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Aggressive Parent Behavior and Its Effects on School Administrators

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AGGRESSIVE PARENT BEHAVIOR AND
ITS EFFECTS ON SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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form to the Office of Graduate Studies, where it will be placed in the candidate's file and
submit a copy with your final dissertation to be bound as page number two.
ABSTRACT

Aggressive Parent Behavior and Its Effects on School Administrators

As much as any other social change affecting schools over the past two decades, the rise of aggressive parent behavior has impacted the way schools operate. To date, largely anecdotal stories have comprised most of our understanding of this phenomenon (aggressive parent behavior) and its impact on school professionals, primarily the additional stress occasioned by such parent conduct.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine aggressive parent behavior, as well as its effects on school professionals. Data from in-depth interviews with school administrators were analyzed and coded via the study of verbatim interview transcripts. The findings suggest that a relatively small number of aggressive parents (as a percentage of a school population) tend to inject stressful dynamics into a school setting, often influencing school professional decision making, including long-term career planning on the part of teachers and administrators. The data further suggest that such parent-school interactions tend to fall into two categories: those in which a parent believes that his or her child requires special treatment (when prevailing professional judgment does not), and those in which schools are concerned about student behavior or performance (and parents are not supportive of school decisions).

The guiding stimulus behind the research is a concern that aggressive parent behavior is negatively coloring teacher and administrator perspectives on their careers in education. As such, this phenomenon runs counter to the central goal of retaining and recruiting talented people to teaching and to educational leadership
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Ask teachers about the best part of their job, and most will say how much they love working with kids. Ask them about the most demanding part, and they will say dealing with parents. *Time Magazine Cover Story: "What Teachers Hate About Parents"* (Gibbs, 2005).

There is no doubt that schools' relationships with parents are vastly different now. The days when teachers were held in deference, parents didn't set foot in school, automatically assumed the teacher was right, and were generally content if their child attended regularly and came home safely, are long gone (Denison, 2004, writing in London, UK).

Everybody loves parent-from-hell stories... If the news gods didn't provide us with a steady diet of toxic parent stories, we'd have to make them up (Fisher, 2006).

If leadership does not become more attractive, doable, and exciting, public and private institutions will deteriorate (Fullan, 2001).

Consider the perplexing situation of the elementary school principal. One school mother had, despite numerous warnings about the dire risks of sending any child to school with peanuts or peanut butter (since another child in the class was extremely allergic), sent her own daughter to school with a PB&J sandwich. When the principal asked the mother why she had acted in such a negligent, even dangerous, way, the parent responded, “But my daughter really wanted a PB&J sandwich! She was going to cry if I didn’t send her with it!”
Or ponder the dilemma of the middle school principal, who had recently completed placement decisions for the school's new sixth grade Honors Math program, in keeping with valid placement protocols from a leading university-based mathematics curriculum. Little did the principal anticipate the barrage of emails, phone calls, and in-person visits that such a curricular initiative would present. The gist of the appeals from those parents whose children were not chosen for the Honors program can be boiled down to the following question (some parents were not so polite as to put it in question form): “But will this affect whether he can be in 7th grade Algebra, in AP Calculus in high school, get into an Ivy League college, and be successful for the rest of his life?”

Or fast forward to the irate phone call from a high school parent, regarding the number of tests that could be given in a particular time period. While trying to explain the circumstances of his concerns to the school’s principal, he confided that, “on Wednesday and Thursday alone, we had several tests (which, upon further investigation, turned out to have been 10 minute quizzes) for which we studied for 3 hours -- both nights!” When asked why his daughter (presumably the other half of the we) hadn’t come forward, the father admitted that his daughter wasn’t that upset.

Statement of the Problem

Listen into any teachers’ lounge or administrative meeting, and it is only a matter of time before the conversation veers towards an issue that is on the minds -- and the nerves -- of virtually every professional working in our schools today: the aggressive and disrespectful behavior of too many … parents. Whether referred to as aggressive,
entitled, hyper, difficult, adversarial, litigious, irrational, helicoptering, hovering or high maintenance, such overparents have shaken the traditional, deferential relationship between family and school unlike any school-related phenomenon we have seen in recent decades. As noted psychologist and school consultant Michael Thompson has stated, “Every teacher [and administrator] has been scarred by at least one threatening out-of-control parent.” (Thompson, 1996, p.3)

The increasing frequency and diminishing quality of parental interaction within many of our schools, by a growing number of parents, has proven more and more challenging for teachers and administrators -- not to mention the negative effects on children themselves. With respect to many middle and upper-middle class families, concentrated mainly in affluent suburban public schools and independent private schools, these vexing problems include: parent-driven, highly-pressured childhoods (“My child must be the lead in the play...win the starting position...go to Harvard!”); the micromanagement by parents of their children’s lives (from the behaviors highlighted in Elkind’s landmark work The Hurried Child (1981, 2001) to daily, often relentless communication with teachers and administrators); and ultimately, and most troubling, the failure by parents to raise resilient, independent young adults.

School parents such as these, arguably, are detracting more from the educational systems they inhabit -- through a singular focus on their own interests and those of their children -- than they are adding to their communities and schools. Though largely anecdotal, there has developed over the past decades unquestionable drag on schools’ daily operations caused by parental over-involvement. Such overparenting behavior has created added teacher and administrator demands and stress, leading to shorter
professional tenures; reluctance among teachers to enter administrative positions; an overall decline in career satisfaction; and detrimental health-related effects on the part of teachers and principals. There is also, to be sure, a negative impact on the students themselves, which is beyond the scope of this study.

The complaints and horror stories school professionals have experienced and shared, and the frequency with which they have done so, has convinced the researcher that the problem of aggressive overparenting is not made up. The amount of time teachers and administrators now spend responding to parents is greater than ever before, and the heavy stress school professionals are experiencing has made this issue one that is front and center for nearly all professionals working in schools. In short, teachers and administrators are beleaguered by, and deeply concerned about, what a distraction from the most important aspects of their work (instructional leadership, curriculum, staff development, student services) responding to parent-initiated communications has become.

Teachers and administrators report that the most challenging, most stressful, and seemingly most intractable problems they have encountered in recent years involve dealing with aggressive and difficult parents. Few, if any, teachers or administrators, went into K-12 education to deal primarily with other adults. And yet, if you were to ask most principals and other school leaders about their greatest administrative challenges -- and nightmares -- there is little doubt that difficult parents would be near, if not at, the top of the list.

Have parent-school relations reached an all-time low? Are parents more aggressive, more litigious, and more troublesome than ever before? Are mounting
parental pressures on schools deterring qualified people from entering the profession, or driving good people out? How is parent behavior affecting administrative time constraints, decision-making, and job satisfaction? What impact are so-called *helicopter parents* having on administrative tenures and teacher willingness to consider a career in administration? In general, what effects are such overparenting behavior having on school professionals’ time, job satisfaction, and stress? And, most important, what is in the best interests of our schools, and of our children?

Who are these parents, and where are they coming from, anyway? Most Americans of a certain age remember their schooling years as a time when teachers taught; peers and friends came first; and parents’ roles were pretty much relegated to visiting school on special occasions (Christmas concerts, or when the child was in trouble), carpooling (without talking too much to their children’s friends, for lack of interest or fear of embarrassment), and to the occasional Little League dad and Brownie Troop mom. But today’s parents comprise a different breed altogether. As Nora Ephron, in her most recent collection of essays, *I Feel Bad About My Neck* (2006), wryly observes:

Back in the day when there were merely parents, as opposed to people who were engaged in parenting, being a parent was fairly straightforward. You didn’t need a book, and if you owned one, it was by Dr. Spock, a pediatrician, and you rarely looked at it unless your child had a temperature of 103, or croup, or both.

...  

All this changed around the time I had children [the late 1970s]...
... Suddenly, one day, there was this thing called parenting. Parenting was serious. Parenting was fierce. Parenting was solemn. Parenting was a participle, like going and doing and crusading and worrying; it was active, it was energetic, it was unrelenting. Parenting meant playing Mozart CDs while you were pregnant, doing without the epidural, and breast-feeding your child until it was old enough to unbutton your blouse. Parenting began with the assumption that your baby was a lump of clay that could be molded (through hard work, input, and positive reinforcement) into a perfect person who would someday be admitted to the college of your choice. (pp. 55-58)

Research to date on the interrelationship between parenting and schools has focused on issues of underparenting, i.e., the deleterious effects of non- or under-engaged parents on student achievement, attendance, and behavior. This existing research has, as its goal, the identification of initiatives and programs designed to increase parental involvement in their children’s schooling, and on resultant improvements to school communities, and to student achievement and behavior. (Epstein 1994; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Hood & LoVette, 2002).

Overparenting, on the other hand, is a relatively new term that describes the behavior of mothers and fathers who are too involved in their children’s lives -- in terms of raising resilient, self-sufficient children -- or to interact positively with social institutions such as health care providers, organized youth activities, and schools (Heins, 2006, Thompson & Mazolla, 2005, Clayton, 2004). In a school setting, these are the parents who micro-manage their children’s schedules, class placements, extra-curricular
activities, and social relations. These are the parents who challenge the Little League coaches and umpires (recall the Boston-area Hockey Dad who actually killed an opposing fan); rail against the injustices of the college admissions process; and challenge both teachers’ and principals’ decisions about anything they feel does not meet each and every need of their children, and, perhaps more accurately, themselves. These are the parents who view themselves essentially as customers (as in, “The customer is always right”) in an educational system that only reluctantly adapts to business models. They consider schools as organizations that exist simply to satisfy their perceived individual needs, rather than as learning and living communities designed to educate, nurture, and respect each and every member of that community – students, teachers, and administrators alike.

This is the leadership challenge that a growing number of teachers, coaches, counselors, and administrators are encountering, on a more frequent basis today than ever before (Gibbs, 2005, Marrano, 2004, Thompson, 1996). Its effects on teacher and administrator job satisfaction, and on professional stress, call into question the all-important issues of teacher and administrator recruitment and retention. According to Fullan (2001), “If leadership does not become more attractive, doable, and exciting, public and private institutions will deteriorate” (p. 10). While the focus of this dissertation is on parent-school relations, such parental behavior towards schools also raises serious questions about the deleterious effects on children themselves, whose parents “fight all their battles” for them, and who teach their children that aggressive and disrespectful behavior towards schools and other institutions can be efficacious, and even socially acceptable (D’Andrea, 2004).
While the overparenting challenge tends to be localized in more affluent schools (suburban public and private schools), the problem is not strictly limited by parents’ education or income (SES). Although the problem is, admittedly, a less critical societal issue than the underparenting problem that has plagued our poorest schools and families for decades, the overparenting challenge is one that demands our attention and analysis. A decade ago, Achilles, Reynolds, and Achilles (1997) observed that “much of a professional’s work is to help resolve ‘people problems’....” (p. 107) For working school administrators in recent years, such people problems often involve not students, but adults -- parents -- with whom few (if any) school professionals went into education in the first place to work with. In short, the most challenging problems facing many teachers and administrators today on a daily basis are adult problems, i.e., difficulties in dealing with parents of the students in our schools.

But things were not always like this. And even today, different contemporary societies (Japan, e.g.) still tend to treat their teachers and principals with great respect. Numerous books and studies have documented the deleterious effects enabling and hovering parents impose, albeit unwittingly, on their own children, depriving them of the self-sufficiency and resilience that comes from exposure to reasonable levels of adversity and challenge (American Society of Professional Education, 2004; Fisher, 2006; Quindlen, 2005; Wiseman, 2006). Parents have been decried “for their hovering interference and indulgent overinvolvement both in and out of school” (McEwan, p. 1) for everything from advocating for higher-than-deserved course placements, to blindly and aggressively defending their children, even when it was patently clear that youngsters had engaged in offensive, even illegal, misconduct (Kane, 2005, Sears & Allen, 2005).
One *New York Times* commentator has described this state of affairs as a *self-control deficit* among adults in general, where

... many traditional external restraints on individual behavior have fallen away. Social structures like close extended families that once constrained behavior have weakened even as widespread affluence has democratized overindulgence. A result is that Americans eat too much, save too little and absolutely guzzle planet-warming fossil fuel, all to our collective detriment. Forget about the national debt. What we have here is a ballooning self-control deficit. (Akst, 2006, p.3)

Viewed in the context of unconstrained behavior, questions remain as to why parents behave the ways they do towards our schools, and why they seem to believe they can “get away with it.”

