

## Three Parent and Family Interventions for Rural Schools and Communities

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### Abstract

Dramatic changes involving rural parents and family systems are impacting schools, communities, and entire provinces and states. The out-migration of individual parents and entire family systems world-wide is especially noteworthy because it contributes to incipient urbanization at the same time that it ushers in consequential demographic changes—with economic development ramifications. For example, as parents migrate in search of jobs and better educational opportunities for their children, vulnerable families may replace them. Meanwhile, more mothers are in the work force. Mother-headed, single parent families are commonplace, and an unspecified number face employment challenges. Comparatively more, culturally diverse families are not fluent in their new nation's dominant language. Where rural schools are concerned, a conventional parent involvement model (PI) founded on the idea that stay-at-home mothers will volunteer no longer will yield desired benefits at scale. Additional parent and family innovations are needed, and they must be founded on intervention logic. Two such innovations are a collective parent engagement intervention and family support interventions. With PI, they form an intervention triad with the potential to strengthen connections among rural families, schools, community organizations, and faith-based institutions. These new connections in support of parents and family systems will help advance comprehensive planning for rural education and human development.

**Keywords:** Rural parents; rural families; rural schools; parent involvement; collective parent engagement; family support; school improvement; rural community development

### Three Parent and Family Interventions for Rural Schools and Communities

Important changes underway in rural America may have import for other nations. Comparatively fewer children come to rural schools, and increasing numbers of them arrive at the schoolhouse door with barriers to learning and healthy development. Rural educators respond as best they can. One option is more student support services (Adelman & Taylor, 2006). Another is a school-linked configuration in which community- and county-based services strategically are connected to schools (Lawson & Sailor, 2000). A third option is multi-service schools and community schools, which cater to whole child development and relocated services at schools (H. Lawson, 2013).

Ideally, everyone benefits as services are implemented, schools are reconfigured, and children's barriers are addressed. For example, teachers' work is facilitated and teacher retention improves (Day & Gu, 2014), helping individual schools and entire districts to achieve their academic goals (Wilcox, et al., 2014). Ultimately, rural communities stand to benefit because healthy children who succeed in effective schools contribute to the vitality of rural places. Viewed in this way, rural schools and communities enjoy a symbiotic relationship, especially so when community economic and social development is prioritized (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Schafft & Jackson, 2010).

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Children and youth are the centerpiece in this symbiotic relationship because, in so many ways, they are the future of rural communities. Investments in young people and their schools thus double as investments in rural places. Such is the conventional frame for relations among rural schools, communities, and children. This frame either excludes, or gives short shrift to, a core priority—rural parents and family systems. Researchers have followed suit. For example, Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean (2005) reviewed 498 rural studies conducted in the United States (USA) and found just 16 focused on parents.

Where the USA is concerned, there is a pattern here, and it may be evident in other nations. Rural leaders focus on children, schools, and communities, while neglecting the central roles of families in integrated plans for education, community economic and social development. This oversight is consequential because mediate and moderate the symbiotic relationship among schools, children, and communities (Briar-Lawson, et al., 2001).

In other words, when desirable outcomes are achieved, it is because many families are stable, supported, healthy, and strong, which enables parents to engage in beneficial child rearing practices. In contrast, when sub-optimal outcomes are in evidence, the search for causes ultimately leads to parents and family systems. Sub-optimal child outcomes, including barriers to learning and healthy development, can be traced to vulnerable families that are economically stressed, transient, socially excluded, and isolated. All such family-related challenges help to account for children's developmental and learning-related barriers when they arrive at the schoolhouse door.

Given the importance of parents and families, the time has come to address several related policy and practice questions. What can be done differently and better to support *rural parents*? What can be done differently and better to improve the condition of *rural families*? What new roles and responsibilities are in store for educators and their community partners? What conditions need to be established so that parent and family innovations will be successful? What are predicted benefits? Together these questions help structure a comprehensive research and development agenda—and with the reminder that every such agenda must be tailored to the unique features of rural schools and communities in diverse nations.

The aim for this article is to contribute to this agenda by proposing three parent and family innovations. Each innovation can be viewed as an intervention. The three interventions featured in this framework are parent involvement (PI), collective parent engagement (CPE), and family support (FS). All three have import for rural schools worldwide, especially when they are developed simultaneously, coherently, and synergistically.

We begin with a summary of the significant demographic changes underway in rural towns, schools, and communities. From there, we describe the unique intervention-oriented features of PI, CPE, and FS, paying close attention to the ways that they might fit the unique strengths, needs, opportunities, and threats of particular rural schools and communities. After highlighting the differences, merits, and limitations of each approach, we conclude with recommendations for rural public policy development, including new imperatives for family-centered policy. Throughout we rely on research from the USA, which clearly is a manifest limitation. On the other hand, our selectivity enables international-comparative analysis, which ultimately may facilitate the development of alternative innovations in other nations.

### **Fast-Changing Rural Community Contexts**

Despite the tendency to paint all rural schools and communities with a single brush, important differences need to be emphasized. For example, different types of rural communities have been identified. Examples include agricultural communities, resource extraction communities, recreational-tourist communities, urban commuter (“bedroom”) communities, and indigenous people's communities (Lichter & Brown, 2011).

Mindful of these important differences, rural school and community scholars also have identified important commonalities. In particular, scholars interested in community economic and social development have provided salient details about the changes underway in a growing number of rural communities world-wide. Four are especially noteworthy.

### **Arrival Cities and New Rural-Urban Spatial Dynamics**

The first consequential change is unprecedented, massive movements of people from rural communities to cities. This global out-migration has two dimensions: (1) Intra-national movement and (2) Cross-border, international migrations. Where cities are concerned, vulnerable families and individuals tend to cluster in particular urban places and spaces. Saunders (2010) calls them “arrival cities.”

They provide points of entry for entire families as well as for divided family systems—characterized by one or two employment-seeking and perhaps employable parents who leave their children and other family members in sender, rural communities (Alameda-Lawson, Lawson, & Lawson, 2013). In this pattern, limited employment opportunities in rural communities are called “push factors,” while the lure of urban jobs implicates “pull factors” (Lawson, 2001). Regardless of the dynamics, the workforces of rural communities are progressively eroded as these migrations occur, and the demographic profiles of remaining families often change.

However tempting it may be to view these migration patterns in a kind of win-lose population game, a growing number of demographers paint a different, more dynamic picture. These scholars suggest that these impressive population movements are not “once and for all fixtures.” These scholars also emphasize how urban areas and rural communities alike are caught up in a new nexus of changing spatial and social boundaries (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2013; Lichter & Brown, 2011). In this new nexus, “the rural” and “the urban” are not mutually exclusive because boundaries continue to shift and populations keep moving. As a case in point, consider the transformed rural community: Formerly an agricultural center, today it has become a “bedroom community” for urban commuters. Here, there are no clear boundaries between urban and rural. In fact, the rural and the urban interact; they are mutually constitutive.

### **The Global Economy, Human Capital Development, and Neo-liberal Educational Policy**

Educational policy and practice in many parts of the world have taken the neo-liberal turn toward human capital development for the global economy (Raffo, 2014). The aim is to harness schools and educational systems overall in service of a particular kind of human development—workforce preparation in service of economic development (Becker, 1993). The logic is straightforward. Project the kinds of jobs, identify the skills and abilities they require, structure curricula and instruction in service of competency development and workforce preparation, and determine what parts of schooling need to be maintained and what needs to change (e.g., Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2010; McGranahan, 2003).

