

## **An educational community to promote high school students' retention and academic success**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research was to mobilize the educational community of a disadvantaged Montreal high school so as to implement practices more adapted to its environmental reality by developing an approach to support the building of collaborative bridges connecting school, family, and community. During the discussion, the perceptions of high school parents (n = 109), primary school parents (n = 381) and neighborhood families (n = 14) concerning the participating school will be presented. Subsequently, the school staff (n = 79) tries to identify the elements that, according to them, contribute to a good home-school cooperation. Finally, we analyze the findings to highlight some of the key elements of the relationship family-school-community and stress the need to work together in order to promote high school students' retention and academic success.

Keywords: disadvantaged areas, family-school-community collaboration, academic success

## INTRODUCTION

Montreal schools in disadvantaged areas have received special grants from the Ministry of Education for several years. However, despite the additional financial assistance granted and the many educational services offered, the number of students who graduate from high school is well below departmental targets. The educational community involving teachers, pedagogical advisers, school principals, university professors, and researchers in educational science and sociology, as well as parents from the community center: *L'Incubateur Universitaire Parole d'excluEs* decided to take action in order to promote the retention and academic success of students who live in a poor, multi-ethnic neighborhood in Montreal. Some young immigrants in Quebec struggle to integrate into the educational system in place; they lag farther behind academically and have more difficulties at consolidating their learning. Students who have just arrived from Haiti, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Somalia may not have received a full and proper education due to war or political tensions in their country of origin (Armand, 2005). This problem leads to the following question: How can the members of an educational community encourage the retention and success of students from disadvantaged multi-ethnic backgrounds?

## REFERENCE FRAMEWORK

### **A school in a multicultural community**

All newcomers inevitably go through an acculturation process that entails a psychological and socio-cultural adaptation process that takes place whenever an individual comes into contact with one or more cultures other than their own (Kanouté & al., 2008). They sometimes arrive to their host country lagging behind in their schooling. Moreover, these allophone students may have severe learning difficulties, as their motivation and concentration may have been affected by their previous traumatic experiences and the pedagogical approaches used (Armand, 2005). In addition, if the transition from the welcoming class, offered to newcomers in the year following their arrival to the regular class groups (Mainstream classes) is not properly implemented, the young students may be destabilized (Kanouté & al., 2008).

Studies on the subject claim that integration difficulties can lead to discrimination, stereotypes and prejudices towards them. It is argued that students who felt some form of discrimination at a certain point during their school life are most at risk of dropping out of high school (Gardenhire-Crooks, 2010). All members of the educational community must be aware of these realities. According to Toussaint (2010), the responsibility for the integration of newcomers in Quebec is the responsibility of all the school staff, where success requires immediate and appropriate intervention; where the school, family and community have to be involved to facilitate the students' integration.

### **Engage parents in the educational community**

According to some studies, parents are the ones who have the greatest influence on the academic success of their children (Manscill & Rollins, 1990). Parental perception towards school would be very important for the development of the child. Indeed, when parents have positive perceptions of the school, their children show less aggression and have more pro-social

behavior in school. These students are also in turn more likely to develop positive social adjustment and a positive image of the school (Bérubé & al., 2007). Furthermore, the frequency of communication between schools and parents also positively affects their children's social adaptation: frequent contacts allow them to share a common point of view, the same expectations and, thus, adopt common strategies to help them succeed. Indeed, it has been shown that perceiving different expectations from the two milieus can be related to the students' anxiety and frustration as well as their loss of motivation. However, parental involvement during the high school years largely depends on their children invitations (Bérubé & al., 2007).

Epstein (1991) points out that when teachers encourage parents' participation or involvement; parents tend to discuss school with their children at home; they feel more at ease to help them and develop greater respect for the teachers' skills. It is important to note that parental involvement is not the only consideration when determining high school drop-out risk factors. Some of the risks factors that could be mentioned are parents' insufficient emotional support, lack of family cohesion, and a negative perception on the part of teachers towards the student. Considering the fact that parents' perception towards school colors their children's perception, schools and teachers should work together to help the students change those perceptions (Deslandes & al., 2008).