Why are school parents acting this way? Likely sources of parental behavior include generalized anxiety and fear about their children’s safety and their futures; about the global economy (Friedman, 2006); and about their child’s fitness for admissions to a highly selective college or university. Indeed, a new genre of literature, dubbed *Admissions Lit*, has been described as books and articles “about the great rat race of getting your children into the right schools” (McGrath, 2006, p. 37). According to the *New York Times Education Life Supplement*, “parents behaving badly is the real subject of admissions lit ... predatory parents who treat the education of their offspring as a sort of social blood sport and will do anything -- lie, cheat, grovel, sue -- to get an advantage” (McGrath, p. 37). Almost daily, we are barraged with outrageous stories of the college admissions system and the anxieties that accompany an experience that was, in the
memory of some, a reasonably straightforward process that did not require a shelf of self-help books and a pricey private consultant. College admissions is but one of the issues plaguing overparents, their offspring, and the many institutions with which they come into contact, most dramatically the schools which their children attend.

Thompson (1996) has suggested that a mutual fear between parents and teachers is responsible for much of the anxiety on the part of both parents and schools. Writing within the context of independent schools, he notes:

Fear infects the relationship between independent school teachers and independent school parents -- a fear that is often denied and only painfully approached. I see evidence of this fear throughout the independent school world, no matter how much a particular school may say it is a "community," or "like family." Parent-teacher relationships, even when good, are less than they could be because of the latent fear between the parties. Heads of school often feel caught between the two, criticized by teachers for favoring parents, criticized by parents for being insufficiently responsive, or too protective of mediocre faculty. Parents often feel subtly -- or not too subtly -- excluded from schools. (p. 1)

Thompson analyzes the sources of parent fear, including these insights: “Your child-rearing mistakes are on display through your child's behavior;” “Every parent is trapped by hope, love — and anxieties;” “Parents are so vulnerable with respect to their children.” and “Teachers have immense power over children's lives” (p. 2). He then zeroes in on the stressful reactions of teachers and administrators:
Many independent school teachers have to sit across from parents who make two times, or four times, or fifty times more money per year than they do. It makes them doubt themselves and their value. A school head made the observation that much of the conflict between parents and teachers is class warfare. One of the things that teachers say to me to explain their fear of parents or their fear of lack of administrative support is, "The customer is always right." Many independent school parents, whatever their income, are high-status in a variety of ways that can be intimidating to teachers. (p. 3)

As if the class-status differential were not enough, Thompson goes on to describe the ways in which independent school parents tend to interact with teachers and administrators. After noting that so many independent school parents are high-powered professionals and business people, he hits the nail squarely on the head, and in characteristically understated language: “Parents bring their professional skills to bear on their relationships with teachers even though they may not be helpful in a school situation.” (p. 2) He explains:

If ... parents can sometimes come to their child's school feeling amateurish, anxious, ignorant, and trapped, they are naturally going to reach for the set of skills that make them successful in the 'outside' world. Independent school parents usually have such skills in abundance, and they are often not helpful in a school context. Even when parents sense that their approach is ineffective, they cannot stop. I have seen attorney parents treat their upper school directors as if they were opposing counsel; mental health professionals analyze the motives of a teacher, child, school head, and every other child in the class.... Recently, I had an
entrepreneurial parent who had come to me for help make a business presentation of his child that took up the entire hour we had together. It was an articulate, polished, forceful sales presentation; however, it did not help the situation, because I was not "buying" his son, I was trying to help a child who was already in the school and already annoying many teachers there. Even when parents know they are intimidating teachers, they cannot stop exercising their strongest muscles, the ones that make them powerful in their own professional lives. (p. 2)

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to measure the effects of overparenting on the professionals who work in our schools. Through in-depth interviews of six experienced suburban public school principals and senior administrators, the study sets out to gauge how much teachers and administrators are affected, and in what educational contexts, by the new breed of assertive and aggressive parents who are demanding an increasing share of a school’s daily attention; who are responsible for a growing degree of teacher and administrator stress and job dissatisfaction; and who, ultimately, may be driving talented and committed people out of education altogether, at a time when our schools and our nation can scarcely afford it.

On the basis of collected data, the research explores the following issues surrounding overparenting and its impact on schools:
1. Identify and describe the behavior of certain parents toward the school staff, both in terms of the frequency (quantity) of such interaction, as well as its tone (quality), i.e., respect shown to faculty and administrators;

2. Identify and describe the effects of overparenting on the professional stress and job satisfaction of teachers and administrators, and the resultant daily and long-term decision-making of those professionals in terms of school action and priorities, and the tenure and willingness to remain in or aspire to more responsibilities within schools; and

3. Identify and describe the contexts in which such aggressive overparent-school interactions are most likely to occur.

The ultimate goal of the research project -- including professional development and parent education programs that would flow from its findings -- is to improve the quality and, in many cases, decrease the quantity of parent-initiated school interaction by overparents (in cases where the school does not perceive a need to be in contact), thus freeing teachers and administrators to spend more time and energy on other (particularly underparented) children, and on their core tasks of developing curriculum, teaching, and leading schools.

In short, the problem constitutes a high priority-high risk one, affecting students, teachers, parents, and, potentially, the overall mission and culture of our schools (Achilles, Reynolds & Achilles, pp. 62-69). In analyzing the problem situation (Achilles, et al., p. 11), the problem of the problem can be summarized as follows:
• The existing state: A growing number of self-interested, aggressive overparents are draining teachers’ and administrators’ time and energy (through unsolicited, parent-initiated contact with the school over non-urgent, non-important issues, i.e., ones that affect only their own children, and are not truly serious) away from their core responsibilities of teaching, supervising and caring for the “good of the whole.”

• The desired state: Teachers and administrators (the real experts on children) would determine when and if a student’s parents needed to be involved in school decisions or policies, and parents would cooperate respectfully with the school professionals in such instances.

• The discrepancy: The number of overparenting behaviors in a given school, and the amount of time and energy this drains from the healthy operation of the school.

• Cause(s) of the discrepancy: Parental anxiety and fear for their children’s futures; parental sense of entitlement; the presence of a consumer mentality among parents; school professionals’ inability to handle (or unintentional enabling of) the new demands.

Research Questions

A. What is the impact of aggressive overparenting behavior on the professional staff (administrators, teachers) of suburban public schools?
B. In what contexts (academic, athletic, social-behavioral) are the most difficult parent-school interactions likely to occur?

Subsidiary Questions

1. How much time are suburban public school principals and senior administrators spending responding to or dealing with aggressive, difficult parent situations?

2. What is the qualitative nature of such interactions, in terms of respect and consideration shown to school professionals?

3. How do teachers and administrators respond to such interactions, in terms of their job satisfaction (staff morale), in-school decision making (rule enforcement), and career planning (tenure, teacher desire/ambition to enter administration)?

4. How does the stress experienced from parent-school interactions compare with other stressors in their schools (accountability standards, administrator-faculty relations, student discipline in the absence of parent intervention, curricular challenges, recruitment of staff, school and safety, etc.)?

5. How many parents (what percentage of school population) come under the category of difficult or aggressive, and are those parents consistently so, or is it largely contextual? In other words, when parents behave in ways that intimidate, alienate, and influence school professionals in ways that are not in the best interest of all our children (i.e., the greatest good for the greatest number), do they do so consistently, or intermittently?
6. *How do school professionals see such parenting behavior affecting their students,*
   i.e., the children of the overparents, in terms of maturity, self-sufficiency,
   respectful behavior (civility) and resiliency?

*Significance of the Study*

The literature on teacher and administrator stress is incomplete, and largely
anecdotal, insofar as the issue of overparenting is concerned. Indeed, most of the
literature on overparenting is new, appearing in professional and popular media outlets
only in the past few years. It is the goal of this study to qualify and quantify such
anecdotal reports of overparenting and its adverse effects on teachers and administrators
by means of social science research, employing in-depth qualitative interviews to gauge
the impact on and perceptions of school professionals who are confronted with these
social phenomena.

It is the hope of the researcher that this study can be useful to school leaders in
several ways. First, it can begin to quantify and qualify the nature of overparenting and
its impact on school professionals. Second, the results of this study may provide
guidance for school professionals, in terms of staff development, as well as for parents, in
terms of modifying their own behavior to become more effective advocates for their
children, and allies with the school in raising the next generation of Americans.

As noted above, issues of staff retention and of recruiting talented people to work
in our schools are of paramount importance for the future of our nation. It is the goal of
the researcher that findings of this study will help schools and districts to attract and retain such qualified people, and improve and maintain our schools for generations to come.

Delimitations and Limitations

The study is delimited to suburban public schools in the Mid-Atlantic region, based on the preponderance of overparenting in such schools. The participants in the study are delimited to experienced administrators, whose teaching and administrative careers exceed ten years of dealing directly with parents, including interactions that qualify as difficult and stress-inducing for school professionals.

Additionally, although the impact of overparenting on the overall health and resilience of the children of such parents is a critically important issue, it is beyond the scope of this study (which focuses on the effects of overparenting on school professionals), other than in terms of what school professionals may perceive to be such effects on their students (Subsidiary question #6).

Limitations of this research include the absence of scholarly literature on the effects of overparenting on school professionals. As a result, much of the literature review (Chapter II) is comprised of popular publications -- books, magazines, and newspapers -- that describe the societal effects of overparenting on schools, and on the students in our schools.
Definition of Terms

The subjects of this qualitative, phenomenological study are:

1. *School professionals*, who are defined as administrators and teachers in grades K-12.

2. *Experienced administrators* are school professionals who have worked in schools, and have had significant contact with parents, for at least 10 years.

It is also important to classify the types of parents with whom schools are dealing, as well as the end result (goal) to which this study is aspiring. For the purposes of this study, parents of school-age children tend to fall into three main categories (the terms are those of the researcher):

A. Those parents who are so under- or un-involved in their child’s education as to be ineffective advocates and helpers, when needed, sometimes to the point of being neglectful (*Underparents*).

B. Those parents who create and maintain an effective, collegial working relationship with teachers and administrators, who are responsive to the school when it perceives an academic or behavioral issue with a child, who subscribe to the mission of the school as demonstrated by respect and support for the faculty and administration, and who leave the school to do *its* job of educating children when there is not a problem (*Healthy Parents*).
C. Those parents who are in constant communication with the school over minor issues that can often be remedied by a self-sufficient student; are assertively adversarial vis a vis the teachers and school administration, creating an *us vs. them* litigation-like dynamic, and staging aggressive defenses of their children even when the children are clearly at fault (*Overparents*).

While the goal of prior research (see Chapter II – Literature Review) has been to move under-involved parents from A → B, the goal of this research would be to enable overparents to move from C → B.

*Organization of the Study*

The research on parent behavior and its stressful impact on school professionals is divided into five chapters. Chapter I presented the statement of the problem; purpose of the study; significance of the study; research questions; limitations and delimitations; and definition of terms. Chapter II will present a review of the related research and literature on: (a) overparenting behavior, and (b) administrator and teacher stress and professional decision-making. Chapter III will present a methodology of the study, organized into: (a) introduction, (b) design, (c) instrumentation, (d) data collection, (e) data analysis, and (f) summary. Chapter IV will present the descriptive qualitative data through pattern and theme analysis. Chapter V will present the summary, findings, conclusion, discussion, and recommendations for further practice and study.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH AND LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to describe the relationship between aggressive overparenting parenting behavior and school professional stress. In particular, the study aims to determine the relationship between such parenting behavior, perceptions of stress, and school decision-making, both in the daily management of schools and in school professionals’ career decisions. The study also sets out to identify those contexts in which the most adversarial and stress-inducing parent-school interactions occur. Chapter 2 presents the review of research and literature on overparenting behavior and staff stress, and develops a thesis for the study.

A. Literature on Parent behavior

The related literature and research on parent behavior and on school stress indicates that today’s schools are under enormous pressure, more than ever before.
The relationship between parent involvement and student achievement is well documented, insofar as insufficient parental engagement (underparenting) has been demonstrably linked to student underperformance, poor attendance, and negative behavior (Epstein, 1994). Similarly, increased parent involvement, when prior involvement had been insufficient, has been linked to improved student attendance, achievement and overall school efficacy and culture (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). And yet, aside from regular treatment in the popular media (newspapers, magazines, and books), together with widespread school-based anecdotal evidence, the effects of overparenting on schools has not been studied in a social scientific context. It is the goal of this study to correlate contemporary overparenting behavior with professional stress and school decision-making, including teacher and administrator decisions to remain in education, and to identify contexts in which such stress-inducing behavior tends to occur.

