PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT IN A SCHOOL DISTRICT IN CRISIS: EXAMINING

SCHOOL REFORM THROUGH THE LENS OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

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For my dad.

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ABSTRACT

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT IN A SCHOOL DISTRICT IN CRISIS: EXAMINING

SCHOOL REFORM THROUGH THE LENS OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

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This qualitative study examines a five-year period of reform in a small, urban district during a time of crisis, using the issue of parental engagement as a lens through which to focus the analysis. While leadership in the Clarksville School District changed dramatically from 2007-2012, most parents remained in the community. As one of the few constants in the district, parents have been both blamed for all the district's problems and cited as the key to possible solutions. Therefore, this dissertation focuses on family involvement at the individual, market, and policy levels. Using interviews, observations, and document analysis, I investigate both the opportunities for and barriers to parental engagement that exist in the district at each of these three levels. Drawing on Bourdieu's theories of power, this dissertation also considers why certain forms of participation are privileged over others, how an environment of school choice impacts parental engagement, and what potential parents have to contribute to policy-level change given different leadership structures in the district. Ultimately, my findings show that—contrary to popular opinion—many Clarksville parents put forth a great deal of effort to be involved in their children's education, despite the multiple barriers that they encounter.

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Overview

In his first State of the Union address in 2009, President Obama outlined several education initiatives, adding the following caveat: "These education policies will open the doors of opportunity for our children, but it is up to us to ensure they walk through them. In the end, there is no program or policy that can substitute for a parent, for a mother or father who will attend those parent-teacher conferences, or help with homework, or turn off the TV, put away the video games, read to their child" ("Remarks of President," 2009). Three years later, Rachel Steward, a teacher from the beleaguered Clarksville School District, sat with the First Lady during the President's 2012 State of the Union address.[1] Steward was invited because she, along with all the other teachers in Clarksville, had agreed to work without pay in a bankrupt district unable to compensate them. While teachers were—appropriately—hailed as heroes for their sacrifice, there was plenty of blame to go around for the district's financial and academic woes. An article in a local newspaper[2] identified popular culprits for the district's problems: "Some say Clarksville has been unfairly used as a political football and education lab since at least 1994, when the state took control. Others blame incompetent administrators and a dearth of local leadership. Still more cite parents who do not understand the system or care enough about good-quality education for their children" (January 23, 2012). Indeed, stakeholders as varied as the President of the United States to district administrators to

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[1] The names of all people and places have been changed.

[2] Throughout this dissertation, I note when information comes from newspaper articles, and I include the date of publication. However, I omit both the author's name and the newspaper's title in order to preserve the anonymity of the district under study.

parents themselves increasingly cite low levels of parental engagement as a major source of the myriad of problems that plague poor, urban districts like Clarksville.

The case of Clarksville is not unique. Since 1989, state takeovers of local school districts have occurred in "18 states and 12 of the nation's largest cities" (Black, 2008, p. 34). About half of the states in the United States have statutes that allow for takeovers of failing districts, and under *No Child Left Behind*, schools that continuously fail may be turned over "to the State educational agency, if permitted under State law and agreed to by the State" (United States Department of Education, 2005). In fact, state takeovers have become a more common reform since the early 1990s, and they have grown broader in scope, with state governments taking charge of academics in addition to fiscal and managerial responsibilities (Wong & Shen, 2001). While *No Child Left Behind* cites state takeovers as one option for failing schools, the legislation also emphasizes the difference that parents can make when they become more involved in their children's education. Parental engagement is a major focus of *No Child Left Behind*, with the United States Department of Education (2004) urging schools and local education authorities to "provide materials and training to help parents work with their children to improve their children's achievement such as literacy training for parents, if necessary, and using technology to foster parental involvement" (p. 33).

This dissertation, situated in the Clarksville School District, explores what parental engagement looked like in this small, urban district from 2007-2012. While Clarksville has long struggled with a lack of funding and poor academic performance, the district's problems intensified in recent years. In the 2011, for example, the Clarksville School District began the school year facing $20 million of debt. Contributing to the

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district's financial problems, half of Clarksville's students attended charter schools, taking their per pupil funding allowance with them. Significant cuts in state funding only made matters worse. The state government blamed the district's problems on mismanagement at the local level and did not want to provide a monetary bailout. Clarksville's 4,000 students and their parents faced enormous uncertainty, as the state and local government wrangled over possible solutions, including dissolving the school district and sending students to neighboring towns; canceling teacher contracts and turning all schools into charters; initiating another state takeover; or allowing the district to remain open under local control, which seemed to be the most unlikely option.

Though this situation was the most dramatic that Clarksville experienced in recent years, the district has a history of turmoil. Located on the edge of a large urban center, Clarksville has experienced an economic downturn that has lasted decades and resulted in the disappearance of a middle class. As a result, the Clarksville School District has wrestled with many of the issues that trouble urban districts. A mixture of politics, fear, and hopelessness has been at the center of all decisions in the district. Polarized by party politics and led by a strong Republican majority since 1875, in the latter part of the twentieth century the city became and remains a majority African-American city with African Americans making up more than 70% of the population. There have been countless attempts to restructure and reform the district over the years—it was taken over by a for-profit management company which left after a few years, partnerships have formed with local non-profit organizations, there have been attempts to create small schools and learning communities—and by most accounts all have failed. The district is consistently among the lowest performing districts in the state as measured by

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standardized test scores, college attendance is equally low, and there have been 12 superintendents over the last 13 years. Clarksville only recently returned to the control of a locally elected School Board in 2010, when the legislation granting the state the right to take over struggling school districts expired. From 1994 to 2010, the Clarksville School District was run by a variety of state-appointed boards, reflecting the political affiliation of whoever was governor at the time.

Research Questions

I came to Clarksville in September 2007 in order to do research in the Clarksville School District as part of a project with my academic advisor, a professor at a nearby Graduate School of Education, and one of the three members of Clarksville's state-appointed Education Empowerment Board (EEB). My advisor wanted to study the history of the district and to document the reform that occurred under the leadership of the EEB. As part of this research, I attended the twice-monthly EEB meetings and interviewed a variety of stakeholders. My advisor and I spoke regularly about our data, and early in the research process, we identified community engagement as a significant issue in the district. After the legislation granting the state control of the district expired and the Empowerment Board—along with my advisor—left Clarksville, I continued to attend bimonthly board meetings in the district, interested to see what community involvement would look like during this leadership transition. In addition, I volunteered at the school district's Truancy Intervention Center (TIC), the administrative department charged with reducing truancy. Through this work, I had the opportunity to observe how parents were engaged in the district. For example, I was able to talk with parents and students at the TIC, attend court hearings for parents of truant children, and assist in

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facilitating court-mandated parent groups to address attendance issues. I noted a range of ways that parents participated in their children's education, and I spoke with different stakeholders about the issue of parental engagement.

While popular opinion in Clarksville holds that parents are not involved in their children's education, I saw parents take a variety of steps to help their children in school. For instance, at the TIC, I observed parents working with caseworkers, trying to develop strategies to improve their children's attendance. At board meetings, parents raised concerns about issues in the schools, such as the lack of textbooks and the abundance of unqualified teachers. I had the opportunity to visit charter and partnership schools and talk with parents about choices they were making regarding their children's education. Moreover, through my conversations with parents, I learned about the many obstacles they encountered when they tried to interact with their children's schools. Some parents described unfriendly school staff, other parents discussed the difficulty of securing services for their children with special needs, and many parents expressed frustration with the poor quality of education that their children were receiving. On the other hand, I talked with many school leaders and teachers who argued that the schools would never improve until parents became more involved in their children's education.

Thus, a central question arose from my experiences in the Clarksville School District: What does parental engagement look like in a small urban district during a time of crisis? From that question, I developed the following subquestions:

- How do parents understand their roles in their own children's education? In particular, how do parents describe opportunities for and barriers to their participation? How do other stakeholders envision parents' roles?

- How has the proliferation of charter schools, as well as other school choice options, had an impact on parental engagement in the district? What new opportunities have opened for parental engagement, given the choices currently available in the district? What barriers still exist? Are there new barriers to participation?

- How has the form/content of parents' participation at board meetings changed—or remained consistent—as the composition of the school board has changed over the last five years?

I addressed these questions by conducting a qualitative study of parental involvement in the Clarksville School District, relying on ethnographic methods such as participant observation, document review, and interviews. Because I spent five years in the district, my data allow me to investigate how engagement changed over time, considering the issue of parental involvement in the context of different leaders and reform initiatives.

In addition, after spending more time in Clarksville, it became evident that power relations have a significant impact on parental engagement in the district, although it was not always clear how exactly power works. For example, both at board meetings and in interviews, community members spoke about the political history of the city, and they expressed a distrust of district leaders, arguing that school officials used their power for personal gain time and time again in Clarksville. Community members explained that this corruption and mismanagement often makes them reluctant to participate in school governance. On a different note, some school leaders described what they saw as their honest efforts to engage the community; efforts they felt went largely unrewarded. As such, some school leaders tried to use their authority to compel parents to participate in their children's education. For example, the superintendent created the Truancy Intervention Center in order to hold parents accountable for their children's attendance and to force "disengaged" parents to interact with the school system. At the same time,

parents described looking for ways to have input into their children's educational experiences. Some parents exercised their power of choice, opting to send their children to charter schools or parochial schools or what they saw as the best public schools in the district. Other parents discussed working with teachers and school staff, trying to advocate for their children, but often feeling powerless to do so effectively. Given these circumstances, I wondered how power—and people's perceptions of power—shape interactions, specifically parental engagement, in Clarksville.

Some theorists argue that power is something that can be divided and shared among stakeholders; for example, democratic scholars such as Fung (2004) and Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi (2001) contend that various interest groups can share power as they work together to solve problems in their community. However, it became clear that power in Clarksville operates in complicated ways that are manifested through people's interactions with one another. As such, I wanted to draw on a theory of power that would help me explore this complexity. Bourdieu's understanding of power as an action that works through "systems of classifications" proved to be a helpful theoretical framework through which to consider parental engagement in Clarksville (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 7). Thus, I added one additional subquestion to my study:

- How can Bourdieu's theories about power—specifically his idea of symbolic violence and his metaphor of power relations as a game—help frame the opportunities and barriers that exist for parental engagement in the district?

As I analyzed my data, therefore, I applied Bourdieu's theories about power and considered how this framework could help to tell the story of parental engagement in Clarksville.

Dissertation Organization

Thus, in my dissertation, I explore these questions through an analysis of the qualitative data that I collected in Clarksville from 2007-2012. My dissertation begins with a review of the literature that addresses the issue of parental engagement. In Chapter 2, I identify three major categories, or levels, of parental engagement that exist in this literature, and I organize the chapter around opportunities for and barriers to participation at each of these levels. First, I discuss research that explores parental engagement at the individual level; this research considers the actions that parents take to secure academic and social gains for their own children. Next, I describe literature that addresses parental engagement at the market level. This research investigates how parents make decisions in the educational marketplace to benefit their own children, and it also considers the impact that these decisions have on the educational system as a whole. Third, I report on literature that discusses parental engagement at the school governance and policy level. This body of research details the actions that parents take to change programs and systems that affect children both school- and district-wide.

I move to a different body of literature in Chapter 3, as I share my theoretical framework for this dissertation. I discuss literature both by and about Bourdieu, specifically as it relates to his theories of power. In this chapter, I focus on his ideas regarding capital and habitus, as they prove especially useful in analyzing the opportunities and barriers that parents encounter as they try to engage in their children's schooling in Clarksville.

In Chapter 4, I turn to my research methodology for this study. I begin by describing the context of the study in more detail. Next, I discuss the qualitative methods

that I employed, providing specific details regarding my data sources. In addition, I outline the steps that I took to analyze my data. I share details regarding how I used grounded theory to identify significant issues in the district, as well as how I explored these issues through the coding process. I end this chapter with a discussion of the validity of my findings, as well as with a consideration of my position in the district and the potential limitations that my position implied.

I present my findings in Chapters 5-7. Each chapter corresponds to a level of parental engagement that I identify in my literature review. In Chapter 5, I discuss parental engagement at the individual level in Clarksville, and I consider how parents and other stakeholders offer different accounts regarding opportunities and barriers that exist when parents try to participate in their children's schooling. In Chapter 6, I consider parental engagement at the market level. I explore the choices available to parents in the Clarksville School District, and I discuss how an environment of school choice creates both opportunities for and barriers to parental engagement. In Chapter 7, I look at parental engagement at the school policy and governance level. In this chapter, I discuss how opportunities for and barriers to participation varied under two different governing bodies, specifically, the state-appointed Education Empowerment Board and the locally elected School Board.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I discuss my findings in light of Bourdieu's theories of power. I return to my research questions and consider how my data address each question, framing these answers with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence as well as his metaphor of power relations as a game. I conclude my dissertation in Chapter 9, where I summarize my findings and outline directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Henderson and Berla (1994) explain that relatively little was written about parent engagement in education until the early 1980s, when a limited body of research addressed issues relating to the impact of home environment on student achievement (e.g., Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Milne, 1989; Scott-Jones, 1987). However, by 1994, the field had become "a growth industry" (Henderson & Berla, 1994, p. ix), addressing an even broader range of issues, including everything from parent involvement in schools and classrooms to communication between schools and parents to parents' participation in policy making, and more. In fact, parental engagement has gained increasing prominence in the literature since the passage of *No Child Left Behind*, in which parental involvement was cited as an important element of school reform, and states were encouraged to develop parental involvement practices that "foster achievement to high standards for all children" and are geared "toward lowering barriers to greater participation by parents in school planning, review, and improvement" (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 8).

Researchers describe parent involvement in a variety of ways. For the purposes of this review, I have divided these conceptualizations into three levels, organized according to type of results the involvement aims to achieve. First, researchers describe parental engagement at the individual level; that is, researchers describe actions parents take to secure academic and social gains for their own children. While these actions may benefit other students as well, parents' primary goal is to improve the achievement of their own children. Next, some scholars discuss the impact parents can have when they

engage at the market level. That is, in this era of school choice, parents have the ability to make their preferences known in the marketplace, enrolling their children in schools that best meet their needs. While parents who engage at the market level are often seeking advantages for their own children, proponents of school choice argue that involvement at this level may have a broader impact, as schools must innovate to meet consumer demands. Finally, parental engagement exists at the school governance and policy level; in this realm, parents explicitly seek to change programs and systems that affect children both school- and district-wide.

Thus, my literature review is divided into three main sections: parental engagement at the individual level, parental engagement at the market level, and parental engagement at the school governance and policy level. For each level, I identify opportunities and barriers for involvement as they are discussed in the literature.

Parental Engagement at the Individual Level

A great deal of research about parental engagement in education focuses on how parents can become involved with schools at the individual level to secure academic and social gains for their own children. While parents' presence in students' classrooms may indeed help improve the overall school climate, research in this area tends to focus on achievement outcomes for individual students. The literature describes many opportunities for parents to engage in this manner, including volunteering in children's classrooms and schools, communicating regularly with school staff, providing supportive home environments, and offering moral support for students' learning. Each type of involvement is discussed below before turning to barriers that make engagement at the individual level difficult for many parents.

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Opportunities at the individual level.

One way that parents may become involved in their children's education is by spending time in their schools or classrooms. According to Epstein and Salinas (2004), parent involvement in schools may take a variety of forms, ranging from participating in classroom reading activities to attending school events during which students share their own writing to working directly with teachers to help prepare students for standardized tests. Epstein and Salinas encourage volunteerism in any form, urging school leaders to "improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and as audiences [and] enable educators to work with volunteers who support students and the schools" (p. 15). Several studies describe the individual benefits students receive when their parents volunteer in their classrooms. For example, in a quantitative study of parent participation in kindergarten classrooms, Munoz (2000) finds that students whose parents volunteer during kindergarten have higher gains in reading test scores at the end of the year. In a longer-term study, Miedel and Reynolds (1999) examine the effects of parent volunteerism in children's kindergarten classrooms, and they argue that "even after controlling for family background, the number of activities in which parents participated in preschool and kindergarten was significantly associated with higher reading achievement, with lower rates of grade retention at age 14 (eighth grade), and with fewer years in special education" (p. 379). While Sanders and Epstein (1998) find lower levels of parent participation in school activities at the high school level compared to elementary and middle schools, they maintain that the respondents in their study "reported that family and community connections with their schools are essential for students' personal and educational success" (p. 33).

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Researchers also describe the benefits that accrue for students when their parents communicate regularly with teachers and other school officials. For example, Gutman and McLoyd (2000) use students' grades to identify both high- and low-achievers in a longitudinal data set, and they consider the different engagement strategies employed by parents of both types of students. Gutman and McLoyd conclude that parents of high-achievers frequently initiate contact with their children's schools in order to check their children's progress and to maintain positive relationships with teachers and staff. On the other hand, they argue that parents of low-achievers only become involved at the request of school staff or administrators when there is a problem with academics or behavior. In a quantitative study of teachers' and administrators' beliefs about parental engagement, Barnyak and McNelly (2009) find that "[keeping] parents informed" is a priority for many educators. Barnyak and McNelly identify a variety of channels through which teachers and parents may communicate, including: sending information home to parents, parent-teacher conferences, emails and web pages, newsletters, parent resource rooms, parent in-services, parent information sessions, academic fairs, and hosting math and reading nights. From a different angle, Reed (2007) considers the importance of teachers forging connections with parents and contends that when teachers have residential history in their schools' neighborhoods, they are able to form relationships with parents based on "trust, collaboration, and mutual respect," which helps support students' success in school (p. 302).

Some studies suggest that the ways in which parents support their children's learning in the home has as much—or more—of an effect on students' achievement than parents' engagement within the schools. For example, Epstein (1995) identifies ways

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that parents may foster learning at home, including: monitoring and discussing homework, participating in student goal setting each year, and assisting students in improving skills on various assignments. Epstein contends that these practices have a positive influence "on students' skills and scores [as well as] attitudes and behaviors" (p. 707). In a study based in part on Epstein's framework, Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman (2007) survey parents of children at high-achieving schools that serve low-income, at-risk populations in order to determine which parent involvement practices are the most prevalent. The authors find that parents in these schools are most engaged in practices that support children at home, both "providing for a child's basic needs… as well as providing school supplies and a place for children to complete schoolwork" and taking part in "home-based learning activities that foster the development of a child's social skills, basic skills, advanced skills, and enrichment" (p. 493).

Many studies specifically focus on parental engagement practices in regards to homework. In a study of perceptions of parental involvement, DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane (2007) find that school faculty members emphasize the importance of parental involvement at home, stressing the "need for parents to ensure that students completed their homework" (p. 364). Van Voorhis (2003) reports that middle school students who engage with their parents in order to complete their homework finish more assignments, turn in more accurate work, and have significantly higher science grades on their report cards (p. 336). Similarly, Sheldon and Epstein (2005) analyze longitudinal data from elementary and secondary schools and report that when families support their children's mathematical learning at home, their children score higher on mathematic achievement tests.

Likewise, Jackson and Remillard (2005) argue that while less visible to school officials, parents' activities within the home provide strong support for students' school success. Jackson and Remillard follow ten low-income, African American mothers and grandmothers who are primary caregivers for elementary school students in an educational scholarship program. They find that the parents in this study "constructed roles for themselves in relation to their children's learning that went beyond the offerings of school… they took it upon themselves to provide additional learning opportunities that reflected their own goals for their children and assessment of their needs" (p. 69). Specifically, the parents actively monitored their children's progress on their math homework, acquired reference materials to aid in their own mathematical understanding in order to help their children, and created educational activities for their children outside of school. While "parent involvement is most often evaluated from the school's vantage point [and] parents whose activities do not look like traditionally accepted behaviors associated with parent involvement or are not visible in the school are often classified in the literature as being minimally involved," Jackson and Remillard identify several ways in which parents and guardians enrich their children's learning outside of school (p. 54).

Schnee and Bose (2010) take Jackson and Remillard's (2005) argument a step further, explaining that even parents' "null actions" (or lack of action) in the home may reflect a sort of engagement in their children's education. Schnee and Bose define null actions as "*expressions of agency that reflect specific parental interests and intentions that lie behind an apparent action*—particularly those that might be expected or desired by school personnel—in a given situation" (p. 97). Using math homework as a lens through which to examine this phenomenon, Schnee and Bose explain that sometimes

parents make the conscious choice *not* to help their children with their work for one of the following reasons: they believe homework is solely the children's responsibility and fear doing the work for their children, they want to build their children's self-reliance as math-learners, they want to use homework as a way to encourage their children to ask their teachers and other adults for help, or they have confidence in their children's math skills. While some observers may perceive these parents as doing nothing, Schnee and Bose contend they are actively engaged in their children's education.

Parent engagement may also come in the form of providing moral support for children and displaying interest in their schoolwork. In a statistical analysis of NELS:88 data, Ream and Palardy (2008) find that students' outcomes on both test scores and academic track placement "improve when parents, regardless of their social class, engage in conversations with adolescents about what they do in school" (p. 251). Harris and Goodall (2008) echo this finding, citing data that shows "students valued the moral support parents gave to their learning more highly than the nature or type of their involvement" (p. 283). In fact, the authors argue that when parents show children that they are interested in their work, that they value education in general, and that they will monitor their behavior, these students display better performance outcomes in school. In their ethnographic study of immigrant parent school involvement, Pérez Carreón, Drake, and Calabrese Barton (2005) provide concrete examples of what this type of moral support looks like. The authors introduce one immigrant father who tries to teach his children by example, emphasizing the importance of school and learning. Pérez Carreón et al. describe how this father's "educational engagement in teaching by example expanded beyond formal school matters to daily life situations" (p. 483). By sharing his

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own areas of expertise with his sons (e.g., mechanics or soccer), this father is "able to construct a self-identify as a father who supports his children's schooling" (p. 483).

Thus, researchers identify many opportunities for parents to become involved in their children's education at the individual level. These opportunities may occur at the school or in the home; researchers contend that in both locations, students experience personalized gains, most often in the form of increased academic achievement. However, these opportunities may not be equally available to all parents. Barriers to engagement at the individual level are the subject of the next section.

Barriers at the individual level.

As part of *No Child Left Behind*, the United States Department of Education (2004) created guidelines for increasing parental involvement. In an *NCLB* policy brief regarding parental involvement, the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE) identifies several barriers to parental engagement. While an unwelcoming school environment and negative communication from the school are cited as obstacles, the brief also highlights barriers such as the "lack of parental education and parenting skills, time and job pressures, and language barriers" (NCPIE, n.d.). Indeed, *NCLB* seeks to increase parental engagement, but it does so in terms of "building parent capacity" (NCPIE, n.d.). In fact, a great deal of parental involvement literature, particularly research that focuses on engagement at the individual level, defines barriers in terms of skills and experience that parents lack. Specifically, researchers contend that often parents do not have the knowledge, language skills, or material resources necessary to work successfully with their children's schools. While these researchers approach parents from a deficit perspective, others consider how schools or teachers may make

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engaging prohibitively difficult for parents. Thus, this section addresses both types of barriers.

To start, many researchers contend that some parents lack the institutional knowledge—knowledge regarding how schools are organized and operate—necessary for navigating their children's educational system. For example, Friedel (1999) describes the many challenges that Native Canadian parents encounter when trying to engage with their children's education: "In virtually all school situations, minority group parents do not have access to the cultural knowledge… that would allow them to act in appropriate or positive ways. As a result, it can often appear as if they do not care" (p. 141). Friedel goes on to explain that typically schools and administrators take on the role of "experts" and "parents remain on the outside looking in" (p. 142). Often, this cultural knowledge relates to how schools work; parents may have a difficult time following unfamiliar procedures or rules of conduct that are not explicitly defined. Similarly, Harris and Goodall (2008) find that parents were more likely to engage with primary schools, as elementary schools are often smaller, more informal, and more personal than secondary institutions. The researchers explain that parents were not only intimidated by the size of high schools, but they were also unsettled by "their complexity and the number of people to whom [they] must relate" (p. 285). Parents perceived their children's schools as "closed systems" that support teachers over students, with limited opportunities for meaningful interaction (p. 285). Fine (1993) adds that oftentimes parents must negotiate several bureaucracies simultaneously (e.g., the school system, juvenile justice system, health system), and each has its own set of complex rules. Thus, many researchers

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contend that schools must do more to communicate their expectations to parents to help them engage more successfully.

In addition to lacking institutional knowledge, parents are often unfamiliar with ever-changing school curricula. This is especially the case in the area of mathematics education, where reform-oriented curricula often express mathematical content and processes in ways unfamiliar to parents. Parents may have difficulty helping their children when their own mathematical experiences different greatly (Schnee & Bose, 2010). Moreover, despite the confusion that new—and more conceptual—teaching methods may cause, teachers in poor schools are often reluctant to send materials home, either because they have limited resources or because they have negative stereotypes of the students and parents, believing them to be too irresponsible to take care of school property (Jackson & Remillard, 2005). In this case, while many parents want to help their children with school assignments, they do not have access to the knowledge that would enable them to do so.

In addition to lacking access to knowledge of school systems and curricula, parents may also lack material resources, specifically time and money, which would enable them to become more involved in their children's education. Fine (1993) argues that poor parents are occupied with the struggles of day-to-day existence, to an extent that makes participation in school activities difficult: "…low income mothers are holding together the pieces of a society torn apart by a federal government that, over the past decade, has shown disdain for and has severely punished those living in poverty. They themselves are the only ones holding their lives together" (p. 688). Indeed, Fine contends that programs that focus on "*individual parent advocacy* without a commitment to

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redistributing power and/or material resources inadvertently fall prey to the overwhelming depth of family needs" (p. 685). While it is important to help families secure much-needed social services, Fine argues that reform is a "very different project" that requires large-scale organization of parents into a political group (p. 685). Without this organization, "parental involvement projects will devolve into a swamp of crisis intervention, leaving neither a legacy of empowerment nor a hint of systemic change" (p. 702).

Cross-cultural communication is also a difficult barrier for many parents to overcome; indeed, it is often left to the parents—and not the schools—to navigate any cultural differences. In their study of immigrant parents' school involvement, Pérez Carreón et al. (2005) explore the many ways immigrant parents struggle to communicate with school personnel who do not speak their language. Parents reported feeling like "second-class" citizens at Parent Teacher Association meetings, with no translator present to help them understand the proceedings or to assist them in voicing their ideas and concerns. Parents often had the impression that teachers did not value their input; as such, they experienced a "loss of authorship over recognized forms of knowledge in the host society and increasing marginalization of their cultural knowledge, in turn resulting in an even greater distance between school and home" (Pérez Carreón et al., 2005, p. 484). Moreover, some immigrant parents in the study did not have legally recognized status, making involvement in their U.S.-born children's schooling more difficult. While the school and society expected these parents to participate in their children's education, their undocumented status resulted in "the negation of [their] presence by that same society" (p. 486).

Finally, there is a body of research that addresses school staff members' negative perceptions of poor and minority parents and the impact it has on parental involvement. In some cases, teachers or administrators display blatant forms of racism or classism. For example, in a number of studies, minority parents voice the concern that their input is not valued, which makes participation a frustrating and upsetting experience. Friedel (1999) writes about the "cultural occupation" that occurs in schools where the dominant culture shapes the school experiences of Native Canadian students. In some cases, teachers and administrators may hold negative stereotypes of minority groups, which can lead to lower expectations for minority students, as well as an unwillingness to include minority parents in decision-making. Minority parents watch as non-minority teachers and administrators do not implement their recommendations and ultimately become more reluctant to participate. Friedel (1999) explains, "Although resistance [to involvement] on the part of Aboriginal parents may act as a means to preserve dignity in a situation that has labeled them incompetent, this same resistance ensures that those in charge will be rid of them" (p. 153). Discussing class differences, Reed (2007) finds that communication between low-income parents and teachers in urban schools is often difficult; teachers may be patronizing, unhelpful, or unable to see challenges parents encounter in becoming involved. This situation creates a general lack of trust between parents and teachers, making collaboration unlikely.

While many instances or racism and classism are overt, sometimes race and class differences between teachers and parents create more subtle barriers to participation. For example, Lareau and Horvat (1999) analyze parent-teacher interactions in a small, predominantly White elementary school in the Midwest. The authors argue that parents

who interact with the school in ways that conform to White teachers' and administrators' expectations secure more academic gains for their children. Lareau and Horvat explain:

> Parents' cultural and social resources become forms of capital when they facilitate parents' compliance with dominant standards in school interactions. In particular, cultural capital includes parents' large vocabularies, sense of entitlement to interact with teachers as equals, time, transportation, and child care arrangements to attend school events during the school day. Social capital includes social networks with other parents in the school community who provide informal information about the teachers. (p. 42)

Moreover, in this community, which has a history of racial discrimination in its educational institutions, being White can be regarded as a form of cultural capital because White parents are able to approach the school with less distrust and greater ease: "Whiteness… facilitates White parents' compliance with the standard of deferential and positive parental involvement in school" (p. 49). While Lareau and Horvat take care to explain their interpretation is not overly deterministic—both Black and White parents enact a variety of strategies to advance their children's interests—their research does illustrate the manner in which the possession of particular social and cultural capital confers advantages on parents who are members of the dominant racial group. In theory, the school may encourage the participation of all parents; however, in practice, teachers and administrators react more favorably to the involvement of White parents.

Addressing issues of class, Reay (1998) analyzes differences in home-school relationships between middle- and working-class families. Through interviews, the author finds that middle class women draw on their cultural capital in ways that help them support their children's academic success in school. Reay identifies seven specific aspects of cultural capital that help these middle-class women, including: possession of material resources, educational qualifications, available time, information about the

educational system, social confidence, subject-specific knowledge, and "proper" orientation to the teaching staff. The more closely the mothers' capital matched that of the school, the more effectively the mothers were able to intervene in their children's education to secure positive results.

Thus, a variety of barriers exist that make engagement at the individual level prohibitively difficult for many parents. These barriers are especially likely to impact poor and minority parents, as well as parents with limited English proficiency. While the literature often frames these barriers in terms of skills and knowledge that parents lack, another body of research suggests there is often a mismatch between home and school cultures, a disparity that typically favors White middle- and upper-class families.

In sum, the literature identifies a wide variety of opportunities for and barriers to parental engagement at the individual level. For my study, I was interested in exploring the ways in which parents are involved at the individual level in Clarksville, so I asked: "How do parents understand their roles in their own children's education? In particular, how do parents describe opportunities for and barriers to their participation? How do other stakeholders envision parents' roles?" Many of my findings are similar to the data reported in the literature. For example, I saw parents engage in their children's education in both formal ways within the schools and in a variety of informal ways within their own homes. I also identified several similar barriers to engagement at this level, such as some parents' lack of institutional and curricular knowledge. In addition, as noted in the literature, I found that some parents are reluctant to interact with their children's schools because they believe that the school staff and faculty have a negative perception of them. However, I also found that just as many parents have a negative perception of the schools

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that their children attend. In fact, in Chapter 5, I argue that in Clarksville, one of the

biggest barriers to participation is parents' belief that Clarksville schools provide a subpar

education for their children. In the context of what they regard as a dysfunctional system,

parents contend that formally engaging with their children's schools is a futile endeavor,

as the school are not responsive to their needs and frequently fail to address their

concerns.

Parental Engagement at the Market Level

Some scholars argue that the most effective way for parents to engage with schools

is by expressing their educational preferences by enrolling their children in particular

schools. In this market framework, parental choice is a form of involvement.   In some

senses, this type of involvement is individual—parents seek to secure personalized gains

for their children by choosing schools that best meet their needs—but proponents of

school choice suggest that implementing choice programs can also secure systemic

change by forcing schools to innovate as they compete for students. Thus, choice

programs embody a sort of middle ground, wherein parents have an indirect impact on

schools at the policy level by seeking to gain benefits for their own children. While it is

beyond the scope of this literature review to explore all the nuances of the school choice

debate, it is worth briefly discussing some opportunities and barriers for parental

engagement within this market model, especially given that school choice has emerged as

"a key strategy in current federal legislation aimed at improving educational outcomes"

since the passage of *No Child Left Behind* (United States Department of Education,

Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2004, p. 1).

Opportunities at the market level.

Proponents of school choice contend that programs such as vouchers or charter schools provide more opportunities for parents to become involved in shaping their children's education. First, school choice advocates assert that when parents are able to act as consumers of educational services—rather than as passive recipients—their preferences have an impact on schools, as institutions must respond to their needs in order to receive their business. In addition, while school involvement at the individual level may favor White and upper-class parents, supporters of school choice argue that a market model allows all parents to participate equally in making educational decisions for their children. Finally, school choice also gives parents the chance to design their own schools around themes or interests that particularly suit their families or communities. Each of these opportunities is discussed in turn.

Returning control to the "consumers" is a theme in much of the literature about school choice. In *Free to choose*, Friedman and Friedman (1980) argue that the failure of education at all levels is the result of "denying many parents control over the kind of schooling their children receive" (p. 151). Chubb and Moe (1990) believe that under the market model of education, parents and students will have more input in schools, as institutions must please parents in order to keep their business. In contrast, in a democratic model of education, schools must respond to the demands of a variety of "constituents" who represent a wide range of interests. These constituents often do not even have children in public schools, and frequently individuals or groups with more political power are able to exert more control over education (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 30). In addition, proponents of school choice argue that public education, as it currently

stands, responds to the self-interests of teachers and administrators, who are driven by their desire for more job security and higher salaries (Friedman & Friedman, 1980; Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1998). Because charter schools must maintain their student enrollment in order to receive funding, they are forced to become more consumer-oriented than traditional public schools.

Many supporters of school choice assert that as charter schools attract more students, traditional public schools will be forced to engage in competition in order to keep their schools open. Chubb and Moe (1990) refer to this process as "natural selection," and they contend that bad schools will go out of business as new schools compete for their students (p. 33). Viteritti (2003) adds that public schools will improve if they have an incentive to do so. The threat of losing students to charter schools provides the motivation to innovate. Thus, Hadderman (2002) argues, "the charter idea (even the threat of chartering) has stimulated improvements in the broader educational system" (p. 7). Osborne (1999) explains the situation in frank economic and political terms:

> Competition forces administrators to take the initiative. If they don't shake things up their districts and schools will shrink. They will have to lay teachers off. Angry voters may overthrow school boards, angry boards may fire superintendents, and angry superintendents may even fire principals. (p. 33)

Thus, through the power of entry and exit, parents can make their preferences known, forcing both new and traditional public schools to implement more creative methods of education to respond to families' needs.

Advocates of charter schools also frame the issue in terms of equality of opportunity, arguing that charter schools give everyone the option to choose where to go to school, and they increase the overall options from which to choose. Friedman and

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Friedman (1980) believe that the best way to increase students' learning and achievement is to give *all* parents more control over their children's schooling, "similar to that which those of us in the upper-income classes now have" (p. 160). Likewise, Manno et al. (1998) write that charters may be "especially attractive" to lower-income and minority parents who have not had many choices in the past (p. 13). Viteritti argues that the parents of children who attend failing schools do not want their children to be there; rather, "they are there because they have no choice" (p. 14). For this reason, there is a great deal of support for school choice policies in many low-income Hispanic and African-American communities where parents do not have money to send their children to private schools.

In addition, proponents of charter schools argue that they increase group equity, as charter laws give parents and communities the opportunity to create schools that meet the particular needs of their students. For example, Levin (1999) explains how some community activists and parents in urban neighborhoods believe that the public schools are "oriented toward White and middle-class students" which "[impedes] the learning of poor, minority children, especially when taught by an aging teaching population that [is] disproportionately White compared to the student population" (pp. 271-272). In this case, parents support movements to establish "African American male academies or Afrocentric curricula" (Levin, 1999, p. 272). Hadderman (2002) adds that as African-American immersion charters increase in popularity in some urban areas, other ethnic/minority groups have begun to "take advantage of the charter movement" (p. 4). For example, Hispanic advocacy groups have raised money to open charter schools that will cater to the particular needs of Latino/a students (e.g., by celebrating Hispanic

culture or focusing on English-language acquisition, etc.) (Hadderman, 2002). In fact, the Center for Education Reform (2007) reports that "in 2006, more than four in ten charter schools served a student body composed of fully 60 percent or more 'at risk' and/or minority students" (p. 1). In this sense, charter schools provide a means for parents to develop educational programs that cater to students who may be overlooked in the traditional public school system.

Thus, school choice provides opportunities for parental involvement by positioning parents as consumers in the marketplace. While its supporters argue that school choice removes many obstacles that keep parents from engaging with their children's schools, others contend that the school choice movement brings its own set of barriers that hinder the participation of certain parents. These barriers are discussed below.

Barriers at the market level.

While school choice may expand parents' options for their children, many researchers describe barriers that prevent certain parents from fully participating in choice programs. For example, though states have passed legislation that requires charter schools to provide "equal protection for all students" (Wamba & Asher, 2003, p. 464), there are a number of formal and informal mechanisms that lead to segregation among charter schools. First, many charter schools have selection criteria that disadvantage certain populations. Often, charters have "first-come, first-served" policies (Stambach & Becker, 2006; Wamba & Asher, 2003; Wells et al., 1998). Wamba and Asher (2003) point out that this type of policy disadvantages people who have less access to information, and they cite evidence that suggests higher-income families have more

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access to information than lower-income families. Stambach and Becker (2006) add that a first-come, first-served policy is biased towards individuals who own cars and can attend registration sessions more easily. In addition, many charter schools give preference to children who have siblings at the school already or who have parents who work there (Howe, Eisenhart, & Betebenner, 2002; Stambach & Becker, 2006; Wells et al., 1998). Finally, some charter schools require that parents visit the school before they can enroll their children; parents with busy work schedules or without their own vehicles may have a more difficult time meeting this prerequisite (Howe et al., 2002). Moreover, sometimes these school visits involve a meeting with school officials to "ensure there is a fit between the charter school and the family" (Wells et al., 1998, p. 44). In this way, charter schools can filter out students whom they do not believe share the schools' beliefs and values (Wells et al., 1998). Thus, though charter schools are not allowed to discriminate in their admissions policies, many schools implement selection criteria that may favor higher-income families.

In addition, some charter schools employ recruitment practices that exclude certain parents. Cobb and Glass (1999) explain that many charter schools simply rely on "word of mouth" as a means of recruiting, and this type of communication tends to stay within homogeneous groups. In addition, Howe et al. (2002) find that some charter schools only provide information in English, which obviously prevents parents with limited or no English proficiency from learning about the schools. While some of these selective recruitment practices may be employed inadvertently, Stambach and Becker (2006) demonstrate that sometimes certain groups are intentionally excluded. In their study, they found that wealthy parents in a suburban district held informational meetings

about a new charter school in their homes, and they did not invite low-income individuals to attend.

While some researchers argue that charter schools purposely employ discriminatory recruitment practices, other scholars note that even when schools make information available to everyone, certain parents have more access to this information based on their "location and social positioning" (Ben-Porath, 2009, p. 537). In particular, Ben-Porath (2009) cites a variety of studies that demonstrate the challenges that poor and minority parents encounter when they try to learn about various choice options. These challenges include a lack of familiarity with how the school system works, not enough time to gather information about different schools, and smaller social networks with whom to discuss available options. Similarly, in an article discussing school choice in a large urban district, André-Bechely (2005) describes the work that many parents have to do in order help their children gain admission to particular schools. André-Bechely notes that parents often must complete lengthy and complicated application forms, interact with unfriendly school staff and administrators, collect (or forge) a variety of documents, consider different transportation options, and balance the needs of multiple children, among other things. Even when parents do all of this work, their children may still not be accepted into the schools where they apply.

In addition, many researchers have found that the use of "parent contracts" allows charter schools to attract students with the most involved parents (Cobb & Glass, 1999; Howe et al., 2002; Wells et al., 1998). In fact, because of parent contracts, even charter schools serving low-income students generally attract students with the most involved parents (Wells et al., 1998). These contracts usually require parents to volunteer or

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participate at the school for a certain number of hours a year. Students can be denied admission or asked to leave the school if parents cannot fulfill this obligation (Wells et al., 1998). Moreover, because charter schools are not required to provide transportation for their students, they may attract students with parents who have more flexible work hours or who live closer to the school (Cobb & Glass, 1999; Wells et al., 1998). In addition, schools with parent contracts and no transportation inherently favor students from two-parent households, particularly households in which one parent does not work, as these families usually have an easier time of meeting the demands required of them.

On a different note, Lankford and Wyckoff (2001) use data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study to analyze how the introduction of vouchers would affect the choices urban parents make regarding where to send their children to school. Lankford and Wyckoff (2001) find that with the introduction of vouchers, the parents who would change their children's schools are 50% more likely to be White, have 50% higher incomes, and are 80% more likely to have a college education than parents who keep their children in the same schools. Ben-Porath (2012) notes that even voucher programs that target disadvantaged students may experience a "skimming effect," in that the students who use these vouchers are less likely to have learning or physical disabilities and more likely to have higher test scores than the students who decline these vouchers (p. 183). Thus, in this sense, vouchers do not provide options for all parents equally.

Finally, Vincent and Tomlinson (1997) contrast the ideas of parent "choice" and "voice" (p. 365). Vincent and Tomlinson explain that after a choice is made regarding which school one's child will attend, "opportunities for the exercise of individual or

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collective parental voice *within* a school appear limited" (p. 365). That is, Vincent and Tomlinson argue that parents have limited ability to affect school policies and procedures, and school officials expect parental involvement to take the form of parents supporting their children with their schoolwork. Furthermore, under a market model, wherein some schools may operate for profit, there is an "emphasis on new managerialist practices… accompanied by a concomitant privileging of business interests and approaches to the management and organization of education. In this way, particular 'publics' are valued over others" (p. 364). School boards are often composed of local business representatives, and commercial interests take precedence over parents who "often remain silent on governing bodies, feeling they have little 'expertise' to contribute" (p. 365).

In sum, while proponents believe that school choice involves parents in their children's education by positioning them as consumers who express their preferences by enrolling their children in the most effective and innovative schools, critics argue that choice policies are more beneficial to particular groups (e.g., White, middle- and upper-class, English speakers). Given the proliferation of choice options in Clarksville during the time of my study, I wanted to investigate how school choice has an impact on parental engagement in the district. Therefore, my research questions include the following: "What new opportunities have opened for parental engagement, given the choices currently available in the district? What barriers still exist? Are there new barriers to participation?"

As in the literature described above, I found that parents appreciate having choices, and they are willing to go to great lengths to exercise that power to choose,

researching different schools, talking with administrators, even creating their own options when none seem to exist. However, parents in Clarksville also face many of the barriers outlined in this section, including limited access to information and few available spaces at the more desirable schools. In addition, I found that oftentimes the choices themselves are problematic in Clarksville. Ben-Porath (2009) argues that in order to provide "equitable educational opportunities through choice mechanisms… society should be required to develop an equitable choice set" (p. 540). In Chapter 6, I argue that the choices from which Clarksville parents have to choose are certainly not equitable to the choices offered to parents living in nearby upper- and middle-class suburban districts, for a myriad of reasons.

Parental Engagement at the School Governance and Policy Level

There are a variety of perspectives regarding how parents may become involved in education at the school governance and policy level. For example, democratic scholars consider how parents can successfully engage in deliberation with district officials to achieve systemic change. On a similar note, literature about community organizing and school reform considers how parents can mobilize their power to advocate for policy reform. While this research envisions collaborative—if sometimes contentious— engagement between parents and school officials, other researchers question the ability of parents to work within the school system without being co-opted by it. Thus, some scholars argue that in order to create real change, parents must take a more activist and oppositional stance, participating in protests and boycotts, if necessary. This section describes these opportunities for participation at the school governance and policy level in more detail before addressing some of the barriers that parents may encounter.

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Opportunities at the school governance and policy level.

First, according to many democratic scholars, parental participation in school and district decision-making increases the democratic potential of schools, leading to a more representative system that better meets constituents' needs. Democratic theorists emphasize the value of discussion and contend that "the democratic virtue, too simply stated, is that we can publicly debate educational problems in a way much more likely to increase our understanding of education and each other than if we were to leave the management of schools… 'to…the most enlightened experts'" (Gutmann, 1987, p. 11). Engaging in school reform, therefore, can mean "mobilization by a broader array of community interests to remove policy-making authority from subperforming policy subsystems" and into the hands of concerned citizens (Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001, p. 4).

Fung (2004) describes avenues for democratic parental engagement in concrete terms, as he outlines his theory of empowered participation. Empowered participation is based on the notion that "people should have substantial and equal opportunities to participate directly in decisions that affect them" (p. 4). Within this framework, "professionals and citizens [work] on an equal footing" to solve problems together (p. 25). Fung emphasizes the importance of external support and explains the state or federal government can provide local agents with money or expertise (pp. 6-7). Fung's (2003) theory of empowered participation is best exemplified by a series of reforms beginning in the 1980s in Chicago, which attempted to engage community members by giving "greater voice to citizen-users" of educational and policing services (p. 113). Fung explains how, as a result of the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act, Local School Councils (LSCs) were

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established for every school in the district. Composed of six parents, two community members, two teachers, and the school principal, each LSC was responsible for selecting and evaluating the school principal, approving the school budget, developing and monitoring school improvement plans, and allocating discretionary funds (p. 115). Consistent with Fung's theory of empowered participation, a central authority oversaw the LSCs, providing support and monitoring their performance (Fung, 2003).