Two implications associated with this logic are especially significant. First, this neo-liberal approach is a standardizing, mass production view of schools. It has the potential to stamp out “the rural.” For example, it threatens, erodes and potentially eliminates priorities for place-based teaching and learning (e.g., Brown & Schafft, 2011; Schafft & Jackson, 2010).

Second, successful human capital development via schools raises a companion issue—namely, how to lure young people who left for postsecondary education back home (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Sherman & Sage, 2011). The question is: What are the lures?

In the wake of failed small town businesses, factories that have closed, and farms that have ceased operations, job opportunities increasingly are scarce. Until such time as these structural push-out factors are addressed, it will be difficult to lure employable young people to rural communities.

### **Changing Families**

Meanwhile, many US rural counties and communities are experiencing three family-related population changes, albeit somewhat uniquely and contingently in different regions (Strange, et al., 2012). One of these changes is population loss. Although some rural towns and school districts are gaining new students and families (Strange, et al., 2012), many are in decline. To reiterate, this decline is fueled by the out-migration of parents and other adults. Parents who leave in search of jobs and better educational opportunities for their children are especially important losses because oftentimes some such parents were involved in their children’s schools. In fact, some were civic leaders (Brown & Schafft, 2011).

The second change pertains to the individuals and families who remain after others have moved out. Granting variability among rural US communities, these families oftentimes are the least effectively served by schools and other public sector institutions. One reason is that some of these families are challenged by a powerful combination of poverty, social exclusion, and social isolation (Brown & Schafft, 2011; H. Lawson, 2009). In the same vein, a national rural student poverty rate of 41 percent (Strange, et al., 2012) serves a proxy indicator that their parents may be hard-to-employ (Son, et al., 2011).

On top of employment and related economic insecurities, a growing number of families are mother-headed, single parent families (Kalil & Ryan, 2010). What's more, the number of mothers who opt not to marry is growing (Martin, et al., 2012). In fact, Sawhill (2014) has concluded that novel social, cultural and economic conditions in the USA will continue to reduce formal marriages, together with the number of children reared in two-parent family systems.

Granting the strengths of single parents and the assets of their family systems, these profound demographic shifts in family forms and compositions have consequences for rural communities, schools, parents, and children.

For example, research indicates that when these single parent mothers lack needed social and economic resources, maternal stress and depression are predictable, and so is hardship for their children (Bauer & Katras, 2007; Olson, et al., 2006). In sum, the greater hardship and stress experienced by single-parent mothers, the more likely it is that their children will arrive at schools with one or more barriers to learning and healthy development (Sano, et al., 2011; US Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), 2011).

The third change involves families who relocate in economically challenged rural communities, especially agricultural communities. In these locales, culturally diverse families whose first language is not English are arriving in record numbers (e.g., Howley, 2013; Schafft & Jackson, 2010). For example, Strange et al. (2012) reported an overall 150 percent increase in multi-ethnic Latino students. Many of these children are English language learners (ELL) in school, including 4 out of every 10 students in the American Southeast (Strange et al.). In addition to language adaptation needs in classrooms, many of these students have other learning and developmental needs for which educators may not be prepared.

When ELL families also are challenged by poverty, social exclusion, and social isolation, and a growing number of them are concentrated in particular rural places and their schools (Johnson, Strange, & Madden, 2010), educators and other professionals charged with serving them confront a kind of double jeopardy. In order for these children to succeed in school, they and their families need expansive, intensive, and expensive services and supports. Unfortunately, funding shortfalls in resource-strapped districts and community agencies limit and even preclude professionals' ability to deliver all that ELL children and families need.

To reiterate, these three changes involving families who leave, those who stay, and new ones who arrive are not isolated phenomena. They interact in both predictable and unique ways. Individually and together they help account for growing barriers to children's learning and healthy development. They also add to the challenges of rural community development.

### **Education, Rural Development, and Family Systems**

As the family-related population changes continue, rural social and economic development specialists are striving to attract businesses and public sector services organizations. These specialists have twin aims. They want to create jobs in order to restore tax revenues. They also want to attract and recruit strong, stable, employable families, particularly those which have postsecondary education degrees and strong work credentials.

These developers' ability to achieve these aims, especially the ability to attract and retain businesses, hinges on several factors. Two priorities top the list. One is the quality of the local schools. The other is the local population's work-related competence, referenced earlier as "human capital." These two priorities go hand-in-hand. Unfortunately, both are extraordinarily difficult to achieve in rural contexts characterized by economic decline, fiscal challenges, and dramatic population changes.

Thus, rural families and their respective schools/districts and surrounding communities/counties can be viewed in a special way. Their developmental trajectories and ultimate destinies are intertwined. If they continue to decline, they will go down together. If they are to progress, they will need to do so together.

How can they progress? In particular, how might schools, together with social, health, and mental agencies serving these children and families, help turn these communities around? Although there are no easy answers to these questions, new designs for parent, family, and community engagement and support hold promise for rural school-community development and improvement. For example, several new interventions developed for high poverty urban school communities can be adapted to, and tested in, rural settings (Alameda-Lawson, et al., 2013; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011; Hong, 2011; Warren, et al., 2009).

In all such cases, these parent and family innovations need to be framed, developed, tested, and evaluated as specialized interventions for rural families and communities. None of these innovations-as-interventions is a panacea. Like all manner of interventions, these three parent and family innovations are effective to the extent that they are tailor-made for particular needs, problems, and opportunities.

### **The Dominant Parent Involvement Intervention**

The idea of PI is rooted in the development of the industrial age school. It remains firmly institutionalized, and it dominates practice (Ishimaru, 2014). A substantial body of research has been developed in support of PI. In fact, the findings are impressive. Regardless of socio-economic status, race, and ethnicity, when parents are actively and regularly involved in their children's education—supporting teachers, ensuring that homework is completed, and volunteering at school—desirable results are often achieved (e.g., Epstein, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2001; Jeynes, 2005).

For example, when their parents are actively involved, children tend to attend school regularly, arrive on time, are ready to learn, and become engaged (Albert & Jury, 2005; Barley & Wegner, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mapp & Kutner, 2014). When children of uninvolved parents provide the comparative standard, children of involved parents, on average, learn and achieve at higher rates. They also tend to have fewer social-emotional and behavioral challenges.

All in all, PI, as a generalized intervention, facilitates teachers' work, helps children, and enhances the probability that schools will achieve their performance goals. Every school wants and needs these desirable results, and recent research confirms its importance (e.g., Wilcox, et al., 2014). No wonder rural educators strive to implement it (Howley, et al., 2008).

### **Parent Involvement as an Inherited, Standardized Program or Activity**

Arguably, this compelling idea of PI has dominated pre-service education programs, professional development programs, and the textbook industry world-wide. Succeeding generations of educators in schools, colleges, and universities have inherited it. They have reinforced its taken-for-granted status as *the* model for recruiting and involving parents, while ruling out the search for alternatives.

These same educators usually refer to this PI as a program or activity. Rarely are they asked to view it as a specialized intervention, and so it is not often subject to critical evaluation or data-driven decision making. This familiar pattern is understandable because the majority of educators have not been prepared in preservice education programs to think and act otherwise. However, in order for PI to reach its promise, its theory of action must be developed and evaluated relative to the strengths, needs, and challenges of different types of rural families, living in different types of rural communities.

