

A District Knew It Was Failing Some Students. How It's Using Parents to Help

By **Denisa R. Superville**

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Mahamed Cali, a Minneapolis parent, had heard firsthand from fellow Somali parents how frustrated they felt that many interactions with their children's schools were negative. [Back to Story](#)

He knew there were not enough interpreters and translators to help them understand what was happening at school and to make informed decisions. When they did hear from schools, the messages were often about their child being absent, or failing. When the school requested a conference with them, the meetings were set for the daytime, without regard for whether parents were working or had to arrange for child care.

So when the Minneapolis district last year announced it was seeking help to improve its relationship with parents, Cali saw an opportunity to make a difference.

"There's a lot of misunderstanding between the public schools and Somali parents," Cali said.

To change that dynamic, the district has enlisted some essential allies. Cali, and other parents from five Minneapolis communities—Somali, Native American, African American, Hispanic, and Hmong—have become frontline gatherers of insight in their respective communities. The district's larger aim is to improve its weak track record on serving students of color and immigrant students, as well as their parents.

Drawing on deep connections they have in their own communities, Cali and the other parents are using a range of techniques—surveys, one-and-one interviews, and focus groups—to collect information from fellow parents.

In a way, they act as researchers for the district, navigating community spaces that district evaluators do not always enter or where they may be viewed with skepticism, including in mosques, living rooms, churches, Zumba classes, Hispanic- and Somali-owned stores, community centers, and listservs.

"Our community is oral and trusting," said Cali, who is also the executive director of a Somali-American radio station. "[If] they know each other, they'll always speak openly; if they don't know you, your question, and where you come from, it's hard to get the answer you need."

The goal is not only to change how the district engages with parents, but to get better information that it can use to make decisions about students' education, said Eric Moore, the chief of academics and accountability, research, and equity.

"I want to make sure that this isn't [seen] as a program," Moore said. "It's more of a mechanism for system change. We wanted the parents to also equally own the process of research, so that they can help us understand through their own perspectives what are the best ways of understanding the phenomenon that impacts their children. Because sometimes as people who work within a system, we look at things just from our own lens, and that lens at times can become institutionalized."

Parent Evaluators

For one, by using parents the district is flipping the concept of who is regarded as an expert in the school system, Moore said.

Unlike the district's surveys that ask every parent the same questions, for example, the new approach has the parents formulating questions they think their fellow parents may want to weigh in on. They decide what issues to focus on, how to frame questions, and what research methods would elicit the best feedback from their communities. That allows them to capture nuances and concerns that are distinct in each community.

The Minneapolis parents are part of an initiative called "parent participatory evaluation"—a method that more school districts are trying to gather better data from a broader array of parents.

Advocacy groups and community organizers have long used this type of research method to train communities to collect data and devise solutions. School districts have been slower to embrace the idea, though Minneapolis is not the first or only district that's finding value in the method, said Karen L. Mapp, a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and an expert in parent, family, and community engagement.

Doing so makes sense, Mapp said.

"I think for too long our schools have kept families on the periphery," Mapp said. "And now they're rising up and realizing that when they engage families meaningfully and that families have true voice—because they have a lot of knowledge about

their kids and the community—the solutions that are created are a lot more authentic and are a lot more in alignment with what the community needs."

While the method can yield smart recommendations, it's not always easy for school systems to embrace.

School district officials, often with advanced degrees, see themselves as the experts. That can make them reluctant to share and relinquish power, Mapp said, explaining why districts may hesitate to ask parents to take on such a prominent role.

Reaching Diverse Groups

In Minneapolis, where nearly 65 percent of students are black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American, there's long been a glaring and persistent achievement gap between black and white students.

The district had also drawn federal scrutiny for its disproportionate rates of discipline for black students. In 2014, it agreed to a number of remedies to address that and other issues raised by federal civil rights officials.

The parent-as-evaluators program grew indirectly from that agreement, which asked the district to involve students in improving school climate and culture. It began training students on research methods to collect data on school climate.

Last year, the district voluntarily began to do the same with parents. Over several weeks last year and this past spring, parents learned from the district's research staff about how to conduct research, what methods might be suitable in specific situations, and how to analyze and present data. They received a \$500 stipend and the district covered their child-care costs.