Fung (2003, 2004) emphasizes the way in which empowered participation allows local stakeholders, such as parents, to create and implement innovative school reforms. According to Fung (2003), empowering local citizens allows "those closest to concrete public programs to… utilize their ingenuity" (p. 113). Local actors are better situated to respond quickly if new ideas do not work exactly as planned; smaller "feedback loops" allow for "rapid trial-and-error learning" (p. 20). In addition, individuals at the local level can engage in what Fung terms "cross-functional coordination" (p. 21). Many problems require solutions that involve input from a variety of bureaucracies; however, any given bureaucracy may not have the "motive" or "opportunity" to address a particular issue (p. 21). Local stakeholders can bridge the gap between these different organizations and bring together their services.

Stone et al. (2001) also emphasize the importance of engaging parents in school reform. They describe the value of building civic capacity, which they define as "various sectors of the community coming together in an effort to solve a major problem" (p. 4). Stone et al. describe a public forum wherein "diverse citizenry reconcile, put aside, or in some manner accommodate their differences in order to pursue their common well-being" (p. 8). Stone et al. (2001) contend that successful school reform depends on the

involvement of a wide range of perspectives that includes both "elite players" and "broader interests" (p. 153). They call their model of community engagement "collective cognition," and they explain that the goal is for participants to "diversify the considerations encompassed" during the problem-solving process (pp. 156-7). Specific forms of engagement may include membership in official or unofficial committees that address educational issues; speaking at public forums, including city council or school board meetings; and attending school events such as parent-teacher association meetings or parent-teacher conferences where specific concerns are addressed. Stone (2001) describes cities that have particularly high levels of civic capacity, highlighting ways in which parents may become involved. In El Paso, for example, a group of city leaders founded the El Paso Collaborative for Educational Excellence, which, among other goals, sought to involve parents for the long term by providing training in leadership and grassroots organizing.

While there is a great deal of literature regarding parental involvement in democratic deliberation in school reform in general, there is less research that addresses parental engagement in democratic deliberation in school board meetings in particular. However, Tracy (2010) and Marsh (2011) describe some of the opportunities that school board meetings and local advisory board meetings present for parental participation in conversations about school governance. Tracy argues that citizens employ a variety of strategies during board meetings to express "disagreement, criticism, and outrage" (p. 83). While the community members in the district that Tracy studied only had two minutes in which to address their school board during meetings, many individuals delivered impassioned arguments that "contributed to building a collective [school

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district] community" and "energized the community's discussion about education" (pp. 93-4). Looking specifically at school district advisory boards, which are composed of various stakeholders, Marsh argues that district leaders should take steps to structure democratic deliberation so that it includes a wide range of perspectives but at the same time encourages participants to work for a common good. For example, Marsh suggests that advisory board leaders should establish meeting norms that are clear but flexible, provide group members with relevant data, and build trust by following through on group recommendations.

In addition to considering parental engagement in terms of democratic deliberation, researchers also study parental involvement through the lens of community organizing. Like democratic scholars, proponents of community organizing for school reform emphasize the importance of parents participating in district-level conversations. However, community organizers emphasizes the importance of building coalitions *outside* the school system, so that parents have more freedom to critique current educational practices and hold schools accountable. Lopez (2003) explains that community organizing for school reform addresses issues of power and "invests in building relationships among power as the foundation of action" (p. 1). Gold, Simon, Mundell, and Brown (2004) add, "community organizing…with its power-building model and base outside the school, helps to move a school toward embracing parents' direct participation in governance and accountability" (pp. 58-9S).

Research on community organizing considers how exactly parents may build a base of power while working outside the system. Gold et al. (2004) argue that successful community organizers help parents form coalitions "that cross neighborhood and

institutional boundaries," and they help "develop leadership among community residents to carry out agendas that the membership determines through a democratic governance structure" (p. 60S). Martinez-Cosio (2010) describes this type of organizing as "collaborative accountability" and explains that when parents and community members come together to learn about issues affecting their schools, they position themselves to engage in informed conversations with school officials. Community organizers help parents look at issues from a structural level, and parents can demand more comprehensive reforms. Because these groups try to work with—and not against—the district, they are able to participate in conversations with school officials. However, because the groups derive their power from coalitions built outside of the school, they are able to level critiques when appropriate. For example, while education officials may focus on holding schools accountable for low test scores, through community organizing, parents may hold education officials accountable for "inadequate school funding, inexperienced teachers and administrators, overcrowded classrooms, and dilapidated school buildings" (Mediratta, 2007, p. 201).

Some scholars worry that, even with coalitions built outside the school system, parents may be co-opted by the very structures that they seek to change. For example, Young (2001), a critical democratic scholar, advocates for parental participation in discussions that impact their children's education, but she also suggests that stakeholders should take a more activist stance toward political involvement. Young identifies limits of deliberative democratic norms that exist in "democracies where structural inequalities underlie significant injustices or social harms" (p. 41). Young explains that from an activist point of view, "activities of deliberation…tend more to confer legitimacy on

existing institutions and effectively silence real dissent" (p. 45). Though deliberative

democrats can and should make accommodations to address these activist concerns (e.g.,

inviting underrepresented voices to participate, creating new spaces for conversation, and

allowing groups to initiate discussions of problems not already under consideration),

democratic theory must broaden to value forms of participation beyond simply

deliberation. Young argues that forms of protest and direct action, such as "street

marches, boycotts, or sit ins" (p. 41) have a place in democracy. Young explains that the

activist uses "alternative means" of communication to bring attention to wrongs:

> While [the activist's] principles often lead him to protest outside of or disrupt the
> meetings of powerful people with whom he disagrees, one of his primary reasons
> for such protest is to make a wider public aware of institutional wrongs and
> persuade that public to join him in pressuring for change. While not deliberative,
> then, in the sense of engaging in orderly reason-giving, most activist political
> engagements aim to *communicate* specific ideas to a wide public. They use
> slogans, humor, and irony to do so because discursive arguments alone are not
> likely to command attention or inspire action. (pp. 45-6)

Thus, Young would argue that that the scope of parental participation in schools must

widen to include critiques of the educational system itself, as well as deliberative

conversations about educational goals and practices.

In sum, researchers identify several ways in which parents may engage in their

children's education at the policy level. While many scholars believe parents can have a

real impact on reform when they are able to participate in conversations as equals with

school officials, others worry that efforts to engage parents by sharing decision-making

power are little more than shallow gestures. Invitations for parental participation in

district deliberations may actually work to conceal power differentials and shift blame for

policy failure onto parents. This barrier and others are discussed below.

Barriers at the school governance and policy level.

Certainly, many barriers that prevent parents from engaging at the individual level may also work to prevent parents from participating at the policy level. For example, cultural and language differences, as well as a lack of resources, may make it prohibitively difficult for parents to sit on governing bodies or work with community organizers. These barriers have been discussed above. Therefore, this section will address barriers that are particular to parental engagement at the policy level. First, efforts to involve parents in this sphere might actually represent more subtle attempts to control parents and blame them for school failures. Second, parents may be reluctant to become involved in school board politics. Some local boards are plagued by corruption, and other school boards have been taken over by the state, with "outsiders" appointed to lead the district.

Vincent and Tomlinson (1997) argue that the concept of parent partnerships "is simply a devise to maintain professional control through the co-optation of parental support" (p. 366). While parents may be invited to participate under the guise of "consensus and congeniality," their roles are still "passive and narrowly defined" as the "subjects, and very rarely the authors" of school policies (pp. 366-7). Fine (1993) looks at Chicago LSCs specifically and argues that "there yawns a large space between the *ideological power* granted to parents and the *material power* still held by the central administrators and the financial elites" (p. 702). Fine contends:

> Parents are being promiscuously invited into the now deficit-ridden public sphere of public education, invited in "as if" this were a power-neutral partnership. Many would argue that parents in urban districts are being asked in when it is too late, asked in to "fix" the damage of racism and an economy with the bottom carved out. (p. 682)

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Thus, Vincent and Tomlinson, as well as Fine, suggest that parents are invited into deliberations to serve as little more than scapegoats for district problems.

In her analysis of school policy documents from Ontario, Spencer (2001) provides another example of how government actors can maintain dominance while purporting to empower local stakeholders. In documents from Ontario's Ministry of Education, Spencer identifies both a "democratization of discourse" and a "discourse of democratization" (p. 10). In other words, policy documents are available to the public and written in accessible language, and at the same time, the documents emphasize the important role that citizens can and should play in the school reform process. Moreover, Spencer notes an important shift in the language surrounding community engagement: stakeholder involvement is not just a right, but it is also a responsibility. In this manner, the state holds parents and community members accountable for providing a quality education (as defined by the state), instead of the other way around. At the same time, however, the stakeholders must operate in a larger social and economic context over which they have little control. For example, the state still allocates funding and monitors local school systems. Moreover, Spencer contends that while policy documents are more accessible, the government still positions itself as the expert who provides guidance to a less-informed public. Local stakeholders are therefore likely to follow the state's advice and work towards state-set goals. Thus, even as they employ a democratic discourse, the official policy makers in Ontario retain dominance.

In addition, Fine contends that even if districts are genuine in their invitations to parents to participate in discussions regarding the "common good" for the children in the district, these deliberations "typically occlude the *real* reason parents come to school,

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which is to represent their 'private interests'—their children" (p. 684). Fine argues that what is characterized as the common good, "tracking, labeling, education for employment, discipline and order" actually privileges "the interests of capital and the state rather than the needs, passions, desires, strengths, and worries of parents and their children, which are framed as simply private" (p. 684). In other words, parents may be invited to discuss how schools can better help achieve established goals, but parents do not have the opportunity to question the legitimacy of the goals themselves. If this very basic power balance is not addressed, Fine believes that "parents end up looking individually 'needy,' 'naïve,' or 'hysterical' and appear to be working in opposition to teachers" (p. 685).

On a different note, school board politics may discourage parental participation in school governance and policy making. Some research demonstrates that local school boards are frequently plagued by corruption. Because school systems are often one of the largest employers in poor districts, elected board members may face pressure to give away jobs (Reinhard, 1998; Saiger, 1999). An outside review of Jersey City schools, for example, found "employment decisions including hiring, firing, promoting, and transferring were not guided by merit, but by political patronage, unionism, and cronyism" (Rettig, 1992, p. 6). Corruption may take another form, Saiger (1999) argues, as boards in "inadequate urban districts" may be "captured by elites" (p. 1869). Wilbur C. Rich (as cited in Saiger, 1999) explains that this form of corruption does not benefit local stakeholders; rather, some urban school districts become "co-opt[ed]" by the White educational establishment as the composition of local school boards becomes "biased toward incumbents, union-backed candidates, and middle-class professionals," such that

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"the local district system… promotes racial and class apartheid" (p. 1869). When board members are beholden to obligations that extend beyond governing and improving schools, parents may be reluctant or unable to engage with their elected officials.

In addition, many states have taken control of financially- and academically-distressed school districts, with state leaders appointing the members of state-controlled school boards. While some research has found that state control of school districts is beneficial, particularly in terms of academic achievement (e.g. Wong and Shen, 2001; Ziebarth, 2002), other researchers demonstrate how state control of districts may create new barriers for parental engagement in policy making. For instance, critics of state takeovers contend that state officials devalue "insider" knowledge of school districts and place "outsiders" in positions for which they are not prepared (Ziebarth, 2002). Moreover, state takeovers sometimes create negative perceptions of local stakeholders, as media coverage of these takeovers may inspire disrespect for both community members and their schools. For example, in his study of the takeover of the Jersey City school district, Rettig (1992) found, "the road to takeover was a media event which publicly decimated the reputation of the Jersey City Public Schools and all who worked there" (p. 27). Thus, facing negative stereotypes, as well as a group of outsiders in charge of their district, parents may be reluctant to engage in school governance when their districts are under state control.

In fact, Research for Action (RFA) has studied the effect that the recent state takeover of the Philadelphia School District has had on the role of local stakeholders in school reform, and they argue that parents have become less involved since the state has taken control. RFA explains that Paul Vallas, the CEO of the district during the time of

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the study, engaged parents on somewhat superficial levels, but he failed to involve them in meaningful reforms. Though Vallas responded to emails and individual parents' concerns, neither he nor the state-controlled school board, the School Reform Commission (SRC), developed structures through which stakeholders could voice their concerns (Useem, Christman, & Boyd, 2006). Even the one forum that did exist for public comments, SRC meetings, had a number of constraints. Rules for speaking at meetings were prohibitive: "speakers had to give district staff prior notification that they would speak, had to provide ten copies of their comments, and were limited to three minutes of speaking time" (Useem et al., 2006, p. 11). Moreover, SRC members "usually listened to their comments impassively without giving a reply" (Useem et al., 2006, p. 11). The lack of parental input was particularly noticeable when the SRC assigned 86 schools some form of radical intervention (including outside management and charter status). Parents "had no say in the assignment process and… were not given a choice about which model or school they would prefer for their children" (Useem et al., 2006, p. 6).

Thus, while both scholars of deliberative democracy and community organizers argue that there a myriad of ways for parents to become involved in school governance and policy making, other researchers point to some of the barriers that parents may encounter. Though there is not a great deal of literature that specifically addresses parental engagement in school board meetings, I found that this forum provided an opportunity to observe democratic deliberation in action in Clarksville. Therefore, I developed the following question for my study: "How has the form/content of parents' participation at board meetings changed—or remained consistent—as the composition of

the school board has changed over the last five years?" Because two different boards led the district during the time I spent in Clarksville, I am able to compare parental engagement under the state-appointed Educational Empowerment Board with parental involvement under the locally elected School Board.   In Chapter 7, I explain that the political context of Clarksville had a significant impact on the work of both the boards, though each board positioned itself differently with respect to the community.

Conclusion

In sum, a variety of opportunities and barriers exist for parents who try to engage in their children's education at the individual, market, and policy levels. Parental engagement literature provides many illustrations of the successes parents have and the challenges they encounter as they seek to improve their own children's education, as well as the educational system as a whole. While these concrete examples illustrate the range of forms that parental involvement may take, it is also useful to drawn on critical theorists—in particular, Bourdieu—to inform the conversation. Bourdieu's understanding of power helps explain why it is often difficult for parents to engage in school reform at all three levels. Thus, as Bourdieu's work provides a useful as a lens through which to examine parental involvement in the Clarksville School District, I move to a discussion of Bourdieu's theories of power in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

Over the last five years, I have seen parents participate at all three levels—individual, market, and policy—in Clarksville. At each level, parental engagement has proven to be a complex phenomenon that is shaped by a number of factors, including the history of the district, individuals' own histories in the city, the current political and socioeconomic context of Clarksville, and more. In addition, as parents try to be involved in their children's education, power relations in the district shape their opportunities for and barriers to engagement. For example, at the individual level, school administrators often use their authority to define "proper" forms of parental engagement. At the market level, parents find creative ways to exercise their power of choice, but once they have secured placements for their children, they are reluctant to challenge school officials in fear of jeopardizing those assignments. At the policy level, school boards create rules for participation in meetings and thereby limit the amount of input parents can have in policy decisions.   As such, when discussing parental engagement in Clarksville, it is useful to draw upon a theoretical framework that helps explore how power operates in the district. Bourdieu's theories about power are particularly well suited for this task. In general, critical theorists such as Bourdieu build theory that "reveals the power of human activity and human knowledge as both a product of and force in the shaping of social reality… [demonstrating that] there is a link between knowledge, power, and domination" (Giroux, 2009, p. 34). Specifically, Bourdieu's work is a helpful analytic tool in that it accounts for how power relations shape people's actions, but it also considers people's freedom to act within those limits.

This section, therefore, focuses on Bourdieu's theories about power. Bourdieu contends that power is as much an action as it is a thing. While he is concerned with the "distribution of material resources and means of appropriation," he is more interested in how power works through the "systems of classifications… symbolic templates for the practical activities—conduct, thoughts, feelings, and judgments—of social agents" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 7). Thus, this section of the paper explores the two main ways in which Bourdieu believes power operates. First, Bourdieu explains that power works through classifications based on different forms of capital, including economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. When individuals internalize these systems of classifications, they experience symbolic violence. Second, Bourdieu argues that power works relationally, though the habitus of individuals. Related to this concept of habitus, Bourdieu develops a metaphor in which he compares the struggle for status and power in society to a game. The concepts of capital and habitus—and the related idea of symbolic violence and the metaphor of the power struggle as a game—are particularly helpful in understanding the opportunities for and barriers to parental engagement that exist in the Clarksville School District.

Power as a System of Classifications

Bourdieu argues that power often manifests itself as a system of classifications. Bourdieu (1984) focuses on the idea of distinction, exploring how the dominant class is able to create an "illusion of natural distinction" by establishing "a definition of excellence which, being nothing other than their own way of existing, is bound to appear simultaneously as distinctive and different, and therefore both arbitrary (since it is one among others) and perfectly necessary, absolute, and natural" (p. 255). To understand

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Bourdieu's argument, it is useful to describe Bourdieu's typology of capital, as the possession of various forms of capital ultimately translates into this "natural distinction" or symbolic power.

According to Bourdieu, there are four types of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Economic capital includes money and property, and it is the basis for the acquisition of all other types of capital (Bourdieu, 1986a; Swartz, 1997). Bourdieu (1986a) explains that in some cases, an individual can gain more access or power within a social setting simply by spending money, while in other situations, access and power depend on the slow development of relationships within a social group. However, in order to have the time to devote to creating these connections, one must have the economic means to support oneself.

Bourdieu also argues, "culture (in the broadest sense of the term) can become a power resource" (Swartz, 1997, p. 75). More specifically, cultural capital exists in three forms, and in each form, members of the dominant class use this capital in a manner that is favorable to them (Bourdieu, 1986a). First, Bourdieu describes the "embodied state" of cultural capital. This form of capital "refers to the ensemble of cultivated dispositions that constitute schemes of appreciation and understanding" (Swartz, 1997, p. 76). Bourdieu (1986a) also describes cultural capital in the "objectified state" (p. 254). This state refers to "objects, such as books, works of art, and scientific instruments, that require specialized cultural abilities to use" (Swartz, 1997, p. 76). Finally, Bourdieu (1986a) describes capital in the "institutionalized state" (p. 246). In particular, Bourdieu refers to academic institutions and the credentials they confer on individuals. These credentials make it possible to compare individuals and assign value to them.

Closely linked to the idea of cultural capital is Bourdieu's concept of social capital. Social capital refers generally to one's associates and networks (Swartz, 1997). More specifically, social capital includes the resources one gains through membership in a particular group. Bourdieu (1986a) explains:

> Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of collectivity-owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (pp. 248-9)

While social capital cannot be reduced to economic or cultural capital, it is certainly related to these other forms of capital in that the volume of one's capital (economic, cultural, or symbolic) increases when one is connected to other individuals with large amounts of capital (Bourdieu, 1986a).

Finally, Bourdieu (1979) describes symbolic capital, which refers to a "transformed and thereby disguised form of 'economic' capital, [which] produces its proper effect inasmuch and only inasmuch as it conceals the fact that it originates in 'material' forms of capital which are also, in the last analysis, the source of its effects" (p. 183). In other words, the value of symbolic capital depends on the (mis)perception that the dominant class has somehow naturally—and rightfully—acquired its dominance. In fact, symbolic capital is "form of power that is not perceived as power but as legitimate demands for recognition, deference, or the services of others" (Swartz, 1997, p. 43).

Bourdieu argues that when the dominated accept the value of symbolic capital, they experience symbolic violence. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) explain that symbolic violence is "the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (p. 167). In other words, symbolic violence refers to how the dominated

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contribute to their own domination in that they accept the legitimacy of their place in the social hierarchy. Bourdieu and Wacquant describe this phenomenon as a sort of cycle: individuals perceive the social structure through frameworks of understanding that emerge out of that very social structure that they seek to comprehend. Hence, Bourdieu (2001) argues, it is almost inevitable that the dominated see their place in the social hierarchy as "natural." In fact, this view "can lead to a kind of systematic self-depreciation, even self-denigration" (p. 35). In denying the "economic and political interests present in a set of practices," the dominated "misrecognize" the source of their domination, and attribute their social status to their own personal failings (Swartz, 1997, p. 89).

The concepts of symbolic capital and symbolic violence are particularly useful in analyzing parental engagement in Clarksville. Symbolic capital plays a role in parental involvement in that school officials often privilege certain forms of engagement over others. In many cases, these preferred forms of engagement require that parents possess a given amount of economic, social, and cultural capital. However, the connection between one's possession of capital and his/her ability to participate is often misrecognized, with both school officials and parents linking one's level of engagement to how much he/she values education. For example, a body of literature draws on Bourdieu's theoretical framework to argue that appeals for community engagement in school reform only increase the participation of individuals who already possess certain forms of social and cultural capital. Researchers who study community involvement in education find that parents are better able to effect change when they have large social networks (i.e., social capital) on which to draw, and when their cultural capital matches

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that of the teachers and administrators at their children's schools (e.g., Heller, 2008; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Luke, 2008; Reay, 1998).

These unspoken prerequisites for participation raise a number of questions relating to symbolic violence. For example, do parents see a connection between their socioeconomic status and the opportunities and barriers they encounter when trying to engage in their children's schooling? Do parents accept the blame for their lack of participation in school-sanctioned ways? How do perceptions regarding engagement— both on the part of parents and school officials—contribute to the actual ways in which parental participation plays out in the district? As I analyze parental engagement at the individual, market, and policy levels in Clarksville, these questions will inform my interpretation of the data.

Habitus and the Relational Nature of Power

In addition to capital, Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides a helpful lens through which to explore parental engagement in the Clarksville School District. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe Bourdieu's work as a type of "social praxeology" that studies both "positions" (institutions and distributions of resources) and "dispositions" (categories of perception and appreciation) and the connection between the two (p. 11). Bourdieu (1997) explains, "any theory of the social universe must include the representation that agents have of the social world, and more precisely, the contribution they make to the construction of the vision of that world, and consequently, to the very construction of that world" (p. 10). Likewise, Bourdieu uses the concept of "habitus" to explore how both social structures and individual/group actions influence

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each other in an unending cycle. Bourdieu (1984) explains that habitus is a "system of practice-generating schemes which expresses systematically the necessity and freedom inherent in its class condition and the difference constituting that position" (p. 172). Swartz (1997) clarifies that Bourdieu's definition of habitus includes "two essential components" (p. 103). First, "habitus results from early socialization experiences in which external structures are internalized" (Swartz, 1997, p. 103). In other words, individuals understand the opportunity structure from an early age, and they unconsciously shape their actions and aspirations to fit within what they see as reasonably possible of achieving. However, habitus also "generates perceptions, aspirations, and practices that correspond to the structuring properties of earlier socialization" (Swartz, 1997, p. 103). Individuals' actions in the social structure and their understanding of the social structure actually contribute to the reality of that social structure.

It is important to note that while the idea of habitus, as a "structuring mechanism" that acts within individuals, may seem to lend itself to a fairly deterministic view of society and social reproduction, Bourdieu argues that there is a "practical sense" inherent in habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 18-20). In *Choses dites,* Bourdieu (1987) explains,

> …habitus is in cahoots with the fuzzy and the vague. As a generative spontaneity which asserts itself in the improvised confrontation with the endlessly renewed situations, it follows a practical logic, that of the fuzzy, of the more-or-less, which defines the ordinary relation to the world. (As cited in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 22)

While one's habitus acts within the limits of the structures that produce it, habitus is also "creative [and] inventive" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 19). In this sense, habitus is

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an "open system of dispositions" constantly shaped by one's experiences (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). Bourdieu (1979) explains this phenomenon in terms of his "theory of practice," in which he accounts for how the subject is on some level aware that his/her actions are structured by social forces, and, as such, the subject learns how to negotiate within these boundaries.

Bourdieu illustrates how habitus operates by employing a metaphor in which he compares the struggle for status and power in society to a game. Bourdieu (1981) argues that in this game, people compete for status. In doing so, individuals reinforce that status (in terms of wealth, education, etc.) is what is important. Even people with power are engaged in the game because they have to defend their privileges. Bourdieu (1981) explains, "no one can take advantage of the game, not even those who dominate it without being taken up and taken in by it" (p. 307). Moreover, the dominated play a role in their own domination by buying into the game:

> Submission to transcendent goals, meanings or interests, i.e., interests superior and external to individual interests, is practically never the result of forcible imposition and conscious submission. This is because so-called objective goals, which only reveal themselves as such, at best, after the event and from outside, are practically never perceived and posited as such at the time in practice itself, by any of the agents concerned, not even by the most interested parties [the dominant agents]. (Bourdieu, 1981, p. 308)

Bourdieu (1979) emphasizes that this analogy of a game does not eliminate individual agency, as social interactions include so many subtleties, they cannot all just be carried out according to rules or laws. Individuals exercise "strategies" within the context of the game, and these strategies "presuppose a constant invention, an improvisation that is absolutely necessary in order for one to adapt to situations that are infinitely varied" (Bourdieu, 1986b, pp. 112-113). That said, "the freedom of invention and improvisation

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which enables one to produce the infinity of moves made possible by the game… has the same limits of the game" (Bourdieu, 1986b, p. 113).

This game metaphor is particularly helpful when considering my data from Clarksville, as one can conceive of parental engagement in the educational system as a game in which parents seek to secure the most favorable educational outcomes possible for their children.   For example, at both the market and policy level, parents follow rules of engagement, as they navigate through school choice options or as they participate in school board meetings. In both contexts, it is helpful to consider the rules of the game, as well as how parents exercise creative strategies in order to achieve their desired ends within those rules. Thus, in my analysis, I draw on this metaphor to explore both opportunities for and barriers to engagement in the Clarksville School District.

Opportunities for Change

While some of Bourdieu's work (e.g., *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*) presents the social structure as a fairly closed system with little chance for modification, Bourdieu's later writings describe how he believes individuals and groups can work to transform the established order. In this sense, Bourdieu's work points to potential opportunities for parents not only to become involved in their children's schooling, but also to change the educational system itself in Clarksville. Bourdieu argues that more than anything else, an awareness of power relations is important to creating and sustaining change. Social laws are not immutable; rather, they "are temporally and spatially bound regularities that hold as long as the institutional conditions that underpin them are allowed to endure" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 52). These conditions can be "undone" by understanding how they came to be. At the

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personal level, individuals can strive to become aware of "the social within them by reflexively mastering [the external] categories of thought and action…which inhabit them" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 49). In other words, by consciously considering how one is influenced by social forces, these forces lose some of their power. At the social level, sociology can help "denaturalize and defatalize the social world" by exposing power relations as arbitrary (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 42).

Bourdieu envisions a new form of intervention in the world, initiated by "collective intellectuals," or independent "producers of knowledge" who work to critique dominant political and economic interests (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 57). Bourdieu (1998) positions himself as one such collective intellectual—though somewhat reluctantly—taking "public positions [when] forced into it by a kind of legitimate rage" (p. vii). Bourdieu describes his goal in taking a stance on issues:

> I have always done it in the hope – if not of triggering a mobilization, or even of one of the those debates without object or subject which arise periodically in the world of the media – at least of breaking the appearance of unanimity which is the greater part of the symbolic force of the dominant discourse. (p. viii)

Bourdieu (1998) invests faith in the power of sociologists, along with "writers, artists, philosophers and scientists" to "make their voice heard directly in all the areas of public life in which they are competent" (p. 9). By publicly critiquing dominant powers, intellectuals have the ability to incite others to action.

These hopeful elements of Bourdieu's work are important to keep in mind as I apply his framework to parental engagement in Clarksville. While Bourdieu's theories illustrate how the power structure presents barriers to parental engagement in Clarksville, he does not dismiss the possibility for change. As Bourdieu argues that people may transform power relations if they become aware of them, it is important to consider what

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opportunities, if any, exist for parents to understand and critique social forces at work in Clarksville.

Thus, as I consider how parents engage in the Clarksville School District, I do so with Bourdieu's theory of power in mind. In particular, I draw on Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence and his metaphor of the power struggle as a game to help understand both opportunities for and barriers to parental engagement in the district. In this regard, it is important to think about how the social structure (e.g., class and race relations, politics, neighborhood dynamics, etc.) and available forms of capital affect parents' participation in their children's schooling in Clarksville. Moreover, it is also important to consider how parents' *perceptions* of that social structure and the available forms of capital shape the nature of their engagement. This theoretical stance informs how I interpret my findings as they relate to my research questions. My research questions and methods are discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

Research Context

      Clarksville is a small urban center, with a population of a little over 40,000. U.S. Census data from the last 60 years shows that Clarksville's population and employment rates peaked in the 1970s, and the city has experienced a steady decline in both areas since then. These shifts correspond with the exit of several manufacturing plants and other industries from the city. While the overall population has decreased, the African American population in Clarksville has grown from 56.8% in 1970 to 76.9% in 2010. According to American Community Survey data from 2006-2010, Clarksville has a 13.5% unemployment rate, compared to 7.9% unemployment rate nationwide.

      Clarksville has a total of about 4,000 students, with approximately 45% of this number currently enrolled in charter schools. While the U.S. Census shows that educational attainment rates for both high school and college degrees have increased overall for residents of Clarksville since the 1950s, the city consistently has lower rates of educational attainment than the surrounding areas. The district also ranks among the lowest in the state in terms of standardized test scores. For example, according to reports published by the State Department of Education, 20.4% of students in the Clarksville School District scored "below basic" on state math tests in 2011, compared to 10.6% of students statewide. In reading, the results were even more striking: 40.2% of Clarksville students scored "below basic," compared to 14.9% of students statewide. Clarksville's graduation rate hovers around 51%.

      While stakeholders and state officials argue over the causes for these poor test scores and low graduation rates—citing everything from lack of family values to lack of

funding to unfair party politics—almost all would agree that, regardless of the reason, the district has been plagued by administrative turmoil over the last 20 years. In 1994, the Republican-led state in which the Clarksville School District is located took over the district, declaring it "financially distressed." After the takeover, the district was run by a variety of Republican-dominated Control Boards, until early 2007 when the Democratic governor used legal measures to dissolve the current Control Board. The Secretary of Education appointed three new people (registered Democrats) to a new Education Empowerment Board (EEB) charged with supervising academic achievement in the district. In practice, the EEB was responsible for making all the decisions in the district, except for those relating to levying taxes and student disciplinary hearings, the two areas over which the locally elected School Board retained control. In 2010, the legislation granting the state the right to take over troubled school districts expired, and the locally elected School Board regained full oversight.

The locally elected School Board came back to power just as the state made large cuts in education spending, seriously affecting the district's budget. At the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year, the district faced a $20 million budget deficit, even after furloughing 40% of its teaching staff, cutting a variety of classes and extracurricular activities, and combining some schools. At the end of December 2011, the district received national attention when district officials stated they would not have enough money to pay their staff, and teachers voted to work without pay as long as they were individually able. After the district filed a lawsuit against the state, a federal court ordered the state to pay $3.2 million in order to help the district meet its payroll. Shortly thereafter, the state agreed to provide enough money to cover necessary expenses for the

remainder of the year. In June 2012, the state passed legislation granting it the right to take over financially-distressed districts. Not surprisingly, Clarksville was declared financially distressed, and the Secretary of Education appointed a Chief Recovery Officer to lead the district, shifting control from the elected School Board back to the state.

Research Questions

I first came to Clarksville in September 2007, as part of a project with my advisor, a professor at a nearby Graduate School of Education, and one of the three members of the state-appointed Education Empowerment Board in Clarksville. In my work for my advisor, I helped conduct research documenting the 2007-2010 period of reform—the tenure of the Empowerment Board—through the perspectives of several stakeholders. In 2010, the legislation that granted the state the power to take over local school districts expired, and the Empowerment Board disbanded. Though my advisor was no longer formally involved in the district, I continued to attend bimonthly School Board meetings in Clarksville. In addition, I volunteered at the school district's Truancy Intervention Center (TIC), the administrative department charged with reducing truancy. Through this work, I had the opportunity to observe parent-student-staff interactions at the TIC, attend court hearings for parents of truant children, and assist in facilitating court-mandated parent groups to address attendance issues.

Thus, while I began my research in Clarksville with a broad focus, I became more interested in the issue of parental engagement as I spent time at the TIC and as I spoke with stakeholders about this topic. Throughout all the changes that occurred in the district, parents continued to be involved in their children's education in a variety of ways at the individual, market, and policy levels. As such, the issue of parental engagement

emerged as a useful lens through which to examine both the current moment of crisis in the district, as well as the four years leading up to it. Thus, in my project, I examine the following questions:

- How do parents understand their roles in their own children's education? In particular, how do parents describe opportunities for and barriers to their participation? How do other stakeholders envision parents' roles?

- How has the proliferation of charter schools, as well as other school choice options, had an impact on parental engagement in the district? What new opportunities have opened for parental engagement, given the choices currently available in the district? What barriers still exist? Are there new barriers to participation?

- How has the form/content of parents' participation at board meetings changed—or remained consistent—as the composition of the school board has changed over the last five years?

- How can Bourdieu's theories about power—specifically his idea of symbolic violence and his metaphor of power relations as a game—help frame the opportunities and barriers that exist for parental engagement in each of the areas outlined above?

I addressed these questions by conducting a qualitative study of parental involvement in the Clarksville School District, relying on ethnographic methods such as stakeholder interviews, participant observation, and document review. Each method is discussed below.

Data Collection

Before describing each data collection method in depth, it is useful to have an overall picture of how I gathered information for each data-based research question. Table 4.1 illustrates the research plan that I followed, with more specific descriptions of particular methods below.

Table 4.1
Research Questions and Data Collection Methods

Research Questions	Data Collection Methods
How do parents understand their roles in their own children's education? In particular, how do parents describe opportunities for and barriers to their participation? How do other stakeholders envision parents' roles?	- Interviews with parents - Interviews with other stakeholders - Observation of parent participation in board meetings - Observation of parent participation in other community meetings - Observation of parents' interactions with the TIC staff (particularly helpful in identifying barriers) - Observation of court hearings for parents of truant students (particularly helpful in identifying barriers)
How has the proliferation of charter schools, as well as other school choice options, had an impact on parental engagement in the district? What new opportunities have opened for parental engagement, given the choices currently available in the district? What barriers still exist? Are there new barriers to participation?	- Interviews with parents, including parents with children at charter schools - Interviews with other stakeholders, including leadership and staff of charter schools - Analysis of documents from 2007-present, including newspaper reports about various charter schools in the district
How has the form/content of parents' participation at board meetings changed—or remained consistent—as the composition of the school board has changed over the last five years?	- Interviews with parents - Interviews with other stakeholders, including EEB and School Board members - Observation of parent participation in Education Empowerment Board meetings (2007-2010) - Observation of parent participation in School Board meetings (2010-2012) - Analysis of documents from board meetings, including agendas, expenditure reports, and board minutes

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Stakeholder interviews.

Hammersly and Atkinson (1995) explain there are "two legitimate and equally important ways in which insider accounts can be used by ethnographers" (p. 124). First, researchers may draw on interviews to learn more about a particular phenomenon, and second, interviews provide information about respondents, as "we can use what people say as evidence about their perspectives, and perhaps about the larger subcultures and cultures to which they belong" (p. 125). Similarly, Weiss (1994) argues that interviews may help researchers in "developing detailed descriptions" and "integrating multiple perspectives" of events or of organizations, as a variety of respondents may help describe "the fullest report possible" of what happened that "no single person could have observed in its totality" (p. 9). Thus, in order to understand the current events in Clarksville, as well as stakeholders' perceptions of these events, I conducted interviews with a range of individuals, first for my advisor's research project and then with a specific focus for this dissertation.

In order to collect a variety of accounts, I utilized what Maxwell (2005) describes as "purposeful selection" (p. 88). That is, I interviewed individuals who were able to provide information about parental engagement in the Clarksville School District, and I tried to "capture the heterogeneity in the population" (p. 89) by choosing respondents who represent different stakeholder groups and who have a variety of experiences in the district. From 2007-2012, I conducted a total of 80 interviews with 78 individuals—the numbers do not match as some of the interviews were done in groups, and some

interviews were follow-up meetings with previously interviewed individuals.[1] Most

interviews were one-on-one, though four interviews were group interviews, ranging in

size from two to 11.   Out of the 78 stakeholders, I conducted follow-up interviews with

11 individuals. Typically, I only conducted one follow-up interview with particular

stakeholders; however, I have four interviews with Dr. Johnson, the Superintendent from

2007-2010, spaced throughout his tenure in the district. I also spoke three times with the

following stakeholders: Angela Abernathy, the Director of the Truancy Intervention

Center; Andrea Barela, the President of the Teacher's Union; and Rebecca Warren, a

teacher at McKinley Elementary School. These multiple interviews with individuals

were particularly helpful as I reflected on how the district had changed—and had not

changed—over time. Table 4.2 provides a breakdown of interviews by stakeholder

groups, noting participants' race and gender. For a complete list of interview subjects,

including the date(s) of interview(s), their specific role(s) in the district, and each

stakeholder's race and gender, see Appendix A.

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[1] My advisor conducted two of these interviews as part of our original study. She spoke with Dr. Johnson, the Superintendent, in 2007, as well as with Daniel Dorey, a community activist, in 2008.

Table 4.2

Interview Participants by Stakeholder Groups

Stakeholder Group[a]	n	Gender		Race		
		Male	Female	African-American	White	Hispanic
Board of Control	2	2	0	1	1	0
Central Administration	6	1	5	6	0	0
Community Members/Activists	4	3	1	1	3	0
Community Organizations	8	5	3	4	4	0
Education Empowerment Bd.	2	2	0	2	0	0
Elected School Board	3	2	1	2	1	0
Parents	21	5	16	18	1	2
Partnership School	1	1	0	1	0	0
Politicians	2	2	0	2	0	0
Principals	4	1	3	2	2	0
Reporters	3	1	2	0	3	0
Students	14	1	13	12	1	1
Teachers	5	1	4	2	3	0
Truancy Intervention Center	3	2	1	3	0	0
TOTAL	**78**	**32**	**46**	**56**	**19**	**3**

[a] Some individuals fit in more than one stakeholder group; however, for this purposes of this table, I only put individuals in one group, based on the primary position they occupy. For a more detailed description of stakeholders, see Appendix A, where each stakeholder's multiple roles are noted when applicable.

I also sought to represent the diversity within stakeholder groups. In particular, because my focus is parental engagement, I interviewed a range of parents in an effort to represent the assortment of perspectives in that group. For example, some parents were actively involved in the district, through frequent participation in board meetings or local politics, while other parents—such as many of the parents I met through the Truancy Intervention Center—demonstrated lower levels of public engagement in their children's

education. By talking with parents who had a broad array of experiences in the district, my goal was to develop a nuanced understanding about opportunities for and barriers to parental involvement in Clarksville (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed description of the parent participants in this study).

Interviews were semi-structured and adhered loosely to protocols designed to capture respondents' understanding of events in the district as well as the role(s) of parents (see Appendix B). Initial questions asked respondents to describe their history in the school district and to reflect on important events that had happened in the district. Subsequent questions asked participants to consider parental engagement. Parents were asked to discuss their goals for their children's schooling, ways in which they interact with their children's schools, and what barriers make participation difficult. Other stakeholders were asked to consider what role they believe parents should play in public education, as well as what opportunities and barriers parents encounter when they try to become involved in the Clarksville School District. Interviews typically lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour. I digitally recorded all of the interviews, and I transcribed them using Express Scribe.

Access to willing interview participants was a key element of my research. Fortunately, I had positive relationships with "gatekeepers" in the Clarksville School District, and I developed personal networks in Clarksville during the five years I spent in the district. According to Hammersly and Atkinson (1994) gatekeepers are individuals who have "the power to block off access, or who consider themselves and are considered by others to have the authority to grant or refuse access" (p. 64). Because I initially came to the district under the auspices of my advisor, who was a member of the Empowerment

Board, she connected me to high-ranking administrators in the district. I developed a friendly rapport with the superintendent, who granted me permission to visit any of the district's schools and to talk to any willing employees. In addition, my advisor developed positive working relationships with union members and many parents in the district; when I asked to interview individuals on her behalf, people were often eager to participate. While my advisor and the superintendent both left the district in 2010, many of the relationships I established through those connections remained intact. In addition to re-interviewing some participants from our original study, I also identified new interviewees by their public participation at district meetings, their presence at the TIC, and by snowball sampling, asking my respondents to refer other possible subjects. Issues of access and limitations are discussed further in the positionality section below.

Participant observation.

In addition to interviews, I also conducted observations in a variety of settings. Hammersly and Atkinson (1994) explain that "there are distinct advantages in combining participant observation with interviews; in particular, the data from each can be used to illuminate the other" (p. 131). While interviews provided insights about stakeholders' perspectives on parental engagement, observations allowed me to watch parents in action (or, alternatively, to watch parents not take action). The data I collected varied according the setting where I was observing; these various settings are discussed below.

First, I regularly attended twice-monthly Empowerment Board Meetings from 2007-2010. I continued attending meetings after the School Board took control, from 2010-2012. While I tried to attend every meeting, I occasionally missed meetings due to other commitments. In addition, meetings were sometimes canceled or rescheduled with

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little or no notice, and I was unable to attend. During 2007-2010, my advisor, as a

member of the EEB, also attended the meetings, and we frequently discussed what

happened afterwards. Moreover, when I could not attend a meeting, my advisor shared

what I had missed. Table 4.3 outlines the number of meetings I attended each year.

Table 4.3

Board Meetings Attended by Academic Year

	Education Empowerment Board			Elected School Board	
Academic Year[a]	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Meetings Attended	9/27/07	8/14/08	8/13/09	7/1/10	9/15/11
	10/18/07	8/21/08	9/10/09	9/16/10	10/13/11
	10/25/07	9/11/08	9/17/09	10/14/10	10/20/11
	11/15/07	9/18/08	10/8/09	10/21/10	11/10/11
	11/29/07	10/16/08	11/12/09	11/18/10	11/17/11
	1/17/08	10/23/08	11/19/09	1/13/11	12/15/11
	2/21/08	11/13/08	12/17/09	2/17/11	1/112/12
	3/13/08	11/19/08	1/21/10	3/10/11	1/19/12
	4/10/08	12/11/08	1/28/10	3/17/11	1/26/12
	4/17/08	12/30/08	2/18/10	4/14/11	2/16/12
	5/15/08	1/8/09	3/11/10	5/12/11	3/8/12
	6/5/08	1/15/09	3/24/10	5/19/11	3/15/12
	6/12/08	1/29/09	4/8/10		4/12/12
	6/26/08	2/19/09	5/13/10		4/26/12
		3/12/09	6/10/10		5/10/12
		3/19/09	6/24/10		5/17/12
		4/30/09			6/14/12
		6/11/09			
		6/18/09			
TOTAL	**14**	**19**	**16**	**12**	**17**

[a] For the purposes of this study, the Academic Year runs from July through June.

Empowerment Board and School Board meetings were particularly helpful to

observe, as they provided a chance for community members to interact directly with the

superintendent and the EEB or School Board.   In addition, since I attended board meetings from 2007-2012, I was able to document how parents' participation changed over five years, particularly during leadership transitions (Chapter 7 addresses this topic in detail). By observing the content of parents' comments, to whom parents directed their talk, as well as the board members' responses, I followed how parents engaged with different issues in the district over time. Moreover, as district leadership changed, so too did the norms and rules for board meetings: both the new rules and parents' reactions to them provide valuable information about opportunities and barriers to parental engagement in Clarksville.

I also attended community meetings that arose in response to the 2011-2012 financial crisis in the district. While these meetings did not occur with the same regularity as board meetings, they did provide unique opportunities to watch parents engage in new outlets. For example, early in the 2011-2012 school year, the state branch of the NAACP hosted a community meeting to address the anticipated budget shortfall and cuts being made to education in Clarksville. In January 2012, the state senator for Clarksville hosted a community forum, in which he responded to constituents' concerns and shared his perspectives on the problems facing the district. A local church held a community-organizing meeting in April 2012, at which representatives from the state teachers' union, local government, the elected School Board, and the district's legal team addressed what Clarksville residents could do to help the district.   Though the speakers outnumbered the members of the audience at this meeting, they still offered detailed descriptions of recent events in the district, as well as suggestions for becoming involved. Reverend Carroll, who had convened the meeting, explained, "We don't get discouraged

by numbers, whether one, two, or three people come, [we] will do our best… we're not gonna stop until justice rolls" (Field notes, April 21, 2012).