### **The Theory of Action for the Conventional Parent Involvement Intervention**

Schön and McDonald (1998) helped to popularize the idea of a theory of action for school improvement. In essence, a theory of action, also known as a theory of change, maps an intervention's hypothesized pathway(s) toward desirable outcomes. In colloquial terms, it specifies how leaders can move from "here" (today's sub-optimal conditions and outcomes) to "there" (desirable child, school, family, and community outcomes). An explicit theory of action offers multiple advantages. For example, it facilitates the development of common purposes, guides both implementation and evaluation-driven, continuous quality improvement, and illuminates an intervention's selectivity, gaps, inherent limitations (Friedman, 2001), and potential harms (Allen-Scott, Hatfield, & McIntyre, 2014).

Figure 1 has been developed with these benefits in mind. It provides a theory of action for the PI intervention. Self-explanatory in several respects, a few details merit special attention.

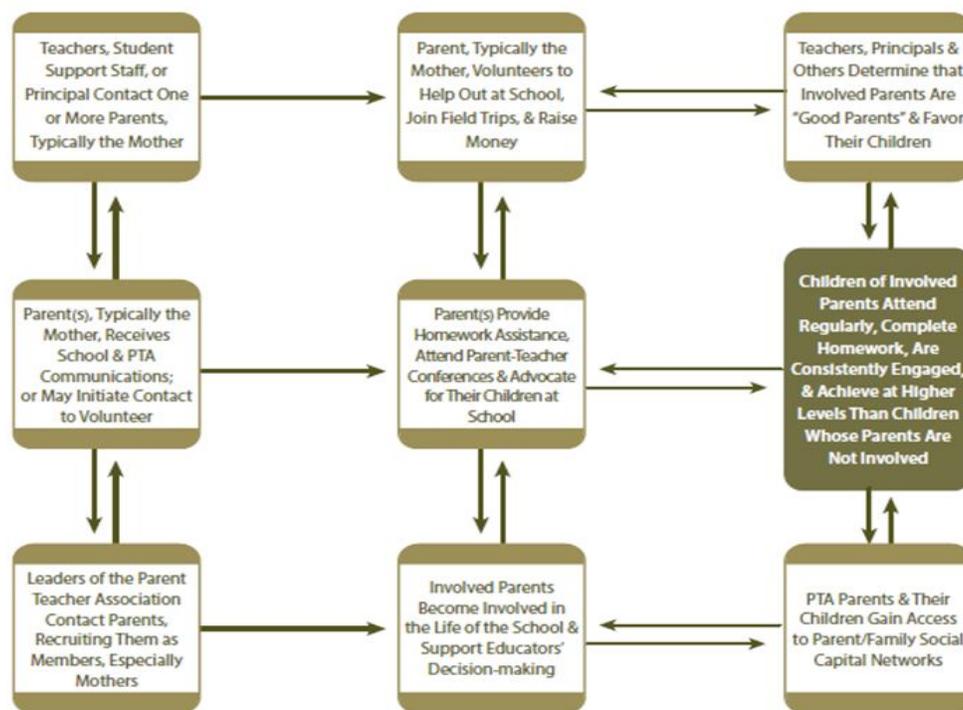
To begin, PI is founded on a one-way relationship; and understandably so because it is sponsored by a school and implemented by educators. The driving question for PI indicates its primary beneficiary. What can parents do to assist educators and support the school? There is nothing inherently wrong with this question and the relationships it is designed to develop. Because it serves rural educators, they often want to see more of it (Howley et al., 2008).

Notwithstanding the importance of PI for rural schools and educators, a close inspection of the literature indicates that it may not fit the strengths, needs, and challenges of all rural schools, communities, or families, especially when the focus expands to include diverse nations. Three of its core features illustrate this selectivity.

First, one or both parents, broadly defined, are expected to volunteer. In other words, PI targets individual parents who are expected to make informed, personal choices, which promise to benefit their children and schools.

Second, there is nothing in this PI intervention that challenges educators' professional power and authority, nor does PI promise to change the structures and operational processes of conventional schools (Ishimaru, 2014). Put differently, conventional PI is a mechanism for maintaining the status quo because it reproduces professional and institutional arrangements.

**Figure 1. The Theory of Action for Conventional Parent Involvement**



Conventional PI is selective in another way. It has depended on mothers' participation, albeit implicitly. Specifically, mothers have been expected to volunteer and rely on their family resources. Mothers also have been the driving force for parent-teacher organizations, many of which are in decline (Putnam, 2000). In all such cases, the assumption is that "good" mothers are committed to their children's education. They will make the time to volunteer and also will be able to transport themselves to and from school. Framed in this way, the success of PI as an intervention is predicated on a core assumption regarding two parent families with fathers as "bread-winners" and mothers as "stay-at-home moms." However, the reality is that just 48 percent of American families fit this 20<sup>th</sup> century ideal for two-parent families (US Census Bureau, 2012). What's more, in excess of 70 percent of all mothers with children under age 18 are in the workforce (DHHS, 2011). Clearly, the contrast between PI's core assumption and these fast-changing realities is profound! It helps to explain the progressive decline of mother-focused PI.

In this light, it also is predictable that conventional PI is not automatically effective with low-income, single mothers in rural communities. After all, many are entangled in circumstances beyond their influence and control. For example, many confront a challenging combination of economic stress, food insecurity, and maternal depression (Olson, et al., 2006).

What is more, an estimated 3 out of every 10 rural women have caregiving responsibilities for children, other adults, and frail elders (Bauer & Katras, 2007; National Alliance for Caregiving & American Association of Retired Persons, 2009). None of these challenges and burdens is addressed by conventional PI. In fact, when these sub-populations of parents fail to volunteer at school and show up at parent-teacher conferences, they risk being labeled as “bad parents” who are uncommitted to their children’s education (M. Lawson, 2003). These attributions are especially likely when their children show up at school with barriers to their learning and healthy development.

The pattern here is noteworthy. When educators lack empathic understanding of vulnerable mothers and single parents challenges (Butera & Humphreys-Costello, 2010), these same educators often are ambivalent about the hard work of developing meaningful, lasting PI relationship. The worst-case scenario occurs when vulnerable parents are stigmatized and labeled as “bad parents.”

All such negative attributions amount to blaming the victim, and they deflect attention from a root cause. *The conventional PI intervention is ill-fitted for particular sub-populations of rural parents and families.*

Insofar as this trend continues, resource-strapped rural schools and districts, especially ones operating as stand-alone entities, will continue to confront formidable challenges. Insofar as better outcomes hinge on parental support as well as strong, stable family systems, outcomes will not improve. In fact, outcomes will decline in schools and districts characterized by the kinds of dramatic population changes described earlier.

### **Parent Involvement as a Selective, Customized Intervention**

Notwithstanding PI’s selectivity, constraints and limitations, it has merit. In other words, the search for better parent/family interventions is not “out with the old, in with the new.” In fact, the loss of a particular kind of PI is consequential. Just as there are leading crowds of students in secondary schools (Carr & Kefalas, 2010), there are leading crowds of active, vocal, and influential parents in many rural school communities. Typically, these parents are employed, and some have college degrees. These parents’ involvement, indeed active engagement, includes schools and extends to community-wide social and recreational activities in rural US communities (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003).