There is a significant body of research devoted to the challenges of underparenting and its effect on children in our schools. As noted in Chapter 1 and above, research to date on the interrelationship between parenting and schools has focused on the deleterious effects of non- or under-engaged parents on low student achievement, attendance, and behavior. This research has, as its goal, the identification of initiatives and programs to increase positive parental involvement with their children, and improvements to school communities, pupil achievement, and student behavior. (Epstein 1994; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Hood & LoVette, 2002).

Such research has focused on creating effective home-school partnerships (Nord, 1998); on increasing the connections between home life and schooling.
(Landsverk, 2003); on cultivating parental support of school initiatives and curriculum (English & Larson, 1996); and more generally, on the importance of parent involvement in the lives of adolescents (Bogenschneider, 1997; Elias, Bryan, Patrikakou, & Weissberg, 2003; Young, Helton, & Whitley, 1997). Such studies have involved children of migrant workers (Lopez, 2004), as well as students outside the United States (Koutsoulis & Campbell, 2001, re. Cyprus). Some studies have documented the efficacy of formal parent-involvement programs, insofar as they have led to increased student success and healthier school cultures (Albritton, Klotz, & Roberson, 2003). In each of these studies, the need for, and efficacy of, increased parental involvement -- part of what prominent New York Times columnist David Brooks has coined human bonding (2006) -- has been demonstrated to lead to improvements in student achievement and the overall health of our schools.

More recently, however, there has been a great deal written about the new paradigm of parent behavior known as overparenting (Heins, 2006; Clayton, 2004). Overparenting and its negative effects on children dates back at least as far as the original publication of Elkind's landmark work, The Hurried Child (1981, 2001), and has more recently come in for prominent and front-page coverage from popular publications including The New York Times (Bazelon, 2006), The Washington Post (Fisher, 2006), and Psychology Today (Marrano, 2004). Numerous books and studies on the psychological dangers to children of parental over-control and overindulgence have been published and widely discussed (for studies on parent control and student psychological effects, see Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981; Grolnick and Apostoleris, 2002; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; for studies on parent indulgence, see
American Society of Professional Education, 2004; D'Andrea, 2004; Kindlon, 2001; Levine, 2006; Mogel, 2001). Meanwhile, as noted in Chapter I, an entire genre of Admissions Lit has sprung up describing parent and student angst surrounding private school and college admissions, and focusing largely on "parents behaving badly." (McGrath, 2006; see also Cohen, 2005/2006; Lieberman, 2004; Quinn, 2005; Shreber, 2006; Trees, 2006).

Articles have appeared in leading national newspapers and magazines describing generally a self-control deficit among adults (Akst, 2006, noted in Chapter I), as well as the need for greater adult maturity in dealing with life's challenges, such as professional responsibilities and child rearing (Brown, 2006). Specifically with regard to K-12 schools, Time Magazine's February, 2005 cover story was entitled "What Teachers Hate About Parents" and featured a full-color cover photo dramatization of intrusive, aggressive parents hovering over a beleaguered young teacher (Gibbs, 2005). Parents' relationships to schools have been portrayed as those between "consumers" and "service providers" (Budiansky, 2006), and parental aggressive and disrespectful behavior towards teachers and administrators has been documented in several books and articles (American School Board Journal, 2006; Kane, 2006; Random House, 2006; Wiseman, 2006).

Some commentators have highlighted special areas in which parent behavior has been particularly extreme, including involvement with their children's athletic program and teams (Corbett, 2006; Kent, 2006); parents' inability to "let go" of instantaneous and ongoing contact with their children via cell phones, despite clear school rules (Scaccia, 2006; Strauss, 2006); and a rising tide of litigiousness on the
part of parents defensive of their misbehaving youths (Associated Press, 2005; Kane, 2005; Moore, 2006; Neufeld, 2005; Sears & Allen, 2005; Tomsho, 2005). Perhaps surprisingly, such behavior does not stop with high school graduation: books and articles have discussed the growing presence, and intrusiveness, of parents at the college and university level as well (Caesar, 2006; Massa, 2006; Strauss, 2006).

Whether it is comforting news or not, such parent behavior is not limited to this country. An educational commentator in England has observed:

There is no doubt that schools' relationships with parents are vastly different now. The days when teachers were held in deference, parents didn't set foot in school, automatically assumed the teacher was right, and were generally content if their child attended regularly and came home safely, are long gone. (Denison, 2004)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the emotionally-charged phenomenon of overparents pressuring a school to change class placements, teacher assignments, grades, and disciplinary decisions has become the subject of a well-circulated internet joke, based on an actual case, which follows:

eRumor [the website] reports that parents at Pacific Palisades (“Pali”) High School in California are suing the school because students who were absent or didn't complete their work got failing grades. Students who had otherwise passing grades were flunked because of absences and tardies. The parents cried foul. They said they had not known about the policy and some threatened to take the issue to court.
The school and teachers are being sued by parents who want their children's failing grades changed to passing grades even though those children were absent 15-30 times during the semester and did not complete enough school work to pass their classes. As a result the following voice mail message was instituted at Pali High:

Hello! You have reached the automated answering service of your school. In order to assist you in connecting the right staff member, please listen to all your options before making a selection:

**"To lie about why your child is absent - Press 1."

**"To make excuses for why your child did not do his work- Press 2."

**"To complain about what we do - Press 3."

**"To swear at staff members - Press 4."

**"To ask why you didn't get information that was already enclosed in your newsletter and several flyers mailed to you - Press 5."

**"If you want us to raise your child - Press 6."

**"If you want to reach out and touch, slap or hit someone - Press 7."

**"To request another teacher for the third time this year- Press 8."

**"To complain about bus transportation - Press 9."

**"To complain about school lunches - Press 0."
"If you realize this is the real world and your child must be accountable and responsible for his/her own behavior, class work, homework, and that it's not the teachers' fault for your child's lack of effort: Hang up and have a nice day!" (Pacific Palisades, 2006)

B. Sources of and explanations for overparenting behavior

While it is the primary goal of this study to document the deleterious effects of overparenting on schools, such a study would be incomplete without a review of the literature on general sources of and explanations for parental stress that may manifest themselves in overparenting behavior.

As noted in Chapter I, likely sources of overparenting behavior include generalized anxiety and fear about their children’s safety and their futures. Additionally, much has been written about the general lack of connectedness and the *Bowling Alone* alienation and anxiety felt by many Americans over the past decade. (Fountain, 2006; Hallowell, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Reimer, 2006). Several commentators, in an effort to describe this alienation, have highlighted the overall lack of social, extended family support, especially for women and mothers of young children (Steiner, 2006; Stites, 2006; Warner, 2005/2006). Domestic and international economic pressures figure prominently in such analyses (Friedman, 2006; Parnes, 2006), and it is likely that such anxiety is elevated for certain ethnic, as well as socio-economic, groups (Wex, 2005).
Perhaps the most visible manifestation of such stress surrounds parents’ worries about their children’s admissions to college, which trickles down to K-12 schools. As noted above, an Admissions Lit genre has emerged in the past several years, while complementing such literature are shelves of how-to parenting advice manuals regarding general nurturance and limit-setting (Dacey & Packer, 1992; Quindlen, 2005); the importance of play, and building student independence beginning at the youngest grades (Associated Press, 2006; Ginsburg & Jablow, 2006); and the high-profile college admissions and matriculation processes (Coburn, 2003; Johnson & Schelhaus-Miller, 2000; Johnson & Shanley, 2000; Kantrowitz & Tyre, 2006; Lombardi, 2006; Mahoney, 2004; Massa, 2006; Raskin, 2006 Savage, 2003). Other books include specific advice for schools and teachers to help parents in their challenging roles of mothering and fathering (Evans, 2004; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; McEwan, 2005).

C. Literature on Teacher and Administrator Tenures and Professional Stress

In addition to the literature on parental anxiety and behavior, there are widely publicized studies, articles, and books on increasing turnover, shorter professional tenures, and growing burnout among teachers and educational leaders, including principals and superintendents. Historical studies have documented how the superintendent position has evolved (Cuban, 1976; Davis, 1998; Yee & Cuban, 1996), and reports of increased turnover, especially in urban districts, demand public attention (Buchanan, 2004; Kelly, 1997). As with their private-sector counterparts, the CEOs and presidents of corporations, shorter professional tenures among school leaders have
become the norm (Cuban, 1976; Ryssdal, 2006). Additional studies have documented how leadership turnover impedes school reform (Olson, 1995), and others have attempted to prove that such stress is endemic in independent schools where head of school tenures have declined markedly over the past decades (Carden, 1999; Littieford, 1999; National Association of Independent Schools [NAIS], 2006). Indeed, both at the secondary and university levels, the term *leadership blues* has become part of the everyday vernacular (March & Weiner, 1999; Foster, 2006).

Recent research on teacher and administrator stress tends to highlight national standards (NCLB accountability, e.g.) and the lack of support from one’s superiors (principal to teacher, superintendent to principal) as the key factors in diminished job satisfaction and teacher retention (Lee, 2005; Mabry 2005; MetLife, 2006; Wheelis, 2005). Additionally, job security and workload concerns are noted as sources of administrative stress and depression (Carr, 1994; Davis, 1997). Notably absent, however, are any specific discussions of parent behavior or parent-school interaction as primary stressors on educational leaders, which is a primary goal of this study (*cf.* Thompson, 1996, *quoted above*, which includes no references). In short, the anecdotal evidence supports the thesis that overparenting creates significant stress on teachers and administrators, ultimately leading to decreased job satisfaction and shorter professional tenures. This study aims to provide social scientific evidence to bolster this anecdotal data.

There are, to be sure, isolated references to parent behavior as sources of administrative stress, including the perception that educational leaders "spend too much time dealing with complaining parents" (Public Agenda, 2003; parent-school relations
was not the focus of the study). Additionally, a recent doctoral study on factors attracting or deterring teachers from aspiring to administrative positions includes *special interest group pressure* as a negative stimulus, but does not name parents directly (Tobin, 2005). The professional stress research to date focuses largely on motivating factors influencing decisions whether to pursue a career as a school principal, and another recent doctoral thesis, citing Herzberg’s motivation-growth factors, makes no mention of parents, either positively or negatively (Battle, 2005). Other scholarship in this field has focused on superintendent burnout and stress (Bluhm, 1998, with no mention of parents); administrative stress and conflict (Blumberg, 1985, not mentioning parents specifically); principal stress, with a major factor identified as “working with staff” (Welmers, 2005, again with no mention of parents). Even a study of spousal perspectives on administrative stress, while noting “politics and community pressure,” does not identify parents *per se* (Bruckner, 1998).

The general literature on psychological stress dates to Sclye’s seminal 1956 work, *The Stress of Life*, in which the researcher distinguished healthy eustress from harmful stress, and at least one study has documented the effect of harmful stress on decreased cognitive functioning and decision-making on school leaders (McEwan & Sapolsky, 1995). Many universities, including Seton Hall, have assigned general books on organizational and corporate leadership, with emphases on leadership pressures, for their doctoral candidates in Educational Leadership (Covey, 1989/1990; Heifetz, 1994).
D. Goal of the study

It is the goal of this study to fill a gap in the literature as it relates to parent-school interactions and school professional stress. It is an effort to flesh out, in a methodical, social scientific process, qualitative and quantitative data regarding the nature and effects of overparenting and its impact on school leaders. While the extant research indicates that both overparenting behavior and administrator stress are social problems that demand public attention, it is the goal of this study to establish the relationship between these two phenomena.
CHAPTER III

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Overview

This is a qualitative phenomenological study of aggressive parent behavior and its effects on suburban public school administrators. Using in-depth interviews from six experienced suburban school administrators, the study set out to answer the following research questions:

Research Questions

A. What are the effects of aggressive overparenting behavior on administrators and teachers of suburban K-12 schools?

B. In what contexts (academic, athletic, social-behavioral) are the most difficult parent-school interactions likely to occur?
1. *How much time* are suburban school administrators spending responding to or dealing with aggressive parent situations?

2. *What is the qualitative nature* of such interactions, in terms of respect and consideration shown to school professionals?

3. *How do administrators and teachers respond* to such interactions, in terms of job satisfaction (staff morale), in-school decision making (rule enforcement), and career planning (administrative tenure, teacher desire/ambition to enter administration)?

4. *How does the stress experienced from parent-school interactions compare with other stressors* in schools (accountability standards, administrator-faculty relations, student discipline in the absence of parent intervention, curricular challenges, recruitment of staff, school and safety, etc.)?

5. *How many parents* (what percentage of school population) come under the category of *difficult or aggressive*, and are those parents consistently so, or is it largely contextual? In other words, when parents behave in ways that intimidate, alienate, and influence school professionals in ways that are not in the best interest of all our children (i.e., the greatest good for the greatest number), do they do so consistently, or intermittently?