Finally, through volunteering at the Truancy Intervention Center (TIC), I was able to interact with a section of the parent population who is not often present at public meetings. As the TIC's role is to work with parents of truant children, the parents who come through the TIC are often struggling just to get their children to school. When students are found on the streets of Clarksville during truancy sweeps, they are brought back to the TIC, where a parent or guardian must pick them up. I began volunteering once a week at the TIC during the 2009-2010 school year, and I continued to visit the TIC once or twice a week during 2010-2011. In 2011-2012, I spent two days a week at the TIC, typically four hours a day. At the TIC, I observed caseworkers interact with parents and children, as they discussed strategies to improve students' school attendance. I also helped prepare court documents, maintained the TIC's database of students who came through the center, typed "Truancy Elimination Plans" that the director created with students and their families, and assisted with other general office tasks.

In addition, from December to June 2012, I attended regular court hearings (usually two to three hearings per month) for parents of chronically truant students. At these hearings, parents accounted for their children's multiple unlawful absences; these accounts often provided a glimpse of some of the barriers parents encountered in trying to engage with the district. As a result of these hearings, some parents were mandated to attend a "parent group" at the TIC, a five-week course designed to help parents develop strategies to improve their children's attendance. Parents in the group were required to meet with the director of the TIC, Angela Abernathy, once a week for approximately two

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hours. I helped facilitate one parent group at the end of the 2009-2010 academic year, one parent group during the 2010-2011 academic year, and two parent groups during the 2011-2012 academic year. Turnout was low for each parent group, and meetings usually involved 3-4 parents, though typically at least 6-10 parents had been assigned to the class by the district court justice. Abernathy used the weekly meetings to share information and tips with the parents, and there was also a lot of time for parents to discuss their concerns about their children's schools and teachers.   Starting in 2011, Abernathy also required parents to attend one School Board meeting in lieu of one group meeting. I had the opportunity to talk with parents after the meetings—either in one-on-one interviews or during our next parent group session—and during these conversations, parents shared insights about what they perceived as opportunities for and barriers to participation during the meetings.

Document analysis.

I also relied on newspaper and journal articles pertaining to the Clarksville School District, focusing on coverage of events that occurred after the state takeover of the district in 1994, as well as the most recent budget crisis. This research provided context for the overall study, and it also was useful when I needed more information about a specific school or event.   In particular, one reporter for a major newspaper near Clarksville wrote a series of articles about charter schools in the district; these articles were helpful in compiling background information for Chapter 6, in which I discuss parental engagement at the market level.

I also analyzed an assortment of documents that I collected through my observations in the school district. For example, board meeting agendas and minutes

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provided official accounts of these gatherings, and monthly district expenditures (presented with board agendas) were often the topic of much public comment at meetings. Therefore, during my data analysis, I often referred to agendas in conjunction with my field notes as I reflected on the events of a particular meeting.

Data Analysis

Using grounded theory, I began my data analysis with open coding of my data in order to identify salient themes relating to my research questions. In the fall of 2012, as I finished my interview transcriptions, I wrote a series of research memos about themes that emerged in my data. I shared these memos with my advisor[2], and we had weekly meetings to discuss my findings. Early in the analysis process, it became clear that my data centered on the three levels of parental engagement that I identified in my literature review, as my memos frequently addressed these themes. Therefore, I began to look specifically for instances of parental involvement at the individual, market, and school governance/policy levels as I further explored my data. For example, in an early memo, I described ways in which parents were involved at the individual level, noting differences between parents who were formally engaged in the district, and parents who participated in their children's education in more informal ways within their own homes. In another memo, I discussed how a variety of stakeholders used words associated with marketing when talking about parental engagement. For instance, one parent described the necessity of "selling" district schools to parents, while the superintendent emphasized the

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[2] It is worth noting that at this point in time, my original advisor had left the University of Pennsylvania. As such, during my data analysis, I worked with my new advisor, Sigal Ben-Porath. While my original advisor provided a valuable insider perspective, as she was a member of the EEB, Dr. Ben-Porath provided many helpful insights as an outside observer to the events in the district.

need to "market" children to their parents. In a different memo, I described several

interviews with school and district leaders, and I considered their perspectives regarding

opportunities for and barriers to engagement at the school governance and policy level.   I

also wondered if a fourth level of engagement existed in the district, as I found examples

of parents helping their friends' and neighbors' children. In one memo, I wrote:

> While in some cases, parents help other people's children with the explicit hope
> that other parents will reciprocate and look out for their kids… this involvement
> seems to extend beyond individual interests. I don't know if I would categorize
> this involvement as "policy" level, though. These examples make me think I need
> to reconceptualize what I mean by "policy"… or possibly add another level?
> These parents want to build strong, healthy, safe communities, which they strive
> to do by visiting schools and interacting with a variety of children. Where does
> this "community building" element of parental engagement fit in? (October 22,
> 2012)

I dubbed this level the "community level," and I identified several examples of

participation that fit in this category. Thus, at the end of my preliminary review of my

transcripts and field notes, I concluded that I had data pertaining to four levels of

engagement, and I decided to use these levels for my initial phase of coding.

I used the computer program atlas.ti to code my interview transcripts and field

notes. When I started my first round of formal coding, I went through my data, and I

applied the following codes:

- Opportunities for parental engagement at the individual level
- Barriers to parental engagement at the individual level
- Opportunities for parental engagement at the market level
- Barriers to parental engagement at the market level
- Opportunities for parental engagement at the community level
- Barriers to parental engagement at the community level
- Opportunities for parental engagement at the school governance/policy level
- Barriers to parental engagement the school governance/policy level

At the conclusion of this round of coding, I realized that I had substantially less data for the "community level" than I did for other levels. In addition, I found that often the community level data fit in other categories. For instance, some parents described choosing to send their children to public schools—rather than charter or private schools—in order to support their community. While this form of engagement fits at the community level, it also represents a market-level choice. Thus, I absorbed my community-level data into the other categories, and when I finished coding, I had six main themes, corresponding to opportunities and barriers at the three original levels I identified.

For my second round of coding, I explored each one of the six overriding themes at a time. For each theme, I read through my coded data, looking for various issues that exist as "central phenomenon of interest" (Creswell, 2007, p. 160). For example, as I reread my data for individual level opportunities, I noticed that the data fell in two main categories: opportunities initiated by parents and opportunities initiated by the school. As I went through this data, I created two preliminary inventories. In one, I listed all the examples of parent-driven opportunities; in the other, I listed all the examples of school-driven opportunities. These inventories were long and even a bit messy—I simply compiled the information as I found it. For example, I identified over 20 different examples of parent-driven opportunities at the individual level, ranging from "taking children to school" to "interacting with teachers" to "letting the teachers do what they think is best." I began my third round of coding by grouping the examples in each inventory by themes, or new "coding paradigms" (Creswell, 2007, p. 161). For instance, out of the 20-plus examples of parent-driven opportunities, I created five new coding

paradigms, including: contact the school, give emotional support, stay informed, create incentives, and provide learning opportunities. I used these themes to code my data a final time. As I worked with the data in these refined codes, I tried to "to further specify what I mean by the categories" in preparation for the writing process (Weiss, 1994, p. 156). Illustration 4.1 provides a visual description of what I did during these three rounds of coding.

Illustration 4.1. *Example of Coding Process*
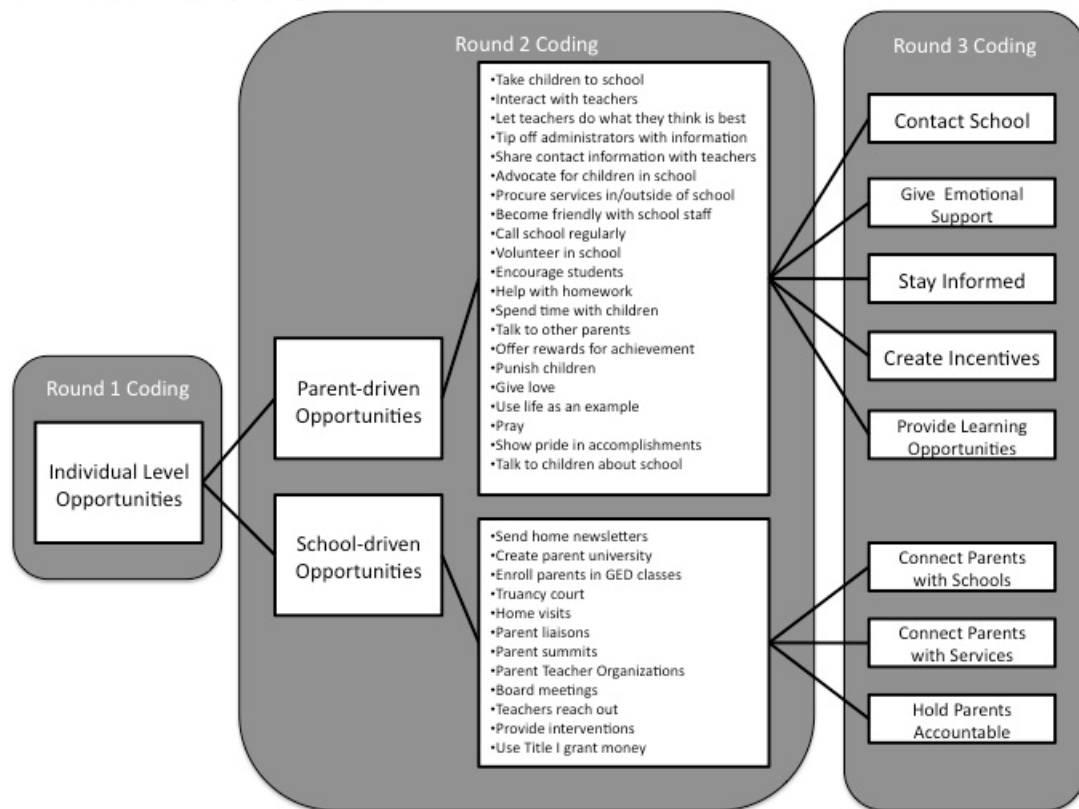
I relied on a similar process of coding for the five remaining overarching themes. That is, I began with a broad concept (e.g., "individual level barriers"), identified initial sub themes (e.g., "parent-identified barriers" and "school-identified barriers"), listed

examples of each subtheme, and then organized these examples into categories, which I used during my final round of coding.

Validity.

I utilized two methods to validate my data. First, I was able to triangulate my data. Hammersly and Atkinson explain, "data source triangulation involves the comparison of data relating to the same phenomenon but deriving from different phases of the fieldwork [or] different points in the temporal cycles occurring in the setting" (p. 230). Because I collected data in a variety of manners (e.g., through interviews, participant observation, and document analysis), each data collection method informed the others and broadened my analysis. For example, after some board meetings, I had the opportunity to speak with parents who had attended that particular board meeting as a requirement for parent group. I was able to ask them about specific events in the meeting and elicit their perspectives regarding what occurred. More broadly, I could compare stakeholders' general impressions of board meetings with my own. In addition, because my data collection spans five years, I have a broad context in which to consider my findings. For example, when stakeholders made generalizations about what happened at board meetings, I could compare their views to each other, as well as to my own observations of the meetings.

Second, I also utilized an informal form of respondent validation. Throughout my three years at the TIC, I talked regularly with Angela Abernathy, the Director, sharing some of my observations and analysis of events in the district. On some occasions, Ms. Abernathy agreed with my analysis, and at other times, she raised questions or concerns that have led me to reevaluate my findings and to raise new questions. As I engaged in

more formal data analysis, I continued to share some of my findings with Ms. Abernathy and ask for her input. I continued to visit the TIC once a month during the 2012-2013 academic year, primarily to help Ms. Abernathy with paperwork. However, I also used these visits as occasions to discuss my ideas with Ms. Abernathy and to ask her to help clarify some of my data. For example, I visited the TIC as I was writing Chapter 6, exploring parental engagement at the market level. I had several lingering questions about school choice in Clarksville, and I wanted to clarify earlier conversations that Abernathy and I had about the topic. I was able to interview Ms. Abernathy a third time, and the information she shared was enormously helpful as I revised Chapter 6.

While I endeavored to use careful data collection methods and worked to validate my findings, limits related to my position and identity certainly exist. These are addressed below.

Positionality/Limits

Because my initial advisor, a member of the Empowerment Board, was my first contact with the district, I had access to a lot of information about the district. Through her work, my advisor knew most of the key stakeholders in the district, and she often put me in direct contact with people or offered suggestions regarding how to reach them. Before beginning this research project, my advisor made sure that she had the support of the new superintendent. He was willing to meet with me on many occasions, and he allowed me to observe various advisory meetings that he conducted. When I arranged interviews with stakeholders who worked outside the district (e.g., in community non-profits), I explained that I worked for an Empowerment Board member, and people were often willing to talk with me because of my connection to my advisor.

After my advisor left the district, I developed other relationships that facilitated the data collection process. In particular, my relationship with Ms. Abernathy, the director of the TIC, gave me access to many people I might not have otherwise met. I worked with Ms. Abernathy to run a court-mandated parent group for parents/guardians of chronically truant children. These were not the parents I typically encountered at board meetings, as they tended to have less overall interaction with the school district. I was able to arrange interviews with many of these parents during or after the course of our parent group sessions, as they got to know me and became more willing to share about their experiences in the district. In addition, Ms. Abernathy has a lot of family in Clarksville, and she has personal relationships with many people who are involved in the district in different capacities. For example, Ms. Abernathy's godfather is the former mayor of the city. She arranged for us to meet, and he agreed to an interview at her request.

While my connections to my advisor and to Ms. Abernathy helped me gain access to a great deal of information, my role in Clarksville was clearly that of an "outsider." My outsider status was visible in a couple of ways. First, Clarksville is a small city; most people involved in the school district know each other, and they easily recognize new faces. However, as I spent more time in the district, community members became more accustomed to seeing me. My regular attendance at board meetings improved my standing with some stakeholders. I believe that some people agreed to speak with me because they recognized me from the meetings and felt that I understood (at least to some extent) the context in which they work. In addition to being relatively new to the district, my race also marked me as an outsider: I am White, and the majority of Clarksville

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residents are African American. Interestingly, the topic of race almost never came up explicitly during my interviews. Though some participants described their understanding of the racial dynamics of school reform in Clarksville, the majority of interviewees did not raise the subject. As I spent more time in the district, I became more comfortable asking respondents directly about issues of race and class when they were relevant to the conversation.

While most people reacted positively to my research, there were some stakeholders who were both suspicious and unhappy about the project. A few individuals declined to participate in interviews. Others participated, but they also articulated their concerns during the course of the interview. For example, a local pastor told me he found the idea of the project "distasteful," and that while he liked my advisor, he worried that we were exploiting the district by doing this research (Interview, Paul Fritz, April 24, 2008). One of my advisor's fellow Empowerment Board members also expressed frustration with the amount of research that has been done in the school district, explaining, "One of the things that I will not vote for again is more studies of this district. This district has been a laboratory for more experiments than I think any district should have been… We've been prodded and poked enough to last a lifetime" (Interview, Anthony Major, November 5, 2008). I take these concerns seriously. Much has been written about the potentially imperialist nature of qualitative research in which "outsiders" study "others" and represent their voices in a variety of forms (e.g., Fine, 1998; Wolf, 1994). While there is no easy solution to this problem, I am committed to privileging "insider" voices and knowledge in my research, and to producing work that can be used to help this district and others like it. I hope that my methods and final

product demonstrate this commitment. Thus, with this goal in mind, I turn now to a description of my data. The following three chapters discuss parental engagement in Clarksville, first at the individual level, then at the market level, and finally at the school governance and policy level.

Chapter 5: Parental Engagement at the Individual Level

I can say what makes [being involved] difficult, because it's a little difficult, it was a little difficult for me this year to do certain things with me not being [employed by] the district. It was easier [when I was] a part of the district to get in touch with certain people, to make sure they called me back. The only way I was able to get things across to the principal this year was because I still had his email address. If I had to call and leave a message, what I did initially, I don't get responses… so that makes it hard. Then when I've heard other parents say… if you tell them to go to the main office… the administration building, it's almost like things fall on a deaf ear. You know, so when you have that happen a lot, it makes it difficult to feel as though… you can go to [the school] and get something back, so. Communication, it's a lack of communication. Parents reach out, but then sometimes they don't get anything in return, until the situation blows up.[3]

—Jasmine Richards, Parent, Interview, June 14, 2012

We're gonna have to reengage parents. Parents are the lost cause, lost, not cause, but the lost leader here. We have a cadre of parents that truly are engaged, but we have a cadre of parents that we gotta help them be more effective in parenting… we gotta help these parents take back their homes. I got kids who run homes here. I have… parents that, for whatever reason, because they've been dealt a short hand in life, don't have the whereforall to be home with [their kids] because they're working and they're single parents, and just a whole bunch of things, and when you don't get a job, I mean, these are the big issues that I think are troubling our parent community, so we gotta spend some time and say how we're gonna educate these people. So… we're looking at ways in which we can get… parents in GEDs, we're looking at ways that we can start a little parent university, maybe start trying to get some… college credits, you know. I think those are the things that, as a school district, that are beyond the scope that I would do in other places, that you got to do here. This is not about [the] school district, this is about city, and revitalizing the city, and it's much bigger than just reading and math… So I gotta bring the parents, I gotta bring the grandparents, I gotta bring the city council, I gotta bring the elected officials, I gotta bring the ministers, because unless all those things in a little town like this come together, the district will never, ever, do really great things.

—Derrick Johnson, Superintendent, Interview, March 10, 2009

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[3] For ease of reading, I have made minor edits to the transcriptions cited throughout this dissertation. I have eliminated pauses, removed words such as "uh," "um," and "like," and cut out repeated words where this omission does not alter the meaning. The notation "…" indicates that I have cut out a portion of the speaker's statement. No other alterations to the transcriptions were made.

Introduction

As illustrated in the quotes above, both parents and other stakeholders in Clarksville agree that parents play an important role in their children's education. However, parents and other stakeholders often have dissimilar views regarding the opportunities that exist for parents to become involved in their children's schooling. In addition, parents and other stakeholders offer different explanations of the barriers that make engagement at the individual level difficult for many parents. This chapter addresses the issue of parental involvement at the individual level, describing what actions parents take to secure academic and social gains for their own children and what obstacles prevent them from doing so.

The chapter begins by exploring opportunities for engagement at the individual level, first detailing opportunities that are parent-driven, before considering opportunities that are school- or district-driven. From there, I consider barriers as discussed from parents' points of view; then I describe barriers identified and explained by other stakeholders. Ultimately, I argue that two different narratives of parental engagement emerge in Clarksville. In one, parents try to be involved in their children's education, but they are constantly frustrated by a failing educational system. In the other, parents do not properly value education and therefore do not take advantage of opportunities to become involved in their children's schooling. Interestingly, while these two narratives exist, the public—including parents—tends to put more stock in the account that blames parents for their lack of participation.

In addition, I explain that parental engagement at the individual level remained fairly consistent despite the various reforms and leadership changes in the district. While

parent participation at district-sponsored events did increase during Superintendent Johnson's tenure—a period of great investment in the district—parents exhibited high levels of interest in their children's education throughout the five-year period that I spent in Clarksville. While many leaders expressed frustration with parents' lack of involvement, and while Dr. Johnson instituted programs and policies designed to teach parents "how to parent" and to "hold parents accountable," the parents with whom I spoke did not seem to need external motivation to care about their children's education. In fact, most parents expressed feeling a great deal of responsibility for their children's academic success. Thus, participation at the individual level in Clarksville was often a personal matter for parents, and the ways in which they supported their children in their own homes did not change significantly even as the district underwent a variety of reforms.

Before moving on, it is helpful to provide an overview of the sample of parents discussed in this chapter. I met parents in the district in a variety of ways. Initially, my advisor suggested parents to interview, as she had developed relationships with some parents in her role as an Empowerment Board member. These were parents who frequently attended board meetings or who were involved in other capacities in the district, such as serving on Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs). These parents referred me to other parents, who also displayed high levels of formal involvement. As I spent more time in the district, however, I made connections with parents who were not involved in such visible ways. While I volunteered at the Truancy Intervention Center, I helped the Director, Angela Abernathy, facilitate court-mandated parent groups. These parent groups consisted of a series of five classes that parents could attend in lieu of

paying fines for their children's truancy. From these parents groups, I was able to recruit additional parents to participate in my study. In addition, Abernathy has a long history in the district, both as an employee and as a former resident. She connected me with some of her friends and acquaintances who agreed to participate in interviews. Thus, I have a sample of 21 parents, who represent a variety of forms of engagement in the district. Table 5.1 summarizes key information about parents in this sample including their race and gender, the schools that their children attended, and any other formal roles they held in the district during the time of the study.

It is important to note that while I spoke with a wide range of parents, including parents who were not involved in many formal ways in their children's education, there was still a subset of the parent population that I did not reach during the course of this study. For example, there were parents of truant children who never appeared for their court dates. Typically, these parents received fines, and that was the end of the matter, as far as the court and the TIC were concerned. Additionally, while the judge ordered some parents to attend parent group at the TIC instead of paying fines, the turnout for parent group was low. Usually, about half of the parents mandated to attend never came to any sessions. I did not have an opportunity to talk with these parents. It is certainly possible that these parents, who did not attend court or parent group, encountered additional barriers to engagement that are not explored in my dissertation.

Table 5.1
Parent Participants in Stakeholder Interviews, 2007-2012

Name	Year(s) of Interview(s)	Race	Gender	Schools Children Attend[a]	Additional Roles in District[b]
Jay Adams	2012	AA	M	Clarksville HS	Elected Bd. Member
Jacqueline Allen	2012	AA	F	Clarksville HS Health Careers HS Local Catholic ES, HS	N/A
Connie Barns	2008	AA	F	Clarksville HS	PTO Member
Michael Beardsley	2012	AA	M	Science & Tech. HS	N/A
Elizabeth Cooper	2012	W	F	Central ES Clarksville HS Wilson ES	N/A
Linda Drazen	2007	AA	F	Oak Grove ES	Teacher, Oak Grove
Kevin Entler	2012	AA	M	Clarksville HS Oak Grove ES	N/A
Syreeta Fayad	2012	AA	F	Science & Tech. HS	School Police Officer, Clarksville HS
Miguel Garcia	2012	H	M	Clarksville HS	N/A
Lisa Jordan	2011	AA	F	Central ES Clarksville HS Health Careers HS	N/A
Olivia King	2008	AA	F	Clarksville HS	PTO member
Elyse Mays	2008 2012	AA	F	Clarksville HS	PTO member & Cheerleading Coach
Dora Miller	2012	AA	F	Clarksville HS	N/A
Sandra Murray	2011	AA	F	Clarksville HS	N/A
Monica Nighman	2009	AA	F	Clarksville Charter Clarksville HS	Admin. Asst., Hamilton Charter
Donna Price	2007	AA	F	Hamilton Charter	Volunteer
Jasmine Richards	2012	AA	F	Anchor Academy Clarksville Charter Science & Tech. HS	Caseworker, Truancy Intervention Center
Adelia Rivera	2012	H	F	Clarksville HS	N/A
Tonya Rollins	2007 2009	AA	F	Clarksville HS	PTO President
Nailah Smith	2011	AA	F	Central ES Suburban public school	N/A
Rose Williams	2011	AA	F	Central ES	N/A

Note. AA = African American; H = Hispanic; W = White; F = Female; M = Male; ES = Elementary School, HS = High School.
[a] Only includes schools discussed in context of interview; parents may have more children in other schools that were not mentioned.
[b] Positions not necessarily held for duration of study.

Opportunities at the individual level

In interviews, two main types of individual involvement emerge: parent-driven engagement and school- or district-driven engagement. Parent-driven engagement refers to actions initiated by parents to secure academic and social gains for their own children. In general, parent-driven engagement arises from parents' desire to get the most they can for their children out of what they largely regard as a failing school system. School/district-driven engagement includes the ways in which school staff or administrators work with parents in order to share information, elicit feedback, or to create systems of accountability. This form of engagement includes individual outreach, such as phone calls home, as well as more general opportunities for involvement, such as parent-teacher conferences or back-to-school nights. School/district-driven engagement is often spurred by the belief that parents lack the skills, knowledge, and values necessary to ensure their children's academic success. This section explores each of these types of engagement in turn.

Parent-driven engagement.

When I first asked Lisa Jordan, a single mother of five children, to describe how she is involved in her children's education, she stated frankly, "I'm not all that involved as I, cause I have a lot of things going on in my life… I don't participate in events… I'm not the classroom mom" (Interview, June 2, 2011). However, during the course of the interview, Jordan explained several ways in which she tries to support her children in school, including helping them with their homework, seeking out a diagnosis and appropriate interventions for her son who has ADHD, implementing a system of rewards and punishments, seeking her friends' advice, talking to her children about school, and

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encouraging her children to learn from her mistakes. Indeed, many of the parents with whom I spoke would not describe themselves as typical "classroom moms" (or dads), as they were not active members of Parent-Teacher Organizations (PTOs) and did not regularly attend school-sponsored functions. However, during interviews, parents described multiple ways in which they are involved in their children's education in the schools, as well as in their own homes.

Engagement within the school.

Epstein and Salinas (2004) argue that parents engage with their children's schools in a variety of ways. Similarly, parents in Clarksville described having multiple types of interactions with the teachers, staff, and administrators at local schools. Many parents said they are at the schools on a daily basis, dropping off and picking up their children. They often use these visits as an opportunity to speak with teachers. Rose Williams, a mother of three children at Central Elementary School explained, "I'm there from morning when I drop them off and I pick 'em up [in the] afternoon, and I'm always going to their classrooms, so I see the teachers every day… so I'mma ask about, 'How was John today? How was Whitney?'" (Interview, May 26, 2011) Teachers confirm that they often have these sorts of informal interactions with parents. The president of the teacher's union and high school business teacher, Andrea Barela, noted that it is "typical elementary" behavior for parents to visit the schools frequently (Interview, February 2, 2012). Indeed, both Sanders and Epstein (1998) and Harris and Goodall (2008) explain that parents of elementary school students exhibit higher levels of participation than parents of secondary school students. Rebecca Warren, an elementary school teacher with over ten years' experience in the district, described seeing her younger students'

parents on many occasions, as they came to school to bring their children lunch, celebrate birthdays, and participate in activities such as Halloween parades (Interview, May 31, 2012).

While this behavior is more typical of parents of elementary school students, parents of high school students also reported taking their children to and from school due to concerns about their safety. In fact, some of the high school parents with whom I spoke described how they stay in regular contact with the staff at Clarksville High School as a result of their worries about their children's wellbeing. Connie Barns described how she began to volunteer regularly at Clarksville High School after she went into the building with her son on his first day of school and was "horrified" by the "fights and chaos and disconnect" (Interview, March 13, 2008). Another parent, and the Clarksville High School cheerleading coach, Elyse Mays, explained that she often monitors Facebook or listens to her cheerleaders' talk for signs of impending trouble at school. For example, when she heard that some students were planning to walk out of the building in a protest, she called the superintendent to warn him. When I asked if the administration was responsive to these warnings, she replied, "Oh yes, indeed, they better do something, cause then I was gonna tell them I told and they didn't do nothing about it" (Interview, August, 2, 2012).

Parents of high school students also described establishing a presence at their children's school, becoming friendly with teachers and staff so that they would be contacted if their children ran into problems. Jacqueline Allen, a parent of four, described being "on a first-name basis with pretty much everyone at [her oldest son's] school" (Interview, May 3, 2012). Another parent, Kevin Entler, discussed his

relationship with the school security guards, with whom he speaks whenever he visits the high school, "I'm a familiar face in this community, so the security guards, I talk to them, ask them, 'Look, have you seen my son today? How's he been doing? Has he been running around?'" (Interview, May 17, 2012) Other parents reported interacting with their children's teachers early in the school year and making their expectations clear. Monica Nighman, whose older daughter attends Clarksville High School noted:

> I'm real friendly with…the office staff and different things like that, so anything goes wrong with [my] children… this is what I say to teachers, "I expect you to call us, I expect you to get in touch with us when this is not going on, because don't come to me at report card time and tell me these things, when I've given you this at the beginning." (Interview, June 1, 2009)

Jasmine Richards, a former Clarksville School District employee, emphasized the importance of getting to know her children's teachers because, "I've been on the other side, I've been in that teachers' lunchroom, I know how [teachers] can be." Having witnessed teachers speak negatively about Clarksville students, referring to them as "those kids" and "dumb," Richards felt it was important both to "set them straight" and make it clear to her children's own teachers that she has high expectations for their academic work (Interview, June 14, 2012).

Parents also discussed interacting with teachers and administrators in order to address specific problems their children encounter in school. For instance, Elizabeth Cooper described how her son "was bullied terrible" at Wilson Elementary School. She explained that her son has Asperger's syndrome and Tourette's syndrome, and "he doesn't socialize very well." After her son repeatedly came home bruised and crying, she spoke with his principal, teachers, and even the head of special education services in the district. Ultimately, Cooper said she "just had a lot of problems with anybody

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hearing me." In order to get anyone to listen, Cooper pursued legal options, including pressing charges against some of the boys who bullied her son and threatening to sue the district if the situation did not improve (Interview, March 15, 2012). Nailah Smith, a mother with children at Central Elementary School, described confronting a teacher whom she believed pulled her daughter by the ear to remove her from the classroom, and who also regularly referred to her daughter as "Miss Thing," instead of calling her by her name. Eventually, Smith spoke with the principal and tried to contact district administrators, though she felt as if "I didn't really get anywhere" (Interview, June 9, 2011). Rose Williams, whose children also attend Central Elementary School, detailed her visit to the school after her 11-year-old son claimed his teacher slapped him. Williams explained that she "didn't act like a fool and all that stuff," but she did try to talk with the teacher when students were leaving for the day. When the teacher said she simply touched the student's face to get his attention, Williams talked with the principal who subsequently reminded the teacher not to touch students. Though angry with the teacher, Williams reported being satisfied with this resolution. While she believed her son, she acknowledged that he was prone to acting up, and she had no concrete proof that the teacher had slapped him (Interview, May 26, 2011).

Parents also reported interacting with a variety of professionals to address academic challenges their children encountered. Lisa Jordan went to great lengths to get her son diagnosed with ADHD and to find the appropriate treatment. Jordan believed her youngest son was different from her other children from an early age; in particular, he had trouble sitting still and completing tasks like homework. She mentioned her worries to his pediatrician and to his third-grade teacher. At first, Jordan wondered if she "was

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going crazy for a minute" because no one seemed to share her concerns. However, after his teacher saw signs of ADHD, he was tested and diagnosed with ADHD at the end of the year. When the school suggested medication, Jordan was reluctant—she said she believes in "natural healing"—but she took her son to two different doctors to get their opinions. Now, he is on medication and "he has changed tremendously" (Interview, June 2, 2011).

On a slightly different note, Jacqueline Allen took a variety of steps to ensure her oldest son, a senior in high school, would be prepared for college, even though the district merged his small, specialty high school with the district's other specialty high school due to budget cuts. Because of overcrowding in the newly combined school, the district planned to give seniors shortened schedules and send them out for internships—related to the high schools' themes—for the rest of the day. However, when the schools merged, the plans for the internships fell through. Fortunately, Allen had a "Plan B," and had arranged for her son to take classes at the local community college, classes for which she had to pay. Moreover, when the school made the last-minute decision to graduate all the seniors a semester early, since many students had doubled up on credits in order to have time for their (now, non-existent) internships, Allen received a letter stating her son was done with school and did not have to return. The district, however, did not update these students' status in their records. Her son was reported as truant, and his transcript stated he had "withdrawn" from school. Allen repeatedly called the school, regularly shared her concerns at board meetings, and finally contacted the interim superintendent for help. In mid-April, her son's records were finally corrected (Interview, May 3, 2012).

Engagement within the home.

A variety of literature addresses the ways in which parents engage in their children's education within their own homes (e.g., Epstein, 1995; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Pérez Carreón et al., 2005). Similarly, parents in Clarksville described many ways in which they are involved with their children's education outside of school. For example, several parents described how they provide emotional support for their children. For some, this support takes the form of creating a caring home environment. Michael Beardsley, a father of two high-school students, stated that he lets his children know that in "everything that they do, I'm a hundred percent behind 'em. Long as it's positivity… We're raising them to be go-getters." When I asked what he and his wife do to create a positive home environment, he explained, "we have a Christian home, and, you know, first and foremost, we put God first, and just, I mean, we have a very loving environment, and our home is comfortable, and you know, they're comfortable" (Interview, May 17, 2012).   For others, creating a caring environment means providing extra supervision, in order to shelter their children from what they see as disruptive Clarksville influences, including gangs and violence. Sandra Murray, a single mother of five, explained that she enlists her four older children to "play a big part in [her youngest son's] life" when she is unable to be home due to work. Nailah Smith said she is reluctant to let her oldest daughter, a middle school student, out of her sight. She explained that even letting her daughter go to the movies by herself is not an option, as she worries about her daughter succumbing to peer pressure: "I know what goes on at [the mall]… no, if you go to the mall into the movies, we can go, but I'm gonna be with you… you can live your life, but you can be 20 paces ahead of me, I'll be 20 paces behind you, but I'm gonna know

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what's going on here" (Interview, June 9, 2011). As with Murray, Smith expressed the importance of protecting her child from outside influences, which for her required staying engaged in her daughter's interests and activities.

Other parents described the value they see in simply talking with their children, both to show an interest in their lives and to stay informed about what is happening at their schools. Syreeta Fayad, a school police officer with children and grandchildren in the district, said that she talks with them everyday, in order to provide encouragement: "…if I don't see 'em, I call 'em, and just talk to 'em, you know, what's your day like today? How far do you think you done went with your education today?" (Interview, March 21, 2012) Kevin Entler described talking with his children in order to intercept any potential problems they may encounter. He explained that he talks:

> …about different things that's going on in school, and [I] ask 'em about different children… They don't want to tell me… what's going on, but I can pretty much get it out of 'em, and that makes me want to get more involved with kids, especially if I know that one of his buddies… took a gun on the school bus or hid a gun at the bus stop, you know, I want to go around, up to that school and let the guys or the girl know, look, this is my child, you know, if you got a problem with 'em… give me a call. (Interview, May 17, 2012)

Parents also described staying informed by talking with other parents to see how they handle particular issues or what they think of different teachers.

Several parents discussed incentive structures they create for their children in order to motivate them to work hard in school. For example, Lisa Jordan said that her children see their efforts at school rewarded—or not—around Christmastime. She explained her children understand her policy: "You like Fs and Ds, Santa don't like you, you ain't getting nothing but what you need and require, not nothing that you want" (Interview, June 2, 2011). Other parents promise their children generous gifts as rewards

for school success. Sandra Murray promised each of her children that she would make a matching contribution to their savings accounts when they graduated from high school (while some of her children have graduated from high school, none of them had any savings) (Interview, November 3, 2011). Elizabeth Cooper bought her teenage son an expensive phone and video games to persuade him to go to school (Interview, March 15, 2012). Miguel Garcia explained that he told his son he would give him his truck if he successfully completed his senior year and graduated. On the other hand, Garcia found threats, rather than rewards, to be more productive with his daughter. I first encountered Garcia in truancy court, where he asked the judge to send his chronically truant daughter to jail, "for her own good." While the judge instead ordered Garcia and his ex-wife to attend parenting classes, Garcia said that he told his daughter, "I talked to the judge [and] she was gonna get locked up."   Though Garcia said his daughter still was not taking her schoolwork seriously, he did report she had better school attendance (Interview, March 29, 2012).

In addition, parents described how they use their own lives as examples to motivate their children. Lisa Jordan said that she tells her children, "I didn't graduate, you know I dropped out… never did anything, you know, you don't want to be like that, don't wanna be like, I wish I could reverse the hands of time and say, 'Yeah, should of did it,' but you know, life throws you what it throws you" (Interview, June 2, 2011). While she cites her life as a negative example, Jordan has actively pursued educational opportunities even after she dropped out of high school. At the time of the interview, she was studying for her GED, and prior to that she studied to be a pharmacy technician at a local professional school. Similarly, Dora Miller, a recent immigrant from Liberia, said

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that she talks to her children about school, "even if they don't want to go there, but I will talk to them until they go because I myself, I'm not educated, and the thing that happen to me, I don't want for it to happen to any of my children."   While she referred to herself as uneducated, Miller actually pursued learning opportunities in the United States, attending literacy classes to prepare for her citizenship exam, which she passed shortly before our interview (Interview, June 8, 2012).   Elyse Mays explained that she shares her life story not only with her three daughters, but also with all of the cheerleaders she coaches in a mentoring class she teaches at the high school. Mays said:

> I'm not embarrassed, but I tell them my story, and then I tell them about my struggles, because I'm divorced, and I raised my children by myself, my mom lives with me, but I tell them about that, so that they can understand life is not perfect, but you may fall down, but you can get back up. But it's all in what you believe. And so I start there, and from there I just build on school… how you dress, how you talk to people, the tone of your voice, your attitude. (Interview, February 5, 2008)

Unlike Jordan and Miller, Mays did attend college and received an associate's degree in business.   She believes it is her job as a parent to share what she has learned with her children.

Thus, while parents sometimes characterize themselves as "not involved" in their children's schooling, all of the parents with whom I spoke described a variety of informal ways in which they were engaged in their children's education. Indeed, though many of these parents did not take part in more formal activities, such as attending PTO meetings or report card conferences, the parents did describe their efforts to stay in touch with their children's teachers and to create supportive home environments.

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School/district-driven engagement.

When I spoke with the Clarksville superintendent, Derrick Johnson, during the second year of his three-year tenure, he discussed the importance of parents engaging at the individual level. While he also welcomed their participation at the policy level, he explained:

> You [parents] don't start off on a governance board…helping us to discern, do contracts and things of that nature, which would be still very, very welcome. I think you start out really getting to know… where your youngster is, where your youngster needs to go, and then creating opportunities for the young student to get there, and that's the level of involvement that I'm talking about starting with… (Interview, March 10, 2009)

In fact, during his time as superintendent, Johnson created many opportunities for parents to become involved at this individual level. Under Johnson, there were many initiatives designed to connect parents with schools and services, as well as efforts made to hold parents accountable. Both types of school/district-driven form of engagement are discussed in this section.

Connecting parents with schools and services.

During interviews, Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs) were frequently mentioned as a viable, if poorly attended, means of connecting parents with schools and engaging them in their children's education. Edward Mead, a former state-appointed board member under the previous governor, explained that he felt that PTOs were one means of educating parents "as to their role in the educational life of their kids" (Interview, December 5, 2007). Scott Pope, a local lawyer and founder of the district's Youth Court program, also expressed the belief that PTOs might be the most logical way to pull more parents into the schools, and he cited the positive work of the President of the Clarksville High School PTO, Tonya Rollins (Interview, August, 18, 2008). Indeed,

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in an interview with Tonya Rollins, she noted that more parents were becoming involved in the organization, with an average attendance of around 50 members. While she acknowledged that this number only represented a small proportion of the parents of the 1500 students who attend Clarksville High School, she felt that the parents who did come to meetings were "starting to take more of initiative role in the school [and] beginning to be more involved in their child's educational process" (Interview, December 7, 2007). Rollins explained that PTO meetings often serve as planning sessions for events, opportunities to interact with administrators, and a time to troubleshoot problems that parents notice at the school.   The principal of Clarksville High School, Gayle Carman, stressed that she tried "to embrace our PTO" and wanted parents to become more "familiarized with the educational process," rather than only coming to school when their children are in trouble (Interview, October 21, 2009).

In addition to relying on PTOs as a means of connecting parents with schools, the superintendent also created several new programs to educate parents and provide them with services.   For instance, over his three years, Superintendent Johnson hosted a number of "Parent Summits," community meetings designed to teach parenting skills and share needed resources. An item in the Empowerment Board agenda for April 10, 2008, explained the intent of the Parent Summit in detail:

> The purpose of the conference is to share strategies that will support and empower parents, offer opportunities to examine district curricular materials from [a variety of district providers]. Parents will have access to providers and partnerships programs such as Supplemental Education Support (SES), 21st Century after school programs, [the local hospital] Library, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, [the local hospital], [a] Martial Arts [program] and more. An added feature of the summit will be our Pre-K and Kindergarten Enrollment Fair. All parents are invited.

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While only 75 parents attended the first district-wide Parent Summit, the superintendent reported that over 700 parents came to the second Parent Summit, which he called "the hottest act in town" (Field notes, November 19, 2009). In an interview with Dr. Johnson, he explained that the Parent Summits were part of his strategy of "marketing our children to our parents" (Interview, March 10, 2009).

This superintendent executed a number of other large-scale events in the district, including meetings to introduce community partners to parents, general parent and community get-togethers, and a "parade of schools" to tour the district's new buildings with parents and community members. In addition, Dr. Johnson held smaller events, such as hosting a dessert for parents of English Language Learners (ELLs), in order to start an ongoing conversation about making proper accommodations for their children and sharing information about important opportunities and events in district schools. Johnson estimated he had about a 30% participation rate at the first of these ELL events (Field notes, December 17, 2009 & May 13, 2010).

In addition to creating a variety of events, the superintendent also relied on different means of communication to reach parents. He sent home quarterly newsletters that addressed topics such as how to best use parent-teacher meetings (Field notes, November, 15, 2007). He advertised events through a variety of media, including using the district's autodial feature to call all households, distributing fliers to local churches, sending memos and making phone calls to local organizations, advertising in the newspaper, and posting notices in the high school (Field notes, May 15, 2008). One of Johnson's assistant superintendents created the first district-wide parent and student handbook, which contained profiles of the schools, the code of conduct, and

transportation and attendance policies (Field notes, September 18, 2008). Johnson also spoke of using technology to "meet people where they are," explaining that the district planned to share information with stakeholders through text messages and Facebook. He told the Empowerment Board they could expect to see "some twittering going on" (Field notes, December 17, 2009).

Along with the superintendent, teachers also described reaching out to parents. Similar to Barnyak and McNelly (2009), who found that keeping parents informed is a priority for many teachers, I met several Clarksville educators who tried to communicate regularly with their students' parents. In my first interview with Rebecca Warren, an elementary school teacher in the district, she explained that she makes an effort to share positive reports with parents the first time she meets them, so as not to "bombard [them] with rotten things their kid's doing" (Interview, December 5, 2007). In a subsequent interview, Warren described her efforts to engage with more parents at district scheduled parent-teacher conferences: "I say to… students, 'You know, if your mom can't come, tell her to write me a letter.' I send home a letter saying that if this time isn't feasible for you, give me a call, we'll set up a time, we'll have a phone conference" (Interview, May 31, 2012). Warren reported that her efforts go largely unrewarded, as she might see eight out of 25 parents at a given conference time. On a curricular level, Mark Matta, an English teacher at one of the district's specialty high schools, described how he spent a lot of time explaining assignments and class expectations to his students' parents. He shared his experience working with one particularly irate and frustrated parent:

> [The parent] did not understand the term paper, and how dare I give [her child] something she doesn't understand… so I spent about 40 minutes explaining the assignment to her, talking about what a close reading was, talking about semantics and syntax and telling her… yes, your student… can choose any poem that they

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want, right, here are some that were provided, they could choose a… song if they'd rather, right… and that was really a lot of my interactions with [the school's] parents, especially in the first few months. (Interview, June 13, 2012)

Andrea Barela, the president of the teacher's union, explained that teachers tend to contact parents primarily "on an individual basis," and that the majority of parent-teacher interactions are "teacher initiated" (Interview, February 2, 2012).

Holding parents accountable.

The superintendent also expressed the desire to hold parents accountable. In order to do so, he implemented a Truancy Intervention Program (TIP) in the district. In a presentation to the Empowerment Board on January 18, 2009, the superintendent's security consultant explained that the TIP would have seven basic components, including: picking up and transporting students who break the daytime curfew law in the city; providing services for these students at the district's new Truancy Intervention Center (TIC); prosecuting students, parents, and business owners who violate daytime curfew laws; and making referrals to Truancy Court for all truant students with ten or more unexcused absences. In an interview, Dr. Johnson explained his main rationale for opening the TIC:

> … we just started [the] Truancy Center, and I'm getting more pushback on that than I'm getting on the fact that only 3% of the kids are proficient in Clarksville High School in math, because I'm moving their cheese, I'm making life uncomfortable, I'm saying to them, "I'm taking you to court because, you know, your kid's truant and we're gonna fine you."…Believe it or not, it wasn't about truancy… the truancy initiative was about getting parents involved, that was the underlying mission of that, it was about getting parents involved, it was about forcing parents to parent. (Interview, March 10, 2009)

In a separate interview, Angela Abernathy, the Director of the TIC, explained that, in fact, the District Court Justices rely on more than simply fines to hold parents

accountable. Abernathy shared that District Court Justices are able to force parents to make use of available services:

> Parents who may not have… enrolled their child in a tutoring program now have mandated tutoring… maybe the child wouldn't have went if it wasn't mandated through court… when the judge says it's mandated, it's a difference between us saying, "You need to go to tutoring" and a judge saying, "You need to go to tutoring." [The judge may] continue the case… to give the parent time to make sure that the child does what they're supposed to do, and actually follows through. If they don't follow [through], we don't have any choice but to… give 'em a fine, but the idea is to get the child to succeed. And sometimes sending 'em to court is the only thing you have to get them to pay attention. (Interview, January 26, 2012)

A caseworker at the TIC echoed this sentiment, when I asked if fines are really the only way to get parents' attention. Robert Linsley explained that caseworkers try to reach parents before they are sent to court, however, there is a group of parents that, "you don't hear anything, you won't get any response, via telephone call, via mail, via home visit… but when that court letter shows up, all of the sudden, they'll find you…that's the catalyst that gets them back involved" (Interview, June 14, 2012).