Home-school collaboration is essential to establish a direct link between the two main communities that the students regularly attend. School stakeholders work every day to achieve the students' best academic and social success and they need parental support to provide maximum learning opportunities for all students. Unfortunately, some parents find it difficult, if not impossible, to get involved in the school life of their children. In a study about immigrant families and schools, the authors find that the interactions that take place between immigrant parents and the school staff vary greatly (Vatz Laaroussi & al., 2008). Some case studies where the child has integrated well into the school were analyzed; and it has been shown that certain conditions facilitate more academic success than others. Two models that are particularly notable for their beneficial effects on student retention and school success are:

1. A partnership collaboration, where both communities enjoy equal importance and collaborate with each other sharing a space for mediation.
2. A partnership collaboration where a community center or any other community resource is present to enable the establishment of an agreement between the families and the school.

Some researchers have noted a positive correlation between parental involvement in the student school life and school success (Kanouté & al., 2008). In a research by Bankston (2004), it was observed that the parent's social capital (their educational level, their resources, the family structure, and parent's projects and plans), their social-capital mobilization and its transmission to the child allows the student to enter school with more resources and confidence. The social capital is made up of a set of resources that may have a positive impact both on the child as well as on the parents' relationship with the school. A study on the parents' needs of information and training shows that, whatever the parental educational level was, they all expressed the need to get better acquainted with school life in general (Duvers, 2005). The positive support that teachers can bring to engage new immigrant students was also documented. The first step would be for the teacher, as the repository of culture, to defocus from her or his own references so as to work on the students' social identity threat (Kanouté & al., 2008). However, some teachers find it difficult to detach themselves from their own culture and their personal prejudices to provide

adequate support to students from immigrant families who are struggling to successfully fit into school life.

A Chohan and Khan study (2010) showed a correlation between parental support and the academic performance. In fact, a 94.5% of students who reported receiving help from their parents succeeded in their exams while only a 10.5% of students who reported receiving little or no help from their parents passed them. Students who receive parental support for doing their homework develop greater self-esteem, they see their grades improve, and they better develop their social skills. In addition, when parents are actively involved in their children's school life, behavioral problems tend to significantly decrease (Nokali & al., 2010).

Kanouté (2003) argues that the failure rate is often attributed to the sociolinguistic universe, the cultural impoverishment or the lack of intellectual stimulation. She also found a positive correlation between the parental involvement and the children's academic success. According to this researcher, among success factors it is important to consider the value the parents assign to the school culture, a positive feedback towards the assessments, and the promotion of a good contact between the child and his or her teachers. To make success possible, parents themselves must first have a good relationship with the school. When parents have a too low level of education and they do not feel appreciated by the school, it can lead them to feelings of inadequacy. Parents from disadvantaged backgrounds often have difficulty being good role models for their children, they have socio-economic difficulties and, sometimes, they may even have incompatible work hours with school. In some cases, children receive support from the school; while their parents are referred to other resources that will help them better support their children school life (Kanouté, 2003).

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES**

The goal of this project was to mobilize the different members of an educational community located in a Montreal neighborhood so as to promote students' retention and academic success. To achieve this goal, the educational team wanted their practices to be better adapted to their students' reality by developing an approach to reconcile family-school-community collaboration (Sander, 2000; Dryfoos and Maguire, 2002). The measure aims to coordinate actions that will support the development of an integrated and comprehensive approach as a better way of placing school actions within the community (Desimone, 2000). The project group wants to establish and strengthen the links among teachers, families and the surrounding community in order to better meet the academic, intellectual, and social needs of the district's students. To reach the latter, two other sub-goals need to be fulfilled:

1) To foster collaboration between the school, the neighborhood community centers and the parents.

2) To raise awareness in all school stakeholders in the development and appropriation of practices which are best adapted to the reality of the community.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To achieve the goals a case study was conducted. This type of study allows an intensive analysis of an individual unit case: the educational community in a multicultural disadvantaged area of Montreal. From this perspective, the case study is not an actual method, but rather a methodological approach that allows the use of various instruments where diverse entities can be

compared with each other to better distinguish the particularities of this case study (Roy, 2003). This research paper is the result of a cooperative exercise spanning the period from September 2009 to August 2012. To achieve this goals, specific tools have been developed to allow the researchers collect data from all the different members of the school community: school district parents, primary schools parents who may probably send their children to the high school of this district in the years to come once their children have completed their primary education, families who participate in the consolidation of the neighborhood and in the Citizens Neighborhood Association, and all other school stakeholders. The researchers, the pedagogical advisers and the director of the school jointly developed the instruments used in the study.

