

The school principal as main barrier to parent engagement

From *The Power of Parents* by Dr. Edward Olivos

Chapter 6 pp 93-97 © 2006 Peter Lang Publishers

Resistance and Counter-Resistance

Bicultural parents are placed in a difficult situation when dealing with the schools. On the one hand, they are systematically excluded from authentically participating in the schools beyond menial tasks and then blamed when they are absent; furthermore, they are discouraged and resisted when they try to participate in more meaningful ways. Clearly bicultural parents have very well delineated roles in the school system. These roles require them to accept the authority of the school without question. However, such an "exclusionary orientation by the school can lead communities to challenge the institutional power structure." That is, when low-income bicultural communities begin to uncover the contradictions that are inherent in the education system, they begin to resist and challenge that very system.

When low-income bicultural communities begin to resist the workings of the public education system, however, counter-resistance on the part of the institution often develops to diffuse and squelch their work. As a result, the parents' resistance is often short-lived or stifled. This is primarily due to the asymmetrical power relations which position the subordinate groups in the continual position of the underdog. In other words, the dominant institution has the power to employ means of counter-resistance, therefore de-legitimizing the subordinate populations' attempts to struggle for humanity and call attention to the contradictions. The most apparent reason for this is because school personnel know that these parents are limited in resources and often lack the technical knowledge of how to effectively challenge the system.

Through the voices of the many bicultural parents I have worked with, it has been acknowledged that there exists injustice, inequality, and inequity when it comes to the education of their children. However, in addition to educational policies and practices which negatively affect the academic success of their children, barriers are also present within the educational system that silence their voices when they make efforts to question these injustices. A barrier in this context is something that impedes a parent or community member from authentically participating in the school system. These barriers are neither exclusively placed within society, the school, the community nor the individuals, but rather these barriers appear to be present in all four.

During my career as an educator and parent advocate, I have come across many parent groups who have voiced concerns about the quality of their children's education, and I have helped them organize themselves to challenge the school system. Their experiences with the school, however, point to barriers that have functioned as counter-resistance to their efforts to be more involved. For example, many bicultural parents I've worked with have expressed their concerns with the role of the school principal and how this individual often represents the most formidable barrier, or counter-resistance, to their efforts and struggles for educational justice for their children and their community.

Administrators as Counter-Resistance

Within the school setting the person with the most relative power is the principal. Countless bicultural parents I have come in contact with have indicated to me that these individuals are the persons that most impede their relationship with the school. Each one has a story to tell or supports the concept that the administrator at their site does not make any authentic attempt to work with bicultural parents or low-income communities. Instead, many bicultural parents, and teachers sympathetic to their work, often identify the school principal as a "dictator" who not only intimidates parents but students and teachers as well.

One parent from San Diego, for example, once told me about a situation that occurred at her school during the beginning of the 2002-2003 school year in which the administrator made it clear to the community (the majority low-income Latinos) that she did not want the parents involved:

The principal didn't want the parents there. She directly said, "I don't want parents at the school." If the parents want to come, they will have to pass by a person who will guide them. [That person] will give [the parents] a specified hour, day, or time so that they can come at that time and they will have to pass a TB test, etc., etc.

When I asked this parent how the administrator at the site was able to promote a policy which explicitly excluded parents, she said that the principal did so in a "nice" manner, using "pretexts":

We received a letter at the beginning of the week, during the first days of the school year, where it stated very nicely "We'd like to have the children get to know their teachers. We want there to be a bond between the teacher and the child. We need the parents to please maintain a distance until we call for them." In other words, "we don't want you here." So this affected the parents who, instead of helping the teachers with their work, left. We had a group of parents at The Learning Academy, but with so many prerequisites she got rid of us. No. There is a big problem at The Learning Academy. The principal doesn't accept any visitors. No. She can't. She's too busy to see anybody.

During my career as a teacher in San Diego I met a very dynamic Latina mother who had a history of many years of activism and involvement at her children's school, and she painted a similar picture. At the time I met her she was serving on the school's governance team as well as the school site council. During one of our discussions she recounted some of her own experiences with an ex-administrator at her child's school and the attempts this administrator would make to preclude her and the other Latino parents' active participation. She related how the principal would meet with the parents at the school during monthly Parent Coffee events but would not be willing to engage their concerns or questions.

The parents are completely denied. One of the main barriers that we had at the school was "time" because they would give us parent meetings but only to inform us about what she (the principal) wanted to tell us. She would give us the meetings, but she would be the only one allowed to speak. When we had questions, [she would say], "I'm sorry but I have to leave. I need to be in a classroom at such and such time." The meeting would end. We'd be left with all our unanswered questions.

The concerns that were voiced by these mothers (as well as many other parents and teachers I have worked with) present an interesting pattern in how administrators relate to active parents, or at least active low-income bicultural parents. For the most part, administrators appear to have an extreme loyalty to the school system rather than to their constituents, which are the parents and the community. Thus, according to the many parent comments I have heard throughout the years it appears that the administrators in many cases acted as not only barriers but at times as counter-resistance to their efforts to improve their children's schools.

From the parents' comments and my experiences with them, I suggest the process of involving bicultural parents in the school system is deeply regulated by a procedural network of bureaucracy which functions as a barrier for those who may wish to become more involved in the school system. This process of regulations, protocols, and procedures is further complicated by the issues of language, culture, and class. Parents who do not speak English or possess the political and economic clout to be heard often get discouraged by institutional barriers that become present in the school system as it attempts to protect itself from disruption. Moreover, this bureaucracy and the administrators' blind loyalty to this system effectively work to squelch any concerns or opposition bicultural parents may have.