

CENTERING THE FAMILY IN THE FAMILY LIAISON ROLE

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This report examines how a parent advocacy organization implemented a family liaison position to help Black and Latinx families navigate COVID-19 learning. The findings come from an in-depth case study of The Oakland REACH and draw from interviews with leaders, staff, and parents from February 2021-June 2021. The Oakland REACH's construction of the family liaison role differed significantly from how the role traditionally looks in school districts. As schools seek to support families during COVID-19 and beyond, they might consider re-imagining the family liaison role. The case provides key lessons for education leaders on how to center families in this liaison position.

Introduction

In the summer of 2020, a parent advocacy organization named The Oakland REACH (TOR) created a virtual hub to serve Black and Latinx families in Oakland, California. The hub offered student academic and enrichment virtual programming and a variety of online family supports. TOR leaders report that the hub had a daily attendance rate of 90% and 60% of students in grades K-2 advanced two or more grade levels in reading over the five-week program. TOR received local and national recognition for the hub. For example, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and local charter schools partnered with TOR to enroll students in the hub. Further, TOR and OUSD received a \$900,000 grant to scale aspects of the hub, including the family liaison position, into six OUSD schools.

When asked why the hub experienced strong reading data and high parent satisfaction, the executive director stated: "What made this hub so special is every family had a **family liaison**. So that was like the sauce, the secret sauce on everything." The executive director went on to explain that each family enrolled in the program received a family liaison or, as the hub referred to them, a "social worker." Family liaisons assisted parents with hub-based processes, such as signing into classes. However, she also emphasized that family liaisons acted as a non-judgmental support system for parents as they navigated the daily process of pandemic education.

As schools struggled around the country to support parents in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is notable that TOR implemented a rather traditional parent engagement strategy. Many schools and school districts employ family or community liaisons. Traditionally, family liaisons are tasked with connecting schools and families. For example, the work of family liaisons might include: keeping families informed on school policies and programs, hosting school events, and offering translation.

Despite the prevalence of family liaisons, in practice, the role is ripe with tensions. Deficit views of Black and Latinx communities within school communities may limit the roles' impact (Green, 2017; Ishimaru et al., 2016). School leaders may narrowly construct the role of family liaison, requiring them to act as "institutional agents" tasked with fulfilling school goals and agendas

(Ishimaru et al., 2016; Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007). A school-centered vision of the family liaison position may also reinforce deficit views of Black and Latinx communities. For example, leaders might expect families to passively receive information rather than being active participants in school decision-making (Green, 2017; Ishimaru et al., 2016). Furthermore, school leaders may not fully understand the importance of the family liaison position and task family liaisons with school support roles (i.e., lunch duty; [Dretzke,& Rickers, 2014]).

As calls increase to improve the educational experiences of Black and brown students, we must ask: **how schools better utilize the family liaison role to support racially minoritized students and their families?** This report helps answer this question by examining how TOR re-imagined the family liaison role to be asset-based and family-centered. An asset-based approach views all families and communities as having “capacities, abilities and gifts” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 13). A family-centered approach to the family liaison role prioritizes the needs of families over programming,

In summary, I find:

- TOR gave family liaisons a smaller caseload than typically seen in district settings and a broader scope within their position.
- The organization’s culture, the goals of the family liaison position, and the work of family liaisons were aligned with an asset-based and culturally responsive approach to family engagement.
- TOR parents expressed a high level of satisfaction with how family liaisons supported parents through a difficult period of COVID-19 and pandemic virtual/hybrid learning.

In the remainder of the report, first, I describe the research methods, followed by a description of TOR’s family liaison position. Finally, the report explores how TOR designed the family liaison position to be family-centered and provides implications for educational leaders.

Methods

This report is derived from a more extensive qualitative case study of TOR and its work between March 2020 and June 2021. As Table 1 shows for this report, I analyzed 18 interviews with TOR leaders, TOR family liaisons, and TOR parents. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Multiple rounds of data analysis illuminated salient themes shared in this report. For this report, I utilized a Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) framework to evaluate how family liaisons supported parents. Community Cultural Wealth considers the assets of families and the cumulative knowledge and skills Black and Latinx parents provide to their children.

