

## **Increasing Parent Involvement at Carver STEM Academy**

University of Michigan Engineering Honors Program Capstone – Final Report

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Carver STEM Academy is a public school in Detroit, Michigan with students in pre-kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Currently, the school is experiencing low parent involvement rates at school events, including monthly parent meetings and parent / teacher conferences. Carver STEM Academy would like to increase its parent involvement rates at the school.

Parent involvement is important in their child's education, especially at the elementary school level where children are more impressionable. When parents are involved in their child's education, it is more likely that the child will be involved in school and have more academic success. Additionally, when parents stress the importance of school to their child and continue a routine at home, it strengthens the child's brain development.

Parent involvement in their child's education has been proven to correlate to educational success. Because parents are the first influence on their children's development, they can influence their children to strive for stronger grades, higher test scores, and better attendance records. This impact on children has been proven to be most beneficial for children growing up in low-income areas.

Parents can be involved in progressing their child's education through multiple avenues, including being involved at the school and by enhancing their child's learning at home. Carver STEM Academy would like to focus specifically on improving parent involvement at the school. When parents are involved at the school, they are able to understand what is going on their child's education. This understanding helps parents foster a sense of academic interest in their child. Also, parent involvement in the school helps them to emphasize the importance of education to their child.

The vast majority of parents want to be highly involved in their child's educational experience; however, there are many barriers to parent involvement at schools. The largest barriers to parent involvement concerning the role of teachers include:

- Lack of access to their child's teacher
- Teacher lack of understanding of parents' communication styles
- Teachers' misperceptions of parents' abilities.

The largest barriers to parent involvement in general include demographic, psychological, and school climate barriers. Demographic barriers include:

- Inflexible work schedules
- Need to care for younger children at home
- Lack of transportation
- Language barriers

Psychological barriers include:

- Parents' lack of confidence in their own ability
- Issues with mental health
- Perceptions of poverty and racism

School climate barriers include:

- Power differentials between school staff and parents
- Unwelcoming school environment
- Issues in the school conveying information to parents

The role of the school staff is important to eliminating barriers and increasing parent involvement at schools. Teachers can create a welcoming environment in the classroom and build a class network between parents. Also, the importance of parent input can be emphasized and encouraged at the school. Carver STEM Academy has already explored a variety of options for how to remove barriers to involvement and increase parent involvement rates. Additional ideas for how to increase parent involvement at Carver STEM Academy are explored throughout this paper.

## **OUTLINE**

Throughout this paper, the following questions are addressed:

- What parent involvement techniques are currently employed by Carver STEM Academy?
- Why might parent involvement rates at Carver STEM Academy be low?
- Which parent involvement techniques are currently being used by other Detroit Public Schools with high parent involvement rates?
- What additional steps can Carver STEM Academy take to improve parent involvement at the school?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Published articles that were relevant to this project were investigated to further understand barriers to parent involvement in low-income areas and other potential challenges. The published articles were also used to gain a better understanding of potential recommendations for Carver STEM Academy. These articles were found through the University of Michigan Library Database and through Google Scholar.

### ***Barriers to Parent Involvement***

In general, barriers can be classified under four different categories:

- Demographic barriers, such as inflexible work schedules, the need to work multiple jobs, the need to care for children, transportation problems, and language barriers
- Psychological barriers, such as a lack of confidence in their own intellectual abilities, perceptions of racism and poverty, and mental health
- Teacher attitudes, meaning that teachers lack value for parent participation, are not welcoming, and alienate parents
- School climate, meaning that the school staff is not encouraging of parent involvement, there are power differentials, and parents feel marginalized

Below are some of the top reasons why low-income parents are not involved at their child's school:

- Parents do not understand course work
- Parents cannot leave other children at home alone
- Parent / teacher conference times and event times conflict with work schedules
- Parents experience language barriers

- Teachers do not directly ask parents to be involved

### ***Common Forms of Parent Involvement***

Below are the most popular involvement roles for parents:

- Helping their child with homework
- Supporting their child by going to performances, games, or award ceremonies
- Going to classes or workshops alongside teachers
- Assisting in events such as field trips or fundraisers

### ***Methods to Improve Parent Involvement***

There are many methods and techniques that schools can employ to improve parent involvement. To mitigate barriers, teachers can learn about the families of the children in the school. Learning facts like names, jobs, and hobbies can make parents feel more welcome and comfortable communicating with the school staff. The school staff should also learn about the community where the students live in order to refer parents to different community leaders for various questions and concerns. Additionally, schools can compile a list of resources for parents, provide on-site services for parents such as a resource drop-in center, offer in-service training for school personnel, and utilize parents' cultural capital to have them contribute to the school in their own unique ways.

Two distinct methods to improve parent involvement include:

- Meeting the physical needs of families
- Enhancing parent involvement in education

To meet the physical needs of families, the school can become a full-service community center that provides parents with information about the school, resources like English classes and computer help, and items like food and clothing. To enhance parent involvement in education, teachers can provide office hours to teach the parents about what their child is learning and provide constant updates to parents about their child's progress.

It is also important to seek input and feedback from parents to encourage ownership and involvement in the school. Teachers can approach parents with an appreciation and understanding of them and place focus on asking parents what they want from their child's education. Many researchers have found that parents want more interactive school meetings, to learn how they can help their children with academics, to be personally invited to meetings by teachers over the phone, a more hospitable staff, and for the principal to hold monthly coffee chats to gather new ideas from parents.

The role of the teacher is very important in increasing parent involvement. Teachers can hold three classroom meetings throughout the term to explain academic goals, share individual data with parents about their children's performance in class, and suggest home activities. Some parents are intimidated at first by school visits and that they will feel more comfortable if teachers reach out to them and keep in touch with them throughout the year. Parent involvement is also higher when teachers create a quality classroom environment by creating a network of parents, provide more ways for parents to participate from home, promote parent involvement,

value parent input, and keep parents updated on their child's progress. Teachers and schools can also plan events aimed at the entire family and involve parents in planning early in the term.

## **METHODS**

To gather data, an interview with the Parent Leader, observations of parent meetings and a competitor analysis of other Detroit Public Schools with high parent involvement were performed. This qualitative data helped create an understanding of the current parent involvement at Carver STEM Academy and led to the generation potential recommendations.

### ***Interview***

To understand the current parent involvement strategies employed by Carver STEM Academy, an interview with the Parent Lead, Ms. Bell, was conducted (see Appendix 1). The interview was conducted over the phone. As the Parent Lead, Ms. Bell is in charge of bridging the gap between the parents and the school staff. She stated that parents will sometimes come to her with ideas for school events and that they will work together to try to make the event happen. She also discussed how parents tend to be more involved when their child is involved in school activities or awards ceremonies. Ms. Bell recommends offering gift cards to parents to improve their attendance at school events and having children attend more events to encourage parent involvement.

### ***Observations***

To understand the current setup of the parent meetings, observations were taken at the parent meetings that were held on January 20<sup>th</sup> at 3:30 pm and March 22<sup>nd</sup> at 3:00 pm. At the parent meeting on January 20<sup>th</sup>, parents and staff discussed and voted on shortening the school day by 45 minutes. At the beginning of the meeting, there was a warm, welcoming environment where parents and staff were chatting all together. Parents felt comfortable discussing their opinions about a shortened school day and communicated information to parents that were not able to make the parent meeting. In total, there were 60 people on the call.

At the parent meeting on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, there was going to be a facilitated training on how parents can help students. However, the facilitator never came to the meeting. At the beginning of the call, teachers were complimenting the children of the parents on the call. Instead of cancelling the meeting since there was no facilitator, the school staff decided to ask parents how they can improve parent involvement rates. A few ideas were proposed, including more incentivized meetings, including children in parent meetings, and asking parents to help with the school's morning announcements from home. In total, there were 7 people on the call.