### **Subjects and data collection**

This section introduces the subjects involved in the educational community. The high school is located in Montreal and it annually welcomes 1300 students from about 30 different countries. Some of them are children of immigrants both first or second generation, and others are newcomers. When the project started, the drop out rate of this school had been for several years of around 40%. Information for this research was gathered through individual semi-structured interviews. 109 parents of the high school students participated in the interviews that were made up of 12 questions designed to gather their perceptions towards the interactions with the teachers and other school stakeholders as well as their expectations of the school and how they perceive it. In the same neighborhood, there are six elementary schools that serve more than 3,200 students from kindergarten to sixth grade. Parents of the elementary school students (n = 381) participated in semi-structured interviews made up of 9 questions to gather information about their perceptions of the high school of the district and their expectations towards the high school. Just in front of the participating school, there is a community center called *Paroles d'excluEs*. It organizes and conducts various activities for citizens of all ages on a regular basis. Many families in the community are involved and participate in the activities. 14 families that attend their activities participated in semi-structured interviews made up of 14 questions designed to gather information about their perceptions and expectations about the high school and its staff and the interactions between the high school and the community.

All interview data were recorded by digital audio recorder and were analyzed in order to highlight the main themes tackled by the parents. All interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis. The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to conduct a thematic and content analysis of the interviews (Van der Maren, 1995). Finally, a questionnaire was administered to the secondary school teachers and some other school staff (n = 79). This questionnaire was made up of 13 questions focused on communication, interactions and winning attitudes that would foster a collaborative communication with parents. To conceal the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants, the data they provided cannot be traced back to them.

## **RESULTS**

### **Parents of the high school students**

Some of the parents of the district high school voluntarily provided interviews when the first report card was issued in November 2010. During the afternoon and the evening, 109 parents participated in semi-structured interviews that included questions about their perceptions

of the school, the services students were offered, the positive and negative aspects of the institution as well as about their involvement in their child's school life.

### **Perceptions**

Parents pointed out students were well supported at school. Some parents whose children have learning difficulties were satisfied that the school was adapted to their needs. Some others appreciated that students with special needs are integrated into regular classes. Most parents said that teachers were caring, encouraging and supportive with their child. Some argued, however, that teachers should encourage their children to participate more in after school activities, do all their homework and meet deadlines. For the most part, parents declared to be confident about the empowerment of educational leadership among teachers and were satisfied or highly satisfied by the quality of the educational services provided at the school. The majority of the parents interviewed recognized that the school offers many key resource persons that propose various services for their children such as pedagogical adviser, social worker, speech therapist and psychologist. Considering all the services offered by the school, the services that were most often appointed by the parents were the educational assistance support service after school hours and the homework help service. These two services are the most frequently used by young people. As regards for the services offered at school for parents, few people used them, but for the second hand store where school uniforms can be found at good prices. A better promotion of the services offered both to the students and their parents might be a good opportunity to give them greater visibility.

### **Expectations**

Some parents said they wanted their children to have more homework, while others would like them to get more help with their homework, considering the difficulties some parents face to offer their child effective reinforcement at home for the lessons learned at school. Some parents suggested that it would be interesting for their children to have more student days events or student placements in workplaces. What predominated was the willingness of parents that their children would obtain a recognized diploma, have a good education and continue studying despite the difficulties they might encounter. They want their children to integrate the society and be capable of functioning properly in it.

Parents relied on the school to help them provide better guidance for their children and teach them to live by the common ideals of harmony, equity, freedom and the right to self-determination. In addition, some parents expressed their safety concern at school as well as during extracurricular activities. Others adduced there were gaps in safety on the school territory. Some of them suggested that the surveillance in the cafeteria at lunchtime was better than the surveillance outside school at the end of school hours. A few recommended the implementation of a strict code of conduct.

### **Interactions**

Among the opportunities for improvement one of the issues raised most frequently was the need for a better communication between parents and teachers. While wanting to respect the autonomy of their children, parents would like to be promptly informed of the academic and

social difficulties the youngster might be facing and to have a more sustained follow up, especially in the case of students requiring special attention. In addition, some parents found that once they were informed about their children's difficulties, it was already too late to help them. In fact, they were informed only when they received their child first report card, in November; it was only then that they learnt their child was experiencing learning difficulties. They considered it would be wiser to hold a meeting with the parents prior to the submission of the first report card to prevent academic failures among students who have learning difficulties. To enhance school-family collaboration, a good communication is essential. Parents appreciated when their telephone calls were promptly returned; it facilitated the communication with the teachers. According to many parents, it was very difficult to communicate with a teacher. When they called the secretariat answering machine was always connected. A mother said: "There is no follow up; you're left in complete darkness. You don't even know if the teacher has received the message."