Thus, teachers and administrators discussed a variety ways in which they try to engage parents. While some teachers described reaching out on a personal level, administrators described attempts to connect with parents on a larger scale. Though these stakeholders contend that parents are crucial to their children's educational achievement, they often suggest (implicitly and explicitly) that parents lack the desire or the skills necessary to help their children achieve academic success. However, parents describe many difficulties they encounter when they try to become involved in more formal ways in the district, and these obstacles extend beyond not knowing and not caring enough. These barriers are taken up in the next section.

Barriers at the Individual Level

As with opportunities for engagement at the individual level, it is useful to examine barriers at the individual level from the perspectives of parents as well as from the points of view of other stakeholders. In fact, parents and other stakeholders reported many similar barriers to parental engagement, including economic hardships faced by parents, poor communication between schools and homes, an unwelcoming atmosphere in the schools, and a lack of knowledge or access to information on the part of parents. However, one key difference emerges in how parents and stakeholders define barriers. In describing their own experiences, parents explained that they do not value the education that their children receive in the district's schools. After years of dealing with bad teachers, poor academic programming, budget cuts, fluctuating district policies, and disorganized school staff, many parents said they feel reluctant to participate in school-sponsored events and organizations. However, other stakeholders, as well as parents reflecting on *other* parents, expressed the belief that too many parents in Clarksville simply do not value education. Though these stakeholders certainly acknowledged that the educational system in Clarksville has very real and persistent problems, they emphasized the ways in which parents, and not the schools, have abdicated responsibility for their children. Thus, this section begins by discussing barriers as identified by parents, before comparing these barriers to those identified by other stakeholders. I conclude by focusing on the key difference in perspectives: parents say they do not value the education provided in Clarksville schools, while other stakeholders argue these parents do not value education in general.

Parent-identified barriers.

While all the parents with whom I spoke described ways in which they are involved in their children's education, they also identified barriers that make it difficult to be even more engaged. In addition, I had the opportunity to observe parents at Truancy Court, during which time parents often discussed—indeed, even experienced—barriers to participation as they interacted with the District Court Judge and tried to explain their children's unexcused absences from school. Therefore, in this section, I draw on both interviews and Truancy Court field notes in order to illustrate parent-identified barriers.

Economics.

In her work about parental engagement, Fine (1993) explains that many parents are overwhelmed just trying to meet their families' basic needs, and their lack of material resources makes finding the time to participate in their children's schooling difficult. This lack of resources is certainly an issue for some parents in Clarksville. According to the 2006-2010 American Community Survey, 30.9% of families in Clarksville have an income below the poverty level, and the median household income in Clarksville is $26,787. In light of these numbers, it does not come as a surprise that many parents said they lack resources that would help them be more involved with their children's schools. Some parents explained they do not have the opportunity to go to their children's school because of their jobs. Sandra Murray said that she would like to be more active in her son's PTO at the high school, but "it's just that I have a crazy schedule, cause I don't get off of work until 7:00 [pm]" (Interview, November 3, 2011). Murray often sends another (older) son to meetings in her place to act as her representative. Rose Williams said that she sometimes has difficulty getting her elementary-age children to school on time—or at

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all—because she often works the night shift, and her children have to stay with her mother on the other side of town (Interview, May 26, 2011). Elizabeth Cooper expressed regret at not being able to spend more time with her children as the result of her work schedule. Her mother watches her children, and Cooper usually returns home from her job at 11:00 pm, after working double shifts (Interview, March 15, 2012). Lisa Jordon summed up her own situation frankly at the end of our interview:

> …my life's been hell, and the kids, we just experienced this hell, the last year I lost my job, I lost my house, everything was like, and they didn't know what the hell, we've always lived just one place, you know, so, I don't know. And when shit is fucked up at home, it's fucked up at school, and you can quote that, ain't nobody tell you that is a lie, you know when something's going on, you know, but it's what it is. (Interview, June 2, 2011)

It is worth noting that despite losing her job and her house, Jordan still outlined several ways in which she is involved in her children's education (see above).

During my visits to Truancy Court, parents' lack of resources manifested itself in a different way. In my field notes, I described several parents who came to court with some sort of serious illness or disability. While I do not know whether these parents had access to adequate health care, they all noted the toll that their ailments took on their ability to be involved with their children's schooling. For instance, early in 2012, I witnessed an exchange between Angela Abernathy, the Director of the Truancy Intervention Center (TIC), Judge Gwenn, and a mother whose daughter had missed 32 days of school and had been late 14 times. I observed that the mother looked "old, tired, [and] sick" and had a voice that was "soft and gravel-y." She was not aware of all her daughter's absences and explained that she had a stroke at the beginning of the year (Field notes, January 26, 2012). In court a week later, another mother told the judge that she had back surgery and sometimes kept her ninth-grade daughter home to help her.

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Judge Gwenn responded that by doing so, the mother risked a $300 fine and jail time (Field notes, February 2, 2012). I first encountered Miguel Garcia, whom I later interviewed, in court. Short and extremely thin, he leaned on his cane and wheezed heavily as he explained to Judge Gwenn that he had the flu and was recovering from a heart attack (Field notes, February 9, 2012). Later, I learned from Thomas Posner, a caseworker at the TIC, that Garcias' ex-wife, and primary caregiver for the children, has cancer and "most of her days are spent at hospitals, trying to get herself, get herself into remission, so the father is very much needed in these circumstances, but he doesn't seem to understand his role" (Interview, February 16, 2012). Another week, a mother explained to Judge Gwenn that she has 11 children, and one of her daughters is hospitalized with a terminal illness. She said that she has to spend all her time at the hospital, noting, "That's mandated. They tried to take her away from me. I do the best I can." This mother started crying as she explained to Judge Gwenn that her other children are out of control, and the reason she was in court was because one of her daughters stays home from school to watch her younger siblings occasionally (Field notes, February 16, 2012).

Communication.

In their research, Pérez Carreón et al. (2005) explain that many parents do not have the language skills necessary to communicate with school and district officials. This barrier was quite apparent at Truancy Court in Clarksville, where I observed a number of parents who only spoke Spanish. In my field notes on February 16, 2012, I noted that a lot of parents in court did not speak English, and they had difficulty interacting with the judge. Some parents had their children translate (often the child who

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was cited for truancy), and later a bilingual parent volunteered to help translate for some families. A couple weeks later, there were at least three families in court who did not speak English, but there was no one in the courtroom who could translate. Eventually, Judge Gwenn called on a Spanish-speaking employee in a nearby office to provide assistance. With the help of the "translator," one mother explained to Judge Gwenn that her daughter missed a lot of school because she has to walk to school, and she keeps getting sick on days when she has to travel through the rain. Her daughter brings notes to school regarding her absences, but the notes are in Spanish, so the school does not accept them. The mother had the pile of rejected notes with her. Abernathy said the school should have accepted them, and she took the notes to enter into the student's record (Field notes, March 1, 2012). Eventually, I had the opportunity to interview a Spanish-speaking parent who attended court-mandated parent group at the TIC because of her daughter's truancy—a court- mandated parent group that I do not think she understood because it was conducted only in English. When I asked Adelia Rivera how she was involved in her daughter's education, her daughter, Daniela, translated the question and then reported her mother's response. Daniela said, "she said…she's involved in my education by helping me and talking to me and asking me how… everything's going." Daniela added, "But she's not really involved in it cause of the language, she doesn't really know the language, so there's, so she's not completely involved" (Interview, February 22, 2012).

In addition, many parents said that their children's schools either fail to share important information or share it when it is much too late. Tanya Rollins, the PTO president, said that when her daughter attended Clarksville High School, "a lot of

things…were happening at the school… I never had knowledge of it. I never received things in the mail…Very few times…are things updated timely on the resource channel…the marquees outside [the high school] weren't being utilized, and it's like, you would just happen upon something" (Interview, December 7, 2007). Sandra Murray, another parent, reported a similar experience with Clarksville High School, noting that she might be able to attend events such as back-to-school nights if she had advance notice and could request time off from work, but "it's just that sometimes I don't know until after the fact, if I'm reading about it in a newspaper or something" (Interview, November 3, 2011). Jasmine Richards, who reached out to other parents when she worked as a caseworker in the TIC, noted that she never received phone calls when her child was late to school, though district policy states that she should have been notified. She added that she wished the district would "update their website more… and maybe [host] a monthly meeting, so you could come up and see the teacher and get involved and find out what's going on" (Interview, June 14, 2012). Olivia King, whose daughter attended Clarksville High School, said that while the "communication piece" had improved under Dr. Johnson, she wished the district could do a better job of "trying to get the information out to parents and children about what the expectations are" (Interview, January 10, 2008).

School environment.

Parents also cited an unwelcoming school atmosphere as a barrier to participation. During our first interview, Elyse Mays asked me if I had ever been in the Main Office at the high school. She exclaimed, "Ew! It's so dry. That's not appealing." She argued, "the whole building needs to be done over…look at the paint, how the paint is on the floor… even the library, how the books are so old" (Interview, February 5, 2008).

Moving beyond purely aesthetic matters, Miguel Garcia said the Main Office staff is not friendly: "They act, some of them act snotty when you ask them a question. Like, they don't even want to answer. They just there, make their eight hours, and that's it, bye" (Interview, March 29, 2012). According to school police officer, Syreeta Fayad, the Main Office is really as far as most parents can hope to get at the high school. When I asked her what happens when parents come to Clarksville High School to talk to a teacher or administrator, she replied:

> Can't do it… You gonna have to… for a teacher, you gonna have to [wait] two to three days…. Matter of fact, I can go as far back as three months to see Dr. Carman [the principal]. You cannot see Dr. Carman. Our students don't know what Dr. Carman look like, other than that picture… up on the third floor. (Interview, March 21, 2012).

Other parents, including Michael Beardsley and Kevin Entler, noted that it is easier to gain access to classrooms and teachers if one is friendly with the school security guards. Even when parents do gain access to the school, perhaps to volunteer or to meet with staff, safety is a concern. Connie Barns, who volunteered regularly at the high school, said that some days her son said to her, "Mom, don't go down [to the] first and second floor by yourself. Please don't," as he was scared for her safety (Interview, March 13, 2008).

Curricular resources.

On a different note, parents also expressed the belief that sometimes they lacked the necessary information or knowledge to help their children. In their research, Schnee and Bose (2010) describe how parents often struggle to help their children with their mathematics homework, as mathematics pedagogy has changed significantly in recent years. Indeed, in Clarksville, some parents found some elements of the curriculum

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difficult to understand. John Connelly, a student at Clarksville High School, said his grandmother, who supervises John and his siblings when his mom is at work, would not be able to help him with his math homework. He explained, "…the stuff when she went to school was so much different than it is to now, like, the stuff they're teaching us, she probably wouldn't even learn when she was in school." John's mother, Elizabeth Cooper, echoed this sentiment, saying, "My mom says the math has definitely changed since she was in school" (Interview, March 15, 2012). Likewise, Lisa Jordan described battling with her son over his homework. In large part, her difficulties stemmed from her son's undiagnosed ADHD. However, she also expressed frustration that she lacked materials that would help her understand his work:

> [My children] don't bring home any books, they bring home ditto sheets… it should be books, enough books for them to go home, shouldn't always be a little ditto sheet, and you just give it to 'em and say "Go home and do that," without, no explanation on how to do this problem, how to attack it… Then when [I] write a little note, [the teacher] got a little attitude… Well, then, how you just send this home, and you don't send nothing to attach it, what you s'posed to do? That's what irks me about, you know, my son's teacher a lot [will send] this math sheet, [but] what do you do with it? Did he learn it today in school? I'm asking him. And that's the thing, I'm asking him. "Nah, we ain't, we did it one time." I don't be—I need to see the example, you know, that's what I'm talking about, like, well alright, and I write her back a note, "Please send home a example, you just sent [the worksheet] home, I don't know if you did it in school, he say you all didn't do it, you say you did do it. I don't know." (Interview, June 2, 2011)

This lack of textbooks was a concern parents frequently raised at board meetings. In fact, when Dr. Johnson began his tenure in Clarksville, he acknowledged this shortage of books, stating that the district was in need of math, science, and social studies texts (Field notes, September 27, 2007).

Value of education in the Clarksville School District.

Parents most often cited their dissatisfaction with the Clarksville schools as a barrier to their involvement in their children's education. That is, parents explained they are reluctant to invest their time and energy in a school district that provides little in return. Connie Barns, a parent volunteer at the high school, said that the parents she knows express the sentiment: "I wanna care, but I'd like to see [the district] at least make the… put a best foot… forward, and maybe if they did, maybe we would, too" (Interview, March 13, 2008). Lisa Jordan put it more succinctly: "This school sucks, the district sucks, everything sucks… This is the worst school district our kids can be in" (Interview, June 2, 2011). Parents discussed several ways in which they believed the Clarksville schools are failing their children, including: lacking strong academic programs, not holding children accountable for their behavior, frequently cutting courses and activities, constantly changing their policies and leadership, and hiring incompetent teachers and staff. Each issue is discussed briefly below.

Parents expressed dissatisfaction with the academic programs available to their children in Clarksville schools. In addition to worrying about a lack of supplies and textbooks, parents also were concerned that their children were not held to high standards. Monica Nighman believed her daughter, a senior in high school, made it through her schooling with minimal effort:

> My daughter…all through high school, never brought home books… she's graduating next week, she had a senior project that she was doing… They gave this assignment to her last year, she did it in two days, and got a "C." No way, there's no way, so if she wanted to go to college, right now, she would fail, she would fail, because she doesn't know what she needs to do to get to this point. (Interview, June 1, 2009)

Elyse Mays expressed frustration with her daughter's experience with technology at the high school. She explained, "half the time, they can't even get the computers to work." Even with functioning computers, her daughter never learned how to make a PowerPoint presentation in her computer class. Mays had to teach her daughter how to use PowerPoint for her senior project, and she wondered what happens to "another child whose parent knows nothing about a computer?" (Interview, February 5, 2008) Other parents felt the schools have low standards for behavior, as well. Miguel Garcia wondered why he sees so many kids "getting out of school early, hookying and walking around the streets" and how the schools allow children to walk out of the building before the day is over (Interview, March 29, 2012).

Parents also expressed frustration with the schools' lack of curricular and extracurricular offerings. Many parents who had attended primary or secondary school in other districts, or who have relatives in other districts, felt that Clarksville had little to offer students in comparison. Nailah Smith explained that she went to high school in a neighboring district, where she benefitted from smaller class sizes, better teachers, more serious students, and a safer environment. She said that she hopes to find an alternative to Clarksville High School for her children, as well (Interview, June 9, 2011). Miguel Garcia said he did not understand why the district no longer had a vocational program, like it did when he was a student. He felt the district should "have a trade for these kids, do something for 'em. Cause don't make no sense just graduating, you don't know nothing, cause I guarantee you most of these kids don't know nothing" (Interview, March 29, 2012). Garcia said he benefited from the district's vocational program, and he wanted his son to have the same opportunities that he had. In fact, the district finally did

create some opportunities for students to receive career and technical certifications in its specialty high schools, only to cut the required classes when the district merged these two smaller high schools due to budget cuts. As discussed above, Jacqueline Allen had to scramble to create an outside academic program for her son, a student at one of the specialty high schools, when the school changed its curriculum. Fortunately, she did make arrangements, because not long after losing his internship opportunity, her son was also told not to return to school, as the administration decided to graduate seniors to alleviate overcrowding (Interview, May 3, 2012).

Not only do programs change, school policies frequently shift as well. Monica Nighman contrasted the consistently-enforced rules at Hamilton Charter School, where she works, with the ever-changing regulations at Clarksville High School, where her daughter goes to school. For example, while the district handbook states there is a uniform policy, the staff stopped enforcing the policy at school. However, in the middle of winter, the school decided that students could no longer wear "hoody" sweatshirts in the building. In addition to being an abrupt shift, there was also confusion over what exactly constituted a "hoody," and Nighman found herself at school trying to determine if her daughter was allowed to wear a jacket with a hood to school. Nighman wished the school would simply "tell me what it is that you want my children to do" (Interview, June 1, 2009). Likewise, the high school frequently changed its policy on lateness, and Nighman was never sure when she would have to accompany her daughter into the building if she had a late arrival. Olivia King's daughter, Olympia, explained that the changing leadership at the district and school level meant that she and her peers at Clarksville High School were constantly adapting to new rules: "a lot of the kids in my

school is really tired of the changing of principals and superintendents and stuff like that, it's just too much, and then we have to get used to a new principal or a new superintendent, and… figure out how they are and their ways… It's really not good for us to keep changing, but I don't know, we just have to deal with it, I guess" (Interview, March 29, 2008).

While some parents complained about the quick turnover of administrators, others argued that incompetent teachers and administrators are allowed to stay for far too long at district schools. Parents of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) detailed a variety of ways in which the school faculty seem unequipped to meet their children's needs. For instance, Monica Nighman has two children in special education. When she attends their IEP meetings, the principal is never present. When the IEP team comes to a decision regarding services for her children, the staff tells her: "Oh, well, we can't do that, it, that has to come to the principal" (Interview, June 1, 2009). Elizabeth Cooper, whose special needs' son was being bullied by other children, was told by his principal that the only way she could transfer him to a different school was to "vacate his IEP" and have him mainstreamed, which she did, despite the fact that he has Asperger's and Tourette's syndromes (Interview, March 15, 2012). Lisa Jordan shared her experiences at her daughter's IEP meetings, where the teachers "said they couldn't find what we talked about in her plan proposed last year" and constantly seemed to change the requirements that her daughter, who just had a baby, needed to meet in order to graduate (Interview, June 2, 2011). Many parents also cited examples of questionable actions by district employees, as their children complained of being slapped or called names by their teachers (these examples were described in the "opportunities" section above). Other

parents explained they were often frustrated when they came to the school, trying to get information, only to encounter teachers or counselors who had no answers. Miguel Garcia said the staff at Clarksville High School never has the information he needs about his son or daughter: "…these people act like they just come in just to get paid and that's it, don't worry about nothing" (Interview, March 29, 2012).

In sum, parents described a variety of barriers that make it difficult for them to engage with their children's education. It is important to note that while these parents explained the challenges they encountered, they persisted in looking for ways to help their children to succeed. While they did not assign much value to the education their children were receiving in Clarksville schools, many parents clearly demonstrated a value of education in general, as they constantly sought ways to improve their children's school experiences.

Barriers identified by other stakeholders.[4]

In some respects, there is a lot of agreement between parents and other stakeholders regarding barriers to parental engagement in the district. Like parents, stakeholders stated that parental involvement is complicated by issues relating to poverty, poor communication, unwelcoming schools, and a lack of information. However, these stakeholders frequently framed the barriers in a way that blamed the parents—and not the schools—for the persistence of these problems. Furthermore, many stakeholders expressed the belief that the biggest barrier to engaging parents is that the majority of

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[4] "Other stakeholders" includes all stakeholders except parents reflecting on their own experiences with their own children. Thus, this section still contains the viewpoints of parents, but these parents occupy additional roles (e.g., district employees, PTO presidents, etc.) and are speaking primarily from these perspectives when they are cited in this section.

parents in Clarksville simply do not value education.   In other words, parents are not

involved because parents just do not care. Each of these barriers is discussed below.

Economics.

Most stakeholders in Clarksville agreed that the economic conditions in the city

make it difficult for many parents to muster the time and resources necessary to

participate in more formal ways in their children's schooling. The superintendent, Dr.

Johnson, described the Clarksville population in this way:

> … you have poor people captured, they don't have the wherefore—to move…
> This [economic situation] created [a] body of people that are captives, that just
> have to stay and continue. Everybody that's had, has resources has left. Only
> ones that are left are poor people… and [they] are left to the crumbs, that are…
> left to them by city and state and agencies. (Interview, December 7, 2007)

A local reverend, Paul Fritz, also stressed that Clarksville residents are in some ways

trapped by economic hardship:

> …you also have the problem within the city of poverty, of children giving birth to
> children, of…single-parent families, or sometimes single-grandparent families…
> You have people trying to simply survive, simply put a meal on the table, and
> they are, they have come through a failed district, and it's that cycle that
> continues… I have a choice to be here... The residents of the city don't have the,
> that privilege, White or Black, and that's where you run into, you hit smack
> against the justice issue of what's going on. (Interview, April 24, 2008)

Because of this reality, stakeholders explained that parents often work multiple jobs to

support their multiple children who attend all different schools, which makes

participation difficult.   As former PTO president, Donald Brose, explained, "you can't

expect parents to…be at meetings if they're working, if they're on second shift"

(Interview, June 14, 2012).

However, while the parents with whom I spoke focused on how economic

realities make it difficult for them to find time to spend at schools or with their children,

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other stakeholders emphasized how economic hardships contribute to a deteriorating family structure in Clarksville, with a large number of households headed by single mothers who pass on a sense of hopelessness to their children. As described in the literature (e.g., Friedel, 1999; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Reed, 2007), some school staff members have negative perceptions of poor and minority parents. Robert Linsley, a TIC caseworker who was raised in Clarksville, explained that families have changed a great deal since he was a child, with more young, single mothers in charge of households. Linsley said this family structure impacts "the investment…that families have in the home, as far as the… educational importance. A mother maybe have to work two jobs, so as a result that child is not getting that adult supervision in the home, and something has to go without, and a lot of times what lacks is the educational development" (June, 14, 2012). Similarly, Clarksville High School principal, Dr. Carman, argued that without stay-at-home mothers, children "have to fend for themselves, and that impacts school. That impacts their achievement, that impacts their behavior" (Interview, October 21, 2009). On a different note, teacher Rebecca Warren explained that two-parent, working families are able to impart stronger values to their children, and she found that her students are more likely to succeed in school if they have parents setting a positive example:

> Working adults know that you have to do well in school to be able to get a job, and they work every day, so their child sees how important a job is, you know. When you have a mom who's home by herself on welfare, me saying, you know, "If you're a better reader, you'll get a better job when you grow up," it really doesn't mean as much to them. (Interview, May 31, 2012)

Longtime Clarksville resident and recently elected School Board member, Evelyn Doonan, agreed, arguing that the newest generation of parents "are so caught up in trying

to make ends meet that they don't see the necessity [of becoming involved]… Did their parents go to school for them? Did they see their parents cussing their teacher out? And I think that started when children started having children" (Interview, June, 26, 2012). Thus, while stakeholders do not blame parents for the difficult economic times, many believe that parents adapt to their circumstances in dysfunctional ways.

Communication.

Poor communication was also cited as a barrier to participation. Like parents, many stakeholders felt the school district did not do enough to share information with families. For example, after a poorly attended back-to-school night at Clarksville High School, former PTO president Tonya Rollins told the current PTO president she was not surprised, explaining:

> I've not seen anything posted in the whole school, the whole time I've been volunteering there, since school started, I've not heard one announcement about it, nothing went to the kids about it, it wasn't on the marquee, we have a auto-dialer system, where you can call everybody's house that's a student at the high school and leave a recorded message. That wasn't utilized… And you'll say, "Parents don't care about, you know, their child's education." It's not fair to say that if you've not exhausted every effort to let them know. (Interview, October 1, 2009)

Angela Abernathy, TIC Director, explained that school staff members often do not give parents enough notice about events "because we're always behind the eight ball." She traced this problem back to the administration and gave an example:

> [The administration] is so overwhelmed that sometimes they're last minute… [Say] somebody [in the administration] told [somebody else] we had to [write a letter] on Monday, and then they come in on Monday, and the letter's not drafted on Monday cause someone else didn't look at it, someone else didn't see it, the superintendent's not here, it's a new superintendent, another superintendent, an acting superintendent, and then they finally get the letter out, and then it's Thursday, and the parents are like, "How dare you tell me on Thursday this is gonna happen on Friday?" (Interview, January 26, 2012)

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She added that because of budget problems, the district often does not know if specific programs will be able to run until the last minute, which often means sharing information at the last minute with parents. While parent liaisons were hired early in Dr. Johnson's tenure to help pass along important information to parents, community activist Brian Holden found that these liaisons "tended to get pulled for other jobs" and lacked adequate training (Interview, February 5, 2010).

While acknowledging that the schools could do better in terms of disseminating information, other stakeholders also blamed parents for difficulties with communication. Some employees said that parents frequently gave the district incorrect or outdated contact information, making them impossible to locate. Former PTO president Donald Brose explained that sometimes parents purposely give false addresses in order to send their children to particular district schools. He described tracking down one person who "was using [an] abandoned home address" as her own (Interview, June 14, 2012). At the TIC, Abernathy and her staff perform many home visits. "A lot of the times," Abernathy explained, "the homes are vacant." Not only that, but parents' phone numbers change frequently or are often disconnected. Abernathy stated, "I guarantee you half of the [phone] numbers [we have] are wrong" (Interview, October 5, 2009). TIC caseworker Thomas Posner explained that even when caseworkers can find parents, these parents are often unaware of basic information about their children's schools, such as what time the school day begins. Posner said the school's schedule is given to parents when they register their children, is posted on the website, and is listed on the district's cable channel, yet many parents do not understand when their children must arrive at the building (Interview, February 16, 2012).

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School environment.

Stakeholders also described how Clarksville schools are often unwelcoming to parents, noting that parents are sometimes treated poorly when they visit district schools. Donna Landreth, the director of a local educational foundation, said she observed firsthand the disrespect parents experience when they visit schools: "They're ignored, they sit for hours, they don't know what their rights are, they don't know what to expect, they don't know what to demand for their child, so it's a very, very uncomfortable situation" (Interview, March 26, 2009). Tanya Rollins said she would like to see some sensitivity training for staff members, because they often treat parents poorly:

> I've talked with parents and…they've said, "You know, when I come, I'm made to feel like they didn't want me there." And I've witnessed, you know, the front office and how sometimes you can be talked to a certain way, or talked very loudly or embarrassed almost, and so I think that's a problem… We're supposed to have parent centers, resource centers, in every school. We don't have 'em at Clarksville High School… And maybe, yes, [the parents] may come in looking like, "Wow," you know, they may come in wrong and in slippers and whatever, but it's still someone's parent. (Interview, October 1, 2009)

TIC caseworker Jasmine Richards added that school security was "awful" and frequently disrespected the parents (Interview, June, 14, 2012).

While some stakeholders felt the schools could be more accommodating, many others blamed the parents themselves for the negative reception they sometimes receive in district buildings. These stakeholders explained that parents often come to school defensive about their children or still upset about their own bad experiences in district schools. Teacher Rebecca Warren said that parents most frequently come to school because their children are having discipline problems, and under these circumstances, "they come in very defensive…they come in yelling… This year we've had so many cases of parents, you know, marching up and down the hallway, yelling and screaming

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and cussing" (Interview, May 31, 2012). Warren attributed this defensiveness to the

parents' own bad experiences in the school, saying:

> I want to say to parents, "Give it, give it a chance. Give us, you know, a chance
> before…we're prejudged." Not that… we always deserve a chance, but I think
> that a lot of parents, we have a lot of young parents, and… they didn't have a
> good school experience…and I think they really take that out on us through their
> kids. (Interview, December 5, 2007).

Elected School Board member Evelyn Doonan explained that sometimes parents are too

quick to become offended, arguing they lack interpersonal skills, and when teachers raise

issues about their children, the parents lash out. Doonan said, "They are so

frustrated…the fuse is so short, they start off being civil, and then somebody makes them

think they're playing on their intelligence, then they explode" (Interview, June, 26,

2012). Another elected School Board member, Jay Adams, said that because of their

own bad experiences in the district, parents are often in "attack mode" when they deal

with teachers, believing that "when I was in [school] you treated me wrong" (Interview,

June, 21, 2012).   In this respect, parents' behavior contributes to the unwelcoming

atmosphere in the schools.

Parenting resources.

Just as the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (n.d.)

identifies a lack of parenting skills as a major barrier to parental engagement,

stakeholders in Clarksville also felt that parents lacked access to knowledge and

information that would allow them to help their children in school. While parents talked

about lacking content knowledge and not having access to school curricula, other

stakeholders frequently complained that parents do not know how to parent and lack the

childrearing skills necessary to raise successful students. Dr. Johnson, the

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superintendent, acknowledged that while some parents are engaged, the district has "a cadre of parents that we gotta help them be more effective in their parenting…we gotta help these parents take back their homes. I got kids who run homes here" (Interview, December 1, 2008). Dr. Johnson hoped to help enroll parents in GED classes and possibly start a parent university. Indeed, the Parent Summits he later hosted provided community members with a variety of parenting resources. TIC Director Angela Abernathy complained that parents rely too heavily on the schools to do the hard work of parenting for them. She cited the example of one parent who called the TIC, demanding that someone come to her home to get her son out of bed and bring him to school. Abernathy said she felt it was "overwhelming that parents could become so… out of control." She clarified that she did not think parents want to be bad parents, but she said that some parents are just not "willing to put the work in" to raise happy, healthy children. Other parents, who are willing to work hard, often do not know where to start. When these parents reach out for assistance, Abernathy and the TIC staff try to find them resources (Interview, January 26, 2012). TIC caseworker Robert Linsley explained:

> I've learned that a lot of the parents are unclear, uncertain at times as to what is the best route to take to try to help their child to remain…in good academic standings in terms of coming to school, doing well in school, but also how do they manage the difficulties of safety, how do they manage the difficulties that plague the city at large, when it comes to their kids. So I'm learning that… you really have to be able to assist families that are in need to help them understand that the school district does have people in place to address those types of concerns that they have. (Interview, June 14, 2012)

Sandra Wayland, the program director at a local education foundation, perhaps best summed up all of these sentiments when I asked her what she would like the school district to look like in five years' time. She replied: "I'd like to see parents who

understand what it takes to raise children, and take advantage of resources that can help them" (Interview, December 19, 2007).

Value of education in general.

Stakeholders repeatedly stated the belief that parents in Clarksville simply do not value education, and many argued that this mindset creates the biggest barrier for parents' participation in their children's schooling. Some stated this belief in rather stark terms. George Miller, a former elected School Board member, said that many parents in Clarksville do not want their children to do better than they have done. Miller explained:

> My generation, my mother, everybody wanted us to be better and better and better… You always want your children to be better… We have third and fourth generations of kids living in the projects. Wow, that's pretty hard to say. We have it here in my community, we have the projects, and you just go from one project to another project, and as they get older, they get married, they live a project. Does anybody ever [leave]? Is this it? (Interview, October 19, 2007)

Miller felt that when children see their parents getting by on welfare, they do not feel compelled to live their lives any differently. While Miller is an older White man with no children of his own in the district, his sentiment was echoed by some African American parents with whom I spoke. Monica Nighman, for example, found that many Clarksville parents have "a mentality of… no goals, no drive, so you're born here, and then… you have kids here, and then they stay here, there's no drive" (Interview, June 1, 2009). Similarly, parent Jacqueline Allen stated that "a lot of people… they've lived [in Clarksville] all their life, 'This is the way it is,' is their motto" (Interview, May 3, 2012). Kevin Entler leveled a harsh assessment against his fellow parents: "you got some people who got to pick between Zumba, happy hour, Facebook, and their kid's education, and… you can look at a number and see how many people decide they want to come to these PTO meetings" (Interview, May 17, 2012). School administrators also complained that

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parents had misplaced priorities. Rosemary Marilo, the principal of Oak Grove Elementary School, argued that in Clarksville "there is a culture here of people that glorify the wrong things," noting that a lot of parents came to school to celebrate Valentine's day with their children, but the same parents never came for report card conferences (Interview, February 28, 2008). Dr. Carman, the principal of Clarksville High School said the key issue facing the district is "just getting our students and parents to really, really value education. Value… learning… doing extra on the outside, valuing education. I think they value education, but they don't value actually being… a learned person" (Interview, October 21, 2009). Stakeholders in a variety of positions liked to draw a comparison between attendance at high school basketball games and PTO meetings. Parent Connie Barns put it succinctly: "there is a big disconnect if you can have 500 [parents] to a basketball game and eight to the PTO meetings" (Interview, March 13, 2008).

Thus, stakeholders in Clarksville described a number of barriers that make it difficult for parents to participate in their children's education. While they identified many barriers similar to those noted by parents—economic hardship, poor communication, lack of knowledge, and unwelcoming schools—they often argued that parents themselves were to blame for these barriers. Ultimately, many stakeholders expressed the belief that parents in Clarksville simply do not value education, and this lack of regard for schooling makes overcoming any other barriers to their participation virtually impossible.

Conclusion

In sum, parents and other stakeholders in Clarksville described a number of opportunities for parents to engage at the individual level in the district. While parents detailed the ways in which they participate informally in their children's education, school officials stressed the number of formal opportunities that the district offers for parents to learn more about their children's progress and about the services that the district provides. Both parents and other stakeholders agreed that parents encounter numerous barriers as they try to become involved with Clarksville schools. However, while parents cited the low quality of education in Clarksville as the biggest obstacle to their engagement, other stakeholders argued that parents place a low value on education in general and are not willing to expend the necessary time and energy to help their children succeed in school.

These competing narratives about parental engagement in the district lead various stakeholders to push for different types of reform in order to improve educational opportunities. That is, while many parents would like to see reforms enacted to improve the quality of education in Clarksville, other stakeholders argue that the quality of education will not improve until parents begin to place some value in it. From 2007-2010, under the direction of Dr. Johnson and the Education Empowerment Board, and with an infusion of money from the state, the district implemented both types of reform, seeking to strengthen academic programs while also trying to engage more parents in formal venues. For example, in order to address student achievement, the district added new academic and extracurricular programs, tried to hire more qualified teachers, and developed detailed curricula for each grade level. In order to reach out to parents, the

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district hosted Parent Summits, implemented new means of communication, and started the Truancy Intervention Center.

If parent turnout at district-sponsored events can be used as one measure of the district's success in reforming programs and engaging families, then certainly Dr. Johnson and the Education Empowerment Board could boast of their accomplishments by the middle of their second year in the district. Over the first year and half, attendance at Parent Summits grew from 75 to over 700 parents (Field notes, April 10, 2008, November 19, 2009). At a board meeting in December 2009, Dr. Johnson began his report by describing the district's recent Winter Concert, where groups from all the schools performed to a "full house" in the Clarksville High School auditorium. He noted that the night before, students at the new Clarksville Arts Academy performed for another big crowd, and the previous Saturday, the Clarksville Children's Chorus sang for a large audience a local church. Dr. Johnson explained, "our parents turn out" and later added that "parent involvement is going to a different place in the district." In addition to seeing more parents at performances, Dr. Johnson noted that he also saw more parents at Clarksville High School for the distribution of report cards. He argued, "parents are being reenergized" (Field notes, December 17, 2009).

In addition, Dr. Johnson succeeded in getting parents to attend Empowerment Board meetings, at least once a marking period, when children and their families were invited to receive awards. While there were not typically a lot of parents at board meetings, during the award ceremonies, the boardroom was filled to capacity, with parents and students spilling out into the hallway. During these award ceremonies, which often lasted close to an hour, every principal in the district presented one award for

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academics, another for attendance, and a third for citizenship to different students from his/her school. Dr. Johnson clearly enjoyed the opportunity to interact with parents and students, and he called each award recipient to the front of the room to pose for a picture with himself and the Empowerment Board. He insisted that family members also be part of the photograph, explaining that the students "didn't do it by [themselves]!" (Field notes, January 28, 2010) Families seemed to enjoy the award ceremonies as much as the superintendent, with parents taking their own photographs and videos, and students coming dressed in fancy dresses and suits (Field notes, June 11, 2009, March 24, 2010). After one particularly well-attended awards ceremony, Empowerment Board member Paul Loedel expressed how pleased he was to see so many families come to the meeting, and he noted the number of men in attendance, saying their presence "debunked national myths" about fathers (Field notes, March 12, 2009).

After the Superintendent and the Empowerment Board departed in 2010, the elected School Board and the Acting Superintendent, Janet Hartmann, continued some of their initiatives. For example, the district hosted a Parents Summit in the Spring of 2011, and Dr. Hartmann reported there were 439 people in attendance (Field notes, May 19, 2011). In addition, during the 2010-2011 academic year, the district continued to host award ceremonies at board meetings, and they were still well-attended (Field notes, May 12, 2011, March 8, 2012). However, due to extreme budget cuts that occurred after Dr. Johnson's departure, there were fewer events for parents to attend in general, and fewer school staff and faculty with whom to interact. That said, the informal ways in which parents were involved in their children's education remained relatively consistent throughout my five years observing the district. Parents spoke about similar

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opportunities for and barriers to engagement, whether I talked with them in 2007 or 2012. I had the chance to conduct follow-up interviews with two parents, and though they certainly noted the changes in leadership in the district and the impact of the budget cuts, they explained that their own involvement in Clarksville schools had not changed a great deal over the years. In fact, when I spoke with Tonya Rollins and Elyse Mays for the second time, their children had graduated from the Clarksville School District; however, both women continued to work with other Clarksville students to provide support and encouragement.

In this sense, it is interesting to consider if parental engagement in formal venues is a prerequisite for a functioning school district, or if increased parental engagement is a side effect of improved and more welcoming schools. Given parents' growing presence at formal events during a period of investment in the district, as well as their consistent involvement in informal ways in their children's education over time, it is clear that many parents in Clarksville care a great deal about their children's schooling.   Thus, it stands to reason that a lack of participation in formal spaces does not indicate a lack of caring but may point to parents' lack of trust in school officials and to parents' history of dissatisfaction with the district.

Chapter 6: Parental Engagement at the Market Level

"Choice is only good if you have good choices."
—Derrick Johnson, Superintendent, EEB meeting, March 11, 2010

Introduction

This chapter explores parental engagement in Clarksville at the market level. At this level, parents have the ability to make their preferences known in the marketplace, enrolling their children in schools that best meet their needs. While parents who engage at the market level are seeking advantages for their own children, proponents of school choice often argue that involvement at this level may have a broader impact, as schools must innovate to meet consumer demands (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1999; Hadderman, 2002; Osborne, 1999). Moreover, supporters of school choice argue that a market model allows all parents—and not simply parents with the financial means—to participate equally in making educational decisions for their children (e.g., Friedman & Friedman, 1980; Manno et al., 1998; Viteritti, 2003).

During my time in Clarksville, I certainly saw parents take advantage of new choices that were offered, and I witnessed parents find creative ways to make choices when none seemed to exist. However, as Dr. Johnson noted in the quote above, the value of school choice depends to a large extent on the quality of the choices themselves. Therefore, this chapter explores the different choices available to Clarksville parents, and it considers the ways in which each choice represents both opportunities for and barriers to parental engagement. That is, how do various choices allow for parents to select better educational experiences for their children? On the other hand, what barriers prevent parents from making informed and beneficial choices? In what ways do the choices themselves limit parents' effective participation?

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Thus, this chapter explores the choices available to parents in the Clarksville School District, considering how an environment of school choice creates both opportunities and barriers for parents as they try to participate in their children's education. I begin by describing how some parents make the choice to take their children out of the district entirely, either by sending them to private or parochial schools or by moving to another district. Next, I detail how parents locate themselves strategically within the district in order to enroll their children in what they perceive as the better public schools in Clarksville. From there, I explain how parents exercise choice by enrolling their children in a variety of charter schools in the city. Lastly, I describe partnership schools in the district and consider how these schools both encourage and inhibit parents' participation.

Ultimately, I argue that while school choice is often framed as an opportunity to engage more parents in their children's education, each choice comes with its own set of barriers. From 2007-2012, the choices available for Clarksville students increased – new options emerged (e.g., there was a huge growth in cyber charter schools) and some already-existing options grew more robust (e.g., the charter school run by a for-profit management company rapidly expanded). However, parental engagement did not change appreciably as a result of this growth in choice. I contend that parents encountered many old barriers to engagement in these new settings, along with new barriers unique to the various choice options.

There is one exception to this claim: the issue of school choice provided an opportunity for parents to engage in policy discussions in the district. At public meetings and in private conversations, parents debated the merits and drawbacks of school choice,

particularly with respect to charter schools. These debates highlight the complexity of school reform in Clarksville, and they illustrate how parents sometimes felt torn between helping their own children and supporting the whole community. That is, while many parents believed charter schools were the best option for their children, they also conceded that charter schools drained valuable resources from the district. This choice that parents often had to make—between what is good for their children and what is good for their community—raises questions about the impact of school choice, particularly in poor districts. In other words, what does it mean that parents have to make this decision? Under a market model of education, does individual success necessarily have to come at the expense of community wellbeing? With these questions in mind, this chapter explores the four choices that exist for parents in Clarksville.

Choice One: Leave the District

In an initial interview, Dr. Johnson explained that anyone who could afford to leave Clarksville had already left, describing the remaining residents as "a body of people that are captives, that just have to stay and continue" (Interview, December 7, 2007). While indeed many families lack the means to relocate to another school district, some of the parents with whom I spoke actively sought ways to enroll their children in schools—both public and private—outside of the Clarksville School District. This section explores both the opportunities and barriers parents encountered as they tried to send their children to out-of-district schools.[5]

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[5] Because charter schools are considered public schools in the district, they represent a different option, and they are discussed in a separate section below.

Opportunities.

Parents and teachers frequently cited local parochial schools as one viable alternative to schools in the Clarksville School District. Two former presidents of the Clarksville High School PTO described how they sent their children to parochial school while they were in elementary grades. Donald Brose explained how his oldest daughter received a "well-grounded" education from a local Catholic school (Interview, June 14, 2012). Likewise, Tonya Rollins sent her children to a Christian school prior to high school, and she found that it "was just a much better option [in terms of] course offering [and] class size" (Interview, December 7, 2007). Jacqueline Allen described taking her eleventh-grade son out of one of the district's specialty high schools after budget cuts reduced staff and programming, bringing class sizes up to 45-50 students. She sent him to a nearby Catholic school, which she felt would better prepare him for college. She wanted him "to get an opportunity that everyone else in the country is getting" (Interview, May 3, 2012). Her three youngest children attend a Catholic elementary school in Clarksville, as well. Linda Drazen, a teacher at Oak Grove Elementary School, explained that she had both of her children in private schools, though she enrolled her youngest daughter at Oak Grove after the superintendent reinstituted science and social studies as part of the curriculum (Interview, November 5, 2007). Rebecca Warren, a teacher at McKinley Elementary School, found that often the "really good families" take their children out of McKinley and are "willing to pay" for Catholic school in order to have their children in smaller classes with better behaved students (Interview, May 31, 2012).

Some parents also tried to send their children to neighboring public school districts. Jay Adams, who was elected to the Clarksville School Board in 2010, described how he tried to keep his children out of Clarksville public schools when he first moved to the district in 1994. He wanted to leave his children in the neighboring district where they currently attended school to "finish out that school year," but he said officials from that district discovered he was no longer living in the district, and his children had to attend Clarksville schools (Interview, June 21, 2012). Nailah Smith explained that her oldest son attended a public school in a district some distance from Clarksville, free of cost. He found the experience "totally different" from Clarksville, "because he got to see, you know, the sports and the arts, and just different things like that… like the computer lab is like amazing and everything" (Interview, June 9, 2011). When I asked Smith for more details about how she secured this placement, she said she "signed up for it" and relied on her "gift of gab" to advocate for her son in order to ensure that he could attend a better high school. Based on our conversation, I presume Smith was able to enroll her son in a different district due to the public school transfer provisions of *No Child Left Behind*, which allow parents to send their children to other public schools if their own schools are in corrective action. However, the details of her son's enrollment are not entirely clear to me.

Lastly, despite limited resources, some parents did plan to move to better school districts if the options for their children in Clarksville did not improve. Monica Nighman, a staff member at Hamilton Charter School with children in Clarksville public schools, said that when her children are ready to attend high school, she will leave the district, and she added that many parents have similar plans:

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… it's the same thing that parents are saying here [at Hamilton Charter], if after our charter is up, and they have to put their children back [in the district], they're gonna move… They don't wanna take the chance—they said it'll be too much of a shock, and it would be, it would be too much of a shock to throw them [in Clarksville High School]. (Interview, June 1, 2009)

While Nighman did not address if moving was a realistic option for many parents, she did underscore these parents' desperation to keep their children out of the district's schools. She recounted interactions with parents seeking to enroll their children in Hamilton Charter:

Yeah, cause they'll say to me… my child is just so lost, my child is just a quiet child, and that when you go in [to district schools], they're just shocked, they come home, they're so upset, they're this and that, you know, because of all these things that's going on in their classroom. Or they were in a school before that was a smaller setting, and you throw 'em into a room with, like, 30 children that are just—"I have to get my son out of there," and that's all they say. And even if they don't come here, they can't go to the district. (Interview, June 9, 2009)

Thus, for many parents, finding a way to leave the district is of utmost importance, and possible options include paying for private and parochial schools, enrolling in different public districts, and moving out of Clarksville.