Table 1: Participants

Participant Type	Participants
TOR Leaders	7
TOR Family Liaisons	5
TOR Parents	6
Total	18

Program Description

The Oakland REACH's Family Liaisons

TOR family liaisons were all Black and Latinx parents or grandparents with children in traditional public or charter schools in Oakland, California. Each family liaison had a caseload of between 15-25 families. TOR's executive director explained that keeping family liaison caseloads manageable was a key to the position's success:

So something like a family liaison is not this new concept, but the way we incorporated it in the hub, it's more effective than you – than you've ever even seen it in [schools] because the ways that family liaison's role work in the traditional public school system you have like one family liaison for like 300 kids...And so we built this like a real growth and support model so each family liaison has no more than 25 families. That's how it's supposed to be.

TOR family liaisons uniformly shared that there were “no typical days”; however, family liaisons did report similar work-related tasks:

- Calling parents on case-load at least once a week
- Providing resources and information on hub and community programming
- Helping parents enroll students in hub classes
- Monitoring attendance and checking in with parents if students did not attend class
- Administering family surveys

At first glance, the TOR's family liaisons tasks are similar to family liaison tasks traditionally seen in district settings (Dretzke & Rickers, 2014). However, their work was not focused on achieving hub-related goals, such as high attendance rates but rather on helping families. TOR's organizational culture, the goals of the family liaison position, and the work of the family liaisons promoted an asset-based orientation to aiding and sustaining families.

Organizational Culture: “Every Parent Needs Help”

As an organization, TOR's core belief was that parents want the best for their children and that “every parent needs help” to obtain educational quality for their children. While White and wealthy parents might be able to pay for tutoring or buy houses near top-rated schools, there are historic and systemic barriers to high-quality education for Black and Latinx families. Therefore, TOR assisted Black and Latinx families in obtaining quality educational services. As one family liaison shared:

The Oakland REACH is a parent-led group that has empowered parents from the most underserved communities to demand high quality for schools and to disrupt systematic inequality that exists in Oakland public schools. You know, it's our mission to make the powerless parents powerful, – And that's what we're doing.

The role of the family liaisons was to connect parents to resources to aid parents in their aspirations for their children.

The Goal of the Position: Make Parents “Their Own Leaders in Their Kids’ Lives”

The goal of the family liaison position was not centered on the needs of the hub but on families. The ultimate goal of the position was for families to develop the ability to advocate for themselves at the school and system levels. For instance, family liaisons wanted parents to have the skills to speak up when they experienced an equity issue at their schools. As one family liaison described:

The main thing for us is to be an advocate for families. It’s important to help families develop their own ability to advocate for their children. So in order to become their – you know, their own leaders in their kids’ lives.

Further, the family liaisons communicated that actions like helping a parent send an email or attending a parent-teacher meeting were in service of parents one day being able to take these actions on their own. For example, one parent said that her time in the hub and the support of her family liaisons gave her the confidence to speak with her daughter’s 2nd-grade teacher about their experience with virtual learning. The mother reported: “I already sent an email to my daughter’s teacher and [the teacher] kind of started to change a little tiny bit.” The mother also reported that if the issues persisted, she knew her family liaison would assist her in setting a meeting with the principal.

The Work of Family Liaisons: “They’re Not Alone”

Family liaisons described their overall job as relationship building. Family liaisons built relationships with families by drawing on their own experiences as Black and Latinx parents navigating the educational system. For example, one family liaison described how she built rapport with her caseload: “Once I get to like telling my story and just opening up to them and letting them know, you know, they’re not alone, and I – you know, we all relate in some type of way, and we come together.” Within relationships, family liaisons: built community, bridged language barriers, provided parents with social and emotional support and aided families in navigating school systems.

Building Community. TOR takes a historical view of education and the systematic disenfranchisement of Black and Latinx families as an organization. TOR’s approach to addressing systemic barriers was forming a community of empowered parents. Family liaisons saw their case-loads as a community. As a family liaison shared:

We will ascend through education together as a family, as a community, the main thing is to make the powerless parents powerful. Each – Every parent I speak to, you don’t feel like you got enough power, I’m going to make you powerful. We going to make you powerful.