In addition to playing instrumental roles in a school’s parent-teacher association, volunteering at school, and helping with school-related fund-raising, these same parents tend to be coaches of youth sport teams; serve as advisors for clubs such Future Farmers of America and 4-H; assist ministers, rabbis and mullahs in religion-related experiences; and transport their own children and others to sporting, recreational, and social-cultural events. Owing to their shared engagements with their children, they know each other, and they gain a collective identity with particular generations of children. The power of these relationships is enhanced when these parent networks have positive associations with teachers and their networks (McClelland, 1997).

Moreover, parent leaders develop special parent-to-parent and family-to-family networks. These networks provide social supports and multiple kinds of resources. All such supports and resources have the potential to benefit participating parents, children, families, and their respective schools. A growing body of research showcases the concept of “social capital” in explanations of how these social supports and resources are produced and used, including the benefits it yields to children of involved and networked parents and families (Allan & Catts, 2012; Sampson, 2012). One such benefit is that children arrive at the schoolhouse door without barriers. They are ready to engage and able to learn.

Predictably, these leading crowd parents and their networks have strong opinions, and their voices are influential at school board meetings, special parent assemblies, and site-based, school improvement teams. When they hold sway, these parents are exemplars for elite power structures and dynamics, which are mainstays in many rural school communities (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Budge, 2006). In other words, these parents constitute such a power structure. Their individual and collective advocacy and active school engagement typically provide them with influence over local educational policy and practice. As Figure 1 indicates, these parents’ involvement benefits their own children and perhaps others. For example, the students Carr and Kefalas (2009) called “the achievers” in their USA research—leading crowd students who succeed in school, are popular in the community because of their extra-curricular activities, get the lion’s share of social supports and resources, go to college and often do not return home to work and live—probably owe some of their success to their parents’ active engagement in their lives and especially in their schools. Parents of these achievers assist educators, and they try to persuade teachers to meet their child’s needs.

The point is, the dominant PI intervention, including the conventional array of educator-serving and school-centered “partnership arrangements” (Epstein, 2011; Mapp&Kuttner, 2014), have their respective merits and research-based warrants. However, all are selective and contingent. They work for *some* people, schools, and places, but not for others. They are effective with *some* parents and family systems, but not for others. They enable some educators and parents to achieve *particular outcomes*, but not others. In short, PI is a specialized, highly contingent intervention. It is not a panacea.

The other side of the story is equally important. When these interventions are not fit for purpose, with identifiable parents and family systems, in special school contexts located in unique rural communities, they have the potential to create problems. So, when PI is not wholly effective, other parent and family innovations (interventions) are needed. The growing diversity of children, parents, and family systems alone compels the search for alternatives. Some can be borrowed from urban school communities and tailored to fit rural school community contexts. Others will need to be designed.

All such innovations can be developed with the guidance provided by five related criteria: (1) The alternative(s) should complement and strengthen conventional PI; (2) The alternative(s) should have research support; (3) The alternative(s) should fit with and augment expanded models for school improvement, including the development of cradle-to-career education systems in rural communities; (4) The alternative should help to stabilize and strengthen families in ways that benefit overall rural community development and renewal; and (5) The alternative(s) should be amenable to customization to fit unique rural school community contexts.

### **Customizing a Collective Parent Engagement Intervention for Rural School Communities**

A collective parent engagement (CPE) intervention, which has been developed, tested, and extended in urban school communities (Alameda-Lawson, 2014; Alameda-Lawson, et al., 2013; Briar-Lawson, et al., 2001; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011), holds promise for rural school communities, albeit with suitable adaptations. Selective contrasts between this CPE intervention and the conventional PI intervention follow.

### **Introductory Contrasts: Collective Parent Engagement Versus Parent Involvement**

CPE targets groups of parents, while PI targets individuals. While PI is launched to serve and support educators and the school, CPE begins with a different question. What can educators and community-based social and health service providers do to assist, support, organize and mobilize parents? In other words, parental needs and self-interests, both individually and collectively are the top priority. Perhaps above all, while PI is oriented toward parents’ compliance with educators’ requests, CPE is predicated on parental leadership, so much so that programs and services are described as parent-run and parent-led.

Four key features of CPE are especially noteworthy, in part because they depart from PI practice. First, CPE is based on the assumption that even the most challenged parents and families have strengths. As a consequence, the practice of implementing CPE proceeds with a strengths-based and solution-focused framework with special emphasis on culturally-competent and -responsive practice (Alameda-Lawson, et al., 2013).

Second, and in contrast to the “professionals-know-best” assumption that often runs through PI, this CPE model is predicated on the need to tap and use parents’ expertise. The assumption is that parents oftentimes know what needs to be done to address barriers to their families’ well-being; and especially what needs to be done to address their children’s learning and developmental barriers. CPE thus facilitates the development of equitable working relationships between parents and professionals.

Third, it is assumed that vulnerable parents cannot be expected to self-organize and mobilize for collective action or assume leadership roles, especially when many are newcomers, and they live in disparate places. For this reason, a school community professional, oftentimes a social worker, is charged with visiting and recruiting them initially. Later this same professional implements a structured protocol, which facilitates the development of their collective leadership (Alameda-Lawson, et al., 2013).

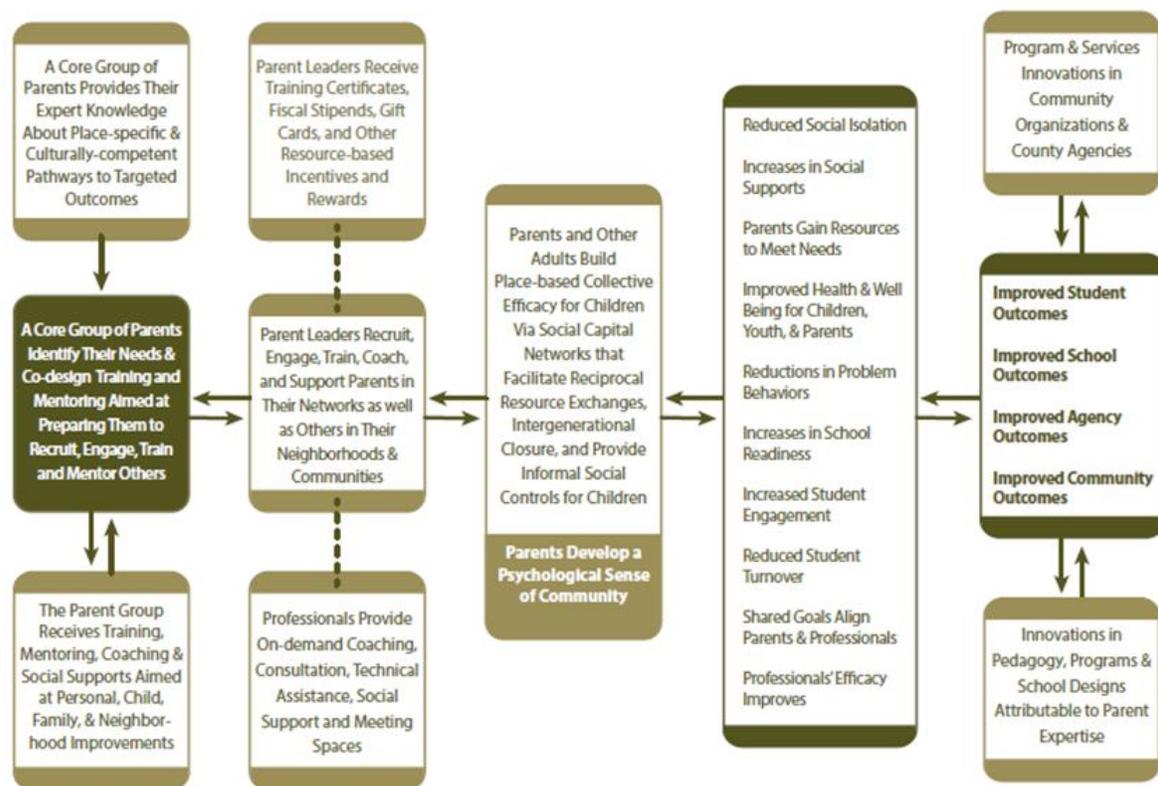
Fourth, parental expertise has import for what educators and social/health service providers need to know, look and listen for, and do in their work with children, parents, and entire families, especially culturally diverse ones.