Barriers.

While several parents with whom I spoke were able to send their children to parochial schools, all of those parents described experiencing some degree of financial hardship as a result of their decision. Both PTO presidents eventually had to enroll their children in district schools because they did not have enough money to keep them in parochial schools any longer. While Jacqueline Allen was able to send her son to Catholic school for his last two years of high school, she "exhausted [her] 401(k)" in order to do so. Moreover, she had another son who was a senior in high school, and she had to keep him in the district to finish his education because she could not afford to

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transfer both of her sons. She said it was "difficult" leaving him in that environment, but she had to "pick [her] poison" and her younger son "had a lot more to lose and opposed to my senior, he was already doing co-op, so he was already at [a local university] half day…" (Interview, May 3, 2012). Linda Drazen, a teacher at Oak Grove Elementary, noted it was "killing [her] financially to send [her daughter] to private school" (Interview, November 5, 2007).

In addition, for some students, the change from a Clarksville public school to a private school can be difficult, and parents are not sure how to ease the transition. Jacqueline Allen noted that while her son took all honors classes in Clarksville, he was not prepared for the honors classes at his Catholic high school, which Allen described as "a completely different scale of school" (Interview, May 3, 2012). She said he struggled through his first semester, and he frequently asked her, "Why didn't I get this before?" Allen said she did not know how to respond to him, because there were "opportunities that ninth graders have there [at the Catholic school] that ninth graders here [in Clarksville] have never heard of…sometimes money buys things" (Interview, May 3, 2012). On a different note, while Nailah Smith's son appreciated the opportunities available in the public district where he attended school, eventually the commute became too much for him, and he returned to Clarksville (Interview, June 9, 2011).

Parents also faced challenges in enrolling their children in other public districts. While Nailah Smith was able to enroll her son in a well-regarded suburban school, her experience is fairly unique. When I spoke with Peter Trallis, a member of one of the former state-appointed Control Boards in Clarksville, he described reaching out to neighboring districts, explaining, "Under the *No Child Left Behind*, if your school is

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failing, and they all were failing, you had to offer an option. We wrote to every school district in [the county], they all refused [to take our students]" (Interview, October 24, 2007). In addition, while many parents expressed a desire to move, their limited financial resources often meant relocating was not a possibility. When I spoke with Lisa Jordan, mother of five, she noted, "This is the worst school district our kids can be in," and added, "if I could move my son from outta here, I would" (Interview, June 2, 2011). Kevin Entler, a father in the district, said that he often hears other parents talk about moving out of the district, but he dismisses their plans. He explained that parents say, "'Well, I'm getting my kids outta here,' knowing [they] ain't got no, a dime to go nowhere else" (Interview, May 17, 2012). In fact, Entler felt these empty threats to move could ultimately have a negative impact on students' school success. He argued that if parents always speak negatively about the schools, their children will adopt the same attitude, making teachers reluctant to work with them.

Thus, while some parents have the resources to send their children to schools outside of the Clarksville school district, these parents are the exceptions rather than the rule. Moreover, the decision to move one's child out of Clarksville public schools often comes with its own share of hardships, as parents have to deal with additional expenses, long commutes, and new academic stressors for their children.

Choice Two: Strategically Locate Within the District

While parents do not necessarily have the means to move outside of Clarksville, many parents described relocating within the city limits—or pretending to relocate within the city limits—as a way of choosing which Clarksville elementary school their children attend. Similarly, some parents described talking to school principals directly to enroll

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their children in a school outside of their neighborhood. Though parents create these possibilities for choice, these alternatives come with their own set of obstacles; both these opportunities and barriers are discussed below.

Opportunities.

When I met with Michelle Mitford, the principal of Hamilton Charter School, she encouraged me to explore the ways in which parents in Clarksville are "constantly searching for different choices [or] educational options." She explained:

> …you'll see every once in a while that [parents] move their kids from here to here, from this school to that school, from this to that, because they're trying to find what works for their kid, and their family… It might be that they don't like, you know, McKinley or Wilson or they're gonna try to get them into [a new partnership school], you know, so they're moving them around… I don't know what the impact of that is on the kids, but I know that it exists. (Interview, June 1, 2009)

Other school administrators also noted this phenomenon. Assistant Superintendent Janet Hartmann explained that parents have been stretching the attendance boundaries since she started in the district. As a principal of one of the more desirable elementary schools, Oak Grove, she had "75 kids my first year that I had to talk to parents and say, 'Your child doesn't belong here,' [because] they didn't live in the attendance area" (Interview, September 28, 2007).   Rosemary Marilo, who held the position of principal at Oak Grove more recently, had a similar experience. She recalled asking one of her teachers: "How many kids in this school live in your house?" because so many children who attended Oak Grove used this teacher's address (Interview, February 28, 2008).

Angela Abernathy, the director of the Truancy Intervention Center (TIC), explained that oftentimes, parents move within the city of Clarksville and do not notify the school district—or they do notify the school district, and no one changes their address

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in the district's database (Interview, February 13, 2013). Thomas Posner, a caseworker at the TIC, said that when he goes on home visits to meet with parents, "much too often, we find where there's no one home, or the home is vacant, or the home is boarded up" (Interview, February 16, 2012). While some of these parents have certainly provided their new address to the district—Abernathy described finding hundreds of student address cards that are collected by school nurses but never entered into the computer system—other parents intentionally maintain their outdated address in order to continue to send their children to a particular school. For example, Donald Brose, a parent who briefly worked as a non-teaching assistant in the district, described searching for a parent whom the district was unable to contact. He discovered that she was using the address of a vacant home. When he found her, she admitted that she was lying about her address and implored Brose, "Don't tell them that I'm using that address" (Interview, June 14, 2012).

Abernathy also noted that parents may have their children's grandparents or other family members register their children for school, so that the children can attend a particular school in that family member's neighborhood. While adults are required to provide proof of legal guardianship when they register their children for school, secretaries often do not follow the district's protocol. Abernathy explained that sometimes school staff members may register a child without proof of guardianship because they know the family personally or because someone came to the office and "gave 'em such a hard time" (Interview, February 13, 2013). In some cases, the grandparents may indeed be taking care of their grandchildren; in other situations, however, the children live with their parent(s) but use the grandparents' address to attend

a school in a different area in Clarksville. These cases often come to Abernathy's attention when the grandparent (or other relative) receives a fine because the student they registered has been truant. In court, the grandparents protest: "I shouldn't get this fine, because I'm not the legal guardian." When Abernathy explains that the student has to attend school where his/her legal guardian resides, the relatives argue, "This is my grandchild, I'm not gonna let my grandchild go there!" (Interview, February 13, 2013)

In addition to these cases, Abernathy said that parents of special education students who receive out-of-district services frequently lie about their addresses. Abernathy explained that, by law, if the schools in Clarksville cannot provide the service(s) a student needs, then the school district must pay the tuition and transportation fees associated with sending that child to a different public or private school. Sometimes, after parents have finally secured an appropriate placement for their child, they move. However, they do not want to jeopardize their child's placement by registering in a new district. According to Abernathy, the new district can choose to reevaluate the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and see if they have a program in-district that "fits the needs" of the child (Interview, February 13, 2013).   Ironically, therefore, parents lie about living in Clarksville so that their children can continue receiving services outside of Clarksville. For example, in one particular case, the Clarksville School District paid approximately $16,000 a year to send a woman's son to an out-of-district school that specializes in working with students who have cerebral palsy. However, Abernathy discovered that the parent no longer resided in Clarksville, as she was living with her boyfriend in a nearby city. Her name was not on her boyfriend's lease, so she could not register her child for school in the new district because she could not provide

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proof of residency there. Moreover, she wanted to keep her son in his current placement, so she gave the Clarksville School District her mother's address in Clarksville. When Abernathy confronted the grandmother, after receiving a tip from the transportation department that the student was never at the grandmother's house for his morning pick-up, the grandmother explained that she did not have—and did not want—legal guardianship of her grandson. Abernathy told her that if she did not file for guardianship, her grandson could not remain in the district. The father, a Clarksville resident, eventually took legal guardianship, though the mother clearly continued to care for her son, coming to all of his IEP meetings and visiting the school without the father. I asked Abernathy if this type of case is unusual, and she responded that when she previously worked for the district in the special education department, she was required to verify addresses for special education students with out-of-district placements.   She estimated that about a third of the children whom she investigated no longer lived in Clarksville (Interview, February 13, 2013).

While some parents lie about their address, other parents are able to live near their preferred school. Parent Lisa Jordan explained that despite her overall displeasure with the school district, she does like Central Elementary School: "I've always, none of my children have never been to another school, we've always seen that we lived right where Central was at."   In fact, she noted that "in the last five years, I moved across the street, so that was even better, so, and I like Central" (Interview, June 2, 2011).   When she recently had to move closer to another elementary school, Jordan explained that she talked with the principal and was able to keep her son at Central. She explained that because of her son's ADHD, she felt that McKinley Elementary School would be "a bad

choice for him." While Jordan was able to keep her son at Central, the district would not

provide transportation for him, which posed a significant challenge for Jordan (Field

notes, May 12, 2011).

Similarly, Nailah Smith described convincing two consecutive principals of

Central Elementary School to let her younger children continue attending the school after

the catchment area changed and her children were supposed to attend Wilson Elementary

School. Smith implored both of these principals to allow her children to stay at Central:

> I said, "My kids aren't gonna make it at Wilson," like, I'm gonna be at Wilson
> every day, and I will probably be the mother like, "Errr," you know… I told the
> principal at the time… Mr. Andrews and then Mr. Andrews left and then it was
> Ms. Rodgers, I said, "My kids aren't gonna make it there, like, they are not used
> to what's going on at Wilson. I'm not used to what's going on at Wilson."… I
> basically spoke for my kids and told [the principals], you know, what they're…
> accustomed to, and it was like, "Okay," you know. I guess a parent that cares,
> that's all the principals like, you know, for a parent that cares, you know. [The
> principals said,] "I understand where you're coming from," so it, that worked.
> (Interview, June 9, 2011)

In this case, Smith tried to convince the principals of Central that she would be an asset to

their school—and truly a nuisance to the staff at Wilson Elementary School. Smith

believed the principals were impressed with her caring attitude and understood her

concerns, so her children did not have to transfer. In fact, Abernathy confirmed that "the

principal can make a decision, like, you can ask for a school transfer, there's actually a

transfer form." She added, "good kids, not a problem, they can move all over the city of

Clarksville" and usually their principal will allow them to remain at the school in which

they originally enrolled (Interview, February 13, 2013).

In sum, parents have to be creative and persistent—and sometimes dishonest—in

order to make choices within the Clarksville School District. While the parents described

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in this section were often able to exercise some form of choice, they still faced significant

barriers. These barriers are discussed in more detail below.

Barriers.

While some parents were able to work with principals to enroll their children in

schools outside of their catchment zones, other parents found that their children's

principals were not as accommodating. For instance, Elizabeth Cooper described her

efforts to transfer her middle son, Michael, from Wilson elementary school back to

Central Elementary School because he was being bullied. Cooper explained:

> Michael has been back and forth between Wilson and Central due to the fact that
> he is disabled. He has Asperger's syndrome, he has Tourette's, and they're trying
> to rule out bipolar… He was bullied, terrible. Something fierce in Central at first,
> two years ago, and then I took him out of there and put him in Wilson, where [the
> director of special education] said he would be much better over here at Wilson
> because of the IEP programs that they have there. So I took him over there, and
> the bullying got worse. I mean, it was on a daily basis that Michael was getting
> beat on… Michael would call me up crying, and he'd have stab marks in his back
> from this girl stabbing him in the back with a pen, and he'd have lumps, like, the
> size of golf—I mean, softballs on his head and face would be all black and blue
> from being punched on, but yet nobody saw anything. No one saw nothing, he
> was supposed to have an aid, we couldn't rely on any aids to be with him at all
> times, like they're supposed to be. (Interview, March 15, 2012)

When even prosecuting the worst offenders did not alleviate the bullying, Cooper decided

she wanted to transfer her son back to Central.   However, she explained that the principal

of Wilson told her, "the only way to get him out of this school and get him back into

Central was to mainstream him, and vacate his IEP. So that's what I did" (Interview,

March 15, 2012). Cooper said her son seemed to be "doing a lot better" at Central,

though later in the interview she shared that "Michael's teacher [at Central] attacked him

last year, and tackled him to the floor, because he tried to leave the classroom"

(Interview, March 15, 2012).   Cooper declined to press charges against the teacher

because she did not "feel like making the front page on the newspaper and all that." She added that she did not want to complain about Central, "Because now he's safe, and I feel safe sending him, and I'm not having any more problems" (Interview, March 15, 2012).

In addition, while principals sometimes grant transfers or school staff members occasionally overlook inaccurate addresses, Abernathy noted that with "discipline problems, everything comes out" (Interview, February 13, 2013). She explained that if a child suddenly causes trouble in school, due to bad behavior or because of excessive absences or lateness, school officials may contact the TIC, asking Abernathy to verify the student's residence. The parents, not surprisingly, often react angrily to Abernathy's inquiries, as they suspect that the sudden interest in their address is "because their child's acting up" not because of any real interest in protecting the school's boundaries. Abernathy went on to explain, "If [the] child wasn't a problem, you might not ever find out that they lived somewhere else and went to that school" (Interview, February 13, 2013). Even when students are not acting out, with the introduction of the Truancy Intervention Center, it is increasingly difficult for parents to provide incorrect contact information and go undetected. One of the TIC's primary goals is to go into the community and locate parents, either to deal with specific attendance concerns or simply to verify addresses.

Moreover, though many parents believe they are helping their children by seeking out the best options within the district, some researchers contend that this constant movement is detrimental to students' education. For example, in a review of literature that addresses this issue of student transience, Rumberger (2003) finds that "students can suffer psychologically, socially, and academically from mobility" (p. 8). Moreover,

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Rumberger points to research that demonstrates a connection between high rates of mobility and low overall test scores, higher administrative costs, and a lack of "cohesiveness" in the entire school community (pp. 11-12). Indeed, in Clarksville, Linda Drazen, a teacher at Oak Grove Elementary, found the ever-changing composition of her classroom to be a significant challenge to her instructional practices and students' success. She explained, "you have the fact that you have a lot of kids that are transient, that move from one school to another, or move from one district to another, the parents don't stay… And that's a big… hindrance to our children" (Interview, November 5, 2007). Drazen explained that as a result of being moved around, children frequently miss days of school and encounter difficulty when trying to catch up on what they missed, especially in a district with oversized classes where students are sometimes "just another number" (Interview, November 5, 2007).

Moreover, it is important to emphasize that when parents try to locate strategically within the district in order to choose a better school for their children, they do not have a significant number of options from which to choose. At the time of this study, there were four public non-charter elementary schools in the district, and none of these schools was particularly successful as measured by students' scores on state achievement tests. In fact, according to the State Department of Education's Academic Achievement Report for 2011-2012, none of the elementary schools in Clarksville made Adequate Yearly Progress, and all were in some form of Corrective Action under *No Child Left Behind*. Test scores in all four schools were low, as illustrated in the Table 6.1:

Table 6.1.

State-Standardized Test Scores at Elementary Schools in Clarksville, 2011-2012

School	% at or above proficient in reading	% at or above proficient in math
Central Elementary School	49.5	49.2
McKinley Elementary School	36.9	51.2
Oak Grove Elementary School	34.1	38.4
Wilson Elementary School	17.8	26.2

Source: State Department of Education's Academic Achievement Report, 2011-2012.

Even if parents specifically enroll their children in the highest performing elementary schools in the district, their children still attend school where less than half the students are at or above proficiency in reading and mathematics (with the slight exception of McKinley, which can boast that 51.2% of its students are proficient in math). In addition, when parents talk about better school climate, they typically speak in a manner of degree, considering which schools provide the least stressful environments. For instance, Elizabeth Cooper moved her son back to Central Elementary School not because he was not bullied there, but because he was bullied to a lesser extent than he was at Wilson.

In sum, moving within the district represents a limited form of choice for parents, at best. Still, some parents go to great lengths to move their children within the district in order to support their children academically and socially. In general, parents do not expect to find an ideal elementary school for their children in Clarksville; rather, they hope to enroll their children in the least bad alternative.

Choice Three: Charter Schools

For parents who do not want to send their children to Clarksville public schools, but who cannot afford to move or enroll their children in private institutions, charter

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schools provide another alternative. At the time of this study, there were four types of charter schools in Clarksville: a university partnership charter school, a charter school run by a for-profit management company, a non-profit charter school founded by community members, and an array of cyber charter schools.   Before discussing the opportunities and barriers this type of choice presents for parental engagement, it is useful to describe the charter schools in more detail, as each school has a unique history and role in the district.

University partnership: Hamilton Charter School.

Hamilton Charter School opened in 2006 as a partnership school with Hamilton University, a small university near the center of Clarksville. The school started with 100 students, split between kindergarten and first grade, and it adds 50 students and an additional grade level each year. This charter school is distinctive in that it receives a significant amount of support from Hamilton University, both in terms of financial and academic resources.   The founding principal of Hamilton Charter, Michelle Mitford said "the university really has tried to put its resources…where's it's mouth is, and… it's been an expensive venture for them" (Interview, June 1, 2009).   The President of Hamilton University, Tom Elmore, described some of the investments the university has made in the school: "[The school] is beautiful. And we've got all certified teachers, we're paying them above the average for the school district, so all our money is going directly into the school, there's no profit to Hamilton, we're raising money outside. We invested $8 million in the building. I mean it is absolutely what should happen in Clarksville" (Interview, September 18, 2008).

Parents and staff associated with Hamilton Charter School argued that the school provides a strong academic foundation for their children. Principal Mitford distinguished

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the school from the district's other charter schools based on its academic philosophy. Mitford explained, "…we're very different from the other two charter schools. We consider ourselves to be more constructivist, we consider ourselves to be more holistically driven" (Interview, October 29, 2007). Donna Price, a parent at Hamilton Charter School, said that she was drawn to the school because of it's "progressive attitude towards education [and its] broad-spectrum type of curriculum, including art, Spanish, [and] music" (Interview, October 31, 2007). Another parent, Jasmine Richards, who did not have children at the school, reported that Hamilton Charter has a reputation for challenging the students "so that they can be prepared for anything" (Interview, June 14, 2012).

Though the school has many strong supporters, Hamilton Charter also encounters opposition because of its affiliation with the university. In fact, there is a long history of negative relations between Hamilton University and the community. Mitford recalled parents sharing stories "about how they weren't allowed to walk on Hamilton's grass, about how they got… picked up from Hamilton security…" when they were younger (Interview, October 29, 2007). Tom Elmore described what town-gown relations were like when he started his tenure as president of Hamilton University, noting:

> [The previous administration] had become so frustrated with Clarksville, they were going to build an eight-foot wrought-iron fence with one entrance, all the way around it, like a prison, because they were so afraid of Clarksville… And the only program that was really invested in the city was the social work program, but they had to do it under the lights, they couldn't let the administration know they were in the city with the students and so forth. (Interview, September 18, 2008)

While Elmore stated that engagement with the community is a priority of his administration, many community members are wary of the university's involvement in public education, given the school's history in Clarksville.

For-profit management company: Clarksville Charter School.

Clarksville Charter School (CCS) was founded in 1998 by a local lawyer, Reuben Chevalier, who is also the founder of a for-profit management company that operates the charter school. Chevalier is a controversial figure in Clarksville, in part due to the profits he has made off of the school, and in part due to his role as a major campaign donor to the Republican governor who supports the unchecked growth of charter schools. Indeed, Clarksville Charter School continually seeks to expand. According to newspaper reports, CCS enrolls more than half the district's students in grades K-8, and almost two-thirds of the district's kindergarteners.

For many parents, Clarksville Charter School provides a secure space in which their children can pass the school day. On its website, CCS boasts a "safe, warm, caring environment," and local stakeholders agree that it represents a more orderly option for many parents. Andrea Barela, president of the teacher's union, argued that if the district schools want to compete with CCS, they "gotta bring safety." In particular, Barela explained that unlike district schools, charter schools have more flexibility in dealing with disruptive students, and they can remove unruly children from their classrooms or from the school entirely (Interview, September 30, 2007). Michelle Mitford, principal of Hamilton Charter, agreed that CCS has grown because the school "has been able to maintain a degree of order" (Interview, June 1, 2009). A local newspaper detailed the lengths to which the school goes to create this sense of security, with "surveillance cameras [that] scan classrooms, hallways, and stairways. [The principal] can watch and even listen in on classes, monitoring students and teachers" (March 18, 2012).

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While many parents are pleased with the school, others stakeholders expressed doubts about the motives of the school's founder, Chevalier. In the first interview I conducted about Clarksville, Sharon Mancini, a reporter, raised the issue of the Clarksville Charter School. She told me, "you gotta try to get in there and look at it," noting that Chevalier, "classifies a lot of kids as special ed and doesn't give them a lot of services. He manages to, you know, eek out a big profit" (Interview, September 20, 2007). Another reporter at Mancini's paper conducted a series of investigative reports about Clarksville Charter School in which he detailed how Chevalier could profit from over-identifying special education students. The report explained that CCS receives three times as much money in subsidies for special education students as it does for regular education students ($23,000 compared to $8,000). However, only 3.2% of those special education students are "severely impaired," (compared to 17.5% in the district) and 43.0% of those students are "speech- or language-impaired" (compared to 5.4% in the district). Speech- and language-impaired students require less costly interventions, and under the state's charter laws, schools are allowed to keep their entire special education allotment, even if all the money is not spent on special education services (December 28, 2008). Stakeholders wonder what happens to this extra money, but the school will not share what it pays in fees to Chevalier's management company. A more recent article cited a state report that found the "charter school pays [Chevalier's management company] a fee of about $5,600 per student… That totals $16.7 million this school year—more than 41 percent of the charter school's budget" (March 18, 2012). Indeed, CCS is emblematic of many for-profit charter schools that privilege business and commercial interests as they provide educational services (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997).

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Community non-profit: Anchor Academy Charter School.

Anchor Academy represents another type of charter school in the district; started by community members, it was run as a non-profit for ten years before the Clarksville School District took control due to its rising debt and chronically low scores on state standardized tests. While Anchor Academy only existed as a charter for one year of this study (2007-2008), I still discuss the school in this chapter, because many parents and other stakeholders recalled their experiences with the charter school, both positive and negative.

George Miller, a former elected School Board member, explained how he helped a group of concerned community members start the school. From his vantage point as a board member, he saw, "a group of parents, they were still raising Cain. I said, 'Wait a second, they just passed a law for Christ's sake, go get your charter, go do your own school if you think you can do it better than us. Go do it.' And that's how I got involved" (Interview, October 19, 2007). Miller said that he helped these parents with the application, as the school was "a mom and pop thing," and he was able to provide some knowledge of the educational system and local politics. Miller praised the school's "strong Christian background," and said the school has "better disciplined kids" – in part due to its Christian values, and in part due to the 33 cameras positioned inside the school, monitoring students' behavior (Interview October 19, 2007).

While the school received positive reviews for its safe and caring environment, the academic programs were not as well regarded. Tonya Rollins, who enrolled her children in Anchor Academy as an alternative to Clarksville High School, found that it was not "conducive for learning" (Interview, December 7, 2007). Robert Quillen, a local

professor who studied the area's charter schools came to a similar conclusion about

Anchor Academy. He explained that his research team "had lots of conversations with

folks who were interfacing with Anchor Academy [and we found] just how far off the

Board of Trustees and the… administrative staff were, in terms of… what the initial

mission was and what they were actually doing" (Interview, February 14, 2008). Peter

Trallis, a member of one of the state-appointed Control Boards, was more blunt in his

assessment of the school. Trallis explained when he was on the board, they had plans to

close Anchor Academy, and there was a strong negative reaction in the community:

> So we were going to close [Anchor Academy], and the parents were screaming,
> they didn't want their kids going to… district schools… One of the reasons why
> they wanted charter schools is because they didn't think the district schools were
> safe. They didn't care that their kids weren't learning, they wanted safety above
> everything else… I asked this woman, I says, "These are the worst test scores in
> the district, why would you send your kid there?" [She replied] "I know he's
> learning something, but it's safety." (Interview, October 24, 2007)

Trallis said that his board was unable to close the school for a variety of reasons;

however, Anchor Academy was eventually taken over by the school district in 2008 when

it did not improve its test scores.

Cyber Charter Schools.

While cyber charter schools have existed in the state since the early 2000s, I did

not hear much about them in Clarksville until the 2011-2012 school year, when they

increased dramatically in popularity among parents and students. That year, the district

experienced deep budget cuts that led to school closings and overcrowded classrooms. In

January of 2012, the district ran out of money to pay its teachers, and the future of the

district seemed uncertain. Board meetings became increasingly contentious, with parents

sharing how upset they were about conditions in the schools and demanding answers

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from the board. At one of these meetings, the board members did not allow all the parents in attendance to speak—some parents did not know the protocol and had failed to sign up in order to address the board. The meeting ended abruptly amidst cries of protest from angry parents, as they expressed concern about the quality of education that their children were receiving. That night, when I walked to my car, I found a flier on the windshield. Looking around, I saw fliers on the windshields of every car in the administration building's parking lot. On the flier, there was an advertisement for a cyber charter school, announcing in bold, capital letters that it was "ENROLLING TODAY," as two African American children stood smiling in front of a computer (Field notes, January 12, 2012).

Indeed, my experiences in truancy court provide additional evidence that more and more parents see cyber charter schools as a safer, more reliable alternative to district schools. For instance, at a court hearing at the end of January 2012, one mother of a truant ninth grader expressed her desire to enroll her son in a cyber charter school. She told the judge, in regard to her son's 35 unexcused absences, "You know for a fact how [Clarksville High School] is," adding that students leave the building because "things are going on in the school" (Field notes, January 26, 2012). At that same hearing, another mother explained that her ninth-grade son was not attending school because she believed his life was in danger there, noting that on one occasion there were 16 children waiting outside of his classroom to attack him. She said she was going to an open house at one of the cyber charter schools that night to enroll her son (Field notes, January 26, 2012). At a later court date, another mother explained to Judge Gwenn that her ninth-grade daughter was in "crisis," because she was being bullied at the high school. The daughter had

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missed 52 days of school, and the mother said she was trying to get her daughter homeschooled, presumably through a cyber charter (Field notes, February 9, 2012). On occasion, Ms. Abernathy, director of the TIC, recommended cyber charter schools as an option for students who had excessive truancy. For example, at a court-mandated parent group meeting, Abernathy suggested to one of the parents, Elizabeth Cooper, that she consider a cyber charter school for her oldest son, John. As John frequently refused to go to school, Abernathy wondered if he might be more successful if he could complete his schoolwork at home (Field notes, March 8, 2012).

In sum, the four different types of charter schools in Clarksville have varied histories in the district and are viewed quite differently by stakeholders. Taken together, however, these charter schools present parents with both opportunities for and barriers to engaging in their children's education. These opportunities and barriers are discussed below.

Opportunities.

The choice to send one's children to any one of these charter schools presents parents with a variety of opportunities to engage in their children's education. Proponents of charter schools contend that they allow parents and community members to design educational settings that meet the needs of their particular students and their families (Levin, 1999; Hadderman, 2002). For example, some charter schools boast family-friendly environments, inviting parents into their buildings and encouraging parents to interact with the staff. Given that Anchor Academy was founded by Clarksville residents, it is not surprising that community members, particularly parents, were welcome in the school. In fact, parents and school officials often spoke of the

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school in terms of family. Jasmine Richards explained that her oldest son attended Anchor Academy since the day that it opened. She valued the sense of community in the school, noting, "we were really like a family there" (Interview, June 14, 2012).   When I asked Richards what helped create this welcoming environment, she said:

> Because everything happened from within. You didn't have to go to a main building for this, or you didn't have to go to a certain department to have this done, everything was in house, the principal was, you know, the overseer of everything, and I think we only had two principals, but they were very open to the families. We have, we had lots, I'll say get-togethers where we would come together and talk about the kids, what we can do to make things better, the PTO was phenomenal, lots of parents engaged in it, you know. And the teachers were… just really open and friendly and not just with me, not just because I was one of the parents who was always there. So, it made it very comfortable for myself and my children. (Interview, June 14, 2012)

George Miller, who helped found Anchor Academy, agreed, noting, "Anchor Academy had a rare way of getting everybody, the families involved. There was more of a family oriented, a lot of parents in the building, which led to a lot of calmness in the building…" (Interview, January 13, 2009). In addition, for a time, Anchor Academy enrolled students in kindergarten through twelfth grade, the only charter school in the district to go beyond eighth grade. Jay Adams, a member of the most recently elected School Board, reported that when he first moved to the district, he and his wife were drawn to Anchor Academy because the school enrolled children in every grade. As a result of Anchor Academy's K-12 offerings, Adams could have all of his children in the same building. Adams explained that this type of setting helped create a "family… environment" and "that's why a lot of people chose the charter back then… because you can keep the siblings in one school" (Interview, June 21, 2012).

Similarly, parents described feeling welcome at Hamilton Charter School. For example, parent Donna Price compared her experience at Hamilton Charter with her

friends' experiences at district schools. While some of Price's friends have never met

their children's principals, Price reported that at Hamilton Charter, the principal's "door

is always open, you can talk to her anytime." Moreover, she said the principal truly cares

about her son, noting, "It seems like every one of these children is her child" (Interview,

October 31, 2007). Likewise, Price felt the teachers were equally accessible and kind.

Price said that, in general, Hamilton Charter has a high level of parental involvement,

explaining:

> I think our parents are extremely concerned. Because, you have to remember, we
> had to work hard to get our kids into this school, you know, we had to come to the
> meetings, we had to fill out all the paperwork, and meet with all the teachers, and
> go through all the testing, you know… It was very, very important to us to get our
> kids into this school, so we're already interested, you know what I mean? It's not
> like we just came and registered them, and then left, you know. (Interview,
> October 31, 2007)

In addition to meeting with her son's principal and teachers, Price volunteers regularly at

the school. Monica Nighman, an administrative assistant at Hamilton Charter, shared

that school staff and faculty are equally invested in working with their students' families.

She explained that because "our school is small, we're able to nurture and know your

child, and know who your family is" (Interview, June 1, 2009).

On a slightly different note, Clarksville Charter School offers parents a number of

concrete incentives for sending their children to the school and for becoming involved in

their education. George Miller, bemoaning the district's inability to compete with CCS,

explained that CCS has a great "ability to market" its school, "with all the new frills." As

an example, he described what happened when the school district held a kindergarten

registration drive at the administration building. That same day, across the street, "eight

busses were loading up, going to [a nearby amusement park], with anybody and

everybody who would register for Clarksville Charter" (Interview, January 13, 2009). In addition to these registration trips, the school's founder also gives gifts to the students and their families at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Moreover, the school holds parents accountable by giving them their own reports cards, "grading them on whether their children complete homework assignments, have high attendance, follow the dress code and behave." Parents who do well on their report cards are invited to a school-sponsored banquet, and one family receives a trip to Disney World (Local newspaper, March 18, 2012).

In addition to participating in activities supported by charter schools, parents also take part in community-wide discussions about the role of charter schools in the city. As parents try to decide what option is best for their own children, they are often confronted with what their choice will mean for the district. For example, when Donna Price decided to enroll her son in Hamilton Charter, she said she experienced pushback from other parents who argued "that we should be supporting the school district rather than yanking our kids out and sticking them into the charter schools" (Interview, October 31, 2007). Ryan Carlyle, a local reporter, shared that people "went crazy" when Hamilton University first suggested founding a charter. He summed up the community's sentiment as: "We don't need another freaking charter! Especially don't need one from Hamilton. Let Hamilton fund their own damn charter" (Interview, September 20, 2007).

Just as with Hamilton Charter, many parents considering Clarksville Charter School for their children are forced think about the impact that their decision will have on the financial wellbeing of the district. In particular, Clarksville Charter School—with its government support and wide profit margin—is often cited as part of a larger plan to rid

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the Clarksville School District of regular public schools entirely.   This suggestion of a charter school takeover arises in a variety of contexts. For example, Mark Matta, a teacher at one of the district's specialty high schools, referred to this issue as the "grand conspiracy theory" that exists in the district, wherein stakeholders worry that "they are going to break up the district and each district around us is going to take us" (Interview, March 10, 2010). In this interview, he laughed off this idea. However, when I met with Matta two years later, when the district was even more in debt and struggling simply to pay its teachers, he felt there was a real threat that the district could disband, explaining that nearby school districts are "still not gonna take our kids, right, but a charter school will take our kids" (Interview, June 13, 2012). Evelyn Doonan, an elected board member, echoed this sentiment, explaining that, "the way the [educational] system is set up, it almost looks like the system is set up to fail so we can have a charter school where the individuals [i.e., Chevalier] can make the money" (Interview, June, 26, 2012).

Indeed, the threat of a charter takeover was a recurrent theme at board and community meetings, particularly after the most recent budget crisis when the district did not have enough money to meet its payroll. At a board meeting during the height of the crisis, a long-time Clarksville resident addressed the board, asking, "Where is the money? Where did it go?" He accused the board of trying to "kill the district" (Field notes, January 19, 2012). At a special meeting convened by Clarksville's state senator to address the financial situation in the district, a local pastor asked the senator why so much of the state's education funds go to charter schools. The pastor noted that the governor's greatest single contributor [Chevalier] is the head of a for-profit charter school in Clarksville [CCS] (Field notes, January 26, 2012). Not surprisingly, the state teachers'

union is not a fan of the governor or of Clarksville Charter School. At a community forum held at a local church in the spring, a representative from the state teacher's union took pains to explain that the governor is "proposing to decimate public education" in the state, and he said that while surrounding districts would be reluctant to take Clarksville students, charter schools would be "happy" to have them (Field notes, April 21, 2012).

Thus, there is much public discourse about the ramifications of charter schools in the district. Parents who choose CCS and other charter schools are well aware of these debates and have thought about the issue. For example, when I interviewed Jasmine Richards, who had children at both Anchor Academy and CCS, I asked her how she would respond to Superintendent Johnson's argument that charter schools drain money from public schools. She answered:

> …I feel that is an untruth. I can understand where he's coming from when he says it, because any time you have to give out money and you're broke, so like, if I had that money back, I can do what I need to do. But at the same time, the community, the charter schools were doing the right things with that money so the parents were taking their children out of… Clarksville School District schools and putting 'em in a charter school… I never liked the district, I never wanted my children in their public schools, once I saw how things were go—I really didn't… My oldest daughter was very advanced, but after so many years in Clarksville School District… I watched as she slowly just got in the mix… I couldn't let that happen again [with my other children]. (Interview, June 14, 2012)

For Richards, regardless of its impact on other schools in the district, CCS provided a safe environment where her son could participate in a gifted program that challenged him, unlike his coursework in district schools. While Richards understood the concerns her fellow residents have about charter schools, she justified her decision to enroll her children in charters based on their needs and her past experiences in the district.

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Barriers.

While the choice to send one's child to a charter school certainly represents an opportunity for engagement, there are also a variety of barriers associated with this option. Some barriers are fairly straightforward, such as the limited space and long waiting lists at some schools. For example, parents have a difficult time enrolling their children in Hamilton Charter. While some charter schools, such as Clarksville Community Charter, are always looking to expand, this is not the case for Hamilton Charter School. By design, Hamilton Charter is a small school. Hamilton University's president, Tom Elmore, explained that originally the school's founders told the district, "We know it's hard for the school district to predict how many students a year to take out for the charters, so we're gonna tell ya. We're gonna take 50 a year, we're gonna cap it at 300 after five years, that's all we're taking. No more, no less, we don't wanna expand it" (Interview, September 18, 2008). Thus, in 2006, the school opened with 100 students divided between kindergarten and first grade, and the school grows by one grade level— 50 students—each year. Students are admitted from all over the district by a lottery.

Given its reputation for strong academics and a safe environment, there is a high demand for the limited spaces at the school. Principal Mitford explained that the school does not need to advertise, as "our parents really are our ambassadors… we've had a lot of, you know, community feedback that has been really positive, and last year we had a waiting list of 300, so, yeah, so I think there's a lot of interest" (Interview, June 1, 2009). Monica Nighman, Mitford's administrative assistant agreed, explaining: "I'm so proud of our school, because we stand out… everybody's trying to get in here, because they know, you know, you want the best for your child, try to get 'em into Hamilton, because

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they're gonna have a good start" (Interview, June 1, 2009).   Indeed, parent Donna Price

reported worrying about her son's education since the day he was born. She explained

that she followed the progress of Hamilton Charter School in the newspaper, and when

her son was ready for school, she "went to [a] meeting [about the school], signed up,

managed to get him in through the lottery that they were holding, and, you know, was

fortunate enough to get him in to Hamilton, which was really wonderful for us"

(Interview, October 31, 2007). While all applicants have an equal chance of being

admitted to Hamilton Charter through the lottery system, the school may actually attract

students whose parents have more resources. Ben-Porath (2009) and André-Bechely

(2005) both describe the ways in which school choice options frequently privilege parents

with more economic and social capital.

While some parents' choices are limited by clear-cut constraints, such as the lack

of space in Hamilton Charter, other parents encounter more intangible barriers when

trying to make decisions for their children. In particular, many parents who try to make

educated decisions regarding CCS report having a difficult time accessing relevant

information. Some parents explained they were unable to get honest answers from their

children's teachers and from school administrators. Andrea Barela, president of the

teacher's union, said it is hard to find anyone employed at Clarksville Charter who will

talk about the school. When I asked her if she has any contact with the teachers there,

she responded, "let me tell you something, you cannot get in there" (Interview, February

2, 2012). She said even teachers who have left CCS refuse to talk about their

experiences, and she cited two examples of acquaintances who used to teach at CCS and

still will not discuss the school. In fact, Barela surmised that CCS makes its teachers sign

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"gag orders" because "nobody [associated with the school] will say a word" (Interview, February 2, 2012).

Similarly, one parent with whom I spoke found her son's teachers at CCS to be fairly unresponsive. Monica Nighman, a parent of a special education student at Clarksville Charter, explained that her son was in a self-contained special education classroom with children of all other ages. Nighman wondered how her son's teacher could address the various needs of all of these students. She said she asked the teacher, "Tell me how you teach it… how can you do each level?" In response, the teacher "would get offended" (Interview, June 1, 2009). Nighman explained that she could not get straightforward answers about the teacher's instructional methods. Nighman said:

> I'm not coming at you [the teacher] irate, I'm asking you a question… now you're getting too defensive, so, okay, I know what to do now. That's just me, because you can't answer my question, so you just literally babysitting… I said, "Don't ever let me come up here," because I worked in the office… "Don't ever let me come up here and [my son] coloring, when I know he should be learning words, he should be doing this, he should be doing that." (Interview, June 1, 2009)

Eventually, Nighman paid to have her son tested at an outside institution in order to identify his specific learning needs, and she has since re-enrolled him in a non-charter district school, where she believes he receives more appropriate services (Interview, June 1, 2009). Nighman's experience in CCS provides an illustration of what Vincent and Tomlinson (1997) describe as the contrast between parent "choice" and "voice." That is, while Nighman was initially able to make her preferences known by choosing to enroll her son in CCS, once her son was a student there, Nighman had limited ability to influence what happened in her son's classroom.

Another parent, Dorothy Baldwin, came to an Empowerment Board meeting in order to share her experiences dealing with Clarksville Charter School. Baldwin

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explained that her autistic daughter did not receive adequate support at CCS, and she argued that CCS officials purposely mislead parents. Baldwin raised these issues during the public comments portion of the meeting. When the board chair realized her concerns were of a personal nature, he told her that he would be happy to talk in private, but she wanted her remarks on the record, and other members of the audience encouraged her to continue, urging, "Speak, Dorothy." Baldwin explained that though she originally enrolled her daughter in CCS because of safety reasons, her daughter was "tormented" by other students at CCS and therefore missed a lot of school for health reasons. As a result, CCS expelled her daughter due to truancy. Baldwin reported that CCS tells parents that if their children need services beyond what they provide, they have to return to the district, presumably so that the district—and not CCS—will pay to have the child transferred to another school. Baldwin concluded by saying that other parents allow themselves to get "riled up" by charter schools, but that is because they are "brainwashed" (Field notes, February 21, 2008).[6]

Even seemingly objective information about the academic programs at CCS is not without its problems. The mission statement posted on Clarksville Charter's webpage stresses the "results-driven academic environment" of the school, and an article in a local newspaper supported this claim, reporting that CCS has higher average state standardized test scores than the other public schools in Clarksville. However, the article also noted that these scores were subject to a state investigation, due to "erasures on many tests where most or all corrected answers were switched from wrong to right, a statistical

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[6] Indeed, in both this example and the prior example, the parents are, in fact, engaging in their children's education, interacting with teachers and board members to address concerns about their children's schooling. However, the parents are finding opportunities to engage in order to address the barriers presented by the charter school.

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improbability" (March 18, 2012). While the state recently ended its inquiry into the matter, clearing the school of wrongdoing, it did so in a confusing manner. A representative from the state explained that its investigation "did not yield clear conclusions notwithstanding the overwhelming evidence of testing irregularities" (Local newspaper, October 14, 2012). Given these problematic test results along with the refusal of Clarksville Charter School officials to release financial information about their management company, parents often feel they are kept in the dark regarding many issues surrounding the school.

On a different note, many parents believe that charter schools are subject to political forces beyond their control. To be sure, charter schools have a contentious and unpredictable history in the district. While the current governor supports charter schools, the former Democratic governor was not as enthusiastic. When the district was controlled by the all-Democrat Education Empowerment Board under the Democratic governor, the EEB made some decisions designed to limit the growth of charter schools. For example, not long after the board was appointed, the EEB tried to impose a "cap" on charter school enrollment. At the board meeting to address this proposal, the EEB listened to hours of testimony, with parents arguing both for and against this proposed limit on charter expansion. However, my advisor, who was a member of the EEB, explained to me that the EEB had already "informally made up their minds to vote for the cap" in the executive session prior to the meeting. Thus, despite the impassioned pleas on behalf of charter schools, the board sided with the governor and voted in favor of the cap, expressing their concern about the impact of charter schools on the rest of the district. Eventually, the charter schools won a lawsuit contesting the proposed cap. However, in

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some charter schools, there is still a constant worry about the future. As parent Donna Price explained, "You never know what's going to happen in the next year, it seems that every year [there's] something new… we have to worry about how things are going to happen for our school" (Interview, October 31, 2007).

While the EEB tried to limit the growth of all of the charter schools, it sought to take control of Anchor Academy entirely. Despite its strong parent supporters, Anchor Academy was generally regarded as the weakest of the charter schools academically. Shortly after the EEB was appointed, Anchor Academy's charter was up for renewal. By state law, the school had to prove that it was doing better than the district's regular schools in order for the board to grant this renewal. According to my advisor, the EEB decided to "play hardball" with Anchor Academy "because we needed to reduce the number of charter schools, and we had visited the school and could tell it wasn't very good" (Personal correspondence, February 15, 2013). Therefore, at a meeting before Anchor Academy's charter renewal hearing, the EEB proposed a deal that would only allow Anchor Academy to stay open if their test scores were as good or better than the district's scores. While the board was confident that Anchor Academy's scores would be too low, Anchor Academy accepted the terms of this agreement. Indeed, when the test scores were published later in the year, they were not high enough, and the school could not remain a charter (Personal correspondence, February 15, 2013). Parent Jasmine Richards said she "literally cried" when Anchor Academy became a district school, and she felt that the school lost its "family sense" (Interview, June 14, 2012).

As they are newer, cyber charter schools have not been subject to the same type of political interference as the other charter schools. However, during my time in

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Clarksville, I did witness one attempt to limit their growth. While cyber charter schools generally operate outside of the oversight of Clarksville administrators, cyber charters still address truancy concerns through the district's Truancy Intervention Center. By the fall of 2011, TIC Director Angela Abernathy had received a number of truancy notices from a variety of cyber charter schools, and she was unsure how to handle them. She scheduled a meeting with the judges who oversaw her regular truancy cases in the district to discuss the issue. The judges were in agreement that cyber charter students should be held to higher standards, as the students do not even need to leave their own homes to attend school. In addition, Judge Douglas argued that the court should make the attendance requirements stricter, so that cyber charter schools would not be as appealing to families. He said there must be stringent penalties for charter school truancy to prevent parents from using these schools as "loopholes" through which to escape mandatory attendance laws. Together, the judges and Abernathy decided to file charges after three unexcused absences (rather than the usual ten), and Judge Douglas agreed to preside over those cases (Field notes, January 19, 2012). While it is difficult to know the impact of this decision on parents' decision to register their children in cyber charters, it is important to note that it was specifically designed to function as a deterrent to enrollment. Interestingly, I later learned that Judge Douglas is the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Clarksville Charter School, one of the cyber charter school's main competitors.

In sum, charter schools present parents with a broad range of opportunities for and barriers to engagement in their children's education. While the act of choosing a charter school presents an opportunity to engage in and of itself, these decisions are often

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difficult for parents to make for a variety of reasons, including a dearth of information

about some of the schools and a lack of certainty about their permanence in the district.