### ***Competitor Analysis***

To understand parent involvement techniques used by other Detroit Public Schools with high parent involvement rates, Dean Fahmi Islam from Burton International Academy provided some insights (see Appendix 2). The interview with Dean Islam was conducted via email. He emphasized that staff effort in contacting parents and consistency in timing is the biggest way to ensure that there is no gap in communication between parents and the school. Additionally, Dean Islam states that Burton International Academy's attendance agent is conducting home visits regularly to find out the best way for the schools to connect with families. Through

feedback from parents, Burton International Academy started breaking up parent meetings by grade level, which has increased parent involvement rates at parent meetings.

## **RESULTS**

After performing a literature search, interview with the parent lead, observations of parent meetings, and a competitor analysis, the following results were achieved.

### ***Barriers to Parent Involvement***

The following includes the most common barriers for Carver STEM Academy:

- Language barriers
- Lack of communication / reminders between teachers and parents
- Lack of time slots for parent / teacher conferences

### ***Common Forms of Parent Involvement***

The following includes the most common forms of parent involvement at Carver STEM Academy:

- Attending incentivized events
- Picking up material at the quarterly distributions
- Supporting their child at a sporting event, performance, or award ceremony

### ***Methods to Improve Parent Involvement***

To improve parent involvement at Carver STEM Academy, the following ideas are recommended:

- Use various forms of personalized communication
- Separate parent meetings by grade level
- Involve students in parent meetings

## **DISCUSSION / CONCLUSION**

In order to increase parent involvement rates at Carver Stem Academy, using various forms of communication, separating parent meetings by grade level, and implementing child involvement into parent meetings is recommended.

### ***Various Forms of Communication***

Currently, Carver STEM Academy uses a mostly impersonalized approach to communicate information about school events to parents. Teachers are responsible for personally communicating with parents, though the extent and frequency to which they communicate with parents is determined by the teacher. Additionally, the child is often responsible for communicating information to their parents. Since the children at Carver STEM Academy are in pre-k through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, the school cannot solely rely on the children to convey information to parents. Because of this, Carver STEM Academy uses ROBO calls to inform parents of upcoming school meetings and events.

The recommended structure for Carver STEM Academy to improve its parent involvement rates includes a more personalized communication approach. Similar to the structure of Burton International Academy, Carver STEM Academy should require teachers to send personalized emails and make phone calls to every parent before each school event. Additionally, teachers

can add more frequent parent / teacher check-ins throughout the school year to increase communication. Increasing the amount of personalized information to parents will help keep parents informed about school events and their child's progress, and will therefore increase parent involvement rates.

### ***Parent Meetings by Grade Level***

Currently, parent meetings are conducted monthly and the content at these meeting are geared for the whole school. Since Carver STEM Academy includes pre-k through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, there is a large amount of information that is covered and not all information is applicable to the parents.

To counter the issues previously mentioned, Carver STEM Academy should conduct parent meetings for each grade level. This is the current structure used by Burton International Academy, and the implementation of this format helped to increase the school's parent involvement rates. By presenting more applicable information, parents will feel more inclined to go to the parent meetings and listen to the information that is given. Separating parent meetings by grade level will help Carver STEM Academy to increase its parent involvement rates.

### ***Child Involvement in Parent Meetings***

Currently, Carver STEM Academy does not incorporate child involvement into parent meetings. However, parents are more likely to attend events that feature their child, including sporting events, performances, and award ceremonies. The Carver STEM Academy Parent Lead, Ms. Bell, commented that similar trends are apparent at the school.

The recommended structure for Carver STEM Academy to improve its parent involvement rates includes involving students in parent meetings. Examples of how children can be involved in parent meetings include giving student presentations and being presented with awards. Once parents go to their first parent meeting to see their child, they will be more likely to go to parent meetings in the future. This is an example of the foot-in-the-door technique where the person feels like they are obligated to keep agreeing to larger requests. Therefore, involving students in parent meetings will help to increase parent involvement rates in the future.



