would like to also see work samples for areas that need improvement

Enrichments: 1 minute - student discusses, adults listen and take notes if needed

- Similar structure to writing: present areas of strength and mention something that could be improved / work samples for at least an exemplary area & would like to also see work samples for areas that need improvement

Growth Area 1: 5 minutes total

- Student discusses their first area for growth and any accompanying artifacts (one minute or less)
- After student presents, teacher begins to facilitate the discussion of action items for teachers, student, then family
 - Begin by affirming the student in some way
 - “You seem really aware and ready to begin working harder on this”
 - “Great job recognizing what you need to work on next quarter”
 - Etc.
 - Then ask the student what their teachers and other adults at SJS could do to help them reach their goals
 - Ask guiding questions if they seem stuck
 - Make sure you do get at least one assignment/action item that will help the student make progress toward their goals (in other words, do not

- land on “there is nothing the school needs to do.” We set the tone for the student and family to take some responsibility to help!
- If needed, remind the parent to use their notes sheet - you should write on your own sheet as well. Try not to have dead time/silence for writing notes and action items, keep the conference moving!
- Thank them and then ask the student what they themselves could do to help them reach their goals
 - Write as the student speaks and remind parents to take notes if needed
 - Ask guiding questions if they are struggling or setting unrealistic goals
 - “What is something you could do to help keep you more organized?”
 - “Do you currently have a space in your house dedicated to completing work?”
 - Etc.
- Thank them and affirm their choices, then ask what their parents/family could do to help them reach their goals
 - Give a gentle suggestion or ask guiding questions if they seem to struggle or be nervous to tell their parents what they need from them
 - After the child shares, ask the parent outright if they think they could do anything in addition to what their child stated to help reach this goal
- Confirm that everyone has their action items written down and remind them that you will review these together at the end

Growth Area 2: 5 minutes total

- Student discusses their second area for growth and any accompanying artifacts (one minute or less)
- After student presents, teacher begins to facilitate the discussion of action items for teachers, student, then family
 - Begin by affirming the student in some way
 - “You seem really aware and ready to begin working harder on this”
 - “Great job recognizing what you need to work on next quarter”
 - Etc.
 - Then ask the student what their teachers and other adults at SJS could do to help them reach their goals
 - Ask guiding questions if they seem stuck
 - Make sure you do get at least one assignment/action item that will help the student make progress toward their goals (in other words, do not land on “there is nothing the school needs to do.” We set the tone for the student and family to take some responsibility to help!
 - If needed, remind the parent to use their notes sheet - you should write on your own sheet as well. Try not to have dead time/silence for writing notes and action items, keep the conference moving!

- Thank them and then ask the student what they themselves could do to help them reach their goals
 - Write as the student speaks and remind parents to take notes if needed
 - Ask guiding questions if they are struggling or setting unrealistic goals
 - “What is something you could do to help keep you more organized?”
 - “Do you currently have a space in your house dedicated to completing work?”
 - Etc.
- Thank them and affirm their choices, then ask what their parents/family could do to help them reach their goals
 - Give a gentle suggestion or ask guiding questions if they seem to struggle or be nervous to tell their parents what they need from them
 - After the child shares, ask the parent outright if they think they could do anything in addition to what their child stated to help reach this goal
- Confirm that everyone has their action items written down and remind them that you will review these together at the end

Review: 3 minutes - Facilitator leads

- Review action items and clarify that everyone knows what they are responsible for
- Promise to share SJS action items with all appropriate teachers

Questions? - Student leads

- The student will ask the parent(s) and facilitators if they have any questions for them (the student)

Wrap up - Facilitator leads

- Remind the family to keep their action items sheet for reference
- Pass out and send home the reflection sheet. Explain that they need to complete that together tonight and that it is due the following day

Closing - Student leads

- Thank everyone for coming to the conference and thank them for their support
- Give a closing sentence that lets the adults know that you have heard what they had to say and will take that into consideration when making goals/improvements going forward
 - Could be a reaction to what they have heard
 - Could be how they are feeling now/what is my reaction now that the team has come together
 - Could be a recap of next steps or action item number one for the student
 - Etc.
- Invite everyone to join in the closing prayer: Glory Be