6. *How do school professionals see such parenting behavior affecting their students*, i.e., the children of the overparents, in terms of maturity, self-sufficiency, respectful behavior (civility) and resiliency?
Qualitative Research Sample

The qualitative research sample was comprised of six suburban public school principals and senior administrators from a representative range of schools in the greater Mid-Atlantic region (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania). Each of the participants was an experienced administrator who has worked in K-12 schools, and had significant contact with parents, for at least 10 years prior to the interviews.

Qualitative Research and Interview Methods

The goals and research questions of the study recommended a qualitative, grounded theory-phenomenological approach. The phenomenon under study was the unprecedented overparenting behavior, by a generation of school parents, which is causing new levels of stress among school professionals.

According to Patton (2002), this methodological approach asks the foundational question: “What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?” (p. 104) In this study, the phenomena are parent behavior and school professional stress, while the group of people are school administrators currently encountering such behavior and experiencing the resultant stress. Van Manen (1990) explains: “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9, quoted in Patton, p. 104). In order for a qualitative study to reflect the “lived experience” of such people, Patton notes:
“This requires methodologically, carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (p. 104).

Qualitative in-depth interviews were chosen as the means for the study, as Patton discusses: “To gather such data, one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, they have ‘lived experience’ as opposed to second-hand experience” (p. 104). In-depth interview transcripts were analyzed in terms of narrative analysis as well, as Merriam (1998) explains: “At the heart of narrative analysis is ‘the ways human experience the world’” (p. 157, quoting Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

The goal of this study was to understand the phenomena of overparenting and school stress in ways that are generalizable to a larger group of parents and school professionals. As Franklin (2002) writes: “...the purpose of research in this environment is to explore the essence of one with the hope with the hope of understanding the reality of many” (p. 67, citing Glesne (1999)). Likewise, Franklin describes the interpretivist belief of qualitative research as “...a process of bracketing individual stories into more homogeneous categories to find commonality in the lived experience” (p. 67, citing Ozmon & Carver, 1995; Rennie, 1999). As explained by Glaser & Strauss (2006), “…the discovery of theory from data – systematically obtained and analyzed in social research … which we call grounded theory … works – provides us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications.” (p. 1) Moreover, notes Eichelberger (1989): “A phenomenologist assumes a commonality in those human experiences and
must use rigorously the method of bracketing to search for those commonalities” (p. 6, quoted in Patton, p. 107).

A form of phenomenological inquiry is heuristic inquiry, which, according to Patton, “brings to the fore the personal experience and insights of the researcher” (p. 107). In this study, the researcher was a working school administrator with “personal experience with and intense interest in the phenomenon” based on the researcher’s own “intense human experiences” with overparenting behavior and school professional stress - both his own and that of his colleagues and teachers who work with him (p. 107). Douglass and Moustakas explain the primary differences between standard phenomenological inquiry and the heuristic variety: “Heuristics emphasized connectedness and relationship [of the researcher to his subjects and to the topics of research], while phenomenology encourages more detachment in analyzing an experience” (p. 43, quoted in Patton, p. 108).

In order to prevent a researcher from simply reconfirming his preconceptions, however, certain inductive rules apply to the qualitative heuristics method. According to Kleinig & Witte (2000), four rules apply, including: “The research person should be open to new concepts and change his or her preconceptions if the data are not in agreement with them,” and “The topic of research … may change during the research process. It is only fully known after being successfully explored” (quoted in Patton, p. 109). In this study, the researcher was exposed to stories, analyses, and ways of thinking that were not previously known to him, which in turn led to a richer, more sophisticated understanding of the research issues at hand.
Interview questions were structured to elicit data corresponding to the research and subsidiary questions. First, Question 1 asked about “memorable parent-school interactions.” Question 2 queried participants about time spent “responding to or dealing with” aggressive parents. Question 3 inquired as to whether parent pressure “influence[d] decision making” in the participant’s school. Question 4 polled participants whether parents “cause stress” among teachers and administrators in the participant’s own school. Question 5 attempted to compare parent-induced stress with other forms of administrative or organizational stress. Questions 6 asked participants to analyze “in what contexts” stressful parent-school relations were likely to occur. Question 7 attempted to quantify the number of aggressive parents in a school, and whether such parents consistently acted in aggressive ways (consistency of aggression). Finally, Question 8 was a catch-all “anything to add” inquiry at the end of the interview.

The researcher interviewed and recorded each administrator in his or her office, via telephone, for between 20 and 40 minutes, between December 13, 2007 and December 21, 2007. Prepared semi-structured interview questions were provided in advance to the participants, and were used to guide the interviews, which were recorded verbatim and transcribed in full by the researcher. (Verbatim interview questions and transcripts are attached in Appendix A.) The researcher then read and reread each transcript several times, and narrative answers were analyzed and coded for patterns and themes according to the research questions.
Data Analysis

In terms of data analysis, the researcher followed the guidance of Franklin that, “The goal of [the] process from coding to theoretical framework is to continue merging codes into themes and themes into patterns until a theoretical framework emerges to explain the observed phenomenon” (p. 71). Once data was transcribed, coded and analyzed, it was the researcher’s goal that “…patterns…will find the commonality in each individual story and convert the tale of one into the reality of many.” (Franklin, p. 71)

Summary

This chapter presented the methodological practices and assumptions underlying the qualitative, in-depth interview protocols used in the research on aggressive parent behavior and its impact on school administrators. Following the structure defined by the research and subsidiary questions, the interviews yielded data from a representative sample of school administrators that was analyzed and coded for themes and patterns common to the various participant educators. The next chapter presents findings from the research, organized by research and interview questions, and attempts to articulate patterns and themes present in the data that was uncovered through the qualitative research performed in December, 2007.
CHAPTER IV
RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of aggressive parent behavior on school administrators. This chapter reports the results of the in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with principals and other senior administrators from six suburban K-12 schools.

The research questions guiding the study were:

A. *What are the effects* of aggressive overparenting behavior on administrators and teachers of suburban K-12 schools?

B. *In what contexts* (academic, athletic, social-behavioral) are the most difficult parent-school interactions likely to occur?

The subsidiary questions were:

1. *How much time* are suburban school administrators spending responding to or dealing with aggressive parent situations?

2. *What is the qualitative nature* of such interactions, in terms of respect and consideration shown to school professionals?
3. *How do administrators and teachers respond* to such interactions, in terms of job satisfaction (staff morale), in-school decision making (rule enforcement), and career planning (administrative tenure, teacher desire/ambition to enter administration)?

4. *How does the stress experienced from parent-school interactions compare with other stressors* in schools (accountability standards, administrator-faculty relations, student discipline in the absence of parent intervention, curricular challenges, recruitment of staff, school and safety, etc.)?

5. *How many parents* (what percentage of school population) come under the category of *difficult or aggressive*, and are those parents consistently so, or is it largely contextual? In other words, when parents behave in ways that intimidate, alienate, and influence school professionals in ways that are not in the best interest of all our children (i.e., the greatest good for the greatest number), do they do so consistently, or intermittently?

6. *How do school professionals see such parenting behavior affecting their students*, i.e., the children of the overparents, in terms of maturity, self-sufficiency, respectful behavior (civility) and resiliency?

*Interview Questions*

Interview questions were organized to yield research data aligned to the research and subsidiary questions. Question 1 asked about “memorable parent-school interactions.” Question 2 queried participants about time spent “responding to or dealing
with" aggressive parents. Question 3 inquired as to whether parent pressure "influence[d]" decision making" in the participant's school. Question 4 polled participants whether parents "cause stress" among teachers and administrators in the participant's own school. Question 5 attempted to compare parent-induced stress with other forms of administrative or organizational stress. Question 6 asked participants to analyze "in what contexts" stressful parent-school relations were likely to occur. Question 7 attempted to quantify the number of aggressive parents in a school, and whether such parents consistently acted in aggressive ways (consistency of aggression). Finally, Question 8 was a catch-all "anything to add" inquiry at the end of the interview.

*Question 1 – Memorable Parent-School Interactions*

Question 1 asked participants about "memorable parent-school interactions."
The verbatim interview question read, "Can you describe one or two memorable parent-school interactions for me?"

Participant responses to Question 1 included many stories and anecdotes, which set the tone for each interview, and the stage for subsequent questions. (The bracketed abbreviation "P1" represents the fact that Participant #1 contributed that data, "P2" stands for Participant #2, and so forth.)

In response to this open-ended opening question, participants described:

- Being barraged by multiple parent-initiated communications, in particular emails (P1, P2) and phone calls (P4), regarding their children's school activities, classes, and progress. Such behavior was described as and "bordering on harassment" (P1, P2),
and one administrator termed it “a mistake” to trust the parent [in terms of judgment, self-control, and respect for the administrator’s time] with the administrator’s home email, even during the summer (P1)

- Parents who “jump,” “attack,” “push,” “complain,” and “angst” over their children’s school experiences (P1)
- Parents who “push” their children to pursue academic or other opportunities, which the children would not pursue on their own (P1)
- Parents who are more motivated than their children for the child’s academic or other success (P1)
- Parents who “blame[d] the school for the child’s failings” (P1) and for things that were largely or wholly within a student’s or parent’s responsibility (P1)
- Parents who are “eager to get [a student] into a top college” (P1)
- Parents who asked administrators to do dishonest or unethical things (to “pretend” to be the student in sending an email application to a science competition, e.g.) in order to advance the perceived needs of their children (P1)
- Parents who were “in desperation,” and “in panic” about their children’s school success and meeting their responsibilities (P1)
- Parents who carefully and strategically choose issues about which to "attack[] ... the school." Such parents were termed "dive bombers" by one participant (P1)
- Being “pushed” by parents to take “action that really they or their children should have taken for themselves” (P1)
- "Eager" parents who take control of projects that "the child should take for himself"
  One participant termed such parent activity as "enabling behavior" that "disabled her
  son in the process" (P1)
- "Vocal" parents who expect or demand special treatment for their children, and who
  act "as our boss" vis a vis the school professionals (P1)
- Parents who perseverate long after an alleged harm has been experienced by their
  children In one case, a mother was still complaining about a high school grade of 86
  even after her child had graduated and been accepted to a highly selective university.
  (P1)
- School professionals who respond to (i.e., cope with) aggressive parents by
  "laugh[ing] about it" (P1)
- Parents that "everyone in the district knows," and "has really been involved with,"
  and for whom "it's a constant, daily issue of walking the line with" (P2)
- Parents who are "out of control" or "teetering on the edge of getting out of control"
  (P2)
- Parents who hire outside consultants to advocate for their children (P2)
- Parents who withhold information from the school because they "don't want the
  teachers" to let the child know that she needs extra help (P2)
- Parents who don't want the teacher to know the parent called about his or her class,
  because of fear of "retribution against their child" (P2)
- A parent for whom a district-wide civility policy was implemented, barring the parent
  from their children's school campuses (P2)
• Parents who threatened or filed lawsuits against teachers and the district for not meeting (unreasonable) parent expectations (P1, P2)

• A parent who “made regular appearances in teachers’ classrooms without signing in [thus violating a school policy]” and who would “confront teachers about things in front of the students in the class” (P2)

• Parents who were “very aggressive” and “harassing” to school professionals (P2)

• Parents who enabled, and encouraged, their children to call and text-message them, during school hours (and even in the middle of class) using their cell phones, in clear violation of school rules (P2)

• A parent who tried to stop a principal from using the bathroom after a long commute because of the parent’s perceived urgency about a school matter (P3)

• Parents who questioned an administrator’s factual conclusions and tried to defend their child, even after their child had fully admitted to his mistake (in this case, rock throwing) (P3)

• Parents who described their child as “devastated” by her middle school Math placement, since she was not in the top group (P4)

• The same parents, who asked the principal to “break the news” (what would have seemed to be the parents’ responsibility) to their child about her Math placement, in front of an entire roomful of people at a school-wide welcome-back-to-school social event. Such behavior (abdicating their responsibility to communicate to their child; putting the child in a position to be publicly embarrassed) was described by the administrator as “unbelievable” and “stunning.” The parents were called “relentless” as well. (P4)
• Parents who defended and advocated for their middle school son’s wholly inappropriate student council campaign posters, which advocated heavy alcohol consumption and were clearly against school rules, not to mention illegal (P4)

• Parents who “scream, “rant,” “rave,” and “pound [their] fists on the desk” One such parent was described as “totally out of control” (P4)

• Parents who were not supportive of reasonable school disciplinary actions (P5, regarding middle school knife sellers)

• Parents who “called [administrators] liars” in the process of disciplinary investigations (P5)