Moreover, many parents worry about the impact that charter schools have on the other

public schools in the city. As such, Superintendent Johnson worked to create more

choices for students and their families within the district, and he opened three new

partnership schools, which are discussed below.

Choice Four: Partnership Schools

Early in his administration, Superintendent Johnson explained that his goal was

"to provide a strategic partner for every school in the city" (Field notes, EEB meeting,

November 15, 2007). He argued that these types of partnerships could provide additional

funding for schools, as well as connect schools with valuable community resources. The

first partnership that Johnson proposed was with the Clarksville Arts Academy (CAA), a

new school being developed by David Worden, a music professor at a local college who

was also the director a children's chorus in Clarksville. Worden had been contemplating

starting an arts school for a long time, at various points considering founding a private

institution or a charter school. However, Worden explained that with the enthusiastic

support of the state's Democratic governor and the Education Empowerment Board, a

partnership school was "just in the cards" (Interview, February 15, 2008). Both Worden

and Johnson hoped the partnership would be mutually beneficial. For Worden, the

district would provide a building and the base funding for his school. On his end,

Worden hoped to raise an additional $4,000 per student through his nonprofit

organization (Interview, February 15, 2008). Clarksville Arts Academy opened in the

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fall of 2008 in a newly renovated district building, with students in pre-kindergarten through second grade and plans to add a grade level every year.

Dr. Johnson also worked to create partnership schools at the high school level, and at a meeting in April 2008, he received board approval to move forward with plans to open two small partnership high schools. He worked quickly, and by September 2008, the district started the academic year with these two new schools. One high school, Health Careers High, partnered with the local hospital and was designed to prepare students for professions in the medical field. The other new high school, Science and Technology High, focused on STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and math) and received financial support from both the Space Foundation and another non-profit group that works to improve outcomes for "at-risk" students. As with the other choices outlined in this chapter, these partnership schools present parents with both opportunities for and barriers to engagement. They are discussed below.

Opportunities.

Many parents felt that Clarksville Arts Academy (CAA) would be a valuable addition to the district. At an Education Empowerment Board meeting, parent Olivia King told those assembled, "I knew at four years old I would like to be a star." As such, she believed that younger students could benefit from early exposure to the arts. Moreover, King had conducted research on arts' schools in other states, and she found that some of these schools required their students' parents to become involved. Thus, King felt that CAA also presented an opportunity to engage parents (Field notes, November 29, 2007). Other parents, whose children were members of the Clarksville Children's Chorus, spoke positively about Worden's work in the district, and they shared

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their excitement about the school he was opening. For example, one parent told the board that her child was a member of the Clarksville Children's Chorus, and she had seen firsthand how all of the children in the chorus love Mr. Worden. She noted that under Mr. Worden's instruction, the children had learned to sing in four languages, and she urged the community to open up to Worden and support his school (Field notes, November 29, 2007).

At the secondary level, the two new partnership schools provided a welcome alternative to Clarksville High School. Robert Quillen, a local professor who grew up in Clarksville and has subsequently studied the district, described many of the safety concerns parents have regarding Clarksville High:

> …the overwhelming consensus is the high school has so many problems, it… was designed to hold something like 3,000 students, at most [it now contains] 1,000… and everyone knows that, you know, there're large portions of the high school that just are not used, that are blocked off, and so there's an enormous concern about safety… and at the same time, you've got all of these other community, kinds of issues that sort of appear inside the classroom…concerns about gangs and the turf battles between the East side and the West side, and there're families that don't like each other, and so on and so on, all of that gets brought to the high school. (Interview, February 14, 2008).

While many parents are willing to send their children to district elementary schools, they are not ready to enroll their children in Clarksville High. As parent Linda Drazen explained, "Clarksville High was a different story [than my local elementary school], cause, you know, I'm sorry, there's not enough change going on there for me to safely say that I want to send my child" (Interview, November 5, 2007). Reporter Ryan Carlyle summed up the sentiments of local parents as, "Hell, I'm not sending my kid to Clarksville High School! Are you kidding me?" (Interview, September 20, 2007)

Indeed, after the two specialty high schools opened, parents reported being pleased with these new options. Michael Beardsley, father of a rising ninth grader, explained that by enrolling his son in Science and Technology High, he could allow his child to remain in the Clarksville School District—and play basketball for the state-champion Clarksville basketball team—without exposing him to "the activity a lot of kids be into, far as… being from different parts of the city" (Interview, May 17, 20120). For parent Jacqueline Allen, the opening of Health Careers High was an answer to her "prayers and hopes" for some alternative to Clarksville High School. She saw the school as a "wonderful opportunity" for her son to learn in "a small environment" with a better "teacher to student ratio" (Interview, May 3, 2012). Similarly, Syreeta Fayad, a school police officer in the district, was excited to send her daughter to Science and Technology High, because she "didn't want her over [at] Clarksville High. It was a bigger setting, I didn't want her to get distracted" (Interview, March 21, 2012). Angela Abernathy, director of the Truancy Intervention Center, reported that the two new high schools had much better attendance rates than Clarksville High School, as well as a greater degree of parental involvement (Interview, October 5, 2009).

Though some parents were already eagerly looking for choices for their children, the district wanted to make sure that all families were aware of these new options. Thus, Dr. Johnson took a number of steps to sell these new schools to the community. In the spring and summer of 2008, he used board meetings as one forum to describe these new opportunities, and the Clarksville local newspaper ran a series of reports about construction on the new schools. In the fall of 2008, Dr. Johnson hosted a "Parade of Schools," inviting community members to spend one Saturday with him, riding a school

bus to visit and tour the district's new schools (Field notes, October 23, 2008). After the schools were open for a year, Dr. Johnson implemented more formal recruiting procedures. In the spring of 2009, Dr. Johnson explained that he was sending his Assistant Superintendent, Janet Hartmann, "on the road," to share the district's "high school choice programs" with the community (Field notes, March 19, 2009). At an Empowerment Board meeting a year later, he explained that rising ninth graders in the district would have the opportunity to visit all the district's high schools at the end of March, and families could attend "open houses." In fact, he described the high school selection process as a "chance to get parents re-engaged" (Field notes, March 11, 2010). The high school selection process continued through April, and Dr. Johnson promised parents that "course selection guides" for the high schools would be ready by the end of the month (Field notes, April 10, 2010).

While Dr. Johnson used EEB meetings as an opportunity to advertise the new schools, he also used them as a setting in which to discuss parents' hopes and concerns regarding the partnerships. During the 2007-2008 school year, Johnson frequently included updates about the new schools in the reports he gave at the beginning of meetings, and he invited community feedback during the public comments portion of the meetings. While many parents and community members spoke positively about the proposed schools, others raised critical questions. For example, many parents expressed concerns that outside funders might have too much control over these partnership schools, and they raised questions about who would be in charge of the schools' budgets. The superintendent explained the money raised by the partners would go into the treasury funds of their non-profit companies. However, Johnson said that the district and the

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partners would work together to decide what to do with that money (Field notes, November 29, 2007). Other parents raised concerns about the costs associated with the district opening two new high schools. One parent asked how the district would afford counselors at three high schools when it could not pay for enough staff members at its one current high school (Field notes, March 13, 2008). A local reverend frequently asked the superintendent questions about community involvement in these partnership schools; in particular, she worried that community members would not be included on the schools' boards of trustees. The superintendent explained that the district would have representation on the boards, along with the partnering organizations. One of the members of the Education Empowerment Board added that he, too, was "struggling" with the issue of these partnership schools, but he promised to try to be objective and take a long-term view (Field notes, April 17, 2008). Thus, though the superintendent and EEB members were not always able to answer all of the stakeholders' questions, they did endeavor to involve the community in the process of opening the new schools and keep them informed of the latest developments.

Barriers.

While both the Empowerment Board and Superintendent worked to share information about these new schools, some stakeholders felt they did not have enough data to make educated decisions. For instance, Tonya Rollins, President of Clarksville High School's PTO, argued that the development of the specialty high schools was a good idea that was poorly executed. She explained that the district did not successfully communicate the purpose of these schools to parents:

> I said we really need to market [these new schools]… people have left this district because they have been tired of the education being subpar, so if you're gonna say

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we're gonna turn it around, we need to market this. We need to let parents know, who are paying for their kids to go to school, in private schools, or moving to get into other districts, whatever it is, we need to market this, we need to say, these are the opportunities, that we have partnerships with, you know, local businesses. We need to sell this and package this so it's phenomenal. And our own students didn't even really get any information, it was just like the schools are open, and you just have to figure it out on your own, and if you want to go here, then maybe you can. It was like, no pre-planning put into it to say, "Okay, let's test students, you know, to see who has high aptitude for science and math," or "Let's… survey students to see who has, you know, tendency for health careers." It was more like, "Oh, you live close to here, go there!" (Interview, October 1, 2009)

Rollins said she felt the students who attended the specialty schools did not value the opportunity, and they did not take advantage of all the offerings these schools provided. She worried that if the district did not properly follow through on its plans in these schools, the schools would lose their community partners. Mark Matta, a teacher at Health Careers High, also noted that attendance at the two schools was often determined by geography: "Science and Technology had more students from the West end of Clarksville, and Health Careers had a lot more from the East side, right, just because of where the schools were positioned" (Interview, June 13, 2012).

Other stakeholders were somewhat suspicious of new programs in the district, as initiatives tend to come and go in Clarksville. When asked if she would consider sending her children to one of the specialty high schools, Monica Nighman replied:

See, I don't know anything about that. That's just too new. And I heard it's a mess… I don't have enough information to… I would have to take off and go check that out and what I've heard, no, that's just something they threw in there, you know, that's something they're gonna have to nurture. They put too many programs in place really quickly for them to sit down and nurture and make sure that this is gonna run like this… (Interview, June 1, 2009)

Likewise, Evelyn Carroll, a local pastor, shared her concerns at a board meeting. She was particularly nervous about moving students to new buildings. She explained, "People promise us stuff all the time, what happens if [the students] move and don't get

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what we were promised?" She went on to say that while the Empowerment Board and Superintendent might not be in the district in ten years, the residents will be, and she is "scared" for their future. The board chair assured her that the board was equally concerned with the longevity of the programs, and Dr. Johnson said her point was "very well taken" (Field notes, April 10, 2007).

In the end, stakeholders were right to be wary. After the Empowerment Board was dissolved in 2010, and Dr. Johnson left for another district, the two specialty high schools quickly deteriorated. The elected School Board, citing budget cuts, decided to merge the two schools. This merger led to a number of problems including overcrowding, conflicts between students coming from two different neighborhoods, withdrawal of partner support, and unstable leadership as two principals were forced to work together with almost no warning. Mark Matta, a teacher at the former Health Careers High, described parents' responses to the merger:

> I had a buncha interactions with parents, you know, some of the parents were like, "Oh my god, I can't believe this!" And some were like, "Here we go again!" And someone was like, "Ugh!" You know. Specifically, parents really wanted to know, well, what classes will my students be taking, right? And it would change every four seconds, right, and so I always told them whatever the party line was at the moment. (Interview, June 13, 2012)

School police officer and parent, Syreeta Fayad, also found the merger upsetting. The specialty high schools had only been open for two years, she explained, and "our children were not ready for a change. They just got settled into Science and Technology. The change came about with Health Careers, and then next thing you know, all chaos came" (Interview, March 21, 2012).

Some parents went to the elected School Board seeking answers. However, often the board seemed unable to explain what was happening at the school. For example, at

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one meeting, several parents asked the board what the merger of the two schools would mean for the graduating seniors. One parent, who had a senior at Health Careers High inquired if her son would be finished in December. She was confused, because he had two periods of English, and she did not understand why he was doubling up on English credits if he would be in school for the entire year. The superintendent told her the extra English classes were due to an increased focus on literacy, but she would not definitively say if the seniors would be done early, deferring to the principals of the two—now one— schools. In fact, all the seniors from Health Careers received letters in the mail in December telling them that they were done with high school and need not return after the holiday. Other parents raised concerns about safety and the lack of instruction at the newly-combined, overcrowded high school. One mother stood up and shared her child's roster, which consisted of substitutes for the first two periods, followed by a free period that was supposed to be a lab, followed by lunch, followed by gym (which functioned as a free period), and then English, her only actual class (Field notes, September 15, 2011).

The board members and acting superintendent expressed concern about the situation, but they did not answer stakeholders' questions. One student angrily told the board that she was unable to participate in the partnerships she was promised with local colleges, as the district had failed to provide transportation, neglected to tell the students the correct starting date for their courses, and did not have working computers for placement exams. Dr. Hartmann, the acting superintendent, had little concrete information to provide in response, and she told student: "Clearly something needs to change. Clearly." One board member, whose own children attended the merged high school, said she had been spending 20-30 hours a week in the school. She explained,

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"We're not sure of what's going on, but we're trying to uncover the problem." She blamed the school administrators and counselors for scheduling problems, and she urged parents to believe that the board was trying to help, but she said that they were "cash-strapped." She pleaded with parents to work with the board. Before the meeting ended, one parent raised a final question, asking if the science labs for the former Health Career High students had been set up in the new building. Board President Melvina Bagley said they were. Another parent in the audience corrected Bagley, explaining that while there were labs in the school, they were not ready for use. Dr. Hartmann sat shaking her head, and the meeting was adjourned (Field notes, September 15, 2011).

Similarly, Clarksville Arts Academy encountered a number of growing pains. Initially, the founder David Worden had many plans for increasing parental involvement at the school. Worden wanted to create a "full-blown parent program" modeled after the types of programs in place in the Harlem Children's Zone, such as "Baby College," where parents could learn more parenting skills. While CAA did not have enough money to implement this type of large-scale initiative, the school took small steps to increase parent "buy-in." For example, parents were required to sign contracts, agreeing to read to their children, limit their children's television viewing, and have family conversations at dinnertime, among other things. However, Worden explained this contract was not enforceable. Moreover, Worden had to devote his time to dealing with other pressing issues at the school, such as replacing the first principal who struggled to maintain order. Though Worden spoke in primarily positive terms about partnering with the district, he did express frustration with the district's chronic lack of resources, noting, "They're understaffed, they're understaffed with bodies and they're understaffed with talent, so

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sometimes we have to work for months to get answers" (Interview, June 16, 2009). In fact, two years after Superintendent Johnson's departure from the district, Clarksville Arts Academy withdrew from the district as a partnership school and reopened as a charter. The new website for the school explains that after four years, the school "reached its limits in terms of what can be accomplished by a regular public school" and decided to part ways with the district.

Thus, though many parents were initially excited about the opportunities these partnership schools presented, other parents approached the new institutions with more caution. Stakeholders worried about the marketing of the new schools, as well as their staying power in the district. Their concerns had merit, as today CAA is a charter school, and there is currently talk of closing the merged specialty high school and moving all the students back to Clarksville High.

Conclusion

Over my five years in the district, I have seen parents make a variety of market-level choices regarding their children's schooling. While the menu of choices has certainly changed since 2007, parents' desire to seek out the best educational options for their children has remained consistent. In Clarksville, parents find a variety of educational options for their children. Some choices the district formally offers; other choices the parents create for themselves. It is important to recognize, however, that more choices do not automatically translate into more opportunities for parental engagement. While the act of choosing a particular school may be regarded as a form of involvement, that involvement is often hindered by a number of factors, such as costly tuition fees, a lack of information, and a changing political landscape, among other

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things. In addition, though sometimes parents find more opportunities to engage in their

children's education at private or charter schools, they also encounter a number of

barriers. It is also worth noting that the options from which parents have to choose are

themselves problematic at times. In Clarksville, parents often make their decisions using

a relative scale, opting for schools that are less dangerous or programs that yield

marginally better test results. Moreover, as parents weigh the choices for their own

children, they often are confronted with questions about what their individual decisions

will mean to financial wellbeing of the district overall.

In light of these circumstances, it is important to note that one other choice exists

for parents in Clarksville: keep their children enrolled in their neighborhood schools.

Certainly, for some parents this may be a passive decision. However, for other parents,

the choice to stay in Clarksville and leave their children in public schools is a strategic,

and community-oriented, choice. To highlight this point, I conclude this chapter with a

story from Dora Miller, a Clarksville mother who immigrated to the United States from

Liberia 12 years ago. When I asked Miller my standard last question: "Is there anything I

didn't ask you that you think is important for me to know about your experiences in the

school district," she responded by sharing a parable from Africa, which I've excerpted at

length below:

> Well, I know we talked about everything, but, you know, maybe my advice is just
> advice, yeah. Okay, we *here*, for example, again, my house here, in Clarksville.
> Okay. I'm not renting. I buy this house, so I'm not thinking about, you know,
> moving from here right now… The Liberian people, they have a parable… They
> say when a goat go in front of your house … maybe trying to eat your rice [or] go
> in your garden, and this goat, when you knock it, it will cry, "Baaah! Baaah!"
> But you know sheep, you know sheep, right? Okay… when a sheep go eat your
> rice and you knock it, it will say, "mm-mm." It won't say anything. The sheep
> say "mm-mm," because it know that's the only place it can get food from. The
> next day, it will go around there again. It might not be your house, but in the next

neighbor house, it will go there to go find food. So the sheep will say "mm-mm."
That mean to say, just, you know, leave it, don't talk, don't call, holler, because
you know tomorrow you will go to the same place again. Yeah, so the high, the
Clarksville High School is, it's our school, yes… We should try to help the
faculties, you see, to make this school year a good school. We shouldn't just be
say, "Oh! My sister lives in [another state], so I carry my… child there, you
know, I carry my child out of this school." Who will be here? We here. Right?
We supposed to pull together and help the faculties, the teachers, to bring this
school up… You understand? Okay, you shouldn't just leave it like that, that's
my advice… The parents, we supposed to put our foot down and help our
children, help the teachers. We combine, because if we are not combined, if we
are not united, this school will break down. And that our school… We that in
Clarksville… especially the parents, we have to try, we have to pull strong, we
have to advise our children, we have to help the teachers, the faculties, for our
school to be successful, for our children to be successful, for the school to be
good school. So that the advice what I'm giving. (Interview, June 8, 2012)

Puzzled, I asked Miller several follow up questions, such as: "What can the sheep do if

they're not complaining, to change, to make it better? To make it so that they have more

to eat?" Initially, when I heard the parable, I took it to mean: even if conditions are bad,

do not complain, just be happy for whatever people give you, because you are going to

have to keep asking for more. However, I do not think Miller was advocating for a

passive acceptance of circumstances. Rather, she provided an interesting commentary on

parents making market-level choices – that is, while parents *can* choose to take their

children to another district or school, they owe it to their community to stay and try to

make their school the best that it can be. Miller suggested that parents can do this by

supporting school faculty. In this sense, staying put and not complaining is an active—

and moral—form of engagement.

Thus, at the market level, parents in Clarksville find both opportunities for and

barriers to engagement. While additional choices may give parents more chances to

become involved in their children's education, these options also come with their own

limits to engagement.   Parents weigh a variety of factors when deciding where to send

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their children to school, and when acting on the market level, parents often consider both their individual needs (i.e., what choice is best for their child) as well as larger policy implications (i.e., what their choice will mean for the district). In Clarksville, many parents find it difficult to support their own children and the district at the same time. This tension highlights the complexity of parental engagement in market level reforms, and it raises questions about the compatibility of market and educational goals.

Chapter 7: Parental Engagement at the School Governance and Policy Level

> *"We have to sit on this end and watch you all make decisions about us… We understand Clarksville better than any of you… My indignation gets the best of me sometimes."*

> —Community member to the Education Empowerment Board,
>   Field notes, October 18, 2007

> *"I want to make an appeal to your conscience. You've discouraged the community from being a part of the conversation."*

> —Community member to the elected School Board,
>   Field notes, October 21, 2010

Introduction

As illustrated in the quotes above, members of the Clarksville community wanted to be involved in decision-making in the school district, and they expressed frustration when the Education Empowerment Board (EEB) and the elected School Board did not include them in conversations regarding the future of Clarksville schools. Indeed, stakeholders experienced barriers to participation under both of these boards. However, community members also found a variety of ways to engage in dialogue with board members. In this chapter, I focus on the opportunities and barriers that parents encountered as they tried to engage in their children's education at the school governance and policy level.

In my literature review, I identify a variety of ways in which parents may become involved in education at this level. In this chapter, I focus on how parents in Clarksville engaged in democratic deliberation with district officials with the goal of achieving systemic change. As I regularly attended EEB meetings and then School Board meetings over the last five years, I consistently had the opportunity to witness this form

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of participation. Certainly, other categories of policy engagement also exist in Clarksville. For instance, organizations such as the NAACP and local churches work to mobilize community members in order to lobby district officials for change. Parents and students also take on activist roles, attending rallies and protests in both the district and the state capital. However, I did not observe these activities with the same degree of regularity as I did board meetings during my fieldwork. Therefore, in this chapter, I focus on the opportunities and barriers that parents encountered as they engaged in democratic deliberation at EEB and School Board meetings.

Thus, this chapter explores this type of participation in two separate sections. First, I discuss parental engagement at the school governance and policy level during the time that the EEB controlled the district. I begin by describing the history of the EEB, focusing on the political context in which the EEB came to power. Next, I look specifically at EEB meetings, considering how parents were both invited to and dissuaded from participating in this forum. In the second half of this chapter, I turn my attention to the elected School Board. I start by describing the political background of the School Board, as well as their relationship with the community. I explain that when the School Board regained control of the district, they limited community participation in board meetings in a variety of ways. I go on to discuss barriers to involvement with the elected School Board before describing how stakeholders created their own opportunities to engage in response to these obstacles.

I conclude that local control does not necessarily translate into more opportunities for community participation in school governance. Contrary to research that finds that local stakeholders have less input under state-appointed school boards (Useem et al.,

2006; Ziebarth, 2002), I witnessed parental engagement in board meetings increase during the EEB's tenure, and then dwindle during the elected School Board's time in office. While board meetings were packed at the height of the district's funding crisis, as worried parents filled the rows of seats in the boardroom, the elected School Board did little to encourage their participation. In fact, parents were sometimes chastised for only coming to board meetings in order to complain about problems in the schools. In this sense, it is interesting to consider whether Clarksville policy makers sought increased parental *participation* in meetings or if they were actually hoping for increased parental *support* for their decisions. Before discussing the EEB and the elected School Board and their respective stances towards parents, however, I take a step back and discuss how I define "parents" for the purposes of this chapter.

Defining "Parents" at Board Meetings

Up to this point in my dissertation, the term "parent" has referred to individuals who are primary caregivers for children. Using this definition, parents rarely attend board meetings in Clarksville, and when they are present, they usually come to address concerns regarding their own children, not to discuss school governance and policy on a more general level. However, during my five years in Clarksville, I came to recognize a core group of community members who regularly attended the twice-monthly board meetings. A few of these individuals did have children currently enrolled in the district; however, more often than not, they did not. Some of them had relatives in Clarksville schools, others had children who had already graduated, and still others were local residents with no family connections at the schools. However, it was clear from their

engagement during meetings that they all regarded themselves as guardians of the students of Clarksville.

Moreover, during interviews, stakeholders repeatedly emphasized the importance of caring for *all* of the children in the Clarksville community. For example, I spoke with two parents who volunteered daily at the high school, even though their children had already graduated. Tonya Rollins and Connie Barns stationed themselves at the entrance of the high school every morning in order to greet students and give them hugs. Rollins explained, "It's very important, when the children come in in the morning, they see a smiling face, we offer them a hug, we greet them, we try to get to know every child by name, we go to extra effort to point out every little nuance about them" (Interview, December 7, 2007). Barns shared that after her son graduated, the younger students asked her, "Now that your son is gone, does that mean that you won't be back for us?" She explained, "That killed me. And so [in] September, soon as the first day of school, I've been there ever since" (Interview, March 13, 2008). Parent Elyse Mays noted that even though her daughter was preparing to graduate from Clarksville High School, she planned to "still be heavily involved… as long as I live in this city… my heart is always here. So I'll always do anything that I can to try to make a difference" (Interview February 5, 2008). Similarly, Olivia King, another parent, said:

> I plan to, as long as I live, to be involved, to try to… support the teachers, the children… When I advocate, I advocate not just for my daughter, I advocate for all the children. So I see my role as being an advocate for a decent, quality education for all of our children, which will eventually impact the community and bring it up to the level where it should be. (Interview, January 10, 2008)

Jay Adams, a parent who eventually won a seat on the elected School Board, said that he ran for office not only to ensure that his daughter would have a good education, but also

to help other children: "Cause what I want for my daughter, I want for the rest of 'em, the rest of the children, so I'm going to be the one fighting for that" (Interview June 21, 2012). Syreeta Fayad, a school police officer and parent in the district, explained what it means to her to be a parent in Clarksville:

> … it's very interesting, because my whole perception of being a parent in this school district is phenomenal. When I see a child, like I did this morning, [I say] "Young lady, stop cussing." Well, the other young lady said, "You not her mother." [I said] "I am your mother. I am part of this community. I am someone else's mother, and til you leave this school, I am responsible for you." (Interview March 21, 2012)

Elected School Board member Bernard Davis spoke at length about why he is motivated to be involved in the district, despite not having any children there. Davis shared that his grandfather, the son of a former slave, believed so strongly in public education that he donated land and money to help build a school for the children in his community in rural Georgia. Davis explained:

> That tells you who I am and why I struggle for children. I like to tell people in this community that they all are, they all my children, they are our children. How can I say mine are okay when yours are not okay and we live right near [each other]…You go to any corner in Clarksville, any corner… and you can get a professional-class basketball player, but it, that child can't go any further, and tell me it's not our responsibility to do a better job. Cause that child's growth limits my growth, limits my safety, limits my whole of who I am and what my city looks like. So yes, they are our children, and we are the reason they have failed, because we have not demanded it, and I'm tired of the pointing fingers… There's a reason and a time for each of our lives now. I just want to leave another step for another child so they don't have to step on that bottom rung to get to where he wants to get in life. (Interview, April 19, 2012)

Thus, in some respects, this chapter takes a step back and looks more broadly at community engagement in board meetings. However, in that so many of the community members involved in these meetings regard themselves as the guardians of all of the children in the community, this chapter still addresses the issue of parental engagement,

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albeit using a more inclusive definition of the term "parent."

The Educational Empowerment Board

The story of how the EEB came to office provides a glimpse of how state politics play a role in policy making in the Clarksville School District, as well as why local stakeholders often feel left out of decision-making processes in the district in light of the political gamesmanship that occurs. In 2003, before the Republican governor left office, he passed a law that state-appointed school board members could not be replaced unless they resigned. This law meant that the next (Democratic) governor could not simply appoint new board members in Clarksville. After unsuccessfully arguing that the state-appointed board had failed in its mission to put the district's finances in order, the Governor's Secretary of Education tried a new tactic. In a sudden change of heart, he explained that the board had successfully dealt with the district's finances, and as such, that board was no longer necessary. Therefore, the Secretary of Education decided to do away with that board and to appoint a new "Empowerment Board" to oversee academic achievement. Local reporter Ryan Carlyle gleefully recounted the political wrangling this way: "…it was so funny because the two sides were suddenly arguing the points that the other side was making. Like suddenly, the [former board's] saying, 'Oh, no, no, no, not everything's fixed.' And [the state is] like, 'Nah, yeah, everything's fine.' You know, when before [the state was] saying, 'You're still messing up!' and the [board's] like, 'No, everything's getting better!'" (Interview, September 20, 2007)

Appointed by the Secretary of Education, the EEB was composed of three members, all Democrats, and none from Clarksville. The chairman of the board, Paul Loedel, was an African-American attorney from a neighboring city. He served as the

director of strategy and planning of his city's Port Authority, and he also worked as general counsel for the city's Housing Authority. My advisor at the time, a White professor of education from a university in a nearby city, was the only woman on the board, and she served as the vice chairman. Anthony Major, the secretary/treasurer of the board, was an African American with a long history in Clarksville, dating back to 1970-1974 when he served as a dean of students at the high school. More recently, he served as Clarksville's superintendent while working under the auspices of the for-profit company that was hired to run the district in 2001. Major was working for the state Department of Education at the time that he was appointed to the EEB.

The EEB was charged with overseeing academic achievement in the district. In practice, the Empowerment Board's work encompassed a wide range of responsibilities. In addition to voting on measures relating to academics, such as curricula and professional development for teachers, the board also had the final say on all business and personnel decisions in the district. The board worked closely with the superintendent, whom they hired, as he submitted strategic plans and a variety of initiatives for the board's approval. In addition, both the superintendent and the Empowerment Board met regularly with representatives from the state Department of Education, who had considerable input in the decision-making process in the Clarksville School District. It is important to note that during the EEB's tenure, the elected School Board did retain some of its duties in the district. For instance, the elected School Board still had the power to levy taxes, and the School Board continued to oversee disciplinary hearings for students. Melvina Bagley, the president of the elected School Board,

occasionally attended EEB meetings, and she was invited to sit at the board table with the EEB and participate in board deliberations, though she had no formal voting power.

When they first began their work in Clarksville, the EEB received a mixed welcome from members of the community. Some stakeholders were pleased with this new board's arrival. In particular, Democratic parents and activists were happy with the shift in power. Reporter Ryan Carlyle said a segment of the population cheered when the EEB was created: "There was a very much… a sense of 'Rah, rah, we won! Got the Dems here!'" (Interview, September 20, 2007) Carlyle explained that along with the Democratic board came an infusion of money, as the Democratic governor had been reluctant to help fund a Republican-led district, but now Clarksville had the governor "on [their] side" (Interview, September 20, 2007). Other stakeholders described the board as almost apolitical, contrasting their actions with those of previous boards that were, as parent Tanya Rollins described, "100% politically motivated" (Interview, October 1, 2009). Rollins explained that the EEB was not beholden to the patronage system that seemed to dictate the actions of former Republican boards. Derrick Johnson, the superintendent hired by the EEB, argued the community was ready for the change that the EEB represented. He explained:

> I thought coming [to the district] there was a desire to change… there was a desire to do something different… you can only keep people down for so long, and morally people begin to say, "Hey, it's the wrong thing to do." I saw that dynamic, I sensed I saw that dynamic from everybody, both parties… all the community. (Interview, December 7, 2007)

While Johnson said his ultimate goal was to "return the district to the community," the time for that was "not right now." He explained, "the community knows they can't make

the decisions that are necessary for the wellbeing of those young people, and to no fault to them" (Interview, December 7, 2007).

Some stakeholders in the district felt that the EEB members brought a level of educational expertise that was previously lacking in the administration. Many local leaders spoke highly of the EEB's qualifications. The president of the teacher's union, Andrea Barela, explained, "there's two educators on the board…and that makes a world of difference. Before, none of 'em were educators. Never taught, nothing… no clue of how a district is run. So now you have two people that have been in the classroom, and they do know how… students should be educated" (Interview, September 30, 2007). Assistant Superintendent and longtime Clarksville resident Janet Hartmann said that in the EEB, the district had "three well-educated, highly motivated [individuals who] want to give back, want to really help out and make a difference" (Interview, September 28, 2007). Donna Landreth, a leader of a local nonprofit organization, was pleased to see a new board that could help develop leadership and organizational skills in the city, as the members came with relevant experience as well as the ability to secure resources (Interview, March, 26, 2008).

While some residents welcomed the EEB, other community members approached this new board with more caution. Though some community members thought that the Democratic EEB signaled a promising political shift in the district, for others, the appointment of the EEB was simply the same old politics as usual. Robert Quillen, a local professor who grew up in Clarksville, said that in the city "politics is the prism by which and through which so many people… see what gets done [and] what doesn't get done" (Interview, February 14, 2008). Quillen explained that his friends and family in

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Clarksville regarded the appointment of the EEB as a political favor, with the governor appointing "his people" to the board in a move that would somehow benefit the governor and his friends, while neglecting the people of Clarksville (Interview, February 14, 2008). Linda Drazen, a teacher and parent in the district, expressed a similar sentiment, explaining that she feels like a "pawn" in a political game that is played "from up to the governor on down." She argued that teachers and parents do not have much input in the district in light of the political climate, explaining, "we don't rate that much… we're like low-class citizens of some kind (Interview, November 5, 2007). Similarly, parent Elyse Mays questioned the motives of the people leading the district, and she wondered if the community's input was really taken seriously during meetings, noting, "A lot of the times, I feel like we meet just to meet." She added that those in power—including board members, administrators, and local politicians—have "their own hidden agendas" (Interview, February 5, 2008).

Given this political backdrop, it is not surprising that many stakeholders regarded the EEB members warily when they initially came into office. While the EEB worked to establish itself as a community-friendly board, community members had a number of objections to their presence in the district. This section explores opportunities for and barriers to engagement under the EEB in more detail, focusing on how parents participated in democratic deliberation during EEB meetings.

Opportunities.

Just as Stone et al. (2001) emphasize the importance of engaging parents and building "civic capacity," both the EEB members and the superintendent explained that they hoped to use their expertise to "build the capacity of the city" (Interview, Dr.

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Johnson, December 7, 2007). In other words, because they saw themselves as "an intervention team," Dr. Johnson explained that a major goal was to "build the infrastructures that will… teach folk to… support themselves once the intervention team's gone" (Interview, December 7, 2007). In particular, Dr. Johnson said it is vital to work with parents in order to ensure "continued support" for his initiatives even after he leaves (Interview, March 10, 2009). Dr. Johnson acknowledged that involving parents is "risky, because when you start building and getting people thinking, it makes you more accountable… and then that can potentially impede your work and ability to move very quickly" (Interview, March 10, 2009). Even so, Dr. Johnson felt it was crucial to garner parental support, and he described some of the strategies he employed to do so:

> What wins communities is when you build a brand new building, and you give turkeys out at the holidays, and you do stuff like that, you gotta blend… what I call the "trinkets and trash" with something that's substantive, that's… part of much broader reform than just the flavor of the month. And I gotta keep putting the flavors of the month out to keep people coming to the store, but while we do that, you know… [we're] working on two fronts. I'm working on this flavor of the month… because you gotta have it, cause if not, I lose the market share. Then I gotta balance that with just good, strong instruction and pedagogical development and skills for teachers. (Interview, December 1, 2008)

Dr. Johnson was not opposed to appealing to parents through giveaways and grand gestures, but he also sought to engage them on a more meaningful level. Reflecting on his three years in the district at the end of his tenure, Dr. Johnson explained, "I'm hoping that we began to build some capacity in the city. Because the way you have good school districts is you have good strong communities and good strong parents" (Interview, June, 15, 2010).

In fact, Dr. Johnson worked hard to become part of the community in order to demonstrate to stakeholders that "there's an investment" in Clarksville on his part

(Interview, December 1, 2008). The president of the EEB, Paul Loedel described Dr. Johnson as "the ultimate [Clarksville] insider," in that "he's been able to really just get involved, you know… not only put his finger on the pulse of what's happening, but I mean, he's intertwined into anything… that's going on here." Loedel added, laughing, "Which is the greatest for me, cause I don't have to do it" (Interview, June 23, 2010). Other stakeholders noted Dr. Johnson's commitment to the district. One member of Johnson's administrative staff, Cheryl Leonard, emphasized how Johnson made himself visible in the community:

> He has a presence for everyone. He's in the school, so he's greeting students when they're coming in in the mornings. He's, and it's unfortunate to say, but he's at funerals. Family members, students, staff, whatever… he is there. And he's made this a seven, it's a seven-day commitment… even if he's just driving around on a Saturday afternoon, just riding through the neighborhood to see what's going on… (Interview, March 11, 2010)

While Dr. Johnson admitted his involvement was strategic, he also said he truly liked spending time in the community, noting, "I enjoy this community. This community has become part of my family's life" (Interview, December 1, 2008).

Likewise, this effort to understand and engage the community was evident during EEB meetings, where both the EEB and the superintendent took a number of concrete steps to encourage stakeholder participation. Victoria Gabriel, a member of Johnson's administrative staff and longtime Clarksville resident, noted that there are "a lot of intelligent people in Clarksville, they just haven't been able to speak… but this board has allowed them to do that" (Interview, March 6, 2008). Parent Olivia King said that with the Empowerment Board, "we have a board who listens. I feel that they're really interested in every child, and the wellbeing of every child in this community… I watch them try to work things out in a amicable way and try to be fair with everybody" (January

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10, 2008). Likewise, parent and PTO president Tonya Rollins said that while the EEB did not always follow the community's advice, they at least listened to "what the community had to say," explaining that they were "more democratic in their process" than former boards (Interview, October 1, 2009). While Dr. Johnson acknowledged that some of the initial EEB meetings were difficult, he thought that overall "the board meetings have been wonderful, calm; I haven't seen a bad one yet. Everybody told me how bad the board meetings were, but damn, they've been great, they've been love fests compared to what I've seen in other places" (Interview, December 7, 2007).

First, it is important to discuss how EEB meetings were structured in order to explore how these meetings allowed parents to participate. Education Empowerment Board meetings occurred the second and third Thursday of each month, starting at 6:30 pm, usually lasting one to two hours, sometimes longer. The first meeting of the month was a "conference" meeting, during which time the board discussed items on its agenda, without voting on anything. At the second meeting of the month, the "voting" meeting, the board had additional discussion, if necessary, and then voted on the contents of the education, personnel, and business agendas. Both meetings followed the same general format: after the pledge of allegiance to the flag, the district's attorney provided a brief report of the private executive session held prior to the meeting, in which legal and personnel matters were generally discussed. Next, the superintendent shared his report, which typically included updates about the district's strategic planning and details regarding upcoming events. Over time, Dr. Johnson gained a reputation for his lengthy reports, which often included guest speakers and PowerPoint presentations. The board chair took to warning meeting attendees, "I hope you're comfortable" before Dr. Johnson

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began (Field notes, September 11, 2008). After the superintendent spoke, the public was allowed to comment on "agenda items," literally the items on the evening's agenda. Initially, agendas were placed outside the boardroom about half an hour before the meetings began. However, after protest from community members who wanted adequate time to review the agendas before the meetings, the superintendent agreed to have copies available at the administration building at least 48 hours in advance (Field notes, November 15, 2007). The board allowed any individual to speak at meetings, provided he/she arrived early to sign up. Usually, if someone wanted to speak who did not arrive early enough to sign up, the board allowed that person to go after everyone else had finished. After the board discussed or voted on the agenda items (depending on what kind of meeting it was) individuals could comment on "non-agenda items," which included any school- or student-related concern they wished to bring before the board.

Over the three years that the EEB controlled the district, typically the same parents, teachers, and community members were in attendance at the meetings. The boardroom, which could hold about 40 audience members comfortably, was usually half full. Though frequently small in numbers, the audience was often quite vocal during the EEB's tenure. Indeed, just as Tracy (2010) found in her research on engagement in school board meetings, community members in Clarksville participated in a variety of ways. Assistant Superintendent Terry Robson said that she was always "amazed at how [community members] read every line of the board [agendas], how well prepared they are" to participate (Interview, January 11, 2008). In fact, when stakeholders came to the podium to address the board, they often asked pointed questions about specific agenda items and district expenditures.   It was not unusual to hear a person ask about why a

particular check had been written for a particular service or why specific vendors were chosen over others. Moreover, during the three years that the EEB was in control of the district, parents engaged in conversations regarding a variety of broader issues with the board and superintendent, including: the availability of alternative education programs, administrative staffing, the selling of school property, curriculum development plans, availability of textbooks, field trip policies, school improvement plans, the district's legal representation, state funding plans, special education, and more. Parent and PTO president Tonya Rollins felt it was her responsibility to hold the administration "to the letter of the law," explaining, "if you promise our children something, if you promise this district something, I'm going to make sure that you deliver what you say or at least exhaust every effort to make sure" (Interview, December 7, 2007). In order to demonstrate how Rollins, as well as other parents, did just that, it is useful to follow engagement around a particular issue at board meetings. Throughout the EEB's three years in the district, teacher retention, recruitment, and quality were themes that came up again and again. Thus, exploring how parents and the board engaged in conversations around this group of related issues provides a snapshot of what communication looked like at board meetings in general.

When the EEB began its tenure, the teachers' contract was up for negotiation. The teachers had worked the prior three years without any increase in pay, and many stakeholders were anxious for the district to give teachers a raise. At board meetings, community members asked for updates regarding the board's talks with the union. When community leader Bernard Davis asked how contract negotiations were proceeding, the board chair, Paul Loedel, explained that they were "still at the table" working out details

regarding compensation and benefits, and Loedel noted that the board wanted to look at all the issues from every angle and think carefully before reaching any agreement. Davis emphasized that the community supported "labor harmony" (Field notes, September 27, 2007). At the same meeting, another parent angrily addressed the board, complaining that the teachers should not go without a raise while the board hires high-priced administrators. She argued that if Clarksville wants to have the types of schools that put on plays or make use of cutting-edge technology, the district has to be willing to spend money on quality teachers. The board chair listened to her concerns and acknowledged they were valid, but he told her the board needed some transition time to learn more about the district and to undertake appropriate actions. Loedel assured her, "We know what our responsibility is and who it's to, and we will strive for excellence" (Field notes, September 27, 2007). Parent Tonya Rollins said that she agreed with Loedel, and she wanted the district to take its time in developing a fair contract. She asked why teachers should get a raise if students are not making AYP (Field notes, September 27, 2007). Later in the school year, parent Elyse Mays asked for an update regarding the teacher's contract, and Loedel told her that they were "very close" to an agreement, with only one or two issues that still needed to be addressed (Field notes, November 29, 2007). At an EEB meeting after the new year, the superintendent announced that the district had signed a contract with the teachers and was working on its implementation. He told the audience that he met with Andrea Barela, the president of the teacher's union, every month. From the audience, Barela added, "They're excellent meetings," and Dr. Johnson replied, "We're in this game together" (Field notes, March 13, 2008).

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In addition to raising questions about the teachers' contract, parents also frequently requested updates about hiring. Addressing the variety of openings for the upcoming academic year, Tonya Rollins asked the board when they would know if the positions were filled. The superintendent explained that the district was engaged in a "rigorous recruiting process," but that it was often difficult to fill math and special education positions. He told the audience, "We all need to be involved in recruiting." Rollins pressed Johnson on when, exactly, the community would know if the positions were filled, and Johnson said he had not received the final staffing needs from the district, but he would have more information within a week (Field notes, May 15, 2008). Parents also urged the board to consider hiring members of the community for teaching positions. At an EEB meeting later in the year, parent Elyse Mays asked the superintendent if he was looking within the district for people to fill the vacancies. When Dr. Johnson replied that the district does not give preference to insiders, Mays asked what message it sends to young people if they cannot get jobs in their own community after they graduate. Another parent echoed Mays' concerns, speculating that Clarksville graduates "can't all be that illiterate." Dr. Johnson emphasized that the district hires the best person for the job (Field notes, August 21, 2008).

When the new school year started, a local reverend, Evelyn Carroll, asked for an update about staffing vacancies. The superintendent explained that the district still needed an English and Spanish teacher, as well as a librarian. Carroll asked who would be hired as a substitute in the meantime for the English position. The director of human resources assured Carroll that the district would seek a substitute with English certification. Carroll asked how substitute teachers acquire the materials they need in

order to teach, and both the superintendent and director of human resources responded to her question, explaining that supplies were available from building managers and department chairs. The superintendent took the opportunity to emphasize again: "What I really need y'all to be is recruiters" (Field notes, September 11, 2008). At the same meeting, Tonya Rollins informed the superintendent that there were more Spanish vacancies than he advertised, and the principal of the high school confirmed there were, in fact, three openings. The superintendent asked Rollins and the principal to talk with him after the meeting (Field notes, September 11, 2008). At the meeting the next week, the superintendent announced that the Spanish vacancies had been filled. He updated the community about the remaining open positions and again asked those in attendance to help him recruit potential teachers (Field notes, September 18, 2008).

The conversations around this issue demonstrate the EEB and superintendent's effort to respond to community concerns. Clearly, neither the board nor the superintendent always agreed with the people who spoke, but they gave everyone a hearing and tried to respond thoughtfully to individuals' comments. Moreover, the administrators spoke in detailed terms, providing concrete answers to stakeholders' questions. When they did not have the information, they arranged to follow up with the community members in the near future. In general, the public comments portions of the EEB meetings consisted of this type of open dialogue between board members and the community members who were present.

Barriers.

While the EEB meetings presented parents with a variety of opportunities to participate, there were also several barriers that made engagement difficult for parents.

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While these barriers were evident during meetings, some of these barriers had less to do with the structure of the meetings than they did with the concept of the EEB in general. For example, some stakeholders explained that they were frustrated that the state had appointed yet another new board in their district. These community members argued that the sheer amount of change in the district had a detrimental impact on engagement in school governance. For example, Sandra Wayland, a director at a local nonprofit organization, said:

> There've been numerous false starts…which is why people sometimes don't even bother to come out anymore, cause if you've been to two or three of [the board meetings], you start saying, "Wait a minute, didn't we do this last year, the year before? Wonder whatever happened to that study? Or, what happened when…" Fill in the blanks, so. (Interview, December 19, 2007)

Parent Tonya Rollins said that a common refrain she hears when she asks other parents to become involved in the district is "Why bother?" Rollins explained that parents do not feel their complaints are heard, and they say to her: "Why keep trying? All they're going to do is change the principal. All they're going to do is change the superintendent" (Interview, December 7, 2007). Moreover, with the constant turnover in the administration, "promises have been broken to parents, over and over again, so it's like, you know, why support, we don't even know if that person's going to be here next year" (Interview, December 7, 2007).