Significantly, this CPE intervention has the potential to incubate timely, responsive innovations that improve pedagogical practice and enhance school climate. Ishimaru (2014), for example, emphasizes the potential contributions of culturally diverse, ELL parents to the kinds of culturally-responsive pedagogies teachers need to adopt and implement in order to facilitate children's learning and academic achievement. CPE is ripe with this potential for schools, and it also has the potential to stimulate innovations in health and social service organizations (e.g., Bess & Dykos, 2014).

### The Theory of Action for Collective Parent Engagement

Figure 2 presents this intervention's theory of action. Just as Figure 1 for PI identifies it as a special intervention, Figure 2 depicts CPE as a unique developmental, process-oriented intervention. It begins with the essential role played by a school community professional, oftentimes called the parent and family coordinator. This person visits and recruits each parent and then organizes and mobilizes him or her for leadership and collective action. Next, parents design, implement, and run the programs and services. At the same time, they recruit and prepare other parents, enabling the CPE intervention to grow and spread. Under ideal circumstances, children, educators, schools, and community agencies benefit.

Figure 2. The Theory of Action for Collective Parent Engagement



Benefits to children, parents, and families can be theorized in a special way. This CPE intervention paves the way for two-generation education and service strategies (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2012). These special strategies derive from social ecological frameworks that emphasize the limitations of interventions focused on a parent or a child. For example, oftentimes community professionals helping a parent work at cross-purposes with educators striving to help a child. Two-generation strategies are developed accordingly. They ensure that children and parents are served, supported, and resourced simultaneously and synergistically. CPE facilitates this two-generation approach.

CPE offers another important benefit, one that is especially important to poverty-challenged parents and families.

When parents serve as leaders, designers, and program-service operators, they are performing meaningful, important work. For previously unemployed and under-employed parents, CPE provides what amounts to the first rung on an occupational ladder for career development and full employment (Alameda-Lawson, et al., 2013; Briar-Lawson, et al., 2001). For this reason, suitably trained and deployed parents are paid. They receive modest stipends as incentives and rewards for their work, particularly when they assume informal and formal paraprofessional roles in schools and community agencies.

Another special feature of this CPE theory of action needs to be emphasized. This intervention affords a special place-based, residential benefit. Called collective efficacy (e.g., Sampson, 2012; Smith, Osgood, Caldwell, Hynes, & Perkins, 2013), it is a powerful resource for parents, family systems, schools, and community organizations.

### **Collective Parent Engagement in Service of Place-based Collective Efficacy for Children**

Essentially, collective efficacy refers to the extent to which community residents intervene on behalf of children's welfare (Sampson, 2012). Residential communities with high collective efficacy have special, important features. Above all, parents and other adults are observant and active. They notice what children do and do not do, and they take action when troubles arise at home, school, and in the community. They thus help to prevent undesirable outcomes as well as facilitate the achievement of desirable ones.

In contrast, when place-based collective efficacy is low, parents and other adults may not be aware of kids' needs and problems. Even if they are, they are not likely to take action. When this pattern prevails, educators, community health and social service professionals and others are on their own in their work with children and youth. Lacking the assistance, supports, and resources that parents and other adults provide, these professionals' work is more challenging because children bring their learning and developmental barriers to school. The social capital construct is salient to understanding and building collective efficacy.

Simply put, social capital refers to social networks offering and providing social supports and multiple kinds of resources (informational, financial, educational, etc.). Three indicators-as-measures of this social capital help to explain place-based collective efficacy for children.

The first is *shared norms for children*, especially norms shared by parents, other local residents, educators, other professionals and civic leaders. These shared norms are associated with the positive, benign meaning of social control. Prosocial norms, widely shared and enforced) facilitate desirable social control because they help to prevent deviant, problematic behavior (Sampson, 2012).

The second social capital feature is *intergenerational closure*. Intergenerational closure refers to the extent to which parents know the parents of their children's friends and classmates (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003), which facilitates parent-to-parent communications and family-to-family networks. Research suggests that when this kind of intergenerational closure is "high" in communities, several benefits accrue. For example, parents regularly have the opportunity to observe their children in different situations, talk with other parents about their children's actions and behaviors, and share responsibility for the implementation of collective norms for how their children can and should behave at home, at school, and in the community.

The third indicator of a community's social capital for collective efficacy is *reciprocated exchange*. It refers to the quality of interactions that occur between individuals and their families.

Whereas intergenerational closure refers to the extent to which parents and their children know each other by face or name, the concept of reciprocated exchange is used to evaluate whether these social relationships facilitate the exchange of needed social supports, assistance, and resources (material, information, and social) (Sampson, 2012). This important idea of reciprocated exchange illuminates the distinction between structural social capital and functional social capital (Ishimaru, 2014). Structural social capital refers the quality and character of parent, family, and resident network ties.

Functional social capital refers to the capacity of networks to provide its members with needed resources. Social capital resources in service of collective efficacy become functional when individuals (children, parents) and entire families draw on them. For example, when low-income children develop college aspirations because of their interactions with the college-educated parents of their peers (Cherng, McCrory-Calarco, & Kao, 2013), reciprocated exchange is in evidence. This same exchange mechanism operates when parents provide transportation for other children; and when stay-at-home parents support other parents and families by providing childcare and assistance with homework.

In all such cases, place-based, collective efficacy is evident, and it is founded on networked parents and families who share norms for children's development and shared parenting and child development resources. Social capital-based, collective efficacy helps to account for positive child, parent, and social outcomes, including enhancements to children's health, improved cognitive functioning, decreased crime and delinquency, better birth outcomes, and improvements in school outcomes (Sampson, 2012).

In view of these benefits, it is surprising that research focused on the collective efficacy, particularly the collective efficacy attributable to parent and family collective action, of rural communities appears to be lacking. This need doubles as a timely opportunity to explore CPE's contributions to place-based collective efficacy in diverse rural places such as villages, small towns, mobile home communities, and geographically dispersed family farms. Bauch's (2001) preliminary framework for social capital development via rural partnerships in the USA provides some of the theoretical roots for the work that lies ahead in other nations.