• Parents who “threatened” school administrators “several times … to the point where [one principal] had to file a police report for my protection” (P5)

• Parents who were “so protective” and “so defensive” of their children that one administrator was “really afraid she was coming to get me, to hurt me” (P5)

• Parents who complained about school photo schedules, because their children “might still be perspiring” from PE class when the photos were taken. (P5)

• Parents who reviewed their children’s grading and scores with a “fine toothed comb” in order to challenge a teacher’s grades – and even compared a teacher’s grading practices, including partial credit, across school years, with a prior student’s (the child’s older sibling) grades (P6)

• Parents who accused teachers of lying to them – saying “we don’t believe you” [with respect to their children’s grades] in front of a Math supervisor – and accusing the teacher of keeping “another set of [grade] books” (P6)
Other “memorable” stories found their way into responses to other, later questions, not necessarily responding directly to that later question, including:

- A parent who was “incredibly upset” about her daughter’s not following through on an optional enrichment project suggested by an administrator, and blaming the administrator (P1)
- A parent who used a discussion about a specific teacher incident (vocal music teacher calling on students to sing) to discuss/question/challenge an entire school music curriculum (P2)
- A parent who “faxed her son’s homework in every day because he was irresponsible. And then she told the teacher not to give the kid anything but an A.” (P3)
- Parents demanding that a public school district to pay for their child’s private schooling because of an alleged (false) school bullying problem (P5)
- Parents having “an over-inflated view of their child’s ability,” which was noted as a common reason for aggressive parent behavior, whether in the context of academic placement or athletics (P6)
- “In many cases,” reported one participant, “the student can advocate for him or herself,” yet it is still the parent doing the pushing (P2)

*Patterns and Themes*

To the first interview question, regarding memorable parent-school interactions, the responses were universally negative, and many included colorful, active imagery and
high emotion. Thus, the use of active verbs such as *jump, attack, push, bully, harass, angst, scream, rant,* and *rave* were common descriptors of aggressive parent behavior in relation to school professionals. Other colorful phrases included P1’s characterization of parents who strategically call school administrators to exert pressure on them as “dive bombers.”

Frequency of parent-initiated communication, in the case of aggressive parents, was a common theme. In addition to descriptions of sometimes-lengthy phone conversations and in-person contacts, several participant responses mentioned Email (often multiple times a day) as a common form of communication from aggressive parents, perhaps because such a medium allows parents to “vent” without needing to make direct face-to-face or telephone contact with the school administrator. Email seems to empower parents to say things – both in terms of content and frequency – that they might not otherwise say (in person or on the phone). A similar, technology-based case involved a student who would text-message her mother from her cell phone in the classroom, and then the mother would arrive at the school to confront the teacher or administrator.

The issue of parents who present as more interested and motivated than their own children, in terms of the child’s success, was likewise a common theme. This phenomenon of parents “wanting it more than the kids” (whether in terms of grades, honors, athletic successes, or college admissions) was in keeping with this researcher’s consistent professional experience over the past twenty years.

The theme of “blaming the school” also surfaced multiple times. Moreover, the theme of parent and/or student inability to take action “for themselves” was a common
one. In a case involving a 17-year-old boy missing a science project deadline, the idea that the school was therefore "enabling" the family to continue its own pattern of dysfunction – blaming others, pushing others to do that which they ought to be doing themselves – was described as "diabl[ing]" the child. Such a theme goes to the issue of student resilience and self-sufficiency, which, although beyond the scope of this study, is an important issue for educators to consider.

Related to this was the theme of pressures felt by parents and students regarding academic and athletic success. Whether parents were portrayed as pushy or panicky, this theme pervaded the qualitative interviews. Many of these descriptions related to parental anxieties about college admissions and future success of their children.

Parents who pressured school administrators into doing things that were contrary to their professional judgment, or worse (such as in cases of parents advocating dishonest or unethical action) was a repeated and disturbing theme in the interviews as well.

The status or profile of the parent, within the school community, was also a common feature of the responses. In several cases, a parent was either perceived as "vocal," "boss[y]," or as a "difficult parent" who would "rally other parents," or one who was perceived as having other power (as a board member or active volunteer, e.g.). Participant #2's description of "everyone in the district knows this parent" was fairly common in that regard.

Observations of parents being "out of control," "very aggressive," "harassing," or "perseverat[ing]" about issues relating to their children were also common, going to administrators' generalized impressions of aggressive parents in their schools. In one
case, an angry parent actually attempted to stop a long-commuting elementary school principal from going to the bathroom before speaking with the parent about a concern.

The theme of hiring outside or additional consultants and tutors to help their children succeed was a pattern in some responses.

Parents who did not want teachers to directly communicate with their children about issues, or who told administrators that they did not want their children’s teachers to know they had called (for fear of “retribution”), was also a theme in several responses, both to this question and to later ones. Both were explained as ways of protecting their children by withholding information from them or their teachers.

Continuing the theme of parent aggression, several participants mentioned litigation (lawsuits and threats of lawsuits) as one of the ways parents pressure schools.

Defending children, even those who were clearly in the wrong, was a theme that emerged. While several participants described incidents in which parents were not supportive of school discipline, in other cases parents questioned administrators’ integrity and further accused them of lying or otherwise being dishonest in an attempt to punish a student.

Over-protective parents who over-estimated their children’s abilities or vulnerabilities, or who fueled such insecurities (as in the case of the “devastated” middle school Math student) emerged as a theme. Parental response to this, in one case, involved pressuring an administrator into “break[ing] the news” to a young girl in an extremely public setting. “Unbelievable,” “stunning,” and “relentless” were the adjectives chosen by an administrator to capture the essence of those parents.
Some extreme themes emerged when participants described parents who "threatened ... several times" to the point where an administrator had to call on the police "for my protection."

The tendency for some parents to question or challenge minor issues (the school photo schedule) was a theme that lent perspective to the issue of over-reaction among aggressive parents. One parent who was "incredibly upset" about an optional enrichment project (about which she blamed the school) was emblematic of parents whose anxieties were out of proportion to the issue at hand. Likewise, parent scrutiny of minor details (math partial credit, compared from year to year) enriched the researcher's understanding of the over-reacting parent.

The theme of "customer/servant mentality" emerged as participants spoke of the parent who "essentially exercised her authority as our boss -- as a taxpayer." And parents who persevere -- such as the mother whose daughter had already graduated from the school and was enrolled at a prestigious college and was "still angling about a grade" -- described some parents as well.

Parents who physically show up on school campuses, and act out in various ways, was a theme in the responses to this question. There was also mention of policy measures that schools have taken, as compared to a pure case-by-case approach to school issues and parent concerns. Thus, the Math placement policy described by P1, the team teaching "all or nothing" practice of P5, and the civility policy described by P2 all described school- or district-wide initiatives designed to avoid difficult case-by-case issues with parents. The threat of or actual filing of lawsuits prompted multiple mentions (P1, P2) as well.
School professional responses to aggressive parent behavior were likewise a theme in Question 1 responses. In addition to the stress experienced by administrators (covered in depth, below), there were also several responses that described humorous reactions to aggressive parents, including an administrator whose colleagues coped with aggressive parents by “laugh[ing] about it.”

Question 2 - Time Spent Responding to or Dealing with Aggressive Parents

Question 2 queried participants about time spent responding to or dealing with parents. The exact question was, “How much of your time would you say you spend responding to or dealing with parent-initiated contacts regarding issues that you and your staff do not consider to be a problem, or that magnify the importance - and emotion - of an issue beyond what you would say was reasonable?”

Participant responses to Question 2 featured additional parent-school scenarios bearing on the time-consuming nature of aggressive parent interactions with school professionals. Participant responses to this question included the following:

- One participant reported spending fifty percent (50%) of parent-school administrative time dealing with “aggressive, difficult parents” (P1)
- This participant also explained the need for non-direct time (i.e., not dealing directly with the parent) during which school professionals meet “in house” to deal with aggressive, difficult parents, including “follow up” conversations with “lots of other school administrators,” and noting that individual parent-school interactions “can balloon into a substantial time commitment” (P1)
• The amount of time spent on parent-school relations depends on the seriousness of the issue and the perceived threat from the parent. One participant spoke of the fear of lawsuits, which “take[] up an enormous amount of time” (P1), and of distinguishing between a parent interactions that is a “flesh wound” versus a “stab in the back.” Given the “litigious mindset among some parents,” school officials seem “so vulnerable” in such cases, and “every conversation has to be discussed with other school administrators.” Such “conversations are enormously time consuming” (P1)

• Another participant estimated that twenty-five percent (25%) of total administrative time – about two hours per day - is spent “responding to parent-initiated contacts.” (P2)

• In one instance, a simple parent call “wound up lasting half an hour” because the parent used the time to discuss other issues with the administrator (P2)

• According to one administrator, twenty-five percent (25%) of parent calls raise “no issue,” i.e., they are simple, informational requests. Seventy-five percent (75%) of calls raise an issue (i.e., something that warrants some discussion), but “so many of them are overblown, blown way out of proportion,” and thus demand significant amounts of time (P2)

• Fifty percent (50%) of one administrator’s total time was spent with “parent issues” (P3)

• Parents formed an ad hoc committee to address the issue of student recess time at the elementary level. This demanded a great deal of administrative time, since the parents and teachers were on opposing sides of the issue (P3)
• Parents were described as possessing "a lot of power" vis a vis the school. A former administrator-participant explained that such parents were "pretty affluent and well educated," and "extremely demanding" (P3)

• It took "time to explain" school policies, priorities, etc. to some parents, who were described as "sometimes ... unreasonable." And while "most parents, if you took the time to explain things to them, could be reasonable," the administrator added, "But of course, you also had your crazies." (P3)

• It took "[t]ime and effort" to get parents to understand school behavioral policies. In one case, "incensed" parents who had been opposed to a ban on skateboarding at school (an activity that represented "so much of [their son's] persona") "went from roaring lions to mild lambs" when they witnessed their own child almost hurting himself badly on his own skateboard in front of the school (P3)

• One participant responded that, during the school year (as opposed to scheduling-intensive and class/teacher assignment-focused summers) she spent "only about 45 minutes to an hour a week" dealing "directly with parents." And while that school's guidance counselor spent more time dealing directly with parents, the administrator noted that, "Indirectly, I probably deal with those types of [aggressive parent] situations a couple of [2-3] hours a week" (P4)

• During the summer, the same administrator reported spending "at least an hour or two a day" (P4)

• Forty-five percent (45%) of an administrator's total time was reported to have been spent on parent-initiated contacts. The administrator characterized this as "a huge percentage" of total work time. (P5)
• An example of a very time-consuming administrative task was researching a parent’s request for the public school district to pay for a student’s private schooling. Beginning with the parent “blind cop[ying] the superintendent,” the administrator noted, “It took hours just to deal with that one email, which is pretty common here.” Noting that she also had to “deal with people in [her] building,” including the guidance counselor and child study team, in addition to the parents themselves, she noted that “it just took a really, really long time.” (P5)

• One participant reported that parent-initiated issues required six to eight (6-8) hours per week, and noted that such time typically reflected “two or three really aggressive parents in a week” (P6)

• This same administrator noted that “a single conversation over a single issue can last forty (40) minutes or more, and that’s just when you – and other school personnel – are in the meeting or on the phone with the parents directly. And then there’s all the clean-up work, the internal meetings. So, by trying to be polite, to show them some courtesy, it can really drag on. So, it probably amounts to 2 to 3 hours a week, per parent, which is like 6 to 8 hours, depending on how many parents attack the school in a given week” (P6)

• This administrator also noted that “[a]bout 90% of the time, we try to back the teacher,” but, when dealing with a problematic teacher, “you have to spend even more time working on the teacher” (P6)

• Responding to Question 3 (parental decision-making influence), one participant noted that “an enormous, inordinate amount of time was spent by all of the
administrators in our building” to “market away” parent concerns about a new school initiative (P2)

- Cases in which parents organized themselves into groups were described as a parent network, lobby, camp, mob or posse by one participant, paired with the verbs rally, organize, storm, and demand. Such tactics were described as particularly “exhausting and time consuming” (P1)

- In response to Question 3, one participant noted: “I think there are bigger issues at the high school, where the stakes are higher – with sports teams and GPA and college and things like that. But, even at middle school, it still takes away too much time from things that are much more worthwhile. We just spend too much time explaining ourselves and marketing what we do, to the parents. And most of us really resent it, since we all feel that this is not what we’re supposed to be doing, which is teaching kids – and not dealing with this whole consumer culture [i.e, the notion of parents as customers, and schools as retailers]. (P2)

- Beyond the actual, direct parent encounters (by phone, Email or in person), there is significant additional “internal time” spent consulting with colleagues, drafting emails, and planning further conversations and strategies, including lawsuit avoidance. (P 1)
Patterns and Themes

Responses to “how much time?” ranged from 2-3 hours per week to 45-50% of an administrator’s total time. Additionally, one participant reported that 50% of parent-school administrative time was spent with aggressive parents.