Minneapolis knew it had a problem reaching those critical demographic groups. When it conducted surveys, which were typically mail-home or online, white and more-affluent parents were more likely to respond than parents of color, low-income parents, and those who spoke a language other than English at home, said Maren Henderson, an evaluation specialist.

Some parent surveys had been done in multiple languages, but the expense of doing so kept the effort limited, Henderson said.

That meant the results—and decisions that spun out of them—weren't always rooted in the best data.

"If we are using data collection methods in which large populations aren't participating, then we are really not making the right decisions," Moore said. "And when we don't have information, what you end up doing is you make the decision based on your own experiences, which may be biased."

Recruiting parents to become the district's information gatherers was challenging. Some wouldn't agree to sign on until they got assurances that their participation would lead to real change.

To help overcome that distrust, the parents jointly created the rules and expectations for the project with the district, Henderson said.

To demonstrate its seriousness about the feedback parents gave, district officials plan to nearly double the budget for translation and interpretation services next school year. It's allocating more money to develop art displays in schools that directly connect to students' culture. It has created a new "cultural liaison" position in the special education department to work, in part, on improving communication with parents whose children qualify for special education services, some of whom told parent-researchers they are often not treated with respect.

"When you talk about what a district is prioritizing, it's often reflected in their budgets," said Ed Graff, the superintendent. "What they are getting from us is a commitment to honor their voice and to actualize that in our work and in our actions."

But the district admits that some of the more systemic issues that parents highlighted will take longer to address. Among them: hiring more teachers of color and changing bus routes to ensure students are picked up closer to home, a request that came from Hmong parents. The district has hired someone to work on diversifying the teacher workforce, including working with Historically Black Colleges and Universities. It also collaborated with the teacher's union to include language in its most recent contract that will give some protections against layoffs for teachers who are graduates of the district's local teacher-recruitment program, who tend to be from more diverse backgrounds.

And for other complex issues that take years to work through, the key is being honest with parents about what you're doing and giving them constant updates on the process, Moore said.

"It's just ongoing communication," he said. "If you say it's going to take three years, people just want to know how it is going."

Eye-Opening Revelations

As the feedback and findings from the parent-researchers began flowing in, most came as no surprise, Moore said. But he said hearing the same experiences repeated across groups establishes a broader pattern that's harder to push aside as individual anecdotes.

And some of the anecdotes parents captured revealed particularly hurtful stereotypes. While about 80 percent of Hispanic parents said they'd like to volunteer at their child's school, some reported being asked most often to assist with cooking or cleaning and not classroom duties.

Minerva de la Cruz, who has two children in the city's schools, became a parent-researcher to be a voice for other Hispanic parents, especially those who do not speak English. In her outreach work, she focused on unearthing parent comments about bullying.

She used focus groups and one-on-one interviews to get feedback, ultimately reaching 137 parents. She was shocked by what she found.

Seventy-six percent of the parents who responded did not know the district's anti-bullying policies. Fifty-three percent said they had changed schools because there was no support or interest by school officials to address bullying. Forty-four percent said they did not know how to help if their children were victims of bullying, she said.

"I was thinking that parents knew about bullying—what it means, what to do with their children if they had this problem," she said. "They don't have any idea what they need to do, and that was very sad to me. I don't know [whether] the schools don't offer that information or if the problem is that the parents—that they don't have time to go to the school."

Now, she hopes the district will make clear it has a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, hold meetings with parents to ensure they know what steps to take if their child is bullied, and create opportunities for teachers and students to build trust.

Sarah Washington, a parent-researcher and longtime education advocate whose children attended city schools and a nearby suburban district, sought input on special education services.

"Parents just want to be respected," she said. "We want to be heard in a respectful manner."

The district has never had an initiative that openly engaged parents and where leaders are sincere about using the results to make changes, said Washington, who credits Superintendent Graff with this new focus.

She is already seeing changes to help parents understand the often confusing process of establishing an individualized education plan, or IEP, for students in special education. That includes the district's plan to create a series of short videos featuring parents explaining special education terms, expectations, and how to seek assistance.

Cali, the Somali parent, is heartened by what he's seen so far.

"I think we are coming together right now," he said.

"I don't want to say we've solved all of the problems, but at least they listened to us. We [took] one or two or three important issues [to the district]. If those issues are taken into consideration, I think we are heading in the right direction."

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