The relationship between teachers and parents could be greatly improved if better communication procedures were implemented. On the same topic, some parents reported they would like to have access to a web portal on the Internet through which they could contact the teachers or professional school more easily. They would like to have a better access to their kid schedule and exams on this portal. This would greatly facilitate school monitoring at home.

Based on the interviews, it is clear that parents' involvement is an important element for the promotion of high school students' retention and academic success. Many parents think they should get involved in the school learning of their children as much or even more than the teachers. This support is perceived as an element that pushes their children to excel at school and that is why parents find it important to learn about the education of their children. Moreover, it is interesting to note that many parents try to get involved in their children school life, despite the difficulties they may encounter.

Some parents found it difficult to help their children do their homework. The language of instruction was not the language spoken at home, thus it was not always accessible to them all. By the same token, some parents felt a sense of helplessness. They were struggling to help their children but they had not even completed their own schooling. Parents would like the school to provide them with training, as this would enable them to better accompany their children in the learning process.

Some parents got involved by volunteering on the various activities offered by the school and wanted to work together with the teachers to guide their children in their school progress. One of the mothers said she would like to get involved in extracurricular activities. Another one remarked she thought it was important to encourage his son when he was doing well at school, so as not to only focus on his academic difficulties.

Parents who have children with learning difficulties seem to have even greater expectations towards school. They were highly aware that their personal involvement was essential to the academic success of their children. Without their involvement, their child would experience even greater difficulties for succeeding.

### **Parents of the elementary schools**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 381 parents of six elementary schools located in the same area as the participating school. They were met following the issue of the

first report card, in November 2011. The bullet points raised by the parents that participated in the research were carefully compiled and analyzed.

### **Perceptions**

One of the discoveries worth mentioning is that the parents' perceptions regarding the school district amply differ. Indeed, many respondents said it was a good school that provided a quality education. They also highlighted the noticeable improvement it had undergone in the last two years with the arrival of a new principal. These parents said they were happy renovations had been made to the school building, they also talked about the increased safety within the establishment as well as of the many special purpose programs that were now being offered as part of the school sports program, scientific program, vocational school kitchen and peer support.

On the other hand, other parents had a negative perception of the school. They claimed it had a bad reputation and that this phenomenon was mainly due to the lack of security outside the school, there were too many students who were a bad influence and the education was poor. It is important to notice that many of the parents who had a positive perception of the school district had family members in the school; an older child who attended or had attended the school recently. Instead, parents who had a negative perception had no child who attended or had attended the school. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that the negative perceptions were for the most part seen outside the educational community.

It is also interesting to examine the perceptions of parents and their intention or lack of intention on sending their child to the school in their district. In fact, 32% of the respondents said they wanted to register their child in this school, 37% of them said they had no intention of registering them in the school. The other 31% of the respondents said they had not yet taken a decision.

### **Expectations**

Parents were also questioned about their expectations towards the participating school. On this regard, they acknowledged the need to provide better guidance to the students and to develop more discipline. In addition, parents would like the surroundings of the school to be safer for the students. Some of them stressed the school should provide a quality education and a wider range of special education programs and projects. Finally, respondents mentioned the importance of improving the school reputation and suggested a partnership with the community, the police and renowned schools so as to better achieve this goal.

### **Local families**

Between April 2011 and January 2012, some of the families that go to the Citizens Neighborhood Association were interviewed. The aim of the research team was to promote their involvement on their district high school. They were, thus, questioned about their perceptions, their expectations and their possible interactions with the school. A total of 14 volunteer families participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews either took place in the Citizens Neighborhood Association facilities or at their home. The interview questions focused on their perceptions and expectations towards the school district and the school-community interactions.

## Perceptions

Most of the families interviewed had a positive perception of Quebec schools as a whole. They acknowledged they offer a lot of resources and a wide diversity of programs. They praised the teachers for being very supportive. As a whole, they trust in the Quebec education system that provides universal free elementary and high schooling access. They also recognized that Quebec diplomas were rigorous and intellectually challenging and said that schools offered a safe environment. Several respondents appreciated the help Quebec granted to its students especially in terms of grants and scholarships and appreciated the opportunities it offered to those who wanted to change careers during their lifetimes.