Individual cases were highlighted, in order to illustrate, for example, how a call about a relatively simple issue “wound up lasting half an hour” -- what this researcher might call the “while I’ve got you on the phone” opportunity.

On the theme of time, one participant broke down parent-initiated contacts into those that raised “no issue” (25%), compared to those that did (75%).

Other participants volunteered that cases involving groups of parents (the ad hoc committee, e.g.) required more administrator time, as did cases in which parent interests and teacher interests were not aligned (the elementary school recess case). This was a pervasive theme of the interview data.

On the theme of teacher participation, several participants noted that, in cases where the teacher is wholly or partially at fault, administrative time-consumption increases, since the principal must deal with both parents and the teacher.

The theme of explaining school policies to parents was deemed time-consuming, and one participant noted that administrative time demands by parents vary throughout the year (i.e., with the summer being the most intense).

Several administrators offered insight to the phenomenon of a small number of parents occupying a disproportionately large amount of administrative time. This theme, which is also dealt with in Question 7 (as well as in Chapter 5), was an important,
common thread throughout data collection, one that raises moral issues as well as organizational ones.

The need to involve multiple school professionals – principals, assistant principals, guidance counselors, superintendents – sounded a common theme throughout the interviews. One participant characterized the distinction between speaking or meeting directly with parents as “direct time,” while those hours spent discussing and strategizing how best to placate parents was called “indirect time.” In many cases, indirect time exceeded direct time.

As a rule, time spent correlated positively with the perceived seriousness of the student issue (private school placement more demanding that the school photo schedule, e.g.) as well as the potential parent threat for failure to address an issue (the threatened lawsuit).

The general theme of parent-school communications occupying “too much time” was shared by all six participants. Their primary concern about time, quite appropriately, was that families who did not really deserve or need extra attention were draining important school resources away from other, pressing issues. Again, this raises the moral issue of resources being shared fairly among all members of a community, and underscores most participants’ desire to spend more time on educational issues, and less as “customer service” representatives to an overly demanding parent population.
Question 3 - Parental Influence on School Decision Making

Question 3 inquired as to whether parent pressure influenced decision making in schools. The interview question asked was, "Do you think parent pressure influences decision-making in your school? Can you recall specific cases?"

Participant responses to Question 3 described additional situations in which aggressive parents had attempted to influence, and in some cases did influence, school policies or programs. Participant responses to this question included the following:

- One participant responded, "Yes, parents absolutely influence the direction of the school" (P1)
- In a response regarding parental pressure over Math placement, this administrator recalled "decision making to avoid the wrath of the parents" as follows:
  - "We recently tested 720 first through sixth graders with a university-based mathematics test that was designed to cull the top three percent – in terms of mathematical ability. So basically, it was a special program for gifted students. When we got the results back, we had a sticky situation. Some of the kids – this was the second year of the program, last year was its pilot year – some of the kids who were in the program last year did not "test in" again this year. So we had a situation. So what we did, if a mother was highly vocal, was take the student in for the second year. Otherwise, we all knew we’d have a posse on our hands. We’d have parents demanding to see all the test scores. Mom wouldn’t swallow it too easily if, say, Joey, who only scored a 19 when the cutoff was 24, who"
was in the program the year before, was not chosen for the second year. So we took the ‘Joeys’ back into the program, ahead of kids who had higher scores, in order to avoid the wrath of the parents. We agonized over this decision. We even hid the fact from unsuspecting parents, whose kids did not get in, but who qualified, by not sharing this with them, since there were only a limited number of spaces. The decision was made politically, because we did not want those parents who would demand a second year – or to see all the scores - to blow up in our faces. And especially in a content area like Math. (P1)

- Another participant responded, “Absolutely.” Describing the creation of a new “house” in her school, the administrator explained:

  o “…an enormous, inordinate amount of time was spent by all of the administrators in our building – the principal, assistant principals, guidance counselors - brainstorming and planning the best way to roll this out to our parents. A lot of what we do is try to anticipate parent concerns and criticism, and we work very hard to avoid that. We try to “market away” those concerns. Sometimes, in extreme circumstances, we’ll just can[cel] things, you know, if we think parents won’t support them, if we anticipate too much “push back.” And this is even in cases where we, as educators, think something is educationally sound.

- One administrator described how an educational science trip was “kyboshed” by lack of parent support (P2)
• The same administrator described decision-making pressure regarding “Math Wars” in the district as follows:
  
  o “All of it generated from parents. Our district Math supervisor has left the district, for a few different reasons. But one of them is that she got a threat from a parent, over the summer, and she got to the point where she felt she really couldn’t work here any longer. So we actually changed some of our Math sequence, not because we thought it was better for kids, but to eliminate the parent complaints at the end of the year. The parent complaints got so bad that it was something we just didn’t want to deal with. (P2)

• Participant 3 responded, “Absolutely.” In describing a decision to not rehire a teacher, the administrator stated:
  
  o “Normally, I would give a teacher another year, you know, because teachers can become great even after a bad first year. But the parents in that class actually signed a petition against him, and I had to deal with the scenario that, if I gave him another chance, none of the next year’s parents would want their kids in his class. So, the parent pressure had a lot to do with my political decision not to rehire him. (P3)

• Likewise, Participant 4 responded, “Absolutely.” In describing the decision to close school due to weather and power outages, the response pointed to parents, and other board members, “overlooking the[] professional judgment” of the school while responding to the anxieties of children (P4)
• Participant 5 responded, “Yes, it does.” In describing two cases in which teachers were dismissed, the phrases “a lot of parent complaints” and parents “who were adamant” stuck out as reasons for these school decisions (P5)

• In discussing the school’s decision to eliminate an end-of-year celebration, the fact that “the parents got into a real uproar” was the reason cited for continuing a school event that was scheduled for discontinuation (P5)

• In one of the more memorable examples of parental pressure influencing school decision making, an administrator recounted the district “Math Wars” in detail:
  ○ “Parents are more hands-off with our major, curricular issues, except for the “Math Wars” we’ve been having, where we are debating which kind of math curriculum to adopt – reform math or traditional math. And our district has also launched a blog, for parents to get more information and have more of a stake in their children’s education. So some parents have written hurtful, personal attacks – of our teachers and administrators – on the blog. They even posted the home address and phone number of the person who was supposed to be our new superintendent, and encouraged people to write to and call him at home, to complain about the reform math program, and to encourage him to not take the job here. So, the man felt so harassed that he actually didn’t take the job here, and we’re stuck with an interim superintendent.” (P5)

• Participant 6 responded, “‘It would be naïve to say ‘No.’” Citing the challenge, at the high school level, of placing students in Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes, the administrator spoke about parents who “offer extenuating
circumstances, like all four grandparents died in one year” (causing some to question the honesty of those parents), and of parents who “just beg” administrators to allow their children in certain courses. On the other hand, the administrator mentions teachers who “might tell you that we always cave” [to parental pressure] (P6)

Patterns and Themes

In the most consistent responses of the entire study, four of the six recipients respond identically to the question, “Do you think parent pressure influences decision-making in your school?” While all six participants responded affirmatively, Participants 1, 2, 3, and 4 all chose the word “Absolutely” to describe the relationship between parent pressure and school decision-making.

The theme of decision-making to curry favor with or to “avoid the wrath of parents” was repeated by several participants. This finding, in concert with parent-centered decision-making “even in cases where [an alternative] is educationally sound” was also repeated throughout the six interviews. Indeed, among the more disturbing findings of this research was the recognition that parent-induced tension obscures good decision making and colors administrative perspectives. For example, the themes of administrators being “blinded by parent pressure,” and always “girding for battle,” caused school professionals to miss important issues, and in effect neglect or punish students because of that defensiveness.
An apt analog to this may be in the medical profession, where non-patient issues can cloud a doctor’s or nurse’s professional judgment. In that field, anything from sleep deprivation brought on by long hours in the hospital, to medical insurance battles, to malpractice lawsuits from overly aggressive patients and their attorneys, may obscure a professional’s efficacy with an individual patient, thus causing unnecessary suffering.

The pattern of continuing programs that were not considered “in the best interest of students” (such as an end of year celebration), or discontinuing, cancelling or not adopting programs that would have been (field trip, new Math programs) were all too common. Such cases of educational judgment being “trumped” by parent pressure included an administrator’s abandonment of a best practice (giving a first-year teacher another chance).

Another theme, discussed above, was the ongoing tension between faculty and parents, whether illustrated by the snow day cancellation story or the decision to place children in Honors or AP courses over the recommendation of the faculty.

One of the unintentional, and unfortunate, results of giving aggressive parents what they want, it seems, is the tendency to overlook the needs or rights of those less vocal, less aggressive families. In the case of P1’s math program – where qualified students were not admitted but less qualified children of vocal parents (the “Joeys”) were – such a phenomenon was evident. Indeed, less deserving, more aggressive families receiving preferential treatment and benefits is a theme in the research data, and violates our fairness ideals, thus causing stress among morally minded administrators.
**Question 4 - Parents as a Cause of Stress within Schools**

Question 4 polled participants as to whether parent interactions caused stress within their schools. The precise question asked was, “Would you say that parent-school interactions cause stress within your organization, i.e., among your teachers and administrators?”

Participant responses to Question 4 described additional scenarios in which aggressive parents had caused stress among school professionals. One of the goals of this question was to gauge the effect of such stress on the job satisfaction of current administrators, and on the administrative potential of future administrators (current teachers).

Participant responses to this question included the following:

- Participant 1 responded “Yes” to this question, noting that “The teachers have the protection of the administrators…” (P1)

- This administrator added: “Teachers know that administrators spend a lot of time dealing with parents, and they expect us to protect them from difficult parents. Most of this stress is on the administrators – not the teachers - when something goes wrong, or when the parent cannot protect his child from the realities of everyday school life.” (P1)

- Touching on the issue of career decision-making, one participant noted, “Most teachers do not want to go into administration because they see the kind of stress – from parent interaction – that administrators have to deal with. Over the last fifteen years, increasingly, there is less and less support on an adult-to-adult level,
between the parent and the teacher or administrator. It’s not a mutually
supportive situation so much anymore. It is a rare situation when a parent will say
to me, “I’m really glad about the way we handled that issue with my child. We
need to stand together as adults.” That’s a very rare occurrence. Generally
speaking, the parents’ loyalty has shifted from an adult-to-adult relationship -
where we are working together to help a young person - to a relationship that is
highly defensive of children, and where the parents see themselves as the child’s
advocate against the school. I think this shift is highly evident among
administrators today. I have a colleague who recently commented to me that she
is redefining her role as public servant with an emphasis on the word “servant.”
(P1)

- This administrator added: “There is a sense of administrators being worn down by
parents. I’m not sure we’re going to quit our jobs, but there really is a tendency to
even miss certain issues – legitimate issues - brought by parents, because we are
so used to being attacked by them that we sometimes miss things, because we are
in such a defensive stance. (P1)

- Participant 2 responded “Absolutely,” noting that the level of stress was “less so
for teachers” (P2)

- Teachers are viewed as protected by administrators, but parents may also request
that an administrator not inform the teacher about an issue, as in the following:
“There’s a real fear about going to the teachers, in terms of retribution against
their child. They’ll call with a complaint about a class, but say, ‘Don’t let the
teacher know it was me who called, because I’m afraid he’ll be angry with my child.” (P2)

- Bearing on the issue of teacher willingness to pursue administrative positions, one participant noted: “Teachers are aware of how much time we administrators spend dealing with parents. They say to me all the time, ‘I don’t envy you. I would never want your job.’ They think that the worst part of our job is dealing with parents.” (P2)

- On the issue of differences among the various levels of schooling, one administrator said: “I think there are bigger issues at the high school, where the stakes are higher — with sports teams and GPA and college and things like that.” (P2)

- Participant 3 responded: “Absolutely. Absolutely.” The former administrator noted: “In my case, I left administration because of the stress, brought on mostly by things involving parents.” (P3)
  - The following story was described: “When I was a principal, at one point, my car actually got vandalized by parents, because they were unhappy with a decision I had made. That was a very traumatic experience. I actually had to seek counseling for it. It was my first elementary school principalship. We had decided not to renew a non-tenured teacher who had a lot of political clout in the town. She was well connected. She had lived in the town for twenty-five years. She had taught parochial school, taught piano lessons. And she found out about our decision, and she rallied a group of parents. And they picketed my school and they
vandalized my car. They key-scratched both sides of my new car. And it was horrible. It was like $1,500 worth of damage. And after that, I parked my car in the police station lot next to the school.” (P3)