### **Collective Parent Engagement Antecedents and Co-requisites**

This CPE intervention's antecedent and co-requisite conditions have been described elsewhere (Alameda-Lawson, et al., 2013). They start with a professional facilitator, oftentimes a social worker. This parent facilitator oftentimes serves as a cultural broker between professionals (educators, community health and social service providers) and diverse parents and entire family systems. Significantly, CPE parents in leadership roles later serve as cultural brokers with other parents and families. A parent or family resource center is another important organizational facilitator for CPE, especially so because parents and family systems need gathering places—conducive social settings—in schools and community organizations (e.g., Bess & Doykos, 2014).

As with CPE programs and services, parents are paid to assume primary responsibility for the leadership and operation of these CPE family resource centers, albeit with culturally-competent, rural-savvy professionals in supportive roles (e.g., Woolley, et al., 2010).

Centers may be based at schools and linked to community and county agencies. Alternatively, they may be based in agencies and linked to schools. In rural, consolidated school districts encompassing huge distances and serving as homes to several small towns, a combination of school-based and school-linked centers probably is desirable. In all such cases, intervention logic applies. What purpose(s) do they serve and who is the targeted population(s)? For example, a parent center meets certain needs and serves particular populations. A family center meets other needs and may attract different populations.

### **School-based and School-linked Collective Parent Engagement**

Significantly, this CPE intervention can be school-based, school-linked, or both. That is, it can be mounted in community agencies or faith-based organizations and linked to schools, or it can be started in schools and then connected to agencies and faith-based organizations. No simple formulas are available. The special geographies of unique rural school community settings influence these designs. (Additional details are provided in the conclusion.)

In optimal configurations, this CPE intervention is explicitly connected to and integrated with two other initiatives. One is the school/district system for comprehensive learning supports (Adelman & Taylor, 2006). The other is health and social service system design for comprehensive, community-based systems of care—with family support as a second pillar (e.g., Perrin, et al., 2007). In view of personnel and funding shortages for both systems, "parent power" can be a most welcome and timely enhancement.

### **Developing a Symbiotic Relationship with the Parent Involvement Intervention**

Significantly, this CPE model is not a competitor for PI. To the contrary, when it is developed strategically in tandem with PI, a mutually beneficial synergy can result. For this synergy to get started, educators and their community service provider colleagues working with schools must change their thinking about PI.

Instead of starting with PI, they may need to view it as a process outcome yielded by CPE. One reason is that this CPE produces the PI's antecedents and co-requisites. More fundamentally, the CPE is tailored for, and responds to the needs and aspirations of, identifiable sub-populations. Many of these sub-populations, including ELL newcomers and poverty-challenged, single parent families, are not likely to be successfully recruited and engaged via PI alone. CPE interventions are needed, and so are family support (FS) interventions.

### **Family Support Innovations-as-Interventions**

Although parents clearly are important units for analysis and intervention planning, and parent interventions often result in desirable outcomes for entire family systems, the fact remains that families, perhaps better named as family systems, are discrete units of analysis.

This means that specialized interventions can and should be developed for them, encompassing and serving all members of the family system—children, parents, caregivers, grandparents, and others as defined by members in the system.

FS interventions can be viewed in a variety of ways. The dominant view is as follows. FS interventions encompass programs and services that provide families with timely, responsive assistance, social supports, and responsive resources (Briar-Lawson, et al., 2001). These services are founded on twin assumptions: (1) Professional assistance is required to address presenting family needs, problems, and challenges before they worsen and multiply; and (2) This short-term support paves the way for greater family self-sufficiency. Examples of services include formal social services such as career counseling and mental health therapy, medical and dental services, and resource-based services such as housing, childcare, and food and financial assistance.

In the main, specially trained and deployed helping professionals are needed to address such a comprehensive list of family needs and problems. Ideally, these services are provided with a family-centered philosophy with four main tenets: (1) Families are the unit of analysis for all interventions; (2) Professionals focus on family-strengths; (3) Families enjoy voice and choice in all intervention decisions, which entails the development of special power-sharing arrangement with helping professionals; and (4) All services are individualized, i.e., they are tailored to the unique needs of each family (Briar-Lawson, et al., 2001; Epley, Summers, & Turnbull, 2010).

It is noteworthy that rural community-based health and social service agencies have long histories of offering FS interventions, at least in the US. However, comparable histories are not typical for the majority of rural schools and districts because educators have focused on children-as-students.

Two main reasons help to explain this pattern. Schools are child-centered institutions acting *en loco parentis* and with a specialized main mission—students' academic learning and achievement. In brief, parental well-being and the condition of families are not school responsibilities. They are assigned to community agencies.

The second reason was identified earlier. Schools' equivalent of social and health services typically is focused on particular sub-populations of students. Programs and services are named accordingly; they are called student support and pupil support services.

These services characteristically address students' academic and behavior problems, and many are directed specifically at students with special education needs. Oftentimes, they are bracketed by the school day and the school's walls.

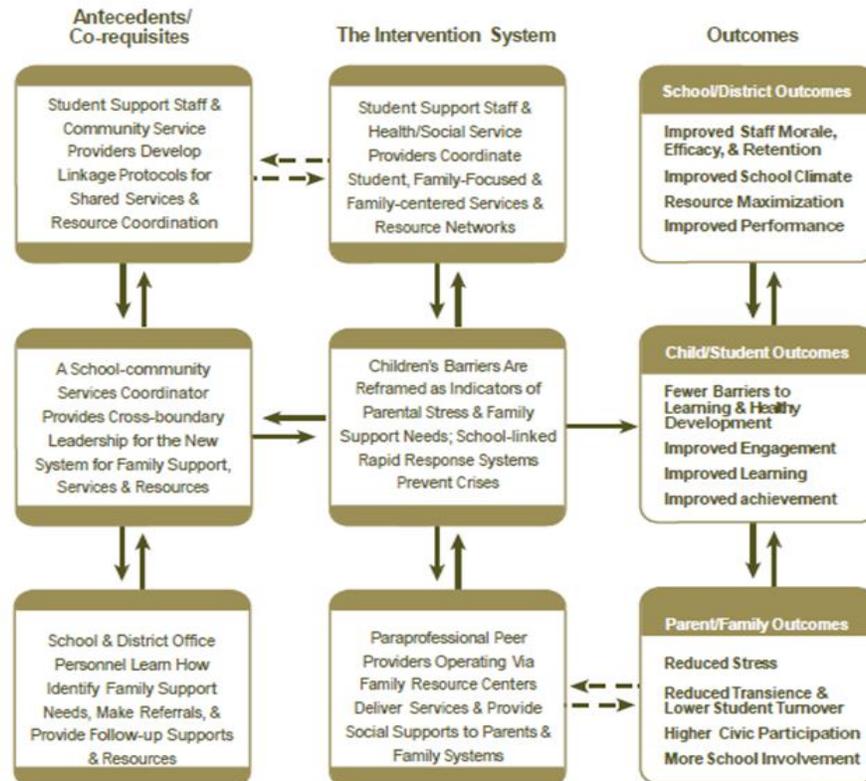
Special education services are an exception. They include parents and family systems. They are called "family-focused services" because the interventions for a student are provided in the context of the child's family (Briar-Lawson, et al., 2001).

### **The Theory of Action for School-linked Family Support Interventions**

The main intervention question for family support is as follows. What can schools do to better support, strengthen, and stabilize family systems? Companion questions involve school and district relationships with family-serving, community organizations and county agencies. These school community relationships usually entail formal partnership configurations. When these partnerships are formed, the descriptor is "school-linked, family support." It refers to a dual configuration consisting of community-services, which are firmly connected to schools.