Some parents complained that teachers did not give enough homework and they sometimes tended to reduce the educational requirements because a lot of immigrant students who were not fluent in the language of instruction attended the school. However, some respondents noted that teachers provided good support to young people in trouble with the language. Others appreciate that the system gave lots of opportunities to those youngsters who did not have a sufficient level of education through several integration and welcome programs. The fact that education is compulsory is another positive aspect of the school system.

Some families pointed out that Quebec school was opened to cultural diversity. For example, it fostered activities where young people were encouraged to bring dishes from their country of origin. They also find that civil and secular education was important since some countries place more emphasis on religion. However, this openness of the system was not always a positive aspect for certain individuals.

Many families sent their children to the school district that was closest to their homes. They may do it in order to have a greater control over their child so as to be able to supervise his/her movements; it gave them a greater sense of security. For others, the proximity of the school was one of the things that stood out, they found proximity was a nice benefit. Some others said they sent their child to this school because they had no choice.

“Everyone agrees that the neighborhood had a bad reputation, but I think it has changed. There are those who judge it still has a bad reputation, but the ones who say so don’t live in the neighborhood. Both local authorities and the school principal have made great efforts to improve the situation.” As an example, one respondent said that the introduction of school uniforms seems to have been very beneficial. During the last years, the school had undergone many positive changes that encouraged parents from the area to send their children there. In addition, there had also been positive transformations of the neighborhood. These transformations implied new projects that had contributed to the school improvement. Both the district and the school had become safer places in recent years and the school was also open to work in cooperation with the community (certain chores such as cleaning the surrounding of the school or loaning the school premises for community center meetings have seen the light in the last few years). One respondent involved in the community commented his experience and explained how he perceived the situation:

“I learned this school had drug, crime problems and a high drop out rate. However, being with the Citizen Association, I have had the opportunity to learn a lot about the school and the various community centers that work with it. The last news I have had about the school is that it has greatly improved thanks to the efforts that had been made in this direction. Students have less access to drugs and gangs have virtually disappeared. At present, gangs gather at the small

corner pizzeria. The more we are aware of the problems, the more we work together, and the easier it will be to live together.”

## **Expectations**

School expectations are often correlated to the perception of the neighborhood. Many families consider changes in the area express a school transformation. Some families feel that the teachers always make efforts for the students, but it is the children who sometimes fall in with the wrong crowd. Parents must be always present, especially for the very young; otherwise there is a risk of delinquency. Teachers should not be blamed, because by themselves alone, they are powerless and it is the collective work that makes the difference.

According to the families interviewed: “Teachers must be attentive to immediately react the moment they perceive the first signs that a young may have problems, for example, when it comes to bullying, some teachers, supervisors or bus drivers pretend they do not see anything. All those who work with students must be vigilant with regards to their well-being without putting their own well-being at risk, because they have their own limits, and theirs are difficult jobs.”

Several families recalled the importance of discipline in the classroom. Others emphasized the importance of the teacher being able to transmit the skills and the contents to the students. Teachers should be recognized as a model and they should establish an authentic relationship with the youth, being attentive to them, because the school and the teachers are of supreme importance in the development of the child. In this sense, some parents considered the school to be a second home and the teachers as the ones who had to transmit as much their expertise as their skills.

Some claimed that school must help both parents and children, and added that calling home whenever necessary was very important in order to keep parents informed of their youth behaviors. For others, it was the parents who had to meet the teachers through parent meetings, but encounters should take place more often. Parents seemed to trust in the teachers’ work and were confident that the teachers would be able to help students whenever they needed it.

Multiculturalism was also discussed. They claimed teachers had to be aware of several realities like: integration, poverty, cultural shock. They believed the school had the right tools to tackle these phenomena, but sometimes the society was not ready to welcome immigrants. Some families enjoyed the multicultural reality of the school. They argued that teachers should treat all young people equally without discrimination. One respondent disputed: “When teachers share the same ethnicity as the student, certain complicity is installed. Sometimes teachers may have prejudices against others. My child thinks this is strange.” Another respondent would like the school to “always be opened to work together with the district because the support is important both for the district and the school”.

Some families in the neighborhood said they would also like the school to offer sports activities for all the family adding that their children should have the possibility of going to school during the weekend. “If you make a schedule, a room could be rented for the children.” The fact that the children would be able to practice hockey, basketball and soccer at school was an issue that aroused in several occasions.