In addition, some Clarksville residents were wary of "outsiders" in the district, and they did not have a lot of faith in either their ability or their desire to create positive change, which sometimes hindered participation. Just as critics of state takeovers (e.g., Ziebarth, 2002) argue that this form of governance does not value insider knowledge, stakeholders in Clarksville worried that their voices would not be heard by state-

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appointed officials. Local NAACP president Randall Abrams voiced his frustration with

the EEB, explaining, "we've been disappointed so many times because people who live

outside the district… are running the programs, and… they haven't gotten it right yet"

(Interview, March 12, 2008). Indeed, this idea of Clarksville "insiders" and "outsiders"

came up frequently during my interviews, and I began asking specific questions about

this insider/outsider dichotomy after spending a year in the district. While definitions of

Clarksville insiders and outsiders vary, in general, stakeholders agree that an individual

must be born and raised in Clarksville in order to be considered a true insider. Many of

the self-identified insiders with whom I spoke expressed a reluctance to work with

outsiders, as they doubted their commitment to Clarksville. For example, some parents

felt the EEB would act more decisively if their own children attended Clarksville schools.

Elyse Mays argued, "if it's your child, you work harder, and you make the change, but

when your children aren't directly affected, and if they don't send their kids here, they

don't care, they could care less" (Interview, February 5, 2008). Likewise, parent Connie

Barns bemoaned the chaos she continued to witness at the high school, and she explained

"unless your child was walking these hallways and you really put forth every effort to

move the system a little quicker, I just think it's a painfully slow process to get things

moving" (Interview, March 13, 2008). Barns argued that new administrators make

excuses, citing their need to learn more about the district, but these reasons are ultimately

"just smoke and mirrors" (Interview, March 13, 2008).

    While some stakeholders shared slight misgivings about these outsiders in their

district, other community members expressed outright resentment. Reporter Ryan

Carlyle described witnessing "real bitterness [among stakeholders] about not being able

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to elect their own school board" (Interview, September 20, 2007). Parent Tonya Rollins expressed her frustration with the outside control of the district:

> I hope that the district can be turned back into the hands of the people and that it not have to be on this high horse, being dictated by a board… what's best for our children. They don't know, they don't live in the city… They haven't grown up through the challenges, they're not here every day. I just feel like that's really a slap in the face when you have to have someone come in and tell you how to do things, versus empowering the people to say, "Here, this is how you do it, and we'll aid you," but let the people make the mistakes along the way, and you help them. (Interview, December 7, 2007)

Clarksville's former mayor, Kenneth Paulson, a lifetime Clarksville resident, agreed that community engagement is compromised when local leaders live outside of the city. He explained that when leaders are outsiders, city residents bring "emotional baggage every time there's a community meeting," because while the leaders go home "to a two-car-garage house in [a nearby town], I'm still living next to gunfire… I don't wanna hear what… you have to say" (Interview, February 9, 2012). Local reverend Paul Fritz felt the EEB—despite its two African American members—represented the racism of "the powers that be," as the state appointed the board in order to help "maintain and sustain a subclass" in Clarksville. Fritz explained, "It's a plantation. I mean, you have to go up to master and say, 'Master, can I?'" (Interview, April 24, 2008)

Though Clarksville insiders often identified Clarksville outsiders as a barrier to their ability to engage in the district, Clarksville outsiders often claimed that insiders' perceptions of outsiders—not the outsiders themselves—were the real barriers to positive change. Dr. Johnson explained that Clarksville residents "haven't shown up…and they haven't stood up… They're fighting the wrong battles here. I mean, when I first came there was a little animosity between the board and citizenry… This board wasn't the issue. This board, I think positioned themselves… to be totally, total children

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advocates." Johnson added that it did not matter if all the board members got in their cars and drove to their homes in neighboring suburbs at the end of the day, as "they could make the tough decisions" (Interview, June 15, 2010). On a similar note, Hamilton Charter School principal Michelle Mitford described her frustration at not being taken seriously at times because of her "outsider" status—despite living and working in the district for three years. She said, "I'm reminded that I just, I don't belong here, I'm here, and I'm allowed to be here on a guest visa" (Interview, June 1, 2009). As a result, Mitford said residents may "discount any ideas or any kinds of programming that you think might…bring innovation to the school" (Interview, June 1, 2009).

While stakeholders described these conceptual barriers to engagement, there were also a number of practical barriers at meetings that made participation difficult. First, both community members and administrative staff expressed frustration with the low turnout at board meetings. Reverend Paul Fritz asked, "You've come to board meetings, how many of us are there?" He explained that if a majority of the community's residents "marched here to a board meeting, you would have instantaneous change" (Interview, April 24, 2008). Similarly, the superintendent argued that the "community is very… satisfied in us doing [the work] for them," and he wished that more people would come to board meetings to ask: "Well, why did you do this?" or "What are you thinking?" or "Well, have you thought about that?" (Interview, March 10, 2009) For the people who do show up, the meeting structure—while designed to allow participation—sometimes complicates community engagement. A specific example helps illustrate how board structures favored the participation of some individuals over others.

On April 10, 2008, I arrived for an EEB meeting to find the boardroom full of people and stiflingly warm. The temperature was about 75 degrees outside, and it seemed that the heat was still on inside the building. I took a seat towards the back of the room, next to an African-American woman who had come with her two young sons. The meeting started, as usual, with the superintendent's report and then a public comment period. Melvina Bagley, the president of the elected School Board was present at this meeting, as she sometimes was, and she sat with the Empowerment Board. Many of the members of the community used the public comment period to address Ms. Bagley, as they were angry about the Elected Board's recent refusal to consider allocating 1% of the city's Earned Income Tax to the school district. (While the EEB ran the district, the elected School Board still had the power to levy taxes.) As a variety of community members accused Ms. Bagley of playing politics instead of helping the children, the two young boys near me squirmed uncomfortably—though remarkably quietly—in their seats. The confrontation between Ms. Bagley and the community grew more personal, and Ms. Bagley lost her temper. She accused the Empowerment Board chair of "smirking" at her. He threatened to have her removed, and in reply, she dared him, "Try me!" At this point, the meeting had been going on for two hours, and if it was possible, the room had grown even hotter (Field notes, April 10, 2008).

As the debate continued in the front of the room, someone on the superintendent's staff noticed the woman with the two young boys and came over to ask why she was at the meeting; the woman replied that she had a concern she wanted to share with the board. The staff member asked the woman if she had signed up to speak; the woman looked horrified as she explained that she did not realize she had to sign up ahead of time.

The staff member assured her that it was okay, and she interrupted Rachel Gaymon, a community member and meeting regular, who was on her way to the microphone to speak. The staff member asked Ms. Gaymon if the woman sitting near me could go first, as she had come with two small children. Mercifully, Rachel Gaymon let the woman go ahead of her. The woman gratefully approached the podium. Looking a bit bewildered about the hostile scene into which she had entered, she apologized and said she was not at the meeting to create any trouble. Instead, she explained that she was concerned because her son attends a district elementary school and they have not had soap in the bathrooms for months. The superintendent apologized and promised to follow up immediately. He asked the woman to leave her name with a staff member, and he would contact her the next day. The woman thanked the superintendent, gathered her children, and finally was able to leave (Field notes, April 10, 2008).

This incident highlights the ways in which the format and norms of the Empowerment Board meetings privileged some voices over others. First, the meetings occurred at 6:30 pm, which in general was helpful because individuals who worked typical hours could attend the meetings. However, parents with young children either had to find childcare or bring their children with them. In addition, the meeting rules regarding speaking were not posted, and when an individual attended a meeting for the first time, the norms were not readily apparent. Moreover, by putting public comments regarding non-agenda items at the end of the schedule, the board prioritized their specific concerns over those of the community, making individuals with specific questions or problems wait until the end of the meeting to speak. That said, some community members also prevented this woman from speaking. In this case, certain community

members—one who had previously run for the elected School Board and one who was a former Control Board member—used the board meeting as an opportunity to present their own views about the Earned Income Tax and publicly reprimand Melvina Bagley for her stance. The Empowerment Board chair stated that it was too late to change the tax situation; in this regard, the community members' comments amounted to nothing more than political posturing. Thus, the structure of the meetings privileged both the board's agenda and the voices of politically-connected citizens.

Finally, it is important to consider why the woman in this story came to the Empowerment Board meeting: her son's school lacked soap. She was not at the meeting to engage in conversations about reform; she simply wanted her son to be able to wash his hands after using the restroom in school. Until basic needs are met in the students' educational environments, it may be difficult for parents to become involved in larger questions about school reform. Parents who have to worry about the everyday realities of sending their children to district schools may not have the time or energy to contemplate larger issues relating to school policy.

In sum, the Education Empowerment Board began its tenure facing a community that doubted the ability and the willingness of outsiders to come into the district and work with the residents. Aware of that reality, the EEB members and the superintendent tried to create an atmosphere that encouraged participation. Moreover, because they knew that their time in the district was limited, the administration felt that community buy-in was essential for the long-term success of their plans. In this respect, parents were invited to share their concerns at meetings, and the EEB and superintendent took great pains to address their worries. Even so, there were still some aspects of EEB meetings that

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discouraged participation, such as the order of events and the time it took for the board to conduct its own business. Overall, though, many community members appreciated the board's efforts to engage the community, and they were saddened to see the EEB leave at the end of three years. Still, many residents welcomed the return of the elected School Board, which came with its own opportunities and barriers for participation; these are the topic of the next section.

The Elected School Board

When the Empowerment legislation expired at the end of June 2010, the elected School Board regained full control of the district for the first time in 16 years. Initially, the School Board consisted of nine Republicans. However, five members were up for re-election in November 2011, and four of those spaces went to Democrats. Melvina Bagley, the Republican president of the School Board, was the only incumbent to defend her seat successfully. Bagley "cross-filed" during the May 2011 primary, and a result, she assured her continued place on the board by running on both the Democratic and Republican tickets. Of the four Democrats who won seats on the School Board, two had been active participants at board meetings during the EEB's tenure. Bernard Davis, a community activist, won a seat, as did Jay Adams, a parent and former board member of Anchor Academy Charter School.   The two other Democrats included Evelyn Doonan, another community activist and educator, and Tilden Kinsley, a Clarksville High School graduate who was pursuing a master's degree at a nearby university. The Republican composition of the board shifted over the years, as four members lost reelection in 2011, and other members resigned and were subsequently replaced through appointment.

One other individual deserves mention in this discussion of the elected School Board: attorney Roy McNealy. With his own private practice in a nearby town, McNealy handled an extensive caseload for the district prior to the appointment of the EEB. McNealy was widely regarded as a political friend of the local state senator, and many stakeholders argued that his employment by the district was a direct result of the Republican-backed patronage system. One of the first steps taken by the EEB was to relieve McNealy of his duties and to hire their own full-time general counsel, a move they argued saved the district a significant amount of money in legal fees. However, one of the first actions undertaken by the School Board was to rehire McNealy. When the Elected Board met officially for the first time, Roy McNealy was seated at the board table along with the other board members. He was present, with few exceptions, at every other meeting, and over the course of the two years, his seat moved from the outside edge of the board table to the center, where he sat directly next to Melvina Bagley, frequently whispering in her ear during meetings.

Often citing McNealy as an example of the political nature of the board, some community members argued that the elected School Board primarily served the interests of Republican policy makers in Clarksville and the surrounding area. In fact, there is a history of a system of patronage led by Republicans in the district; this history is long, dating back to the late 1800s. Robert Quillen, who was raised in a Clarksville and is now a professor of political science at a nearby college, explained:

> …it was a political machine that was Republican, and that had [a] tremendous amount of control and power over patronage jobs, and so on. So people in the community will talk about…going to vote for the first time and… being co-opted to vote for the Republicans … if the Republican machine gave you, or gave your father, or gave someone in your household a job, you had to vote Republican, and so on…One very famous story is that the [leading Republican] machine actually

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put colored powder on the voting levers… some of the powder may have been red for one party, some of the powder may have been blue, and so, you came out and you were met by a party worker who shook your hand. "Oh," you know, "Great job," and so on, and, of course, you left the powder on that person's hand, and so that person could tell whether you had voted Republican or Democrat. (Interview, February 14, 2008)

Given this history, many community members believe that elected School Board members win their seats because of their connections to the Republican Party, not because they are qualified for the job. Moreover, voter turnout in Clarksville is low, and some stakeholders argue that those who do vote do not make educated decisions. Rather, community leaders contend that some community members rely on candidates' party affiliations, instead of their own best judgment, when voting in the district.

Even though most stakeholders acknowledged the existence of a Republican-backed patronage system in the district, Clarksville residents still characterized the return to local control as a move towards more democratic governance in the district, especially after the 2011 election, when four Democrats replaced four Republicans on the board, creating a vocal minority presence. Parent Jay Adams, who won a seat on the board in 2011, said that even though the EEB listened to the community, the elected School Board was more democratic in principle. He explained, "If you don't like what they're [the elected School Board's] doing, then their fourth year, then you run or somebody else run, and then you vote them out… we should have a right to govern our school" (Interview, June 21, 2012). While Adams acknowledged that being a board member is hard work, he explained that it is much less tiring than being "on the other side, hollering and screaming… because now we can make a change, and when the people say something to us, we listen and try to put it into play" (Interview, June 21, 2012). Similarly, parent and community activist Donald Brose said that it was difficult to be part of a community that

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"ranted and raved" but had no real input in the actual running of the district. He argued that the state did little to improve the district in the time that it had control. He asked, "'94 to now, what's been consistent? [The state], number one, and what's the other thing that's been consistent? An elected school board that had no power. That had no power… no community input" (Interview, June 14, 2012). While Brose leveled a fair amount of criticism against the elected School Board, he believed that, in theory at least, the elected School Board represented a more just system. In fact, when I spoke with Brose in 2012, he expressed his desire to run for a seat in the next School Board election.

In addition, though the composition of the elected School Board went through a variety of iterations during the two years I observed it, all of the elected School Board members had lived in Clarksville for a long time. In fact, many of the board members had gone to school in the district themselves. Some board members had family members in district schools, either currently or in the past. For example, Bernard Davis explained his connection to the district, noting that even though he does not have children in the Clarksville schools, "I got grands, I got cousins. I live here. They're mine… I'm impacted when everyone, whenever there's one to get hurt, whenever there's one that goes to jail, I'm impacted" (Interview, April 19, 2012). Similarly, Evelyn Doonan explained that while her daughter graduated from Clarksville High School in 2009, she currently has grandchildren in the district. In a local newspaper article, Melvina Bagley explained she was ready to lead the district, noting, "We're here for the kids. These are our kids. When I say ours, I mean mine, my cousins, my niece and my nephew, my family, my community. These are my people and we're going to do everything we can to have things run as smoothly as possible" (June 24, 2010).

Thus, the elected School Board began its tenure with some degree of community support; however, its relationship with the community was complicated. This section explores the opportunities and barriers for involvement at the school governance and policy level under the direction of the School Board. When the School Board began their tenure, they took a number of overt actions to limit community conversation during board meetings; therefore, barriers to involvement at board meetings will be described first, in order to set the stage for the ways in which stakeholders created their own opportunities to engage in response to these obstacles. One methodological note is necessary before I move on to my discussion of barriers and opportunities. While I tried to represent a broad range of stakeholders' voices, I was unable to interview any current Republican leaders in the district. Early in my study, I tried to interview Roy McNealy, but he declined because he was suing the district. Melvina Bagley agreed to an interview, but when I arrived at City Hall to meet her, she was not there. The Republican state senator expressed initial interest in an interview, but his spokesperson eventually stopped responding to my emails. I tried contacting one other Republican board member, but she never responded. Though their voices would have added a valuable perspective to this chapter, they were largely inaccessible for the purposes of this study.

Barriers.

While many Clarksville residents praised the return of the elected School Board, other stakeholders argued that the elected School Board did not represent the people of Clarksville any more than the state-appointed EEB did. Some community members argued that the elected School Board was beholden to the Republican-backed patronage system in the district, and this perception made some individuals reluctant to engage with

the board. In fact, the outgoing chair of the EEB made this point clear to me shortly before he left office: "I believe, and you can quote me on this and put my name on it, I believe the elected Board, especially the president, has handlers. And that she listens to her handlers, whatever they want, she does" (Interview, June 23, 2010). Indeed, Democratic members who joined the elected School Board in 2011 argued that the Republican board members acted upon the orders of others. For example, Evelyn Doonan explained that oftentimes the Republican board members, under the instruction of Roy McNealy, would come to meetings and say, "Well, we have word that we should do this." When Doonan asked, "You have word from where?" the board members would reply, "From the state… well, not the state directly" (Interview, June 26, 2012). Similarly, Bernard Davis expressed frustration at working with people who "have not a clue, they just mimic and go [with] what they've been told, programmed to do." When I asked specifically how much input Roy McNealy has in board decisions, Davis responded, "Roy, through the one-party system, is a surrogate control of the board… [The Republican board members] don't know what they're doing…that's why they look at Roy… He runs the district for [the state senator]" (Interview, April 19, 2012). An editorial in a local newspaper suggested why the board president might benefit from following orders, noting: "Bagley, a Republican who has long fed at the public trough with various city jobs, is currently holding the position of recreation coordinator for Clarksville parks department" (July 5, 2010).

Again and again, stakeholders explained their belief that politicians are interested in Clarksville because it represents an opportunity to make money. Indeed, research about local school boards demonstrates that they are often plagued by corruption

(Reinhard, 1998; Rettig, 1992; Saiger, 1999). In Clarksville, there are a variety of
theories regarding how and why politicians use the district's troubles for their own
personal gain. For example, reporter Ryan Carlyle explained, "Democrats and
Republicans fight over Clarksville… because in Clarksville it's really easy to get grants
for things and because it's got a high poverty level, and high unemployment level, and so
you can get money for infrastructure improvements. Half of it goes in your pocket. I
mean, the poverty pimps, that's what they do" (Interview, September 20, 2007). Randall
Abrams, president of the Clarksville NAACP, argued, "with a patronage system," the
board doles out contracts to their friends, so that "outsiders again are making money off
of this area" (Interview, March 12, 2008). Other stakeholders accused board members of
outright theft. Parent Michael Beardsley asked:

> …I would like to know also, where did all this money go?...What is it that
> happened to the monies that was there, that was available before… Money is
> being pocketed for self use, cause you have millions of dollars coming in into this
> district, but all of a sudden, there's no money there for [the children], so where
> did it go? You look around, you don't see nothing done to the schools. It's more
> schools shutting down than anything… it doesn't make sense… the kids are
> getting the bad end of the deal. (Interview, May 17, 2012)

While it seems unlikely that this type of embezzlement could occur in a district with strict
state oversight of its finances, Beardsley's sentiment is common in this district where
schools receive a lot of public funding and have little to show for it. This opinion creates
a barrier to participation in that stakeholders are reluctant to trust a board that they
believe profits, either directly or indirectly, off the plight of their children. Because of
the history of a patronage system led by the Republican Party, stakeholders question the
motives and qualifications of their own elected officials, often arguing that School Board
members serve for personal gain rather than the benefit of the community.

While these concerns may have prevented some stakeholders from engaging at School Board meetings, the School Board itself also enacted a number of official policies and informal practices that made participation more difficult. The School Board continued to meet twice monthly, holding "conference" and "voting" meetings. However, the School Board eliminated the public comments portion from the conference meetings, so the community was no longer allowed to address the board at the first meeting each month. In addition, public comments were limited to three minutes. At the School Board's first meeting, President Bagley explained this new rule, noting, "We're not here for questions tonight" (Field notes, July 1, 2010). Bagley had a timer on her cell phone that she used, and she frequently cut people off at the three-minute mark, sometimes giving an extra minute to friends or acquaintances. Often, newcomers to the meetings were unaware of the rule. They would ask the board a ten-second question and then use the rest of their time listening to the superintendent provide a lengthy response. Much to their surprise, they were not permitted to ask follow-up questions or make additional comments. Early on, the School Board also made the decision that only Clarksville residents could speak at board meetings. Local pastor Evelyn Carroll told the board she was "very disappointed in all of [them]." Carroll explained that she had several colleagues involved in her church's education ministry who should be able to share their ideas and opinions with the board, even though they do not reside in Clarksville. Bagley replied that only taxpayers should be able to address the board, concluding, "You have my answer. That's all I have to say." At the same meeting, Bernard Davis told the board he wanted to "make an appeal to [their] conscience" and shared his feelings that the board's action had discouraged the community from being a

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part of the conversation, calling the three-minute rule "foolish" (Field notes, October 21, 2010).

In addition to limiting stakeholders' opportunities to participate, the board members themselves were much less vocal during meetings, sharing little information with the community. Meetings, which under the Empowerment Board generally lasted at least an hour, took only minutes. The superintendent's report generally contained a few announcements and nothing more, and the board members did not discuss the agenda items. Rather, Melvina Bagley would read the letters of the agenda items one after another, waiting briefly to see if any board member had a comment. The meetings frequently reminded me of a game of Bingo, with Bagley at the front of the room calling out: "A-1... A-2... A-3..." and so on. On a rare occasion, a board member would ask a question, usually in a whisper, and the response was typically brief and too quiet to hear. After the new members joined the School Board in 2011, they asked more questions during the discussion of agenda items; however, conversations remained limited.

Moreover, when community members did have the opportunity to address the board and ask questions during the public meeting every month, oftentimes the School Board did not respond to stakeholders' concerns. Parent Jacqueline Allen felt the School Board shared their intentions for the district only after "the plans [had] unfolded," explaining she asked repeatedly about the eventual merger of the district's two specialty high schools and was told "time and time again that it was not gonna happen" (Interview, May 3, 2012). Later, the two schools merged. In addition to misinformation, other parents complained about a lack of information. Angela Abernathy, director of the district's Truancy Intervention Center, required parents in her court-mandated "parent

group" to attend a School Board meeting in order to complete the course. I had the opportunity to speak with these parents after their visits, and some of the parents expressed surprise regarding how little the board members seemed to know about what was happening in the district. Parent Sandra Murray described the meeting she attended as "a little out of control" and said "it just seemed like it was a lot of questions being asked that weren't being answered" (Interview, November 3, 2011). Murray added that she was surprised to learn about the extent of the problems at the district's high schools. She explained: "I wasn't aware that [the students] weren't getting the necessary classes to get into a good [college], so, I kinda felt, I was a little upset by that. I'm very emotional, I actually almost cried…" (Interview, November 3, 2011). Later in the year, parent Miguel Garcia attended a meeting, and we had the opportunity to discuss his impressions. I asked Garcia what he thought about the way in which board members responded to people's concerns, and we had the following exchange:

> MG: Yeah, they didn't know what was going on. They didn't. People was asking questions, that they didn't even know.
>
> KM: What gave you—
>
> MG: That was—that didn't make no sense. Why you in the School Board, and make a meeting if you don't what, people's, you don't, the answers to questions people's gonna ask you. [Laughs.]
>
> KM: So, I'm curi—what gave, how did you know that they didn't know what was going on, what did—
>
> MG: The way they acted! And the way it looked, and then the way they were answering the questions, "Oh, well, we'll get to that when we know." You're supposed to know something before you even go to a meeting. Cause you already got the paper on you, what they gonna talk about.
>
> KM: Yeah, did you—
>
> MG: So that, that don't make no sense.

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KM: Did you have a sense of why they didn't know? Did they, did they talk about that—

MG: They ain't doing their job. I don't think they doing their job. That's what I think. Cause how, how in the hell you gonna have a meeting, you give them the papers, what, what's the agenda, and you didn't know if they were gonna ask you questions that you can't answer the questions, right there, in front of you. That don't make no sense. That don't make no sense… Cause they supposed to know what they doing, they're supposed to answer the questions. What's the idea of having School Board meetings for that purpose? So why in the hell are you having a meeting if you ain't gonna? You might as well not have no meeting. Stay home. That's the way I feel. (Interview, March 29, 2012)

Garcia went on to explain that if he exhibited the same kind of ignorance while he worked as a bricklayer, he would have been promptly fired from his job.

While the meetings sometimes lacked concrete information, they often had plenty of commotion. In fact, on occasion, the drama of the meetings themselves became a barrier to engagement. More than once, for example, School Board meetings were adjourned early as tempered flared, leaving parents with concerns unable to speak. For example, one meeting abruptly ended after a local reverend led the audience in a choral reading of their complaints about the district. President Bagley reacted angrily, yelling, "I am here for four more years, and I won't be running again, so I'm libel to say anything… I'm not going to bite my tongue any more!" She argued with the reverend about how Jesus would have handled the situation.   Another board member added indignantly that he "didn't come here to listen to people spout off… personal crap!" The room became quite noisy, and finally Bagley banged her gavel, adjourning the meeting. A parent at the back of the room who had been promised time to speak stood up and yelled, "Excuse me! Excuse me!" The school police officer told her that the meeting was over. She flopped back in her seat, saying, "I just wanted to find out about my

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child's education" (Field notes, November 17, 2011). A month later, another meeting ended abruptly, right before the portion for public comments on non-agenda items. One of the new board members, Bernard Davis, attempted to address the community before the board vote, hoping to explain the lack of access the new (Democratic) board members had to relevant information. The Republican board members and Roy McNealy did not want to let him speak. The audience, led by State Representative Christian Crosby, a Democrat, started singing and humming "We Shall Overcome." McNealy pushed the vote forward, amidst all the noise, and the Democrats on the board did not even realize a vote was taking place. Their lack of participation in the vote did not matter, as they typically lost every vote by a 5-4 margin. The interim superintendent simply got up and left the room, while parents started yelling in frustration:

"They don't answer no questions! They don't do nothing! They're good for nothing!"
"They don't care about our kids!"
"They're not worried about our children unless they make money!"
"The role models are teaching the wrong things!"

One particularly angry man yelled at the board president, "Your ass will burn in hell!" (Field notes, December 15, 2011). Because the board never got to public comments on non-agenda items, it is hard to know what concerns, if any, particular parents came with that night. The chaos of the meeting and its sudden ending precluded any form of parental involvement, save for yelling at the end.

Finally, it is interesting to note how one community member's election to the School Board seemed to limit his ability to advocate publicly for the community during board meetings. Even prior to his election to the board, Bernard Davis came to almost every meeting and spoke passionately about a variety of topics. During the 2007-2008

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school year, Davis gave a lot of advice to the Empowerment Board (of whom he was generally supportive) regarding their interactions with the community and the need for complete transparency. At the first regular board meeting I attended, for example, Davis stressed his concern that the board and the community learn to talk openly with each other, and he urged the board to bring honesty and information to community meetings (Field notes, September 27, 2007). At a meeting a month later, Davis continued to press the board to involve the community in strategic planning for the district. He urged: "Seriously, keep the community plugged in, not after the fact" (Field notes, October 25, 2007).

After he was elected to the board, Davis still championed community involvement in the district, but he expressed frustration with parents and Clarksville residents who came to meetings demanding change but armed with little information. At a particularly contentious school board meeting early in 2012, Davis and the rest of the board listened as community members spoke angrily about the district's impending inability to pay its teachers. At the end of the meeting, several parents still wanted to speak, but they did not know they had to sign up. When pastor Evelyn Carroll asked the board to allow these parents to address them before adjourning the meeting, Davis replied, "It's good to see ya, but we need you every night. We need you at the meetings. We will give you good and accurate information." In fact, Davis seemed extremely frustrated by the angry meeting participants. A parent yelled in reply, "It's not a blame game! Our students are in jeopardy!" Davis responded that he hoped the community would grow to the point where it could respect the board and the process, and the meeting was adjourned with no additional time for comments (Field notes, January 12, 2012). At another crowded and

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heated meeting two months later, many community members angrily addressed the board after the board president had been in a fistfight with a teacher in the high school and faced no disciplinary action. Davis addressed the crowd and said, "I've been on the other side, but I take issue when you call us ignorant… We can't just do what I want to do. But we have to follow law" (Field notes, March 15, 2012). In a sense, board protocol and legal obligations required Davis to stay silent, whereas before he shared his feelings more freely with the community.

Thus, there were a variety of barriers that made it difficult for parents and other stakeholders to engage in meaningful conversations with School Board members during their meetings. While I cannot know how many parents would have attended meetings and spoken if not for these barriers, it is important to note that the stakeholders who were present were often unable to address the board, and when they could address the board, they frequently received inadequate answers to their questions. Though they faced several barriers, parents and stakeholders found a variety of creative ways to express their viewpoints at board meetings; these opportunities are discussed below.

Opportunities at School Board Meetings.

Indeed, because the elected School Board was regarded as part of the community, there was certainly a sense of pride when Clarksville residents regained control of their district. Community members welcomed the board back, and a lot of stakeholders took to calling Melvina Bagley, "Madame President." The equivalent term, "Mr. President," was never applied to EEB chair Paul Loedel. Even after the elected School Board made a number of decisions that community members regarded as questionable, many still rallied around their local leaders. When the district made national attention due to its

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budget shortfall and its inability to pay its teachers, Donald Brose implored the community to understand the "grave situation we're in." At a board meeting, he explained that with the reinstatement of the elected School Board, the district had witnessed "democracy in action"; however, he worried that the state might take back control. He implored Clarksville residents to stand up against state interference in Clarksville, urging his community to understand, "We can fight later, we can disagree later… this is our chance" (Field notes, January 19, 2012).

Though they encountered a number of obstacles, some parents remained optimistic and continued to work through board-approved means to express their viewpoints. Parent Jacqueline Allen explained that she wanted to be able to work "collectively" with the district, as she needed them "to make the right decisions to benefit [her] children" (Interview, May 3, 2012). As such, Allen regularly attended School Board meetings throughout the 2011-2012 academic year. She explained:

> I just really wanted to have [parents'] voices heard, and I think for so long that we've went on as business as usual, and the parents' voices really haven't been heard… I really thought that [the School Board] needed to hear and see the voices of the people that are really being affected by these changes [e.g., the merging of the two specialty high schools]… Even though now my oldest son is the only one that's still in the district, I'm still concerned about things that happen, because my neighbor's children go there. I still have relatives and other family members that are still in the district, so I want the same for their children that I would want for my children. (Interview, May 3, 2012)

Indeed, some parents continued to support the School Board throughout the difficult year. At the height of the district's budget crisis, Donna Fowler, a parent of two children at Science and Technology High School came to a board meeting to distribute orange ribbons for people to wear. During the public comments portion of the meeting, Fowler

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explained they were "ribbons of cohesion," and she urged everyone to work together for the benefit of the district's children (Field notes, January 19, 2012).

While some community members continued to participate through board-approved means, other stakeholders became more creative in the ways in which they approached the School Board. For example, there were a variety of responses to the three-minute rule. Some people, including parent Olivia King, activist Donald Brose, and NAACP member Francis Cleary, took to sharing all of their questions at once, without waiting for an answer, in order to make sure that they covered all of their concerns before their time ran out. This strategy was only semi-effective, as the Board did not always address all of the questions that were asked (e.g., Field notes, October 20, 2011, November 17, 2011, April 26, 2012). Some community members became unofficial "time-keepers" in the audience. On occasion, Reverend Paul Fritz timed speakers from his seat, stopping his timer whenever a Board member interjected a comment. When Bagley's three-minute buzzer rang at the front of the room, Fritz provided an alternate time count that only reflected the amount of time the community member had actually spoken. For example, during one board meeting, Reverend Carroll was engaged in an exchange with the School Board about their decision to renew the charter for Clarksville Charter School, when Melvina Bagley told her that her time was up. From the audience, Reverend Fritz said, "She's only spoken for one minute and 57 seconds." Carroll finished her remarks before sitting down (Field notes, November 18, 2010).

Young (2001) argues that community members must sometimes find new and creative ways to participate in deliberative democracies. In Clarksville, stakeholders employed new means of communication when public comments were no longer allowed

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at conference meetings. For example, a few months into the School Board's tenure, I

arrived at a conference meeting to find several residents sitting in the audience holding

large signs. The signs contained slogans such as:

> McNealy & Bagley: Resign Now
> Roy McNealy Must Step Down
> I don't trust Melvina Bagley

When the board entered the room, they largely ignored the signs, except for one

Republican board member, a White male, who looked particularly amused and took a

picture of the signs with his cell phone. The meeting proceeded, as usual, with no

discussion of the agenda items, and the meeting ended in less than ten minutes (Field

notes, November 11, 2011). A couple of months later—at the height of the funding

crisis—some parents and community members organized a candlelight vigil before the

board meeting. Standing on the steps of the administration building, approximately 40

people gathered and listened as local ministers prayed for the school administrators,

students, teachers, and government leaders. All three local news stations were present.

At the end of the vigil, there was an announcement that there would be a rally the next

day at city hall. Someone in the crowd tried to comment that the mayor was not present

at the vigil, and Reverend Carroll cut him off, seemingly trying to stay out of politics

during the vigil (Field notes, January 12, 2012).

Lastly, Clarksville residents sometimes used the meetings as a means of

addressing the community, rather than the board. As the situation in the district grew

more dramatic, there was more media coverage of the meetings. A reporter from the

local newspaper was always present, but during the 2011-2012 school year, there were

local—and even national—television crews. Three minutes at the podium may not be a

lot of time to change any board member's mind, but it provides ample opportunity to produce a sound byte for television. After a special meeting convened by the state senator, for example, Donald Brose explained that he was disappointed that he did not have a chance to share his comments. Brose strategically signed up at the bottom of the list of speakers in order to hear what other people had to say first. However, the meeting ended before Brose had a chance to speak. Brose explained that he was fully aware his comments would not sway the state senator; however, he later learned the meeting made national news, and he missed his opportunity to reach a larger audience. He ruefully explained, "Ah, I was mad at myself!... Especially when I found out they showed it on national [news]… that's important" (Interview, June 14, 2012).

In sum, while many community members were initially excited when the district returned to local control, stakeholders found their opportunities to participate in board meetings limited under the newly empowered School Board—their efforts to find alternative means of engagement notwithstanding. In some respects, it seems surprising that a group of Clarksville residents would implement rules that prevented their friends and neighbors from speaking. However, it is possible that the School Board was only able to change the format of meetings *because* it consisted of Clarksville residents. While stakeholders frequently argued with President Bagley, she is clearly a beloved member of the community. Even some of Bagley's biggest critics described their affection for her. During an interview with Donald Brose, some time after Bagley had been charged with assaulting a district teacher, I asked why the community was not more critical of her. He explained:

> Well, she's loved, she loves her community, and don't get it twisted, I like
> Melvina, all of that, but she just plays politics. And she's bought and sold. Plain

and simple. You do what you told. You don't do, when the push come to shove, what's right for the community. You don't stand up, and that's the problem that I give to her, but I love her…No, I love her because she's Clarksville… (Interview, June 14, 2012)

When I asked what made her "Clarksville," Brose explained, "you see Melvina at all events, you might run into her, she ain't scared of the community, she ain't afraid of the community, you know, and that's all good, we respect that. But you doing wrong. Plain and simple" (Interview, June 14, 2012). Brose's sentiment about Melvina Bagley illustrates how participation under the elected School Board was bound by a complex set of opportunities and barriers. On one level, many stakeholders were proud to see their fellow citizens running the district. However, many community members were dismayed by the choices the elected School Board made and the reasons behind their decisions. In this sense, stakeholders looked for ways to participate and criticize the board, even as they tried to maintain a unified front, worried that they might again be forced to cede control of their schools to the state.

Conclusion

In sum, under both the EEB and the School Board there were a variety of opportunities for and barriers to participation at the school governance and policy level. Having outsiders in charge of the district did not necessarily mean that local stakeholders were excluded from the decision-making process. Likewise, having insiders in charge did not necessarily grant stakeholders access to the board. In fact, because the EEB was composed entirely of outsiders, the board knew that it had to work to earn the trust of the community in order to create buy-in for their proposed changes. As such, the EEB tried to welcome community input and create opportunities to have conversations about reform efforts in the district. On the other hand, the elected School Board, composed of

Clarksville insiders, may have felt less pressure to prove themselves as responsive to the community. Certainly, the School Board dramatically limited opportunities for participation in board meetings by creating specific rules and requirements for speaking, and by refusing to respond to some stakeholders' questions and concerns.

Though parents had to overcome a variety of obstacles in order to participate, they did not stop looking for ways to become engaged during the five years that I attended meetings. In fact, as they encountered more barriers at board meetings, they found increasingly creative ways to share their opinions. For example, when they were no longer allowed to speak at conference meetings, some stakeholders came holding signs that expressed their viewpoints. Given only three minutes for comments, community members developed strategies for using their time more efficiently. That said, while parents tested the rules of the meetings, they never outright disobeyed them. Though tempers sometime flared, people generally stopped speaking when their time was up. Cries of protest that occasionally erupted during meetings never turned into anything more, and people cleared the boardroom when the meetings were adjourned and the school police officer on duty asked everyone to leave. When parents and community members organized a candlelight vigil for the district, they did not allow any discussion of politics, trying to keep their prayers for the district non-partisan.

While the parents who did attend meetings were both creative and persistent, it is fair to say that turnout at board meetings was typically low, and the number of parents (broadly defined) at board meetings only represented a small portion of the entire community. In fact, various stakeholders often cited this low turnout as the reason behind the lack of reform in the district. School Board member Jay Adams jokingly

suggested that the School Board should hold its meetings during halftime at Clarksville High School basketball games to ensure better attendance. He added seriously, "If [parents] don't want to fight for [their] child's education, then the state's going to continue to do what they are going to do" (Interview, June 21, 2012). Moreover, stakeholders complained that the people who do come to meetings and are often there for the wrong reasons. For example, former Clarksville mayor, Kenneth Paulson, argued that at meetings "the most vocal people are not the ones you need to be vocal," suggesting that only people with their own "hidden agendas" come to engage with district leadership (Interview, February 9, 2012). Likewise, David Worden, founder of the Clarksville Arts Academy discussed the "professional meeting-goers" in Clarksville, who are "wary of anything from the outside." Worden argued, "It's a small community, and there are very few that speak out. So, who knows whether or not the few folks that are speaking out, that their opinion is representative of a wider opinion of Clarksville" (Interview, February 15, 2008).

In fact, stakeholders frequently place the blame squarely on parents for their lack of participation at the school governance and policy level. While stakeholders often discussed the importance of encouraging more parents to attend EEB and School Board meetings, they rarely addressed how the meetings themselves could be altered to allow for more parent participation. Furthermore, it is unclear if board members believed that community engagement is a crucial element of school reform because parents have important ideas to contribute, or because participation helps ensure more community buy-in for changes implemented by the board.

Certainly, the EEB took steps to welcome community feedback during meetings, giving anyone the opportunity to speak, with no time restrictions. However, they did not fundamentally alter the structure of the meetings. Moreover, they could not change the fact that they were appointed by the Governor and not elected by the residents of Clarksville. In addition, the EEB often expressed the desire to engage parents as a means of building the capacity of the city. It is less clear if the EEB sought to engage the community as a means of building its own capacity to govern. In other words, did the EEB truly believe the community had important ideas to contribute, or did the EEB seek to involve stakeholders as a means of garnering more widespread support?

When the School Board gained control, they took deliberate steps to limit participation during meetings, and they never provided a clear explanation of any reasons behind their actions. In fact, many stakeholders believed that the state exerted as much influence over the School Board as it did over any other state-appointed board, even though the School Board was democratically elected. While members of the elected School Board sometimes bemoaned the low parent turnout at meetings, they also bemoaned the fact that parents occasionally turned out in large numbers to critique their handling of various crises in the district.

Thus, there are a variety of barriers that prevent parents from engaging in their children's education at the school governance and policy level. While it is important to consider what parents can do to become more active participants, it is also essential for leaders to think critically about the opportunities they provide for democratic deliberation, as well as how they position themselves in terms of state and local politics.

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Chapter 8: Discussion

Introduction

As a central question for this dissertation, I asked: what does parental engagement look like in a small urban district during a time of crisis? From that question, I developed the following subquestions:

- How do parents understand their roles in their own children's education? In particular, how do parents describe opportunities for and barriers to their participation? How do other stakeholders envision parents' roles?

- How has the proliferation of charter schools, as well as other school choice options, had an impact on parental engagement in the district? What new opportunities have opened for parental engagement, given the choices currently available in the district? What barriers still exist? Are there new barriers to participation?

- How has the form/content of parents' participation at board meetings changed— or remained consistent—as the composition of the school board has changed over the last five years?

- How can Bourdieu's theories about power—specifically his idea of symbolic violence and his metaphor of power relations as a game—help frame the opportunities and barriers that exist for parental engagement in each of the areas outlined above?

In this discussion, I consider how the data presented in the previous chapters address the issues raised in these subquestions, and I take up the first three sets of questions in turn. Throughout this discussion, I address the last set of subquestions, as I draw on Bourdieu's theories about power to frame my findings regarding opportunities and barriers for parental engagement in the Clarksville School District.

Two Competing Narratives about Parental Engagement

In the first set of subquestions, I ask how parents and other stakeholders in Clarksville understand parents' roles in their own children's education. The data

presented in Chapter 5, "Parental Engagement at the Individual Level" speak to these questions. In that chapter, I identify two types of opportunities for engagement at the individual level: parent-driven opportunities and school/district-driven opportunities. Parent-driven forms of engagement refer to actions initiated by parents to secure academic and social gains for their own children. I argue that parent-driven engagement often arises out of parents' desire to get the most they can for their children out of what they largely regard as a failing school system. School/district-driven engagement includes occasions when school staff or administrators reach out to individual parents, as well as more formal events that are designed to bring parents into the schools, such as parent-teacher conferences or back-to-school nights. This type of outreach tends to come from the belief that parents lack the necessary skills and values to help their children succeed in school.

Similarly, I explore barriers from the perspective of parents and the perspective of other stakeholders. Parents identify a variety of barriers that make it difficult to be involved with their children's education. At their root, these barriers stem from the dysfunctional nature of the school district itself. In contrast, other stakeholders argue that these barriers for participation are rooted in the dysfunctional nature of parents and families in Clarksville. To be fair, both parents and stakeholders express more nuanced understandings of these barriers. For instance, some parents expressed the desire to learn more parenting skills. In addition, I did not meet any teacher or administrator in Clarksville who would argue that the schools are free of their own share of problems. However, two competing narratives do exist. In one narrative, parents struggle to remain involved in a school district that continually alienates them and fails their children. In the

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other narrative, the school district continually reaches out to parents who either ignore their overtures or react to them with hostility. These competing narratives hinge on one important difference in perception. While parents talk at great length about why they do not value education *as it is provided in the Clarksville School District*, other stakeholders contend that parents do not value education *at all*. Though two narratives exist, most stakeholders—including parents—tend to put more stock in latter account, blaming parents for their failure to participate in formal venues. Bourdieu's theories about symbolic capital and symbolic violence help explain this phenomenon.

First, it is helpful to explore the connection between formal engagement and capital in general. Certainly, parents' ability to participate in school-driven events requires that they have a variety of resources on which to draw. Formal participation requires economic capital in that parents who are involved must have some degree of freedom from economic necessity. For instance, parents with higher incomes often have more flexible work schedules and more free time, which enables them to visit their children's schools more easily. In addition, when parents have more social capital, in the form of social networks, they are more likely to know what is happening at their children's schools and when events are scheduled. While Bourdieu (1986a) argues that social capital is separate from economic capital, he explains that social capital is dependent upon economic capital, as one cannot form social networks if he/she has no time to do so. Finally, without the requisite cultural capital, parents may not know how to navigate the education system successfully, and they may feel unwelcome in schools. For example, PTO president Tonya Rollins shared that parents are sometimes treated rudely in the Clarksville High School main office, and she suggested that school

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secretaries might not take parents seriously because of their style of dress—a form of embodied cultural capital (Interview, October 1, 2009). This illustration demonstrates how cultural capital also has a link to economic capital. Some parents do not have the money to buy suitable clothes or they might lack the educational or professional experiences that would enable them to know what the appropriate clothes are. Thus, in many respects, parents' ability to participate in formal venues depends on the amount of economic capital they possess. The fact that stakeholders' understanding of parental engagement is expressed primarily in terms of values—i.e., parents who do not participate are parents who do not value education—indicates that many stakeholders do not see a significant link between economic capital and participation. In this sense, certain forms of participation have taken on symbolic capital, in that formal participation has become a "transformed and thereby disguised form of 'economic' capital, [which] produces its proper effect inasmuch and only inasmuch as it conceals the fact that it originates in 'material' forms of capital which are also, in the last analysis, the source of its effects" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 183).