Figure 3 presents an overall theory of action for FS interventions. Self-explanatory in several respects, two critical conditions are salient to all such school-linked, FS interventions. Especially where educators and schools are involved, these critical conditions require major shifts in thought, language, and practice.

Figure 3. A Theory of Action for School-linked, Family Support Interventions



### Learning How to Frame Students' Barriers as Family Support Needs and Priorities

The majority of educators, particularly teachers and principals, have learned to view chronic tardiness, persistent absenteeism, untreated health and mental health needs, social and emotional behavioral disorders, limited school and classroom engagement, and manifest poverty/hardship indicators such as tattered clothing and sleep deprivation in a particular way. They are barriers to students' healthy development, engagement, learning, and academic achievement. It follows that the dominant solution is to contact the school social worker, psychologist, counselor, and the principal to initiate student (pupil) support services.

In this light, the names "student support" and "pupil support" and "academic support" are noteworthy, especially so in the current educational policy environment. A holistic focus on whole child development increasingly is difficult in this environment (H. Lawson, 2010). However, even whole child development misses the mark. When students arrive at the schoolhouse door with identifiable, multiple barriers, the *de facto* need is for FS interventions because the root causes of these barriers' can be traced to the condition of families and their surrounding circumstances (Briar-Lawson, et al., 2001).

An analogy is instructive. When school services are designed to meet only school-defined needs accompanying the academic student, the situation is akin to a physician who treats only symptoms without addressing the causes of a disease; or who prescribes medication which may not be taken because the patient cannot afford to purchase it. In brief, when this pattern prevails, there is no end in sight to the students' barriers because family system needs are neglected and ignored.

Two noteworthy implications for policy and practice are salient here. First: In addition to child-centered, student support services for one child or a group of like children, more interventions designated as family-focused (services to children in the context of the family) and family-centered (as described above) need to be offered.

Second: In addition to professionally-prescribed interventions, the parent-to-parent and family-to-family interventions and supports provided by CPE can help relieve the excessive caseloads often experienced by professionals serving low-income, rural school communities. In other words, suitably prepared parents are able to provide services, supports, and resources to other parents and entire family systems, building stocks of social capital while addressing problematic social exclusion and social isolation.

### **School-linked Family Resource Centers for Family Support**

A family resource center (FRC) is an intervention antecedent and co-requisite. Whether based at school and linked to community agencies, or based in an agency and connected to a school, the FRC structure is especially important under four conditions: (1) Entire families—and not merely parents—are the priority and unit of analysis; (2) Services must be family-focused or family-centered; (3) Peer service providers, especially other parents, are prioritized and need an organizational home; and (4) A considerable number of single-parent, mother-headed families are vulnerable and need help.

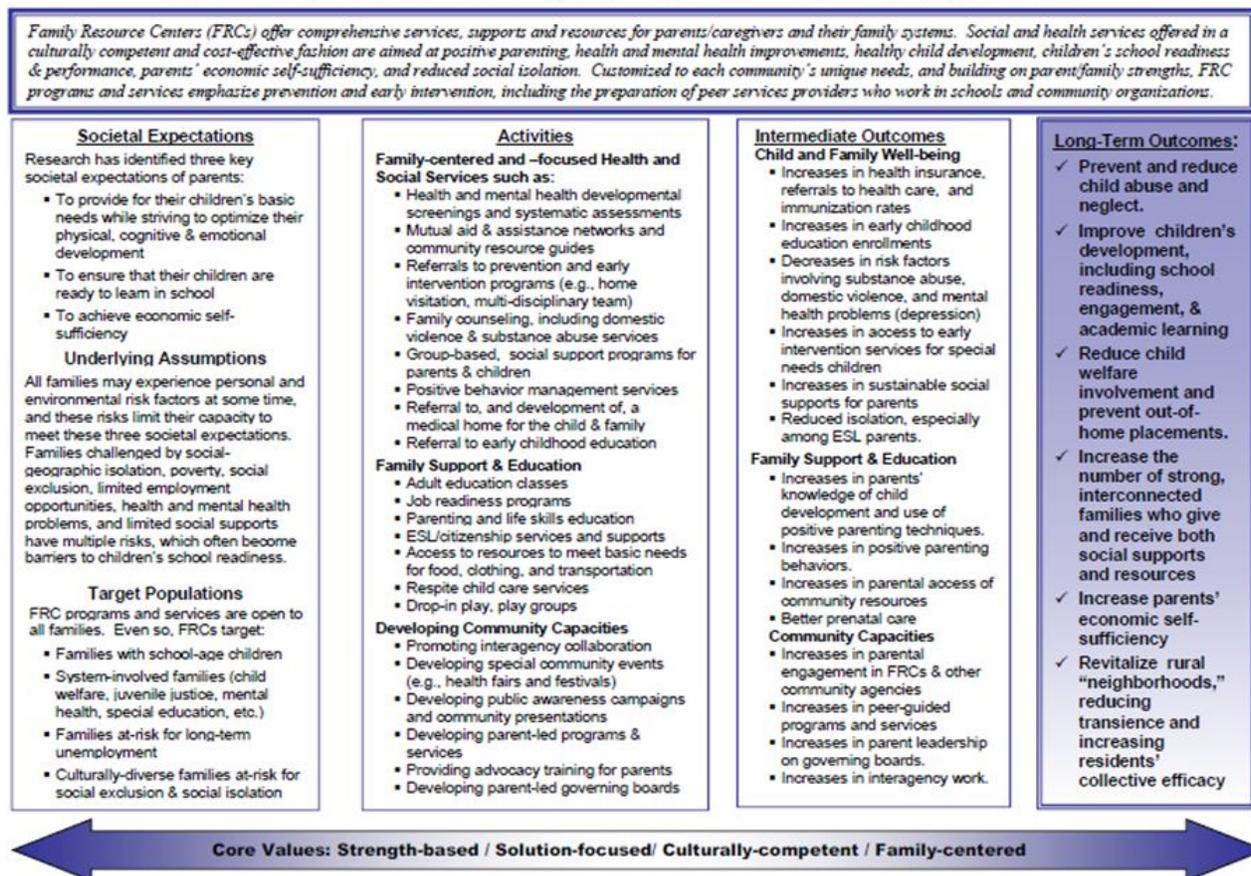
As indicated at the outset, a growing number of mother-headed, single parent families need basic supports such as childcare, parenting assistance and training, caregiving supports, and transportation assistance. These highly stressed individual parents simply cannot manage their responsibilities when they are socially isolated and socially excluded. This is especially likely for newly-arriving ELL parents in tightly-knit, rural school communities. Much-needed social integration in school and community settings oftentimes is especially challenging for these families (Howley, 2013; Schafft & Jackson, 2010) and, when efforts fall short, the risks increase for social exclusion and social isolation.

All in all, these newly arriving families deserve professional assistance, and it is easier to provide if an FRC provides a convenient, welcoming gathering place and service delivery site. In fact, this is one reason why CPE, with its focus on creating vibrant parent-to-parent networks, often acts as a co-requisite for family engagement in FS services (Briar-Lawson, et al., 2001).