As regards on how the parents would like to receive the school information, most of the respondents favored meetings, phone calls, emails or a few words in the students’ agendas. Some parents suggested several means of communication should be available to communicate with a

teacher, because one of the most important things for their children success was that the parents would be promptly informed of any difficulties at school. Along the same lines, others said they would appreciate being continually informed of their children behavior and/or grading to avoid unpleasant surprises at the end of the year and to better adapt at home.

Some respondents expressed their desire to increase the safety at school or at lunchtime, because there were some young people who gathered at the local pizzeria and they had inappropriate behaviors. One respondent protested: "They throw their papers on the floor and, sometimes, they even yell at people."

Some parents pointed out the importance that all stakeholders (teachers, director, supervisors, social workers, psychologists) should have a good communication, since a good relationship with the school allowed these actors to mentor the youngsters more easily at home.

### **School-community interactions**

Several families claimed a greater involvement of the school in the district would be valued. They would like the school staff to work in collaboration with the parents so as to be aware of what is happening outside the school. They said that this would be possible if they were close to both parents and children. A good way of achieving this goal would be by organizing outings and activities where parents could meet other parents and teachers in a safe environment. One parent said: "Organizing an Open House would be a good idea to meet people and visit the school." Some parents would like the promotion of affordable sports activities for young people so that they could discover their talents and abilities, stay fit and healthy, and build confidence. In addition, several respondents indicated that the school should raise awareness among young people towards the environment, make them use the recycling bins, and ask them to make some chores that would improve the neighborhood cleanliness.

Some families reported that they would like to receive more information from the school, that it could send them a short newsletter by the mail for example. A few respondents also argued that the school should organize activities with old people community centers and all other community organizations in the area; they also suggested that they should make better use of the parks they had around the school. One respondent argued: "The school should ensure better management and use of our public park. It is very large, but, unfortunately, the school never takes advantage of its proximity. Both the school and the park can be used for sporting events where parents are spectators, for example."

Respondents also mentioned the possibility of the students getting involved in the various projects of the community centers in the area. A person even offered herself to be the link between the school and the Citizen Association. The Youth Committee would also like to get young people involved in the community. One respondent explained: "It may be of common interest for the students and the Youth Committee to create a homework help service, and have computers available for students. We already have a few projects, such as film screening that the school could also profit from. It would be on everyone interest." She added: "There are beautiful projects with the Citizen Association, for example, a general store and a computer room available for the students and we hope there will be a good cohabitation. For now, I see no problem with the school, but if I consider the perceptions of the various committees in which I am involved, I think the citizens are afraid of being invaded by the students. It will be necessary to integrate the school students, one of our purposes is an intergenerational approach so if we want to be in line with our goals, youth must be integrated. Right here, in the houses around the

school, there are 80 children living here. The creation of a youth committee would be a good way of inviting young people to join us. For example, if we want to learn about the problem of bullying, the youth who face it on a daily basis could come and talk about it. A member of the Montreal police went with us to the local CLSC; they explained to us the various programs concerning children. There are really lots of services for young people. This summer, we made an urban festival in the park for all the community. We must develop the habit of getting involved in this neighborhood, because the more the people get involved, the easier it will be to do things together.”

Many parents were open to work with the school and the community. They volunteered in extra curricular school activities or in district projects, they tried to support the youngsters offering music lessons or art classes. They aimed was to encourage young people in what they liked. Others simply participated in the organization of parents’ meetings. “Volunteering allows the parents to see how the school works from the inside.” In short, families were open to the idea of working with the school and it would be a good opportunity for them to be known within the community. As one respondent asserted: “If you invite me to participate, I’ll help. If the school calls us, it makes us feel at ease, it is a sign that things are going well. The school and the district have changed and families have started to occupy the territory previously occupied by street gangs, but we must remain vigilant and work together to avoid the return of street gangs. To achieve this goal, the school, the district and the Community Associations must work together.”

Another respondent declared: “It seems that the school management is very open to working together. They used to be rather closed, but now we can talk to them.”

### **The school staff talks about family-school collaboration**

Secondary school stakeholders of the district volunteered to complete a questionnaire that included open-ended questions to gather short-term responses made up to better understand the elements that contribute to a good home-school cooperation. A summary of their responses is presented bellow.