Family liaisons also encouraged parents to have community with each other. For example, family liaisons heard from parents that the isolation of the pandemic was becoming challenging for parents. One family liaison described that feedback:

[Parents shared] virtual stuff is wearing me down too, and I need to—I need some social—I need to be social with somebody. So they’ve been asking for like yoga classes and cooking classes and things where they can be engaged with the parents and stuff.

The family liaisons took that information back to TOR, and family liaisons began to facilitate a weekly virtual group for parents.

Bridging Language Barriers. The hub serves both Black and Latinx families. The organization strove to make sure they were accommodating to families who spoke Spanish. Four family liaisons were Spanish-speaking and worked with Latinx families. The family liaisons on the Spanish team emphasized that they were always making sure to present information in both English and Spanish. One Spanish-speaking family liaison recognized that translation was time-intensive but argued that it was essential.

[TOR is] always sending information, we always have to translate it. We always have to translate it if parents can’t—are not able to do it themselves...And also it takes longer. I think with us it takes longer. The Latino community needs a lot of support, and it takes time.

TOR family liaisons recognized that parents possessed a multitude of communication and language skills and worked to bridge the “standard English” used in educational settings and families.

Assisting with Navigating Systems. Family liaisons provided families with support in navigating virtual school, school policies, and the education system. First, family liaisons provided support in navigating the hub and virtual schooling in general. For example, family liaisons offered technical support and connected parents to hub-provided technological resources. As one family liaison described:

So I work closely with families calling them, letting them know what we have going on, helping them set up their Zooms or, you know, just their e-mails, walking them through different things, having one on ones with parents, so that they could be able to walk them—just walk through their our website itself and just helping them be able to advocate for their kids.

Next, family liaisons also assisted parents in issues within schools. For instance, one family liaison discussed how one of the students on her caseload was in danger of being left back due to her performance in the pandemic. As the student was a high-performing student before the pandemic, her mother and the family liaison found this unacceptable. The family liaison

described how she supported the mother and her daughter (who the family liaisons refers to as “a baby”):

You know, but when you have a family liaison and you communicate with a parent and the parent is telling me this – this is what they facing, you’re like “Oh, hell no. It’s not going down like that. We need to—we need to fight. And if it takes me and you and a village too, we all going up to the school. We all going to be on that Zoom meeting, conference to see how we can make that baby thrive.”

Further, family liaisons assisted parents with navigating school systems. For instance, there is an open enrollment system in Oakland where parents can apply for traditional public schools and charter schools. The family liaisons expressed that the enrollment process was complicated and challenging for some parents. Therefore, family liaisons assisted parents with the enrollment process. As one family liaison described:

If we have a parent that needs help navigating to find a good school then we have to navigate. We have to walk them through the process, and we see what they need out of the school, and...we see what the best choices we got for them with good schools, and we sit down and we go over it and let them make choices that they need to make for their kids.

Family liaisons saw their role as assisting parents in navigating all aspects of schooling, whether the hub, schools, or educational systems.

Parents’ Feelings of Support: Liaisons as “An Aunt or a Best Cousin that Keeps in Contact”

Across the study, participants expressed the stress of parenting both as a Black and Latinx person and during the pandemic. One parent expressed how overwhelmed she felt with the transition to virtual learning:

I was just so overwhelmed with like—I was getting emails daily, multiple emails from the school. I just didn’t know which way was up. Trying to navigate all the different platforms that they were giving [my daughter], like you know, she does Power School, Google this. It was just—it was so overwhelming for me that I can imagine that it was overwhelming for [her] too.

All the parents interviewed shared that their family liaison was a valuable resource in navigating the hub and traditional virtual school. Parents appreciated having someone staying in contact and informing them about the resources available at the hub. Further, parents knew that if they had a question or concern, it would be answered quickly. As one parent shared:

The best thing was, you can call any time. There was always a liaison to help you, they have tech support...It was just wonderful. There wasn’t ever a “Well sorry, I don’t know what to tell you” or “We’ll get back to you.” There was always an answer and helpful and just so much support.

However, beyond hub-based support, the social and emotional support family liaisons provided was the most transformative for parents. One parent described the family liaison role as “an aunt or a best cousin that keeps in contact.” Another parent shared that just knowing support was available was important. The parent explained: “When you’re in a pandemic with kids and going through so much, to have somebody that really has your back, especially with academics and programs, it’s so nice.”