More importantly, however, the fact that parents have less capital—in all of its forms—than many other stakeholders in the district explains why their narrative is easily dismissed, or indeed, not even heard in the first place. Stakeholders with more capital have the power to set the discourse in the district, and their explanation that parents do not care about their children's education takes precedence over the suggestion that schools must improve in order to engage more families. What makes this dominant discourse even more compelling is that many parents express their belief in it. For example, at one particularly heated School Board meeting, board member Bernard Davis

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chastised the public for not being more involved and for failing to attend previous meetings. One parent yelled from the audience, "Don't blame us. It's our fault—we know that, now we need to fix the problems" (Field notes, January 12, 2012). Similarly, during interviews, many parents described helping their children at home in a variety of ways with their schoolwork, only to say, as Lisa Jordan did, "I'm not all that involved" because they do not attend school-sponsored events (Interview, June 2, 2011). Parents were also particularly quick to criticize their fellow parents' lack of involvement. Parent Kevin Entler suggested many parents prefer to spend their time on Facebook than at their children's schools (Interview, May 17, 2012), and parent Monica Nighman said that she thought a lot of Clarksville parents just "don't have it in 'em" to participate (Interview, June 1, 2009). Following Bourdieu, parents' belief in the dominant discourse that blames parents for the myriad of problems in Clarksville's schools is an example of symbolic violence. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) explain that people experience symbolic violence when they accept the legitimacy of their place in the social hierarchy. Moreover, in that individuals participate in their own "depreciation [and] denigration," they perpetuate their domination (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 35). Certainly, when parents in Clarksville add their support to the common belief that Clarksville parents just do not care, other stakeholders believe even more strongly in that sentiment.

In sum, parents face a variety of barriers as they try to become involved in their children's education at the individual level. Indeed, a lack of capital makes it challenging for many parents to become formally engaged. In addition, chronically failing schools have eroded parents' trust in the Clarksville School District. Beyond that, however, parents also encounter the prevailing sentiment that they just do not care about

education—a sentiment that gains strength when Clarksville parents themselves express their belief in it. This belief makes participation even more difficult for parents. Parents may question their ability to help their children in school, as they are faced with negative stereotypes professed by other stakeholders. Moreover, parents themselves devalue the time and energy they devote to their children in their home environments, which also serves to perpetuate the belief that parents just do not care, which, again, makes participation all the more difficult.

School Choice as a Game

In my second set of subquestions, I focus on engagement at the market level. Specially, I ask how an increase in school choice options impacts opportunities for and barriers to parental involvement in Clarksville. In Chapter 6, "Parental Engagement at the Market Level," I present data that address these questions by outlining the different types of choices that exist for parents in the district, and I describe the opportunities for and barriers to engagement that come with each choice.   For example, parents may choose to send their children to parochial schools, but this choice comes with a significant economic burden in the form of tuition fees. Alternatively, parents may opt to send their children to a charter school, such as Hamilton Charter, where they pay no tuition and where the principal has an "open-door" policy for parents who wish to speak with her. However, limited space and long waiting lists make it impossible for all interested parents to pursue this choice.   Clarksville Community Charter has seemingly endless spaces for enrollment, and the school even offers parents incentives to send their children there. However, teachers and administrators at this school do not always provide parents with information about the school's academic programs or finances.

While each choice has its own set of opportunities for and barriers to engagement, the policy and practice of school choice itself can also be regarded as both an opportunity for and barrier to engagement in Clarksville. The metaphor in which Bourdieu compares the struggle for power and status in society to a game is particularly useful in describing this phenomenon. That is, school choice can be conceptualized as a game, in which parents seek to secure academic and social gains for their children, and within this game, parents employ a variety of strategies. While the rules of the game provide occasions for parents to become involved—and while parents creatively manipulate the rules of the game to achieve their own ends—these opportunities are ultimately limited by the structure of the game itself.   A closer look at Bourdieu's theory helps illustrate the opportunities and barriers inherent in school choice in Clarksville.

First, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) explain that this game—this struggle for status—can occur in a variety of settings; in fact, it happens whenever people occupy specific positions that are defined in relation to one another. Bourdieu (1979) uses the specific example of a card game to illustrate how people have various advantages and disadvantages based on the positions they hold. He explains that the outcome of the game depends both on how the cards are dealt (i.e., how capital is distributed) and on how much skill the players have (i.e., how people make use of their capital, and how one's capital evolves over time).   Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) add that sometimes players wield "trump" cards to their particular advantage; in other words, certain capital has additional value in certain settings (p. 98). Applying this metaphor to school choice, parents can be seen as players who seek to use the capital they have to the best of their ability in order to make the most beneficial decisions for their children.

Within this game, parents exercise a variety of strategies to play a winning hand. Some parents find ways to acquire enough economic capital to pay for private school (e.g., one mother described borrowing money from her retirement fund). Other parents talk with principals, drawing on their cultural capital, to convince school leaders to allow their children to register for a particular school. Sometimes parents use their social capital, speaking with other parents and friends to learn more about different choice options. On occasion, parents even try to "cheat" at the game or stretch the rules. For example, some parents lie about their addresses in order to secure a particular school placement for their children. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) explain that this type of behavior is just one more type of strategy as "playing with the rule is part and parcel of the rule of the game" (p. 18). Moreover, not only does the use of strategies indicate parents' active engagement in the game (i.e., their involvement in their children's schooling), it also demonstrates a nuanced understanding of how the game is played (i.e., how choice works and how schools operate in Clarksville). Bourdieu (1986b) explains that the use of strategies means that agents have an awareness of the "whole structure and history of the game" (p. 117).

While there are a variety of opportunities to exercise strategies within the game, Bourdieu argues that ultimately the game itself limits what the players will be able to achieve. In fact, Bourdieu (1981) explains, "no one can take advantage of the game… without being taken up and taken in by it" (p. 307). In other words, by playing the game, participants submit to the "transcendent goals, meanings or interests" of the game (p. 308). Typically, the goals and interests of the game benefit people who already have power and status in society. Therefore, it is important to ask: what are the "goals,

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meanings or interests" of school choice? Certainly, the answer to this question varies

depending upon whom one asks. Some theorists argue that school choice serves the

interests of all members of society, in that it provides every individual the opportunity to

choose what is best for his/her child (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman & Friedman,

1980). Other researchers contend that school choice serves the interests of the dominant

class, in that choice programs privilege people who have access to more resources (e.g.,

Wamba & Asher, 2003; Wells et al., 1998). Moreover, in that some individuals stand to

profit from school choice (e.g., investors in for-profit school management companies),

school choice serves the interests of capitalism.

No matter where one stands in this debate, however, there is clearly a connection

between school choice and the interests of individuals. Even though proponents of

school choice argue that it increases competition, which can lead to systemic change,

choice is first and foremost framed as an issue of individual liberty. In this sense,

regardless of one's ideology, it is evident that school choice serves the interests of

individuals over the interests of the community. When parents engage in the game of

choice, they focus on securing advantages for their own children. Indeed, some parents

opt out of this game and send their children to pubic schools in the interest of supporting

the district. As parent Dora Miller explained, "We combine, because if we are not

combined, if we are not united, this school will break down" (Interview, June 8, 2012).

However, these coalitions have less power as more parents leave district schools. In fact,

the impact of school choice on the community is the theme of a recurrent debate in

Clarksville, in which people argue about the effect that the proliferation of charter

schools has on the district. However, both the focus on this debate, and the focus on

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making individual choices, directs the conversation away from what district schools can and should do in order to improve for all the children of the city.

Thus, school choice embodies a variety of opportunities for and barriers to engagement. On one level, each choice presents parents with new ways to be involved with their children's schooling, but these choices come with their own obstacles. On a more general level, however, school choice gives parents the opportunity to engage in decision-making regarding what kind of schools they want for their own children. However, by engaging in the individual process of school choice, parents often remove themselves from conversations about what kind of schools they want for their community.

Insiders, Outsiders, and School Governance in Clarksville

In my third set of subquestions, I consider how the form and content of parents' participation in board meetings changed as the composition of the school board shifted during 2007-2012. In Chapter 7, "Parental Engagement at the School Governance and Policy Level," I address this issue. I describe the political contexts in which both the Education Empowerment Board and the elected School Board led the district, and I consider how these contexts created opportunities and barriers as parents tried to participate in school governance. For example, as a state-appointed board, the EEB encountered some resistance from stakeholders who were wary of "outsiders" running their district. On the other hand, composed of democratically elected representatives, the School Board enjoyed a great deal of community support when they began their term. In Chapter 7, I also focus on the different ways in which the two boards themselves facilitated and hindered parental engagement. For example, the EEB openly discussed

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many of their decisions and invited community feedback.   However, meetings were often lengthy, and the time for public questions and comments was left until the end, making parents wait through a great deal of board business before they could speak. Meetings were much shorter during the tenure of the elected School Board; however, this brevity was largely the result of the School Board's reluctance to engage in public discussions, as well as new procedural rules that limited opportunities for community participation. Ironically, therefore, the community had less visible input into school governance and policy making when a democratically elected School Board took control of the district. Bourdieu's theories about power help explain this phenomenon.

First, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital can provide some insight regarding how the two boards positioned themselves in relation to the Clarksville community. According to Bourdieu (1979), members of the dominant class convert their "material" capital into "symbolic" capital. That is, while members of the dominant class achieve their power through the use of their economic, social, and cultural capital, their dominance is "taken for granted" and seen as a legitimate outcome of their talent and efforts (pp. 183-4). The EEB, when it came to Clarksville, did not have any symbolic capital. Appointed by the governor after a great deal of political wrangling at the state level, these leaders were not viewed as legitimate by many stakeholders in the district. In fact, some Clarksville residents clearly believed the EEB members achieved their positions directly as a result of their connections to the governor. Thus, lacking symbolic power, the EEB had to earn the trust of stakeholders in order to govern, and the EEB members worked to establish this confidence by engaging the community at board meetings. On the other hand, the elected School Board did possess symbolic capital

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when its term began in 2010. Elected by the people of Clarksville, the School Board was composed of individuals who earned their positions through a democratic process. That said, stakeholders in Clarksville acknowledged that their political system suffered from corruption, and they understood that money and connections had an impact on the outcomes of local elections. However, the symbolic value of a locally elected board meant a great deal to many residents who had been waiting to regain control of the school district since the state first took over in 1994. The School Board, in this sense, did not have to worry about establishing its legitimacy, and therefore they did not need to work as hard as the EEB to earn the community's trust.

While the concept of symbolic capital helps to explain why the School Board did not need to go to great lengths to win over the community, it does not explain why the School Board actually took steps to *limit* community input during meetings. In other words, the School Board could have used its symbolic capital to engage the community in even more ways. Why did this board choose not to do so?   One possible explanation is that while the elected School Board had symbolic capital, it lacked the other sorts of capital necessary for leading the district. For example, when the board began its tenure, the district experienced severe budget cuts; thus, the board did not have enough economic capital to implement its plans. In addition, some board members lacked the cultural capital that would have helped them fulfill their job requirements. For example, while the board members had a great deal of familiarity with Clarksville, many members had never before served on any boards of organizations, and they had limited experience in public office. Moreover, most of the elected School Board members did not have any expertise in the area of education.   Thus, it is possible the board did not know how to

engage the community. It is also possible the board was reluctant to engage the community because members were afraid they would be unable to answer the community's questions.

Though the idea of capital certainly helps explain some of the dynamics of the meetings, it does not fully capture the complexity of the interactions between the School Board and the community.   In this sense, it is useful to turn again to Bourdieu's conception of the struggle for power and status in society as game.   In fact, if one conceives of engagement at the school governance and policy level as a game, then School Board meetings were one setting in which this game was played in a vivid fashion. For example, at board meetings, there were a variety of players representing different interests, including: the Republican board members, who always held at least a five-person majority; the Democratic board members, who made up a four-member minority after 2011; the superintendent, who changed three times between 2010-2012; Roy McNealy, a close ally of the Republican state senator; and audience members, who aligned themselves with different factions of the board. There were also clearly defined rules for board meetings regarding who could speak and when, for how long, etc. Meetings followed the same format for all five years that I attended them.

Moreover, Bourdieu (1981) argues that by playing the game, participants submit to the "transcendent goals, meanings or interests" of the game (p. 308). Indeed, there were both spoken and unspoken goals involved in boardroom interactions in Clarksville. When stakeholders in Clarksville explained why they attended board meetings (i.e., why they played this game), they unfailingly provided a variation of the standard answer: "For the kids." Again and again, stakeholders professed their commitment to helping the

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children of Clarksville through improving the educational system there. However, when stakeholders in Clarksville discussed why *other people* attended board meetings/played this game, the reasons they shared were much less altruistic. In general, stakeholders believe that people become involved in Clarksville's schools in order to increase their own personal status or wealth. For instance, consider the following players in the game: School Board President Melvina Bagley, Republican State Senator Vincent Tarsitano, and Clarksville Charter School Founder, Reuben Chavalier. Each of these individuals expressed their desire to help the Clarksville community due to their genuine commitment to the families in the district. However, many stakeholders offered a different explanation for their involvement in the school system, exemplified by the following arguments: Melvina Bagley serves as president of the School Board in order to carry out the State Senator's interests; in return, the State Senator secured Bagley a comfortable job in city government. State Senator Tarsitano is interested in the district because he wants to promote the growth of charter schools, as Tarsitano's biggest individual campaign contributor, Rueben Chevalier, is invested in Clarksville's largest charter school. Reuben Chavalier owns a for-profit management company that runs Clarksville Charter School, and Chavalier makes a large profit. Ultimately, as illustrated through this example, many stakeholders argue that the goal of the game of school governance comes down to making money.

Where do parents fit in the context of this game, particularly as it is played during board meetings? As illustrated in Chapter 7, some parents clearly believed that a game was being played, and they were reluctant to participate in school governance because they felt their engagement was pointless in the overall political context of the district.

For example, parent Linda Drazen used the language of game-playing to describe her role in the district, explaining that she often feels like a "pawn" being manipulated by powerbrokers in Clarksville (Interview, November 5, 2007). For this reason, Drazen doubted the ability of leaders to create positive change. On the other hand, some parents did engage in the game with the hope of being able to advance their own interests. For example, parent Jacqueline Allen consistently attended board meetings during the 2011-2012 school year in order to advocate for her children and their schools in the district. Parent Jay Adams ran for—and won—a seat on the elected School Board so that he could help his daughter and her peers finish their schooling successfully.   Similarly, some parents were not deterred by the limits the School Board placed on participation, and they developed strategies for interacting with the board, such as stretching the time limits or holding up signs or even prefacing their remarks to the board president with phrases like, "Melvina, you know I love you, but…" Of course, while these strategies tested the rules of the game, ultimately, they fell within the limits of the game.   Still other parents did not seem to understand the dynamics of the game, and their lack of understanding inhibited their ability to advocate for their children at board meetings. For instance, on occasion, parents attended meetings because they were clearly angry about a particular event or policy, and they sometimes shared their frustration by yelling at the board. Oftentimes, they lacked information or shared incorrect details. In this respect, both the School Board and other community members dismissed these parents' comments, as the parents did not demonstrate any skill in playing the game.

It is important to note that the rules of this game of school governance are not set by one political party or by a specific state senator or by the current School Board in the

district. As Bourdieu (1981) explains, power does not come from any particular position in the game; rather, power derives from the playing of the game itself. Therefore, Bourdieu argues, "no one can take advantage of the game, not even those who dominate it, without being take up and taken in by it" (p. 307). In this sense, the game takes on a life of its own, and it is difficult to know where the game begins and ends, just as it is difficult to know who is playing the game for what reasons. Stakeholders in Clarksville constantly question each other's motives, and as former mayor Kenneth Paulson argued, it is important to look for people's "hidden agendas" whenever individuals raise their concerns at public meetings (Interview, February 9, 2012). In the case of the elected School Board, stakeholders often suspected that board members were trying to profit off of the plight of the district (or that they were working for other people who were trying to profit off the plight of the district), and they sought to bring their suspicions to light during board meetings. In addition, some School Board members expressed little patience for parents who used their time for public comments at meetings in order to advance their own personal causes.

Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that the School Board curtailed opportunities for the community to speak.

Thus, Bourdieu's ideas regarding capital and the struggle for status and power as a game help explain some of the dynamics of parental engagement at the school governance and policy level in Clarksville. I focus on the elected School Board in this discussion because of the apparent contradiction between the ideal and the reality of this board. Community members looked forward to the return of local control to their district; however, under the locally elected School Board, stakeholders had less input in

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the running of the district than they did when the EEB was in charge. I am not suggesting that the EEB was not part of a game. However, as state-appointed outsiders, they were not as entrenched in the game—the maneuverings for money and power in Clarksville—as were longtime residents of the district. Moreover, the EEB expressed a desire to engage with the community. The superintendent explained this desire was born as much out of strategy as it was out of their commitment to democracy. That is, the EEB understood that parents were reluctant to trust them because they were not from the community; consequently, the EEB created opportunities to hear from parents to earn their trust in order to garner more support for their reforms. On the other hand, members of the elected School Board were part of a more complicated—and seemingly contradictory—game. Despite being elected by the people of Clarksville, some members of the School Board believed community input would negatively impact their ability to achieve their goals in the game of school governance, and they supported policies to limit this participation.

Conclusion

In sum, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital and his metaphor comparing the struggle for status to a game help explain some of the opportunities for and barriers to parental engagement in the Clarksville School District. While Bourdieu's work presents a fairly deterministic view of society, he does show how individuals are able to make decisions and employ strategies to improve their own positions within given circumstances. Moreover, in Bourdieu's later work, he argues that an awareness of power relations can help create and sustain social change (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Though I have explained that parents sometimes adopt the dominant

discourse in Clarksville and blame themselves for their lack of formal engagement in the school district, I want to emphasize that parents also demonstrate an awareness of how power works in the district. Some parents express this understanding when they discuss the ramifications of school choice; other parents communicate this understanding when they consider how political power works through the various school boards. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) envision "collective intellectuals" working together to critique the dominant political and economic interests in society (p. 57). Indeed, some parents have already begun this work, and it is worth thinking about how school districts can provide further opportunities to do so—or more importantly, what resources parents could use to create these opportunities on their own.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Overview

During the time that I have been working on my dissertation, people (friends, family, acquaintances, my dental hygienist, anyone who knows I am a graduate student) have asked me what I am studying—probably as much out of politeness as out of any real desire to hear details about my qualitative study. When I tell them that I am looking at parental engagement in a small urban district, though, people become interested. More than once, someone has responded, "*What* parental engagement?" Several people have assumed that I am studying all the reasons why parents *do not* participate. One of my (more conservative) uncles, who at one time lived in a town near Clarksville, offered to connect me with administrators at a Catholic school in the area, so that I would be able to meet at least some parents who actually care about their children's education. Indeed, these responses to my topic reflect a commonly-held belief in our society: one major reason that urban schools are failing is because urban parents are not involved in their children's education. However, during my time in Clarksville, I witnessed just the opposite: I met parents from all over the city who clearly care about their children's education. Granted, these parents are not always involved in formally-recognized ways, but they take a variety of actions in order to help their children succeed in school.

I found the issue of parental engagement in Clarksville to be even more compelling because of the sheer number of constantly changing issues facing this small district. For example, during my five years in Clarksville, the district had two different school boards and three different superintendents. When I came to Clarksville in 2007, teachers had gone without a raise for three years. In 2008, the teachers signed a new

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contract, and the district experienced a period of hiring. By 2011, however, the district furloughed 40% of its teaching force, and by 2012, it ran out of money to pay teachers entirely. In addition, legal problems continually plagued the district. When my advisor started her tenure on the EEB, for example, the parents of special education students were suing the district because their children had received inadequate services, the former Board of Control was suing the district for being removed from office, and Roy McNealy was suing the district for money he believed he was owed for legal services. In fact, my advisor's years in the district were bookended by lawsuits; as a parting gift, the School Board filed an injunction against the Empowerment Board during their last days in office, trying to prevent the EEB from issuing a bond. The lawsuits did not stop there, as the district later sued the state for much-needed funding, charter schools sued the district for money owed to them, and parents of special education students continued to sue the district as a result of inadequate accommodations for their children. Even the school buildings themselves were subject to instability, as buildings were opened, closed, repurposed for new grades, combined, and sold—often in the middle of the school year. When I started doing research in Clarksville, there were four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. By 2009, there were six reconfigured elementary schools (some schools changed from K-6 to K-8), no middle schools, and three high schools. Today, there are three elementary schools, two middle schools, two high schools, and a new (public) Clarksville Cyber Academy. These events represent only a sampling of the changes that parents have had to navigate.

In addition, the historical and political context of Clarksville is fairly unusual, as it is a majority African-American, Republican city. In this small, politically-minded

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town, many residents are acutely aware of the impact that state and local politics have on district decision-making, and changes in the district's schools do not go unnoticed. Moreover, though many Clarksville residents are quite proud of the district's history and upset by its current decline, these same residents are often cynical of the district's potential to change. While stakeholders argue that the schools must improve, many community members are wary of outsiders coming into their city in order to implement large-scale reforms. Certainly, this unique context shapes the types of opportunities and barriers that parents encounter as they try to engage in their children's schooling.

Thus, as the central question for my dissertation, I asked: What does parental engagement look like in this small urban district during a time of crisis? Indeed, there were certainly parents I met who seemed overwhelmed, and there were many parents whom I never met because they did not respond to outreach from the Truancy Intervention Center or other district staff or because no one reached out to them. However, by and large, the Clarksville parents with whom I spoke looked for opportunities to become involved in their children's education, despite a variety of obstacles they encountered.

Key Findings

In this study, therefore, I chose to examine parental engagement at the individual, market, and school governance/policy levels. I focused on these three levels because of their connection to the events in the district. In other words, parental involvement does not always occur in individual, market, and policy settings. However, as a result of the historical context of the city, as well as the current reforms underway in Clarksville, parents encountered a variety of opportunities for and barriers to participation in these

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areas. Thus, for each level, I discuss evidence that demonstrates the ways in which parents are engaged in their children's education, and I also share data that illustrate the barriers that parents encounter. In Chapter 5, I describe two competing narratives that emerge about engagement at the individual level. That is, I explain that parents are discouraged by the low quality of education that their children receive in Clarksville, and this lack of faith in the district often translates into a lack of participation in formal venues. Other stakeholders, however, argue that Clarksville parents do not value education in general, and parents fail to provide the support their children need in order to succeed in school. The parents with whom I spoke, however, all expressed their belief in the importance of education—though some parents shared they did not always know what to do in order to help their children in their academic endeavors. Moreover, I observed that levels of parental participation in formal settings (board meetings, report card conferences, school concerts, etc.) increased when the EEB and their superintendent were able to invest more money in the schools and develop new academic and extracurricular programs. This change in involvement suggests that increased parental engagement in formal venues may be a side effect of improving education in the district, and not necessarily a prerequisite for successful school reform. In addition, I found that parents were consistently involved in their children's education outside of school, providing support and encouragement at home, throughout all the changes that occurred in the district.

In Chapter 6, I describe parental engagement at the market level, and I consider how the proliferation of choice options in the district has had an impact on opportunities and barriers for parental involvement. While more choices may seem to provide more

opportunities for parents to engage, the situation in Clarksville is more complex. First, many of the options from which parents have to choose are problematic. For example, a choice between a failing public school or a potentially corrupt charter school with only marginally better—and slightly suspect—test scores does not present parents with a real opportunity to help their children achieve academic success. In addition, parents encounter barriers as they try to make informed choices. Some parents may have a difficult time accessing relevant data that would help them make reasoned decisions. Even when parents are armed with all the information they need, the schools in Clarksville are constantly changing, so what is true of one school one day may be quite different the next. Making matters even more difficult, parents are often confronted with the question of what their individual decisions will mean for the fate of the district, as there is a widespread belief that the declining enrollment in public schools is as much a cause as it is an effect of the diminishing quality of education in Clarksville. Thus, an environment of school choice may create just as many new barriers as it does new opportunities for parents to engage.

In Chapter 7, I discuss parental engagement at the school governance and policy level, and I focus on the differences in involvement during the tenures of the state-appointed Education Empowerment Board and the locally elected School Board. As outsiders, the EEB had to work to gain the stakeholders' trust; as such, they provided a variety of opportunities for parents to share their feedback in order to build a positive relationship with the community. On the other hand, the locally elected School Board was composed of Clarksville insiders who had many close connections in the district. Interestingly, the elected School Board took a number of steps to limit participation in

meetings. While parents still found ways to voice their opinions, opportunities for democratic deliberation during the two years I observed the School Board meetings were minimal. Though community members and district leaders frequently bemoan the low parent turnout at board meetings, it is important to consider what opportunities these meetings actually offer for participation and what steps district leaders can take to remove barriers that make it difficult for parents to engage.

In addition, it is important to note that while these three levels provide a helpful way to frame my data, in reality there is a great deal of overlap in the types of engagement that occur. For example, parents sometimes attend board meetings (governance-level engagement) to address a concern specific to their own child (individual-level engagement). Parents often speak passionately at public meetings about the issue of school choice, specifically addressing whether charter school enrollment should be capped (a market-level issue in a governance-level setting). Some parents worry that their voices are not represented on the boards of charter or partnership schools (a governance-level issue in a market-level setting) and so on. On a related note, even opportunities and barriers within these levels sometimes overlap. For example, when parents complain to an administrator about an uncommunicative teacher, they find an opportunity to engage in order to address a barrier. When parents discuss the impact that charter schools have on the school district, it represents an opportunity for parents to consider school policy. However, in that these discussions may inhibit some parents from making a choice that best suits their child's needs, they represent a barrier. If anything, these overlaps in levels, as well as between opportunities and barriers, further

illustrate the complexity of the issue of parental engagement and point to the inaccuracy of simplistic statements such as "parents just don't care."

Given the complicated nature of parental engagement in Clarksville, Bourdieu's theories about power prove helpful in understanding the various issues I observed. For example, Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic capital and symbolic violence help explain why parents often accept the blame for their lack of formal involvement in Clarksville schools. Given the number of barriers that parents encounter when they try to engage in their children's schools at the individual level, it is puzzling why many parents believe— and perpetuate—the dominant discourse that blames parents for a lack of involvement in their children's education. In fact, stakeholders, including parents, frequently argue that the lack of parental involvement is a major reason that Clarksville schools are failing. While there is clearly a link between economic capital and parents' ability to participate in their children's schooling, Bourdieu's idea of symbolic capital helps explain how stakeholders misrecognize this connection, attributing a lack of parental participation to a lack of values and not to a lack of resources. In that parents accept this interpretation of the situation, they experience symbolic violence, and they even contribute to the discourse that argues parents do not participate because they do not care.

In addition, Bourdieu's conception of the struggle for power and status as a game is a useful lens through which to examine parental engagement in both school choice and school governance in Clarksville. In the case of school choice, parents endeavor to secure academic and social gains for their children, and within the context of the educational marketplace, parents employ a variety of strategies to win advantages for their children. Ultimately, however, the game of school choice emphasizes the needs of

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individuals over the needs of the community.   By participating in the game, parents may miss opportunities to engage in and improve public education for all of the children of Clarksville. In the case of school governance, a variety of stakeholders compete to promote their own interests. While these stakeholders contend their motivations center on improving the quality of education for the students of Clarksville, other observers in the district are not so sure. In this historically political city, many stakeholders argue that district leaders are primarily interested in pursing partisan interests, as well as increasing their own status and wealth.   Thus, in the context of this game, parents sometimes feel reluctant or unprepared to participate in their children's education at the school governance and policy level. Moreover, even when parents want to participate, they sometimes encounter barriers put in place by school leaders who view community input as potentially harmful to the ends they wish to pursue.

While Bourdieu emphasizes how power relations shape people's actions, it is important to note that Bourdieu also describes individuals' freedom to act within those limits. Indeed, parents in Clarksville develop a variety of creative strategies as they engage in their children's education at the individual, market, and school governance levels. Moreover, Bourdieu argues that individuals can challenge the limits imposed by power relations as they become more aware of how power operates. During my time in Clarksville, I observed parents take part in conversations regarding the power structure in the district, as they debated who truly benefits from various policies and reform initiatives. This type of engagement suggests that parents might be able to find even more ways to work together to critique how power relations perpetuate the dominant

political and economic interests in the city, as they advocate for change that directly benefits the children of Clarksville.

Parental Engagement as a Lens

In light of my findings, it is interesting to consider how parental engagement can be used as a lens through which to examine the reform efforts that occurred in Clarksville over the five years I spent in the district. In other words, how does an exploration of parental engagement contribute to a more thorough understanding of the nature of school reform in the district?

Initially, when I approached this study, I wanted to focus on parents' involvement in structural change and their engagement with systemic issues in the district. I felt the district faced an overwhelming number of complex problems, and I believed that anything short of a complete overhaul of the district's current goals and strategies would be unlikely to create any meaningful change. I wondered how parents were—or could become—involved in this type of reform. However, as I spent more time in Clarksville and talked with more parents, it became clear that most parents became involved in the district in order to address personal, rather than systemic, issues. That is, parents often expressed the desire to secure a better educational experience for their own children. While improving the overall quality of schools in the district would benefit everyone, parents became involved with a focus on their children's needs.

In a reflection on parental engagement in urban districts, Fine (1993) asks why the "private interests" of parents are often positioned in conflict with schools' interests in promoting the "common good" (p. 684). Indeed, when I first came to Clarksville, I was ready to dismiss the personal ways in which parents engaged in order to focus on how

parents could advocate for systemic change. Fine argues that parents' "needs, passions, desires, strengths, and worries" are not "simply private," any more than the goals of schools—often shaped by the interests of capital—are purely "good for all" (p. 684). Fine contends that by giving parents the space to discuss their "private" concerns, in a forum where they have access to information and the respect of other stakeholders, parents may contribute to broader types of school reform. However, Fine explains that without openly discussing issues of authority and power that exist in school-parent relationships, parents will have a difficult time acting collectively, and their participation "will be read as marginalized and hysterical, especially if [the parents are] poor and of color" (p. 707).

In Clarksville, parents understand—and respond to—reform in quite personal ways. At least in part, this response is shaped by the opportunities for engagement that are offered. For example, at the individual level, events designed to bring parents together, such as back-to-school nights and parent summits, gather parents primarily to distribute information more efficiently, not to create space for parent discussions. Similarly, at the market level, choice is framed as an opportunity for parents to make individual decisions to benefit their own children. At the school governance level, the structure and format of board meetings does not facilitate parents working collectively; rather, parents engage in short, individual conversations with board members.   In part, parents respond to reform in personal ways because their own children are their priority. In addition, however, parents respond personally because there are not many opportunities for parents to engage collectively in Clarksville. Certainly, on a few occasions, I witnessed parents find ways to work together; for example, parents prepared

signs to hold up at a board meeting, and they organized a candlelight vigil. However, these instances of collaboration were infrequent. While policy makers often argue that reforms fail because parents do not participate, one could argue that reform efforts in Clarksville actually fail to provide parents with adequate opportunities to discuss their concerns in a public forum where "the dynamics of power are addressed…the range and consequences of cultural capital are supported…and a deep vision of schools as community-based democracies of difference is engaged" (Fine, 1993, p. 707).

Future Research

My findings point to several opportunities for future research. For example, based on my time in the Truancy Intervention Center, I am interested to learn more about the impact that truancy policies and truancy court have on student attendance and parental engagement. How does judicial involvement in policy-making impact schools in general and parents in particular? Moreover, how do parents describe the experience of truancy court? In Clarksville, I observed some parents who were incredibly angry to be called into court, and they wanted nothing more than their cases to be dismissed as quickly as possible. However, I also observed parents who desperately seemed to want help from the court, and they looked to the judge and Ms. Abernathy for assistance. Do these parents change their behavior or their children's behavior as a result of their court appearances? Do they find the support that they need? It would also be enlightening to speak with the judges, in order to understand how they view their role in the school district. As urban districts around the country rely more on the judicial system in order to address issues of truancy and parental engagement (Baker, Sigman, & Nugent, 2001; Walls, 2003), these questions become increasingly important to investigate.

On a different note, I would like to think more about the impact of school choice on parental engagement; in particular, I am interested in how the proliferation of cyber schools is changing the ways that parents are involved in their children's education. Cyber charter schools were a new development when I started in Clarksville; now the district itself offers a public cyber option for students. However, there is little research on the connection between cyber schools and parental engagement. What demands, if any, do cyber schools make of parents? How do the cyber charters envision parents playing a role in their children's schools? How do parents understand their role when their children are educated through cyber charters? Moreover, how do parents navigate their relationships with schools that do not have a physical location?

In addition, as I prepare to work with future teachers, I would like to explore the implications that this work has for preservice teachers, particularly for preservice teachers in urban schools where parents have a reputation for being disengaged. What impact does this perception of parents have on future teachers' practices? How would an broader understanding of the ways in which parents are engaged in their children's education influence teachers' pedagogy, as well as how teachers attempt to work with parents? There is a great deal of literature that underlines the importance of preparing preservice teachers to work with their students' families (e.g., Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Flanigan, 2007; Katz & Bauch, 1999). Some of this research addresses the need to challenge preservice teachers' stereotypes about urban parents (e.g., Jacobbe, Ross, & Hensberry, 2012; Lazar, 1998). However, other literature about preservice teachers and parental engagement considers the topic from a more traditional angle, detailing how preservice teachers can learn to engage parents in formal venues, often

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approaching parents from a deficit perspective (e.g., Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; Flynn, 2007; Freeman & Knopf, 2007). My findings show that oftentimes this deficit perspective itself creates barriers to parental engagement in schools. Thus, additional research that considers how to challenge this viewpoint—particularly in terms of preservice teachers—could help open more opportunities for parental involvement in schools.

Finally, on a more theoretical level, I would like to think about the variety of narratives that exist regarding parental engagement in this district and other districts like it. For instance, I frequently heard the argument that parents do not care about their children's education, but I often saw parents take a variety of steps to help their children succeed in school. Why is there a mismatch between this narrative of participation and the reality? In a discussion of youth culture and education, Wortham (2011) argues, "educators should attend to widely circulating accounts of youth, because these often yield or buttress attitudes and policies that influence young people" (p. vii). In the same way, researchers and policy makers must pay attention to widely circulating accounts of parental engagement in different settings. How do these accounts differ from parents' documented participation? Moreover, how do these accounts actually *shape* parents' participation as well as school officials' interactions with parents?

Implications

While the goal of this dissertation is to offer a description of parental engagement in a district in crisis and not to make policy recommendations, my findings do suggest the need for both district stakeholders and outside observers to move beyond the simplistic claim that uncaring urban parents are a major reason for the problems that plague urban

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schools.   This claim allows district leaders and policy makers to avoid addressing more complex issues facing urban schools (e.g., lack of resources, political corruption, declining enrollments) and shift the blame to parents and families. When reform efforts fail, district leaders have an easy excuse close at hand: "We tried," they can say, "but the parents were not behind us."

With this argument in mind, I end this chapter by sharing a memorable moment from a School Board meeting that illustrates both the scope of the problems in Clarksville and how one administrator was able to avoid addressing some of these problems by placing the responsibility on students and their parents. Early in the 2011-2012 school year, the new acting superintendent was present at his second board meeting. At the end of the meeting, during the portion for comments on non-agenda items, several students had signed up to address the board. One student from Health Sciences High School asked why she would no longer be able to receive EMT certification through the high school. The superintendent told her that he would have a meeting in the next week with parents to make sure that students would have all they needed for certification and graduation (ultimately, many of the seniors were forced to graduate early without their certifications). An eleventh grader from Science and Technology High School was too shy to talk, so an adult read her remarks. She wanted to ask the board why students did not get feedback at school and why they did not know what their grades were. The superintendent promised to investigate and get back to her. Another student explained that she transferred to a Catholic school, and the standards were much higher. At Health Careers High School, she explained, she could stay on the Honor Roll without trying, and now her work is a lot tougher. The superintendent replied that a "Quality Assessment

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Review" was currently underway. Finally, a student came to the microphone, but she was crying and was unable to read her question. Her friend came up to read it for her. The question was simply: "Why don't I get homework?" In response, the superintendent encouraged her to talk to her teachers, or to have her parents talk to her teachers or the principal, and then get back to him if there was still a problem (Field notes, November 17, 2011).

What stands out about this incident is that the student seemed to be asking a larger question than just, "Why don't I get homework?" She was pointing out that there was something fundamentally wrong with her education, one symptom of which was a lack of homework. The interim superintendent, who had been in the district about a month—at a salary of $800/day—promptly shifted the responsibility back to the student and her parents. This student's subpar education would not likely be improved by a conversation with her teachers, but by making this suggestion, the superintendent was able to dodge a more difficult question and not address what was (or was not) being done to improve education in Clarksville. To be fair, the superintendent was in a somewhat impossible situation, leading a bankrupt district with a myriad of problems, but by failing to acknowledge the complicated nature of the situation and implicitly blaming the student and her parents for their failure to act, he reduced a complex problem to one of parents/students simply not being engaged. I saw similar scenarios play out many times in Clarksville.

Thus, I believe that district and state leaders would do well to consider both the opportunities and barriers that exist for parents to engage at the individual, market, and policy levels. If policy makers come to appreciate the myriad of ways that parents

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already are involved in their children's education, they may be better situated to consider how schools can engage parents in more formal ways. Moreover, rather than devoting time and money to creating initiatives designed to reach out to parents, district leaders could spend this time and money on programs intended to improve educational opportunities for the children in the district. In fact, improving educational opportunities may be the best way to encourage more parents to engage. At the very least, policy makers, and stakeholders in general, should refrain from perpetuating the idea that poor, urban parents just do not care. More than anything, during my time in Clarksville, I found that parents care deeply about their children's future and see education—for better or for worse—as the key to their children's success.

APPENDIX A

Interview Respondents, 2007-2012

Pseudonym	Date(s) of Interview(s)	Role(s) in District	Gender	Race
Abernathy, Angela	10/5/09 1/26/12 2/13/13	Director, TIC	F	AA
Abrams, Randall	3/12/08	President, Clarksville NAACP	M	AA
Adams, Jay	6/21/12	Parent & Elected School Board Member	M	AA
Allen, Jacqueline	5/3/12	Parent	F	AA
Andrews, Walter	3/26/08	Former Teacher & Principal	M	W
Barela, Andrea	9/30/07 11/13/08 2/2/12	Teacher & President of Teachers' Union	F	W
Barns, Connie	3/13/08	Parent & PTO Member	F	AA
Beardsley, Michael	5/17/12	Parent	M	AA
Brose, Donald	6/14/12	Parent & Community Activist	M	AA
Carlyle, Ryan	9/20/07	Reporter	M	W
Carman, Gayle	10/21/09	Principal, Clarksville HS	F	AA
Connelly, John	3/15/12	Student, Clarksville HS	M	W
Cooper, Elizabeth	3/15/12	Parent	F	W
Crosby, Christian	10/18/12	State Representative	M	AA
Davis, Bernard	4/19/12	Community Activist & Elected School Board Member	M	AA
Doonan, Evelyn	6/26/12	Elected School Board Member	F	AA
Dorey, Daniel	6/24/08[*]	Community Activist	M	W
Drazen, Linda	11/5/07	Teacher, Oak Grove ES	F	AA
Elmore, Tom	9/18/08	President, Hamilton University	M	W
Entler, Kevin	5/17/12	Parent	M	AA
Fayad, Syreeta	3/21/12	Parent & School Police Officer	F	AA
Fritz, Paul	4/24/08	Local Reverend & Community Activist	M	W

Pseudonym	Date(s) of Interview(s)	Role(s) in District	Gender	Race
Gabriel, Victoria	3/6/08	Administrative Assistant to the Superintendent	F	AA
Garcia, Miguel	3/29/12	Parent	M	H
Greene, Evelina	12/7/07	Teacher, Miller MS	F	AA
Hartmann, Janet	9/28/07	Assistant & Acting Superintendent	F	AA
Holden, Brian	2/5/10	Community Activist	M	W
Hume, Barbara	12/12/07	Community Member & Former District Employee	F	AA
Johnson, Derrick	12/7/07[*] 12/1/08 3/10/09 6/15/10	Superintendent	M	AA
Jordan, Lisa	6/2/11	Parent	F	AA
King, Olivia	1/10/08	Parent	F	AA
King, Olympia	3/29/08	Student, Clarksville HS	F	AA
Landreth, Donna	3/26/08	Executive Director, Local Education Foundation	F	W
Leonard, Cheryl	3/11/10	Human Resources Director	F	AA
Linsley, Robert	6/14/12	Caseworker, TIC	M	AA
Loedel, Paul	6/23/10	EEB Member	M	AA
Major, Anthony	11/5/08	EEB Member	M	AA
Mancini, Sharon	9/20/07	Reporter	F	W
Marilo, Rosemary	2/28/08	Principal, Oak Grove ES	F	W
Matta, Mark	3/10/10 6/13/12	Teacher, Health Careers HS	M	W
Mays, Elyse	2/5/08 8/2/12	Parent & Cheerleading Coach	F	AA
Mead, Edward	12/5/07	Board of Control Member	M	AA
Miller, Dora	6/8/12	Parent	F	AA
Miller, George	10/19/07 1/13/09	Elected School Board Member & Anchor Academy Board Member	M	W
Mitford, Michelle	10/29/07 6/1/09	Principal, Hamilton Charter	F	AA
Murray, Sandra	11/3/11	Parent	F	AA
Nardell, Nancy	5/28/09	Associate District Counsel	F	AA
Nighman, Monica	6/1/09	Parent	F	AA
Paulson, Kenneth	2/9/12	Former Clarksville Mayor	M	AA

Pseudonym	Date(s) of Interview(s)	Role(s) in District	Gender	Race
Philip, Patricia	3/6/08	Program Coordinator, Clarksville Youth Organization	F	AA
Pope, Scott	8/18/08	Director, Youth Court	M	W
Posner, Thomas	2/16/12	Caseworker, TIC	M	AA
Price, Donna	10/31/07	Parent	F	AA
Quillen, Robert	2/14/08	Local Professor & Former Resident	M	AA
Richards, Jasmine	6/14/12	Parent & Former TIC Caseworker	F	AA
Rivera, Adelia	2/22/12	Parent	F	H
Rivera, Daniela	2/22/12	Student, Clarksville HS	F	H
Robson, Terry	1/11/08	Assistant Superintendent	F	AA
Rollins, Tonya	12/7/07 10/1/09	Parent & PTO President	F	AA
Smith, Nailah	6/9/11	Parent	F	AA
Trallis, Peter	10/24/07	Board of Control Member	M	W
Varsity Cheerleaders (11)	8/13/08	Students, Clarksville HS	F (11)	AA (11)
Walker, Joseph	3/5/08	President, Local Charitable Organization	M	W
Warren, Rebecca	12/5/07 11/13/08 5/31/12	Teacher, McKinley ES	F	W
Wayland, Sandra	12/19/07	Program Director, Local Education Foundation	F	AA
Williams, Rose	5/26/11	Parent	F	AA
Withington, Sarah	10/23/08	Reporter	F	W
Worden, David	2/15/08 6/16/09	Founder, Clarksville Arts Academy	M	AA

Note. F = Female; M = Male; AA = African American; H = Hispanic; W= White.
* These interviews were conducted by my advisor (and former EEB member) for the purposes of our original study.

APPENDIX B: Interview Protocols

A Study of Reform in the Clarksville School District
University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education

Interview Questions – Parents
1. Describe your history with the Clarksville School District. Did you attend school here? Where do your children attend school?
2. Describe your children's experience in the district overall. What are some positive experiences? What are some negative experiences?
3. Describe your role in your children's education.
4. How would you describe the events that have taken place in the district this school year? What stands out? How have these events affected your role in your children's education or your role in the district?
5. How often do you interact with your children's school(s)/teacher(s)? What kind of interactions do you have?
6. What, if anything, makes it difficult to become involved with your children's school(s) or the district overall? What could the district do differently to help parents become involved?
7. What opportunities, if any, exist to become involved in your children's education?
8. Overall, what do you want your children to get out of school? In other words, what educational goals do you have for your children?
9. What do you think is the biggest concern/problem facing the Clarksville School District today? Why?
10. If you could change anything about the district, what would you change? Why?
11. Is there anything else I should know? Who else should I talk to in order to learn more about the Clarksville school district?

APPENDIX B: Interview Protocols

A Study of Reform in the Clarksville School District
University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education

Interview Questions – Stakeholders who are not parents
1. Describe your role in the district. (How long have you been in the district? What previous experience do you have in the district?)
2. How would you describe the events that have taken place in the district this school year? What stands out? How have these events affected your role or your work in the district?
3. How do you interact with different members of the Clarksville community in your role? For example, what kind of interactions do you have with parents, students, non-profits, etc.? Has the nature of these relationships changed during this year?
4. What role do you think parents/guardians should play in their children's education? What opportunities exist for parents to become involved in the school district? What barriers prevent engagement?
5. How would you describe the state of education in Clarksville today?
6. How would you explain how the district got to the point where it is today?
7. What are the biggest challenges the district currently faces?
8. What do you see as your role in the future of the district? What do you bring to that role?
9. Is there anything else I should know? Who else should I talk to in order to learn more about community engagement in the Clarksville school district?

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