The Role of White Parents In Overcoming Racism

By Susan Nairnack

As a white parent in a school system used predominantly by families of color, I have struggled with my appropriate role as a parent activist. Issues of equity — or, more accurately, lack thereof — abound. I have learned that while we all want what is best for our children, for some it is more readily available. One of the realities of racism and its effects can be invisible to those who benefit from it.

My children attend the Boston Public Schools where I grew up, but to white hostility toward court-ordered desegregation, whites are a minority. At seven of the eight schools my children have attended, young people of color made up 80 to 90% of the students. The schools have included a few of the “best” in the system, as well as some known for their mediocrity. It wasn’t until I became active in my kids’ schools that I began to see how racism and class bias were debilitating to so many of my children’s peers in such insidious ways. It wasn’t until I listened to parents different from myself in race, class, and family composition that I saw how a child could go through the same school as my child, side by side in the same classrooms with the same teachers, and come out with such a fundamentally different experience. This was frightening. It was even more frightening to think that I might never have noticed.

My experiences as a foster parent of a white high school student, who had been brought home all as As and Bs and couldn’t do math as well as my son who was 6 years younger, I suspected color to be wrong. When I questioned the teacher and got the response, “But what are you worried about? She’s such a sweet kid...” I knew something was wrong. When I questioned why she was getting virtually no homework and was told by another teacher, “For families like mine that are concerned, we arrange extra assignments.” I knew a lot was wrong. (How do all “families like mine” be different from the rest? I wondered.)

After I became active I learned that low and unequal expectations were only the tip of the iceberg. (This article focuses on the school level; organizing on a citywide level has its challenges worthy of a separate article.) As part of court-ordered desegregation in Boston, each of our school system’s 117 schools has a School Parent Council of which all parents and guardians are automatically members. The Councils are coordinated by co-chairs, one Black and one white, elected by the parents. When I became the white co-chair of my children’s school, I was lucky to have a Black co-chair who was committed not only to the families of color, but willing to enlighten me about their concerns.

We spent long hours in conversation and analysis. It started with a concern that the school’s “privileges” went disproportionately to white children — even though whites were only 15% of the student population. Because it was an elementary school, teachers generally chose students to be pulled out of class to take part in chorus, instrumental lessons, the student newspaper, and student government. A couple of parents did a survey and asked the teachers how they selected children. All insisted that they used “objective” criteria or “fair” practices based on good behavior, grades, and an active interest. A few teachers got extremely defensive that we were even questioning them.

Patterns of Privilege

After a while, the pattern became clear to me. It had to do with white parents who for various reasons, whether personal back-ground or positive experiences with institutions of power, felt most comfortable in aggressively advocating for their children. It had to do with each child’s internalized expectations, developed in the context of a racist society, of what he or she “deserved.” It had to do with well-embedded beliefs of what potential in a child looked like, acted like, and dressed like.

Because these extra-curricular activities were such a selling point of the school and, in most cases, they only happened because of the extra time and commitment of the teachers involved, the administration resisted challenging the practices of the teachers who ran them. We then decided to make information about the activities more widely available and accessible to parents.

This helped open up participation to a broader group of students, although our work on this issue is hardly over.

Next we raised the question of how classroom assignments were made. Again, the “best” teachers had large clusters of white children while the teachers with less spectacular reputations typically had classes that were 100% students of color.

Exploring this dichotomy we discovered that many white parents insisted that their children move from year to year in a herd, so to speak, with their friends — who were the other white, middle-class children. On the other hand, most parents of color had no idea that it was common though unofficial practice that parents lobby the principal in June for their choice of teachers for the following September. By exposing and challenging this practice, a more equitable policy was established. The new policy, which followed extensive discussions among parents, teachers, and the principal, allows for parent input but recognizes that the teachers and staff have the final say, based on the need to create groupings that work best for the majority.

The new policy wasn’t without controversy, and there was more than one white parent who threatened to transfer out of the school if she couldn’t hand-pick the teacher for her children each year. And a few parents continue to lobby the principal, even though this is explicitly prohibited. But for the most part, the new assignment policy has helped to create a more equal distribution of children in the classrooms and has pulled many of the white parents to realize that their favorites aren’t the only good teachers in the school.

Relations Among Parents

One day early in the school year the Black co-chair said to me, “You know, many of the Black parents feel like the white parents treat them like they’re all on drugs or something.” Now, it was no secret that many white parents were disproportionately active on the parent council. Typically less than half of parents who attended parent council meetings were parents of color, in a school with 85% students of color.

We began to look at these issues of parent involvement, focusing on the following concerns: How could we conduct our business to enlighten the parents — in this case, for the white parents to back off from dominating both process and content — and to allow parents of color to feel that they belonged and had ownership in this organization?

Over time, we have developed some strategies that have moved our parent council toward a more racially representative composition. One of the results was that parent council meetings that I run, for example, each parent is to turn to someone they don’t know and introduce themselves. What starts out as a generally wary and uncomfortable group of racially diverse parents often breaks into dozens of lively conversations. Another thing we’ve done is to make sure agendas for meetings are sent out in advance and posted on the wall during meetings. There’s nothing more alienating than coming into a meeting where you might not know anyone, seeing a sea of faces that don’t look like yours, and having no idea what’s going on.

While we are not always able to implement all of the strategies that we’ve developed, here are a few evolving practices for fighting racism within parent organizations and for building effective multicultural organizations within our schools. Try the following out and if they don’t work in your situation, remember that it’s better to make mistakes (and learn from them) than never even to try for fear of failing.