Appendix K

Student Led Conferences Responsibilities and Protocols: Final Version

Roles and Responsibilities		
Presenter - Student	Facilitator - Teacher/Advocate	Stakeholder - Parent/Guardian
<p>Before the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify goals/learning targets for areas of strength and areas of challenge as they understand them at the beginning of each quarter ● Students will identify a goal in each of the following areas: Spiritual, Academic, and Personal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide students with examples of possible goals ○ Rationale: narrowing too much limits students to focusing on one standard, etc. ○ They can narrow the goals they think they need to work on during this particular 9 weeks ○ The goal categories are the same as the faculty are required to set (SMART goals, measurable) ● Build and review digital portfolio and identify work that shows growth and those that may indicate a new goal that needs to be set (growth is ongoing process) ● Students choose one piece of writing they want represented from any subject to insert into the presentation 	<p>Before the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teach children about Student Led Conferences (SLCs) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Set the stage and goal for this process from the beginning of the year ● Communicate with the parents about this new process and their roles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Mention during orientation ○ Letter as time gets closer clarifying parent role ● Create a process for students to identify goals at the beginning of each quarter that are reviewed by the teacher for best fit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ After goals are set, give students the assignment to share them with parents ○ When conference sign up is sent, include reminder for parents to ask how they are doing on their goals ○ After student is assigned to share set goals, teacher sends email to parents to let them know to expect it (via Wednesday Folder) 	<p>Before the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review initial goals set by student ● Ask children about their goals and their progress ● Read relevant info sent by teachers about student led conferences ● Set time and date for the conference

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students choose one work sample from each remaining content area to include in their digital portfolio <p>During the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Student leads the entire conference using a protocol agreed upon by the team <p>After the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflects on the conference in writing using the template ● Takes deliberate actions to continue to work toward achieving goals ● Student confers with teacher to review the progress of the developed goals ● Revise/add goals as necessary ● Reflect on goals/action items between conference times (each quarter) as they change/ evolve <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Updated goals go home in Wednesday Folder to be signed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Share the template and a model digital portfolio with the students and remind them to be collecting work samples for their digital portfolio ● Build digital portfolio days/time into schedule and practice conferences (small groups) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Exploratory period ○ Facilitator times set as works with their schedule ● Share conference sign up with parents <p>During the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teacher prompts or guides the student if needed using script protocol as a guide <p>After the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Facilitators meet with one another to review and share action plans ● Student and facilitator discuss reflections and what changes they might make before next conference or for upcoming goal setting ● Complete follow-up and check-ins with students on their goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Progress report time, plan for check-ins ○ 1st Thursday of new quarter ● Send home updated student goals at the beginning of each quarter <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ On paper in Wednesday Folder with signature line 	<p>During the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listen carefully to their child, takes notes, ask clarifying questions ● Note action items decided for parent support at home <p>After the Conference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Parents review action plan and determine steps to help their children at home <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use notes/action plan document from conference as guide ● Be responsive to student: check-in and updates discussing progress toward the goals
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Appendix L
Student Goal-Setting Template

{School Name}
Student Goals
{School Year}

{SCHOOL LOGO}

Student Name:

Guidance for Setting Individual Goals:

- You will set one personal, one academic, and one spiritual goal each quarter for the 20XX-20XX school year. These goals require teacher approval.
- All goals must be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-bound).
- You must have a plan of action to complete your goal. You may adjust your plan as needed, however, please consult with your teachers if plans need to be adjusted between quarters.
- If you have an area of concentration for this quarter related to your last conference your goals should reflect that focus.

Personal Goal

Rationale: (Why is this goal important to you?)

What are some potential obstacles to your successful completion of this goal?

Goal Action Plan (include dates if applicable)

What will you do to reach your goal? Add more if necessary.

- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
-

Academic Goal

Rationale: (Why is this goal important to you?)

What are some potential obstacles to your successful completion of this goal?

Goal Action Plan (include dates if applicable)

What will you do to reach your goal? Add more if necessary.

- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
-

Spiritual Goal

Rationale: (Why is this goal important to you?)

What are some potential obstacles to your successful completion of this goal?