### **Communication**

When they were asked about the communication with parents if they felt the need to communicate with them besides the school meetings, they indicated that phone calls were the best way to get an instant reaction of the parents. “You can talk directly to them, without intermediaries.” However, a good phone call procedure had not yet been implemented so that a good communication between the school and the parents was not always possible or easy.

According to the teachers, psychologists and others stakeholders who responded to the questionnaire about the communication between the parents and the school, they explained that when they met the parents personally, it allowed a personal contact. They considered this to be the best means of communication whenever possible. One respondent argued that the speed of a response might sometimes be of critical importance.

The student agenda was also considered a useful tool to communicate with the parents quickly so as to arrange a meeting. The school staff also encouraged parents to manifest themselves through regular memos on the agenda and to make an appointment whenever they had an urgent need. In addition, many of them recalled the importance of not waiting until the

situation escalated and advised parents to quickly communicate with the right person any kind of issue or concern.

School stakeholders highlighted the importance of clearly determining the reason why the parents were summoned and to remain focused on the student's needs. They considered it their duty to communicate the good things and the good news but also to transmit their concerns about the students' academic success by discussing their difficulties and their skills. Finally, they acknowledged that it was important to give clear explanations to the parents and be sure to respond to their questions with respect and empathy.

### **Overcoming communication difficulties**

The language barrier was repeatedly mentioned. Some parents proposed to call on the services of an interpreter to help the parents who spoke a language other than the language of instruction. Several mentioned the possibility of having private offices with a telephone so that calls made to parents respected due confidentiality and the students' privacy, rather than making these calls in a room where several teachers were gathered together so that their conversation was no longer private. Several mentioned the need for an individual mailbox number so that parents could leave personal messages to the teachers without having to go through intermediaries.

Some stakeholders suggested inviting parents more often to participate in school life, to engage them in extracurricular activities and provide them more opportunities to become involved in the school life of their child. According to them, the school should be more open to parents that want to be involved so that they feel comfortable. It should respond to the parents' expectations and remain focused on their needs. Finally, many teachers and practitioners also recommended the need for the creation of a portal that would allow a constant communication with all parents to communicate not only the bad news but also the good news and good results. This portal could also include any kind of information that parents might find useful.

### **Winning attitudes to foster collaboration**

Listening and understanding the family realities, establishing a regular and respectful communication that meets the needs of parents as well as those of the teachers and the school were some of the issues that emerged when respondents evoked winning attitudes for establishing good communication among all the school stakeholders. They also mentioned the importance of identifying all the factors that hinder the students' success in order to eliminate them; setting goals and having a common approach together with parents could solve most problems that might arise. To achieve these goals, teachers should have accurate data such as grades, copies of exams, late arrivals and absences at hand during parents meetings. They considered it important that the teachers understood their needs and were capable of reassuring them. One respondent said that it was important to focus on the strengths of the students and, if possible, to organize family-school meetings.

Stakeholders affirmed that when parents showed a real interest in their child success, this was a strong positive element for the child. When parents had clear demands, a precise reason for asking to see a teacher and wanted to find a solution rather than blame the school, the intervention had more chances of being successful. Moreover, when they showed a strong desire to be engaged and a real interest to get involved, the collaboration could be nothing but positive.

## **Collaboration**

Teamwork seems to be an important element to promote communication with the parents. They pointed out the importance of having a clear communication and seeking to collaborate with them for the students' benefit. They reminded the importance of listening to each other and finding solutions together. "In addition, it is highly desirable that the student can perceive we are working towards the same ends, that we say the same things, that we agree on the same things, that is why we must listen to them attentively and try to find all possible solutions together."

## **Services to parents**

As requested by the students' parents and the local families; the school stakeholders interviewed also recommended to update the website as well as the school portal in order to communicate deadlines, consult exam dates and the results of each assessments. They suggested encouraging phone calls and Internet communications through a parent's section on the site and organizing more meetings, not just the ones to issue report cards. Some suggested offering parents workshops on adolescence, school support and children management. Others emphasized the need to give more importance to the parents' suggestions and to enhance the openness and transparency in the communications with them so that they would remain in contact with the teachers and their children. It should be recalled, whenever possible that parents' collaboration is very important, even essential.