- Participant 4 responded (touching on several issues): “Yes, definitely. The teachers feel a lot of stress from parents, a lot of pressure to give kids good grades, to cater to parents’ desires. There is a lot of pressure in our district for kids to get into a good college. The drug and alcohol issue in our high school, I think a lot of that is coming from the stress parents put on the kids that way. The parents are stressing out their kids.” (P4)

- In terms of attracting teachers to administration, one administrator noted: “My teachers often tell me that they could never deal with the kind of pressure I face as an administrator, with all the parent pressures” (P4)

- Participant 5 responded: “Absolutely. For the most part, we try to protect our teachers, unless the teacher is clearly wrong. But the parent complaints and criticisms, they definitely cause stress all around – on the teacher, on the administration, even on the kids. I mean, the kids know when their parents are on a tear, are angry with the school and the teachers.” (P5)

- The administrator added: “In terms of teachers shooting for administrative jobs, my teachers tell me all the time that they would never want my job, that they don’t know how I do it. I think they perceive my job as really stressful, that dealing with parents is stressful. (P5)

- In terms of administrator job satisfaction and continued tenure, the administrator added: “And I do think that this is a tough career choice. Every day, almost, I ask
myself, 'How much longer can I keep doing this, keep going back into the lion’s
den with these people [the parents]?'" (P5)

- Participant 6’s response, in full, reads as follows:
  - “Certainly. For many teachers, the mere presence of parents causes stress.
    They are intimidated by parents. As soon as they hear a parent has called,
    they think the worst. They think there’s going to be conflict. That it’s
    going to be confrontational. And one of our mantras, as administrators,
    when parents call us, is ‘Have you spoken to the teacher? Because there
    are always two sides to a story, and maybe the story your child has told
    you isn’t the whole story.’ Teachers can even be hypersensitive to a
    legitimate parent question. I would say that most parent questions are
    legitimate. But teachers who feel they’ve been burned before are pretty
    wary of parents. If they’ve had even a few negative interactions with
    certain, hyper-aggressive parents, that experience colors their perceptions
    of other parents. Remember, these teachers went into the profession to
    deal with kids, not their parents. So when a parent calls, they often get
    anxious, defensive, insecure. Especially if they’ve had experience with an
    administrator not backing them up with a parent.” (P6)

*Patterns and Themes*

A clear theme in participant responses was the perception that the stress on
administrators is greater than that experienced by teachers.
As to the key issue of nurturing future administrators, teacher awareness of how much time administrators spent dealing with parent issues was acknowledged several times. This theme set the stage for the question of whether teachers aspired to, or even considered, going into administration. Indications in this area were consistent, as illustrated by the common response: “I don’t envy you. I would never want your job.”

The themes of parent defensiveness of their children (even when the child is clearly wrong) and the adversarial relationship between parents and schools were also consistent.

Parents “wearing down” administrators, and obscuring their professional judgment (discussed above) were common themes as well in response to this question.

As to the question of current administrator job satisfaction, the results were split. While one former administrator (whose car was keyed and sought counseling) admitted to having “left administration because of the stress, brought on mostly by things involving parents,” other administrators, thankfully, were not so affected. Although one participant referred to the parents as “the lion’s den,” others seemed more slightly optimistic and resilient.

While one participant observed that certain teachers can be “hypersensitive,” this was not a pattern, i.e., in most cases, participants concurred that certain generally-recognizable parent behavior qualifies as aggressive and should be minimized.

The theme of parents inflicting stress on their own children, and not just on the school, was noted several times. The comment that parents cause “stress all around” was emblematic of this pattern.
In short, this section suggests real implications in terms of keeping good teachers in the profession – our “end of day” most important fear and concern – and that even a few “bad egg” parents can skew the teachers’ experiences

Question 5 – Comparison of Parent-Induced Stress to Other Administrative Stressors

Question 5 attempted to compare parent-induced stress with other administrative stressors. The exact wording of the interview question was, “How does the stress experienced from parent-school interactions compare with other stressors - accountability, administrator-faculty relations, student discipline in the absence of parent intervention, curricular challenges, recruitment of staff, for example?”

Participant responses to Question 5 described additional situations in which aggressive parents caused stress among school professionals, and isolated, compared and ranked parent-induced stress against other school stressors. Participant responses to this question included the following:

- Participant 1 captured many of the important issues in aggressive parent-school relations by stating:
  - “All these stressors, taken together, make the school administrator’s job very stressful, more stressful than most outsiders would realize. But looking just at parent-school relations, this is a special stressor because it’s very personal. I honestly believe that people go into education to help kids, for a better future for our country, and not for the money or anything
else. So these kinds of over-aggressive parents really do a lot of damage to that ideal. They may be a small number, but they act like a pin-prick that bursts our balloon. You may be having a really great day, helping a lot of kids, and then you get a phone call from an angry parent. We take it more personally than we do, for example, test scores. These kinds of communications are directed at us, and the parents are not objectifying the problem, but rather, blaming us. It’s qualitatively different from other stressors. It would be stressful enough if a parent called us, in a very cooperative and appreciative mode, saying, ‘Let’s get together to discuss my child,’ because we are dealing with real children, with real issues — academic, social, behavioral, etc.” (P1)

• The administrator adds: “But to add to this stress the enmity and anger shown by the really aggressive parents – like the one who yelled at me that her child had ‘never gotten an 86 before’ – that really pushes us over the edge. When a parent says, ‘You better do something about it,’ that’s a direct attack. And you never know, when you pick up the phone, that that’s what’s going to be coming out of the other end of the receiver. So you’ve gotta take that breath, and turn it around, and objectify the call, identify the real issue, settle yourself down, settle the parent down, and choose your words carefully, so you won’t be misunderstood – or possibly sued. Then you are in a high stress conversation with a person who is not a partner in the conversation, but an adversary.” (P1)
• Participant 2 gave a straightforward answer, ranking parent relations as the second most aggravating stressor: “just below accountability issues, like test scores and curriculum” (P2)

• Participant 3 ranked parents as “the major cause of stress,” with the following elaboration:
  o “I think that, with all the other areas you mention, you have some control over them. You can manage your curriculum, adjust to board policies, but parents are unpredictable. And parents have a lot of power. The old saying, that the parents get together at ShopRite or in the parking lot, and talk about school, that can get very stressful. You can control some of the other causes of stress, but parents you really can’t. I’d say in these high socio-economic districts, parents are the major cause of stress for administrators and teachers. They are a major, major factor.” (P3)

• Participant 4 identified “a small but vocal group of parents” as the source of “a good deal of stress” (P4)

• This administrator also noted that it was “kind of hard to separate some of this. Parents are often a part of curricular and teacher issues.” (P4)

• Participant 5 also ranked parents as the #2 stressor, right behind “my teachers, with trying to get them to help make changes in our school” (P5)

• Of the dual stressors of teachers and parents, the administrator added: “And you know, we all went into education to work with kids, but we spend most of our lives, it seems, dealing with their teachers and parents. But thank God for the kids! If it weren’t for them, I don’t think I could really do this job.”
Patterns and Themes

Participant rankings of “parent-school relations as stressor” narrowly ranged from a “high” of first to a “low” of second. While first-place stressors included accountability and teacher relations, the consistently high ranking of parents-as-stressors was a powerful finding of the research.

The theme of parent-school relations being “qualitatively different” from other stressors was consistent throughout the research. From the personal or “attacking” nature of parent interactions, to the unpredictability (“lack of control”) accompanying such interactions, such patterns weighed heavily on participants’ perceptions of stress caused by aggressive parents. Signaling an important shift in parent-school relations over time was the observation that today’s aggressive parent is typically “not a partner in the conversation, but an adversary.”

Previewing the research findings of Question 7 (quantification of aggressive parents), participant responses to this question included the insight, “They may be a small number, but they act like a pin-prick that bursts our balloon.”

In several cases, participants bemoaned the general stress inflicted by aggressive parents, and yearned for more time to pursue other, core educational goals. Sounding a theme echoed by many, the following sentiment memorably summarized a common theme, namely, “[W]e all went into education to work with kids, but we spend most of our lives, it seems, dealing with their teachers and parents. But thank God for the kids! If it weren’t for them, I don’t think I could really do this job.”
Question 6 - Contexts in which Stressful Parent-School Interactions Occur

Question 6 asked participants to analyze in what contexts stressful parent-school interactions tended to take place. The specific wording of the interview question was, “In what contexts - academic, behavioral - do the most stressful parent-school interactions occur? In other words, what kind of cases do you see in which school and parent opinions and values don’t mesh, or where parents over-advocate, bully, or over-protect their children from reasonable consequences and other school decisions?”

While Question 6 asked participants to analyze and contextualize aggressive parent behavior, responses to this question continued to describe additional scenarios in which aggressive parents had caused stress among school professionals. Moreover, participant answers to other questions yielded information that were responsive to the question of context, albeit indirectly. Each response and story of aggressive parent-school interactions provided a context in which that response or story was framed.

Participant responses to this question, either direct or indirect, included the following:

- Participant 1, who earlier (in response to question 1 about “memorable parent-school interactions”) had described specific cases of parent aggression in relation to academic issues, explained that context can be determined by one’s role in the organization, stating: “I’m not the school psychologist, who may deal with the more social and emotional, but I do interface with many principals, and so I see it as mostly being about academic issues: placement, grades, college admissions.” (P1)
• The administrator continued: “It’s also because these parents are in the context of their society – which is upper middle class, suburban, ambitious – and they are terrified that their kids are not going to make it, that they’re not going to survive in the future. And so the parents are operating with a certain amount of fear and terror about what’s going on, and that insecurity and fear is being projected onto the schools. I work a lot with high school kids, who say things like, ‘If I don’t get into Yale, I won’t be able to live with myself.’ These are kids who have very high expectations, and their parents have very high expectations.” (P1)

• The common issue of teacher assignment and effectiveness was exemplified by this response:
  
  o “Here’s a telling story: One of our kindergarten teachers was out for two weeks – her father was dying – and the substitute was adequate but not as good as the regular teacher. So this group of parents got together – remember, this is kindergarten! – and met at different people’s homes, and came up with a list of demands. Because they were worried about two weeks in which a kindergarten teacher was out, that their children were going to fall behind in the curriculum. And one mother, who was the self-appointed representative of the group, came into school for a meeting with me and the principal. The mother has a Ph.D., but is not working – not exactly keeping her own career on track - and she said to me, right after our meeting, ‘Can this school district get my kid into Harvard?’ The kid is in kindergarten” (P1)
- Participant 2 identified issues of student discipline and academics, noting: “I’d say the [most stressful context] is the issue over student discipline and the consequences we hand out. Parents are always arguing that the consequences are too harsh, or, if their child was the victim, that the punishment wasn’t strict enough. The second would be the parents’ concerns about their children’s academic success – about grading, and about class placement, especially for our 8th graders as they are heading toward the high school.” (P2)

- Participant 3 identified teacher/class assignments (i.e., parents concerned about which class their child would be in) as a context for stressful parent-school communications, noting, “…parents would request having or not having a particular teacher all the time.” (P3)

- P3 also noted, “I think you find academic issues more in the higher grades, in high school and even middle school.”