Goal Action Plan (include dates if applicable)

What will you do to reach your goal? Add more if necessary.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Initial Goal Meeting:

Faculty Member Signature (Date)

Student Signature (Date)


Parent Signature (Date)

Student Signature (Date)

Appendix M

Student Led Conference Presentation Template: Final Version

<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">{Student Name and Grade}</p> <p style="font-size: 0.8em; margin-top: 20px;">Student Led Conference (Insert date of conference here)</p>	<h4 style="margin-top: 0;">Overview of the Conference</h4> <p>Student, family, teachers: Opening Prayer</p> <p>Student: Introductions/intentions</p> <p>Student: Growth highlight - what progress I am the proudest of</p> <p>Student: Subject area highlights</p> <p>Student: Areas for growth (2)</p> <p>Student, family, teachers - Discussion and goal-setting for areas of growth/finalize action plan</p> <p>Student: Review, closing, closing</p>
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<h4 style="margin-top: 0;">Opening Prayer/ Introductions & Intentions</h4> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Almighty and Everliving God,</p> <p>As we go into this meeting, we place ourselves before You, for You are filled with the beauty and goodness and care deeply about us. Help us to value and appreciate those we are gathered with.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">May Your light enfold us, and may Your Holy Spirit guide us. May Your grace abound in us. We ask this through Christ our Lord.</p>	<h4 style="margin-top: 0;">Growth Highlight</h4> <p>Quick notes about your growth highlight</p> <p>Possibly a quick link to your work sample (a work sample must be provided for this section)</p> <p>Do not type word-for-word what you are going to say (presentation skill)</p> <p>Options for this space:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delete this text box • Add the text of what you are most proud of as your growth highlight • Delete this text box and add an appropriate, relevant image
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<h4 style="margin-top: 0;">Subject Area Highlight: English & Language Arts</h4> <p>Options for this space:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delete this text box • Add the text of what your highlight is • Delete this text box and add an appropriate, relevant image 	<p>Quick notes about your ELA highlight</p> <p>Possibly a quick link to your work sample</p> <p>Do not type word-for-word what you are going to say (presentation skill)</p>	<h4 style="margin-top: 0;">Subject Area Highlight: Science</h4> <p>Options for this space:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delete this text box • Add the text of what your highlight is • Delete this text box and add an appropriate, relevant image
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<h4 style="margin-top: 0;">Subject Area Highlight: Religion</h4> <p>Options for this space:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delete this text box • Add the text of what your highlight is • Delete this text box and add an appropriate, relevant image 	<p>Quick notes about your Religion highlight</p> <p>Possibly a quicklink to your work sample</p> <p>Do not type word-for-word what you are going to say (presentation skill)</p>	<h4 style="margin-top: 0;">Subject Area Highlight: Math</h4> <p>Options for this space:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delete this text box • Add the text of what your highlight is • Delete this text box and add an appropriate, relevant image
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Subject Area Highlight: Social Studies

Options for this space:

- Delete this text box
- Add the text of what your highlight is
- Delete this text box and add an appropriate, relevant image

Quick notes about your Social Studies highlight

Possibly a quicklink to your work sample

Do not type word-for-word what you are going to say (presentation skill)

Subject Area Highlight: Enrichments

Options for this space:

- Delete this text box
- Add the text of what your highlight is
- Delete this text box and add an appropriate, relevant image

Quick notes about your Enrichments highlight

- You will choose only ONE enrichment to highlight your progress in
- Your options are: Spanish, Band, Choir, Art, PE, Tech, Library

Possibly a quicklink to your work sample

Do not type word-for-word what you are going to say (presentation skill)

Area for Growth #1: {Add what it is here}

Options for this space:

- Delete this text box
- Delete this text box and add an appropriate, relevant image

Quick notes about your #1 Area for Growth

Possibly a quicklink to your work sample (a work sample must be provided for this section)

Do not type word-for-word what you are going to say (presentation skill)

{Everyone keep this at the bottom, delete this text in bold} Whole group discussion (families, please see template provided to take notes)

Current Grade:

Area for Growth #2: {Add what it is here}

Options for this space:

- Delete this text box
- Delete this text box and add an appropriate, relevant image

Quick notes about your #2 Area for Growth

Possibly a quicklink to your work sample (a work sample must be provided for this section)

Do not type word-for-word what you are going to say (presentation skill)


{Everyone keep this at the bottom, delete this text in bold} Whole group discussion (families, please see template provided to take notes)

Current Grade:

Review and Finalize Action Plan for all


1. Review action items for parents, student, and teachers
2. Discuss any clarifications needed
3. Ask parents if they have any final questions

Reflection Sheet & Thank you



1. Discuss next steps (reflection sheet to be completed at home together)
2. Thank everyone for coming and for supporting you!

Closing Prayer



Glory Be

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning.

Amen.

Glory Be

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning.

Amen.