The other idea involves the co-location of specialized health and social service providers at FRCs. Especially when children and their families have multiple, co-occurring and interlocking needs, FRCs provide the requisite conditions for services integration—also known as “one stop shopping” and “a single point of contact.” Although this improved services access does not guarantee improvements in services quality and, in turn, better outcomes, it provides a good start, especially so when the ever-present threats of rural social isolation are weighed. The full range of FRC activities and possibilities opens new avenues for school-community partnerships arrangements, especially those in which parents serve as co-leaders. Figure 4, which provides a theory of action for an FRC, illustrates this potential.

Finally, such a well-developed FRC offers a bonus outcome. Insofar as once-fragile, highly mobile, stressed and diverse families are strengthened and stabilized; and especially when ELL families are integrated into the social fabric of rural schools and communities, the antecedent and co-requisite conditions for school-centered PI are established. Put differently, FS interventions set the stage for PI interventions, even more so when both are aligned with CPE interventions. Such is the import of a formal intervention triad developed with coherent, symbiotic, synergistic, and testable relations among PI, CPE, and FS.

Figure 4. A Theory of Action for School-linked Family Resource Centers Offering Family Support Interventions



## Summary, Conclusions, and Next Steps in the Rural Research and Development Agenda

We began with an important gap-as-need, which was characterized in two ways. First, parents and families typically receive short shrift in rural school-community development initiatives. The other, presented later, was educators' reliance on an inherited, self-serving, and status-quo maintaining approach to PI. This gap illuminates a special need-as-opportunity. Whether the goal is improved rural community development, better school performance, or school districts' contributions to community economic and social development, parent and family innovations are needed. All such innovations can be framed and evaluated as interventions. Some are suitable for specialized needs and problems, but not for others.

One alternative to PI is a CPE intervention. Another is a FS intervention framework. These two interventions can be aligned with each other and also with PI. When these three interventions are suitably aligned with considerable clarity and coherence, an innovative parent and family intervention triad is available. This intervention triad holds promise for producing desirable outcomes for rural schools, community organizations, county agencies, and families.

Research and development initiatives mounted primarily in urban schools and districts and their surrounding neighborhoods have documented these desirable outcomes. These same initiatives have enabled the development of testable theories of action. Questions remain, however, about intervention antecedents, co-requisites, and theories of change in diverse, rural school community settings. There are no immediate, easy answers in the USA.

## The Rural Social Ecology of Parent and Family Interventions

Intervention logic is recommended as research and development initiatives, each with evaluation-driven continuous quality improvement methods, are mounted.

A three-component standard can be applied to evaluations of all manner of parent and family interventions. This standard is fit for purpose, in unique contexts, and at particular times (H. Lawson, 2013).

Social-ecological planning and analysis are implicated here (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Wilcox, et al., 2014), especially three essential priorities. These three priorities are *demography*, especially parent/family sub-population characteristics; *organizational ecology*, especially schools' locations and their relationships with community organizations and county agencies; and *social geography*, i.e., socially constructed and constituted features of particular rural places.

Rural social geography is a special priority, especially so when the rural family population changes are showcased. Particular places (geographies) are "social" precisely because towns and villages change as their populations shift. In fact, some such shifts may threaten the cherished ideal of what it means to be rural, including how rural identities are learned and developed (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Arguably, the most important meanings and practical significance of rural social geography derive from the huge distances encompassed by just one rural school district. Social geographic challenges mount when school districts are consolidated; and also when inter-district, shared services configurations are in evidence.

For example, many such districts are home to several small towns and villages in addition to their adjacent farms and recreational areas. Each town and village may have its own sense of "community" as well as a specific collective identity. Owing in part to distinctive histories involving interscholastic athletic teams, one town or village's collective identity and sense of community often is founded in part on important differences and enduring conflicts involving other towns and villages in the same school district. Under these conditions, rural social geography poses special challenges, ones that contrast with urban parent and family interventions developed for just one or two neighborhoods.

Another example: It is easier to develop place-based (neighborhood) collective efficacy for children in a single urban neighborhood, especially one with high residential stability, a vibrant network of neighborhood-based organizations, and a long-standing, place-based sense of community (Sampson, 2012). In contrast, the development and sustainability of place-based collective efficacy for children is immensely more complicated in wide-ranging rural school districts with multiple towns and villages, each with their own community meanings and identities.

Wide-ranging school districts serving agricultural families and their communities provide another notable exception to the urban scene. These special rural settings start with the challenges posed by considerable social isolation. Challenging to family well-being in its own right, the social isolation of families complicates transportation and overall access to both school and community-based programs and services. Add to this scenario the increasing concentration in particular places of vulnerable, often transient families challenged by poverty, social exclusion, and social isolation as well as the growing number of ELL families (Strange, et al, 2012), and the result is a daunting set of place-based, rural challenges with considerable uniqueness. These challenges make urban school renewal look comparatively easy.

The above examples serve to drive home an important conclusion. Parent and family interventions developed in and for urban schools and their "home neighborhoods" are not automatically transportable and generalizable to rural school communities. All three interventions—PI, CPE, and FS—must be suitably "placed," i.e., tailored to local contexts. In the same vein, the three theories of action presented in this article are not sure-fire guarantees for improved parent and family engagement and the desirable outcomes such engagement yields.

All in all, these theories of action provide justifiable points of departure, i.e. they are guides for social experimentation and development and with the important proviso that each is fit for purpose, in unique rural school community contexts, and at particular times.

### **Rural Social Experiments Guided by Policy Practice Partnership Councils**

Clearly, the time has arrived to invest in rural school community policy-pilot experiments—real world demonstration sites—focused explicitly (but not exclusively) on parent and family innovations, and encompassing the intervention triad outlined in the preceding analysis. Framed as research and development "laboratories," they should be developed with firm plans for scale-up to other, like rural settings. Rural school and community leaders cannot be expected to mount and advance this important research and development agenda on their own. To begin with, they often lack the required resources, and leaders often need more expertise. More poignantly, the accompanying needs, challenges and opportunities implicate a systems change problem involving multiple actors and diverse organizational sectors.

When systems change is the agenda, and many stakeholder-leaders must be engaged in collaborative research and development, "rural partnership councils" or "rural educational policy development tables" are needed (H. Lawson, 2013).

So are cross-boundary leaders able to organize and mobilize key stakeholders for collective action (Williams, 2012). These special tables and councils serve as essential intermediary organizations, and they provide opportunities to organize and mobilize diverse, important leaders for collective action. Only when these rural school community leadership infrastructures are established will the multiple actors and their respective systems improve comprehensively, coherently, simultaneously and synergistically. Put differently, without these special organizational structures an inherited, familiar pattern will continue. This pattern is characterized by fragmented decision-making, conflicting goals, competing policy agendas, top-down mandates, and a persistent tendency to force-fit urban improvement agendas on rural school community contexts.

Under ideal conditions, these special councils and partnership tables will facilitate innovation development and organizational improvement initiatives characterized as “bottom-up” and “top-down;” and with families and community leaders involved, both from the “outside-in” and the “inside-out.” Guided by Kurt Lewin’s (1951) strong claim—that one of the best ways to understand any phenomenon is by trying to change it in natural contexts—these scale-able policy-pilot, demonstration sites provide opportunities and structures for knowledge generation, translation, dissemination, diffusion and use (e.g., Ball, 2012). Such is the manifest need in rural America. By all accounts, the same need is evident in other nations. If the preceding analysis of an innovative parent and family intervention triad contributes to this comprehensive, action-oriented agenda in service of rural children, families, schools, and communities, it has achieved its primary aim.

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