During COVID-19, when families faced so many challenges, family liaisons reminded them they were not alone.

Conclusion and Implications for Educators

In summary, the family liaison position as essential to a parent advocacy organization’s virtual program to address pandemic-related learning issues. The family liaison position supported parents during the pandemic and facilitate equitable access to their virtual student programming.

TOR’s organizational culture, the goal of the family liaison position, and the work-related tasks of the family liaisons were aligned with building power for Black and Latinx families. Ultimately, parents reported a high level of satisfaction with the hub and with their family liaisons.

TOR is an advocacy organization and not a school. However, there are lessons that traditional educators and leaders could learn from the work of TOR family liaisons.

Invest in the Position: Typically, a school might have one family liaison, or a central office might have a small number of family liaisons for an entire district. A limited number of family liaisons creates large caseloads and limits the ability of family liaisons to build deep and supportive relationships with families. Therefore, school leaders may consider investing in these roles and hiring more family liaisons. Yes, this would require funding. However, it could reap benefits.

As stated earlier, TOR and OUSD received a grant to pilot TOR’s family liaison model in six schools within OUSD. Under the pilot, each family liaison has no more than 25 families. Although the partnership is in the early days, TOR and OUSD’s work illustrates that a family-centered liaison model may be possible within traditional school constraints. For example, as schools decide how to invest an increase of federal funding due to the American Rescue Plan educators might consider investing in community engagement and the family liaison role. Furthermore, TOR family liaisons were viewed as family social workers. Perhaps it is worth considering the cost-benefit of hiring family liaisons in addition to social work staff.

Review Organizational Mindsets: As an organization, TOR has an asset-based view of Black and Latinx families. The asset-based view of families influenced how family liaisons approached their work. Therefore, leaders may consider their mindsets and how their attitudes shape the role of

family liaisons in their schools. Perhaps, leaders should develop asset-based and racially aware perspectives of communities *before* instituting family liaisons roles in their communities. Multiple resources are available for educators to develop asset-based views of communities for themselves and their staff. For instance, the *University of Washington's Equitable Parent-School Collaboration* research project has many publicly available resources for leaders embarking on family-centered and asset-based community engagement.

Reframe the Role: TOR family liaisons had a goal beyond hub outcomes. For instance, although the family liaisons checked hub attendance, the purpose of the position was not to ensure the hub could boast of a high attendance rate. Instead, TOR family liaisons provided emotional, technological, linguistic, and navigational support to make parents powerful. Here, the theory of action was that when parents are supported and empowered, students experience positive outcomes. The hub's high attendance rates and impressive student achievement in K-2 reading levels seem to support their outlook.

School and district leaders might consider reframing the role of family liaisons. Rather than family liaisons focusing on supporting parents to meet school outcomes, the family liaison roles could be reformulated to build parents' capacity to interact with and thrive within educational systems. For example, family liaisons could support parents in organizing parent-teacher meetings. In addition, family liaisons might collaborate with school leaders to gather key information and perspectives from parents. For instance, TOR family liaisons conducted verbal surveys with parents recording parent satisfaction with the hub. Importantly, TOR leadership was responsive to the data collected by the family liaisons. In the end, with parents in the driver's seat, schools might see an increase in student outcomes such as attendance and academic achievement.

Expect the Possibility of Tension: Leaders who reframe the role of family liaisons to focus on family empowerment must be aware of the possibility of tension. Parents who are empowered might identify issues with schools and school leaders. Empowered parents will also know how to advocate for themselves. In one view, empowering parents may cause additional work and headaches for educators. However, evidence suggests that there are a number of parents, often White and affluent, who already leverage their voice and wield advocacy skills (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Leaders should consider how schools might improve if educators are required to attend to the advocacy of Black and Latinx parents at the same rate as White and affluent parents. Furthermore, if public education is part of our Democratic institutions, all families should be involved in school governance and policy decision-making. Family liaisons could help develop Black and Latinx parents' capacity for advocacy and involvement with issues central to learning.

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Photos courtesy of [The Oakland REACH](#)

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