## **DISCUSSION**

The parents of the participating school put forward several positive aspects of the school. They repeatedly talked about the good quality of the educational services offered to their children as well as of the many on-site professionals that were available at school to assist students who have special needs. Parents appreciated the warmth of the teacher-student relation and indicated that teachers were attentive to their children. However, the communication between parents and teachers seemed to be an important aspect that needed to be further developed. Indeed, messages left on the school answering machine sometimes remained unanswered or without monitoring by the teacher. According to Bérubé & al. (2007), a frequent communication between the school and the parent is a positive factor for the social adaptation of the child. Where good communication is established, parents weave closer links with the school and are more likely to engage in school life. A solid commitment would greatly contribute to the academic success of students (Kanouté & al., 2008).

Regarding students' achievement, some parents expressed the need to know earlier during the school year the difficulties their children faced. Parents, families and school stakeholders suggested possible solutions to this problem such as having access to a web portal where results, deadlines, due dates for assignments or exams and all other important information could be quickly accessed via the Internet and updating the school website to be informed of the various events and services offered at the school both for students and parents. Parents suggested students could visit different workplaces to open their awareness towards business they may have never thought of. They considered this implementation could contribute to their retention. Some parents would like to help their children more, but have little personal resources to do so.

Some of them showed a real interest on assisting to language training at school to be able to better support their children in the learning process. They proposed event organizations, classroom support and after school homework assistance.

School stakeholders of the participating school stated that a good communication with the students' parents was essential. For this purpose, it would be essential to facilitate a procedure to improve telephone calls. Stakeholders recommended their peers to show respect, to build up trust and communicate as often as possible with the parents either by telephone calls or through meetings, they considered it essential to generate positive and fruitful contacts with parents. Our results showed their concern to establish communication with the parents to contribute to the retention and success of high school students. Knowing that parents are one of the actors who most influence the academic success of their child (Manscill & Rollins, 1990); it is imperative that teachers help to change the negative perception some parents may have with respect to school, that perception may eventually color that of their child (Deslandes & al., 2008).

Local families, who are involved and participate in the activities the community center organizes, expressed their expectations regarding the school stakeholders' involvement in the neighborhood life. They would appreciate the students' participation in the land clean-ups of the areas around the school. The teachers' presence to the activities organized by the center and the students' participation in the community meetings would highlight that the schooling should not be reduced to what is happening within the school walls. The area where the school is located has long been a haven for gangs. Fortunately, it is no longer the case as it is now the subject of several revitalization and greening projects. Citizens and school parents fervently hope that school stakeholders become active partners in maintaining that peace, peace that cannot be maintained without everybody's involvement: citizens, families, community organizations and local schools staff.

The educational community showed a real interest to encourage parents' participation. They responded it was important to enhance the school culture among parents, foster positive perceptions and promote a good contact between the child and the teachers. Parents should also develop a good relationship with the school so that they will feel eager to help (Kanouté, 2003). It is even more important to maintain the link with parents and families when the need to communicate emanates from them. Studies have shown that parental support in education positively affects students' achievement (Chohan & Khan, 2010). It should however be noted that, regardless of their level of education, parents often express the need for a better understanding of school life in general (Duvers, 2005). This means that a better understanding of the realities of school life could enhance parental support offered to students; this knowledge could therefore be the result of a better communication and collaboration between the school and the family. Another key element that repeatedly aroused was that teachers, as repository of culture, could bring immigrant students a positive support. To do this, they should move off their own cultural references to better interact with the students (Kanouté & al., 2008).

## CONCLUSION

It is important to understand that despite certain socio-economic factors, the parents' role in their children's learning process as well as their support is essential. Another valuable asset to promote success is that parents and teachers work together towards a common goal. It is therefore the duty of all members of the educational community to ensure parents' involvement. In order to achieve this, a constant and frequent communication is crucial, as it is encouraging parents' involvement so that they should invest themselves as early and as often in their children academic life as they possibly can.

Finally, it is essential to bear in mind that different or conflicting expectations from family and school may provoke anxiety and frustration and lead to a decline in the student's motivation. By the same token, parents' involvement depends largely on the students and teachers' invitations (Bérubé & al., 2007; Epstein, 1991). Based on findings from earlier research, and those from the present case study –conducted from 2010 to 2012– it is clear that the relationship family-school-community and the need for everyone to work together to encourage students to remain in school and succeed is essential.

This paper presents only the first part of the project: “An educational community to promote high school students' retention and academic success”. In the second part, students will be asked to express themselves and talk about their expectations regarding high school, they will also be urged to mobilize efforts to defend their position and try to produce changes in the school that will have an impact on the entire educational community.

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