* At every meeting or event, try to include individual parents who are representative of the diversity of your school. While the obvious diversity is racial, think about linguistic, economic, sexual orientation, age (e.g., grandparents and young parents), and other differences as well. If you consistently cannot attract certain groups, seek out individuals and ask what would help them get involved. Do not expect one person to speak for a whole group, but listen to that individual’s feedback, seek out others, and find the common threads in what you’ve heard.

* Always prod parents to talk to, sit next...
to, and work with others of another race, or not just those they already are friendly with. We've found that, since a large group of white, middle-class parents are only then will we see the parent council, they've gotten to know each other very well over the years of their children's education. Then when a parent of color comes along, not only do they see very few parents who look like them, but it's then when the obvious that the majority of parents in the room seem to be good friends, and the newcomers are that much more alienated by the experience.

• Be bold! If you see things going on in your school that don't seem fair, don't wait for someone else to raise the concern because it appears to be "their" problem. I remember one incident when five to seven parents were interested in the standardized test scores, and I was asked that the scores of the Black children were half of the whites. I was amazed at the sight of relief when I asked about the white children. At the same time, if the case.

• Work with sympathetic parents, teachers, and other school staff to change policies which are clearly not benefiting children of color as much as white children. While we have found that many critical policy issues are systemwide and not under the control of individual schools, there are plenty of things which can be addressed at the school level.

Black parents want good schools for their kids but may feel unwelcome getting involved.

Barriers to Increased Parental Involvement

By Klare Shaw

At my first parent council meeting I felt that a lot of white parents were judging me to see what "kind" of Black person I was. Was I someone "just like them" who happened to be Black?

By and large it was not the parents who have made life choices (home, job, lifestyle) to be inclusive and have multiracial (I say diverse) friends who made me feel that way. Instead, it tended to be parents who have chosen to live in a fairly homogeneous (or at least solidly middle-class) neighborhood and who are at our school because of its reputation, its teachers or, perhaps, out of some incompletely conceived dogooder status of wanting to expose their kids to non-white kids. At the first bad bump, or improved economics, they will have their kids in private school. The irony is that for many parents of color, education has been viewed as a means of upward mobility for our kids, so that regardless of most class factors we want the same things for our children's education as someone from a middle-class, white community. The question is how we advocate for that.

Many of the most active parents have jobs with less of flexibility (which in many areas mean an upper-level managerial or white-collar job). Those who don't fit this bill come out because they are comfortable with the other parents on the parent council and comfortable with the school. If parents have negative school experiences when they were students, including bullying episodes with teachers and administrators, they may choose minimal involvement with their child's school. It doesn't help that issues of elitism and racism in the school rarely get addressed head on. I'm still smarting from the Parent Council meeting two years ago, after gun shots were fired up the street from the school. Many parents were worried about police protection at dismissal, recess, or when the buses were rolling. Although it's completely ignored the need to address violence in the neighborhood for the children who live here 24x7. This is a school where more than 70% of the students live within walking distance and don't ride the bus. If I had been in charge, I would have assigned someone from the school to the neighborhood block watch effort immediately. But the reaction of most parents showed a really short-sighted concern for "my kids" and little concern for "our kids."

Parents who had negative school experiences when they were students may choose minimal involvement with their child's school.

We have not done so good a job on drawing in parents. That is one of the reasons we need so badly to have a parent outreach program. This is particularly true for parents of color. The outreach we do as parent council representatives isn't sufficient to overcome people's feelings that school is a place for professional educators not parents, and all our hard work can be eroded by a negative interaction with school staff. Even the most well-intentioned principal or office staff person usually cannot give a parent sufficient attention about a pressing concern because the system does not give administrators enough time or support to run the schools well. I know there are people with kids in the school who are either unemployed or on public assistance who may be willing to give the school more time. But how do we tap into this? We have to do a better job of demystifying what goes on in the school. That means less jargon, clearer English, and spending time going over the school's Three Year Plan, funding formulas, and other things parents need to know to feel comfortable and advocate for change. It took me two years to understand the difference between the site council and the parent council. I helped that I knew one of the parents really well and figured that if she was involved on the parent council, it must be all right. I think people really do come out to meetings from a sense of shared accountability. We need enough opportunities to hang out with other parents to create the sense of a school community. Finally, the system must mean it when they say parental involvement. It should not be used just at convenient times like city budgeting, but also at inconvenient times like during curriculum choices and personnel decisions. The school system pays non-profits and universities a lot of money, asking them to increase parental involvement. Most of these people don't have kids in the public schools. There are parents in our school who show leadership every week — on the job, in their families, in other churches, with other non-profits and mutual assistance associations. The schools need to acknowledge that those skills are transferable and pay parents stipends that will let them participate. This is not belittling; it is an acknowledgment that a parent's time is worth as much as the $20/hr consultant.

Klare Shaw is a co-chair of the parent council at Trotter Elementary School in Boston.

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These might include: use of portfolio assessments; looking at the school's classroom assignment process; establishing a school policy and environment which explicitly encourages respect for racial and other differences; and ensuring that the board of books that reflect the reality of all the children in the school, particularly the children of color. Before choosing your battles, so to speak, be sure that the group doing the choosing is itself reflective of the entire student population, and that the least-spoken voices are heard. You may find that some of the concerns of parents of color are quite different than those of the white parents.

Some teachers and administration may be key to establishing the educational atmosphere in our children's schools. It is not enough to wait for them to pick the lead if that atmosphere is not conducive to the best learning for all. You may find that some teachers and administration are quick to speak out only as individuals, are too easily dismissed. We have to organize — to name the barriers — and learn to speak with one voice on the issues of importance to us. Only then will we see the changes that are necessary to make our schools places of growth and achievement for all children.

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