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## **APPENDICES**

**Appendix 1:** Summary of Interview with Carver STEM Academy Parent Lead

**Appendix 2:** Protocol with Burton International Academy's Dean

## **APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW WITH CARVER STEM ACADEMY PARENT LEAD – MS. BELL**

### **Q: Why were you interested in being the Parent Leader?**

A: Wanted to be supportive of her children and be around them more, as well as see what else was going on around the school

### **Q: What is your role as the Parent Leader?**

A: Call parents to ask for feedback and provide reminders for school meetings, work to connect parents with principal

### **Q: How long do you serve as the Parent Leader?**

A: Up to the principal

### **Q: Have you noticed a low parent involvement rate?**

A: Yes, has tried everything to get parents to be more involved and the only time you see parents involved is when their child is in a ceremony or getting an award

### **Q: Do parents ever tell you why they are not involved?**

A: Language barriers (tried to combat language barriers but involvement did not increase)

### **Q: How often do parents discuss concerns or ideas with you? What is the platform for this?**

A: Once when parents wanted to plan a fundraiser for the school but plans fell through, parents went directly to Ms. Bell with idea

### **Q: Any ideas for increasing parent involvement at the school?**

A: No, looking for fresh ideas

### **Q: How can we get more parents to attend the parent meetings?**

A: It is sometimes on the child to get the parent more involved; one idea is to start providing parents with gift cards

### **Q: What type of events would you like to see?**

A: Parents like when their children are performing in events, one idea is to have children involved in more meetings

### **Q: How do you feel about home visits?**

A: Carver STEM Academy has been doing home visits once a quarter, could try to increase the frequency

### **Q: How do you feel about more time slots for parent teacher conferences?**

A: It would be a good idea to open more time slots and continue to talk to parents throughout the semester

### **Q: How do you feel about more volunteer options for parents?**

A: A variety of options are already offered but parents do not sign up for the volunteer opportunities

**Q: How do you feel about trainings for school staff and parents to do together?**

A: It is a good idea, one for the training could be how to help kids with homework

**Q: How do you feel about more frequent updates about child progress from teachers?**

A: Parents are already given updates about their children frequently (once a week)

**Q: How do you feel about a school blog?**

A: There is a school blog already but it is not frequently used and could be revamped

## **APPENDIX 2: PROTOCOL WITH BURTON INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY'S DEAN – FAHMI ISLAM**

### **Q: What is your current parent involvement rate?**

A: I cannot give you an exact number or percentage however, our parent meeting participation is very high. Most of our parents are very involved in their child's education.

### **Q: Was your involvement rate ever low? How did you increase it?**

A: Our involvement rate is low right now prior to the pandemic. We understand the barriers that are in place for our rate to decrease. However, we are making effort to contact each parent to share information and guide them with their child's education.

### **Q: What events do parents come to / want? What are the times of these events?**

A: Our principal conducts regular parent information session via TEAMS platform. He does it in grade bands which tends to work out better for us. Prior to schools going virtual we held parent meetings in the building that started at 8:00am or 5:00pm. Our biggest attendance occurs during school performance which is always held at 5:00pm.

### **Q: Do you do any home visits or personalized check-ins?**

A: Yes, our attendance agent is conducting home visits regularly. Also, our support staff has and will continue to conduct personalized wellness check-ins for the remainder of the school year. This allow us to connect with families and find out how we can provide support.

### **Q: What is the structure of your parent meetings?**

A: As of right now, we are holding virtual meetings.

### **Q: How do you get parents to sign up for parent / teacher conferences?**

A: We do ROBO calls, emails to parents and students, and use social media platforms to inform parents of conferences. Also, teachers create a sign-up sheet where parents can make an appointment online.

### **Q: How do parents communicate their ideas and suggestions to the school?**

A: Our parents are quite vocal so they will always contact us via email, phone call, or in person to communicate/share any suggestions.

### **Q: Anything else?**

A: Consistency is the biggest thing and using various method of communication where we don't leave a gap.