- Participant 4, who had previously described Math placement and snow closings as contexts involving stressful aggressive parent-school interactions, identified athletics as well: “Athletics. Big time, especially as they get into the high school. With playing time, they try to dictate to the coach who to play, what strategies to use.” (P4)

- P4 also introduced another context, stating: “The other area is when kids have problems socially, like with bullying. Some parents are convinced it’s a big issue. I’m not. In all honesty, a lot of the parents are bullies. They’re just so aggressive. They interfere. If their child comes home and says, ‘Suzie made fun of me,’ then they come into school ‘loaded for bear,’ wanting us to do something about Suzie.
And they really don’t allow their kids to solve problems on their own. They’re constantly taking up the charge for their own child, whether it be with a teacher or another child. And they’re very aggressive in that. They’re going to make sure that their child is treated the way they, the parents, think they ought to be treated.” (P4)

- Participant 5 spoke about social issues, in particular “bullying and social exclusion” issues with peers, and also about “the perceived slight that a child may have felt when a teacher wasn’t absolutely kind or gentle with him or her,” noting, “And that really grates on some parents.” (P5)

- P5 also introduced a parent-school context that had nothing to do directly or at all with student-school interactions, describing a holiday faculty breakfast sponsored by a group of parents:
  - “And parents can just be ridiculous, to the point where it’s not even about their child but about them. This week, for example, we had a group of parents who, every year, provide a holiday breakfast for the faculty, and they’ve always done it in the teachers’ room. But the problem is, our teachers’ room is really small, and only a few teachers can fit into it at a time. So, we asked them if we could do it in the cafeteria, so we could all eat together. And they gave me such a hard time! Even though the breakfast was supposed to be for us, they wanted to decorate the teachers’ room like they always did. I had to go back and forth with them like six times before the thing was resolved. It was ridiculous.” (P5)
Participant 6 (responding to Question 5, but responsive to Question 6) spoke about academic placement and discipline, particularly at the high school level:

- "AP and Honors placements are probably the most stressful. Discipline actions can also cause a lot of stress. It's pretty rare for a parent to say, 'Thank you for disciplining our child, for teaching him a lesson.' More times than not, the parent becomes the advocate for the child. And we think they're not acting like good parents. For example, when it comes to alcohol or drugs, they'll say to us, 'Yeah, but we all drank and smoked pot when we were teenagers. What's so bad with this?' And we need to remind them that it's illegal, as well as dangerous. And we say, 'We're not trying to crucify your child, but there are consequences for doing wrong.' We don't have a whole lot of discipline issues, but when our debate team went on a trip to Boston, and got caught drinking, we're going to react to that." (P6)

- P6 also described athletic issues, in particular the issue of playing time. "There are parents, of course, who are convinced that their kid doesn't get more playing time because the coach doesn't like the kid, but most coaches – and I've been a coach myself – they just want to play the best athlete. A kid would really have to be despicable for a coach not to play him or her, if they're the best athlete." (P6)

- Participant 6 added: "But it's still pretty rare that a parent will thank you for a decision you've made that the child or parents don't like. They're not going to say, "Thanks for teaching my kid this lesson." They will downplay the seriousness of an incident, like student drinking, or they'll all of a sudden start
pushing for honors courses, because they're nervous their kid won't get into a good college.” (P6)

- Finally, P6 told the story of a student parking space controversy (P6, in response to Question 8)

Patterns and Themes

As noted above, themes of school-parent context were included in virtually all-prior responses, from academic issues to disciplinary consequences. Several participants identified these contexts as the most common, stressful school-related contexts, while others included athletics and social issues such as peer relations and bullying.

Participant responses to Question 6, more than any other question, were informed by an individual administrator’s role within the organization. Thus, responses which began with “I’m not the school psychologist [or any other role]” were typical limiting factors in yielding consistent data regarding stressful parent-school interaction contexts.

The common theme of high school grades (or Honors placement, or all-day elementary school teachers) “mattering more” was likewise a consistent feature of the responses to Question 6, stressing the importance of grade level in participant responses. Thus, the common issue of teacher assignment in the lower grades may become an issue of Honors placement in the upper grades, although we have no reason to believe that bad teachers will be any more tolerated at non-elementary levels. (That being said, the memorable story of the kindergarten mother inquiring about Harvard may convince us that things really are as bad as they can get.)
While Question 6 was designed to elicit data about school contexts, several participants provided "parent context" that helped to frame the theme of parental anxiety (i.e., the stresses felt by parents) and their aggressive behavior towards schools.

Notably, the theme of aggressive parents also being thankless (as in, "They’re not going to say, ‘Thanks for teaching my kid this lesson’") was described by several participants.

Question 7 – Quantifying Aggressive Parent Behavior in a School

Question 7 attempted to quantify the number of aggressive parents in a school setting, and to determine whether parent inclusion in such a group was consistent or episodic. Specifically, the interview question asked, "How many parents would you say come under the category of difficult or aggressive, along the lines we have been discussing? What percentage of your school population would that be? Are these parents consistently ‘in’ or ‘out’ of that group, or do they move from difficult to cooperative?"

Participant responses to Question 7 attempted to quantify the number and percentage of aggressive parents who cause stress within schools, as well as to gain understanding as to the consistency of such behavior (consistency or constancy of aggression). Participant responses to this question included the following:

- Participant 1 estimated thirty percent (30%) of parents are aggressive, as discussed throughout the interview (P1)

- In terms of consistency of aggression, P1 reported: "They are pretty consistent. They don’t go, for example, from being dive bombers to being
lambs. Once they become that kind of aggressive parent, that’s pretty much who they are. I deal with parents from K-12, so when I’m dealing with really aggressive first grade parents, I often say to myself that I hope I retire before their kids reach high school- because I can hardly take them now.” (P1)

- P1’s earlier statement, in response to Question 5, also bears on the issue of quantification: “They may be a small number, but they act like a pin-prick that bursts our balloon.” (P1)

- Participant 2 responded in a way that combined several themes: number of parents, amount of time spent, consistency of aggression, and qualitative description of aggressive parent behavior: “Really aggressive parents, I would say, make up only about one or two percent of our parent body. But they can take up as much as thirty percent of our time spent on parent concerns. There are also times when, depending on the specific issue, a normally non-aggressive parent can become an aggressive one. For instance, in this Math case we spoke about [the “Math Wars”], you can have normal, rational parents, and this issue has caused them to really take out the daggers. So, when it comes to a single issue, they – these normal, nice folks - become nasty and aggressive people. In terms of what percentage of parents “ever-ever” fall into this category, I would say maybe six percent.” (P2)

- Participant 3 estimated “ten to twenty percent,” adding, “You know how it is: the 80/20 rule. Twenty percent of the parents cause 80 percent of the problems, the stress.” (P3)
- Speaking to the consistency of aggression, the administrator elaborated: “And the twenty percent pretty much stayed the same. You know, they always had to find something to complain about...something [they were] unhappy about, and always let us know it.” (P3)

- Sounding a familiar theme about high SES parents, the response continued: “And then there are the parents that go directly to the Board of Ed, bypassing the principal and the superintendent. Particularly in the high socio-economic districts.” (P3)

- Participant 4 responded ten percent (10%). In terms of consistency, the administrator replied, “And if they are difficult, they’re just difficult.” (P4)

- P4 had also responded (in Question 5 about stress, but relevant to this question), “I would say that a good deal of stress comes from the parents, from the board and a small but vocal group of parents.” (P4)

- Participant 5 distinguished between aggressive and difficult parents: “Aggressive, I’d say about 60%. We have a very aggressive parent body. And they can be sweet as pie about it. But they want what they want. As far as difficult, that’s a much smaller percentage, maybe 5 or 10%.” (P5)

- Noting the consistency of aggression, the administrator remarked, “And they are repeatedly difficult, incident after incident, year after year.” (P5)

- Participant 6 estimated a relatively small 2 or 3 percent, noting that the number of “the really hard-core difficult ones...may even be lower than that, maybe 1 or 2 percent.” In describing that notable minority, the administrator added: “They’re the ones that should never have had kids.” (P6)
• Distinguishing the “hard-core difficult [parents]” from those that are only episodically aggressive, the administrator noted, “...the others are just sometimes the mother bears who, when they see their kid has been hurt, rush to the scene, but as soon as the crisis is over, they return to being normal people.” (P6)

Patterns and Themes

Reponses to this question, asking participants to estimate what percentage of their parent body qualified as aggressive, ranged from 1% to 30%.

Given the diversity of responses regarding parent numbers, a strong common theme was the notion that a small number of aggressive parents can have a large impact on a school, as illustrated by the response that “really aggressive parents...make up only about one or two percent of our parent body. But they can take up as much as thirty percent of our time spent on parent concerns.” (There was, similarly, the response citing the 80/20 rule.)

Most participants saw aggressive parents as behaving in a consistent pattern (“if they are difficult, they’re just difficult”), although one administrator noted that parents can “return to normal” once an incident involving her child had passed.
Question 8 – Additional Thoughts and Stories

Question 8 was a general wrap-up query at the end of the interview designed to measure if the participant had additional thoughts or stories to add to his or her qualitative data. The question specifically asked was, “Is there anything I haven’t asked that you would like to add?”

Participant responses to Question 8 described additional scenarios in which aggressive parents had caused stress among school professionals. Question 8 served as a similar, general question like Question 1 (“memorable parent-school interactions”), though this question presumably was influenced by the balance of the qualitative interview.

Participant responses to this question included the following:

- Participant 2 elaborated on SES differences, having worked in various schools, noting parents to be “less of an issue in this [suburban] setting. And it’s kind of the reverse of what many people would think.” (P2)

- This participant also noted that parents tended to be less intrusive in grades 6-8 since “middle school [is] where you see the least parent involvement.” (P2)

- Participant 3, the former administrator who resigned largely as a result of parent-imposed stress, concluded the interview noting: “Thinking of all these stories again, I’m glad I’m not a principal anymore. I don’t ever want to go back into that fire.” (P3)

- Participant 4, in contrast to Participant 2 (on the issue of SES), concluded by stating “In affluent districts, it’s all about wanting to get their kid every
advantage, and so they become very competitive, and they’ll do anything to make sure their kid gets ahead. And that creates an interesting dynamic in a school that’s really not supposed to be about that kind of competition and selfishness.” (P4)

- Participant 6 concluded hopefully and lending perspective to the small number of parents that inflict so much school stress by stating: “Despite all of the examples we’ve talked about, I still think the cup is half full. Most parents, whether their kid gets a bad grade or gets cut from a team, I see the mother bear instinct come forth, because they really love their kids, which is a good thing. Most of the time, they just need to vent. It’s only in the cases where certain parents are out of control a lot of the time. They kind of ruin it for everyone – the school, the other parents, and most of all, their own kids.” (P6)

Patterns and Themes

Interview responses continued to yield information about aggressive parent behaviorimpeding student resilience.

Themes of a “small but vocal group of parents” inflicting a great deal of stress were repeated, as were mixed descriptions of parent behavior tied to SES and the level of schooling (both areas are recommended for further study in Chapter V).

Some participants used Question 8 as an opportunity to deliver a “parting shot” to their interview, such as the former principal who stated, “I don’t ever want to go back into that fire.”
In a wise and hopeful conclusion, one participant summed up many of the important themes of the study, stating, "I still think the cup is half full. Most parents... just need to vent. It's only in the cases where certain parents are out of control a lot of the time. They kind of ruin it for everyone – the school, the other parents, and most of all, their own kids."

**Summary**

Chapter IV presented data from the in-depth qualitative interviews on a range of questions, from frequency and quality of communication, to estimates of administrator time and aggressive parent population.

The next chapter presents conclusions and recommendations for further research, as well as potential future programs to help schools confront the phenomenon of overparenting in our schools.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The research on aggressive parent behavior and schools yielded a great deal of new data, nearly all of it in alignment with the literature to date, as limited as that existing data has been in a social scientific context.

Perhaps the insights of a veteran educator would best characterize the state of our schools today. Nick Schloeder, who taught in Baltimore schools from 1958 to 1999, described the shift in parent-school relations thusly:

Thirty years ago, the students were afraid of their parents, and the parents were afraid of the school - of the school judging them and their kids against fixed standards. Today, the parents are afraid of the students, and the school is afraid of the parents - of what they might do to the school, from withdrawing their personal and financial support, to suing the school in court.

N. Schloeder (personal communication, October 13, 2007)
Alignment with Current Literature

The findings of this research study confirmed many of the themes present in the current literature, as outlined in Chapter II. In that earlier chapter’s section on Parent Behavior, for example, many of the patterns found in the literature were echoed in this study’s findings.

The theme of parental over-control was evident in the many stories of parents advocating for their children in a variety of school contexts – from academic, to athletic, to social, to behavioral and disciplinary cases. The general theme of pressures on parents, schools, and students in the college admissions process, likewise, were evident throughout the interviews. From the social status anxieties felt by parents, to the pressures placed on schools and students, this theme was consistent in the data in this study. As in the literature, there was specific mention of grades, class placements, teacher assignments, athletics, student discipline, and other contexts.

Another area in which the literature and the research findings aligned was in participants’ descriptions of parents lacking maturity (recall participants’ inability to trust parents with information) and wanting for self-control (i.e., Akst’s self-control deficit). Throughout the interviews, moreover, were descriptions of school parents presenting as bullies and aggressors (recall the Time Magazine cover story), and as customers and consumers who looked upon schools as service providers, rather than partners in educating and raising their children. In a few instances, such customer service mentality was taken to an extreme level, as in the case where the parent did not allow the principal to use the bathroom. In such cases, it was noted, “parents just lose all perspective.”
Particular school-based data correlated directly with topics covered in the literature, from athletics advocacy, to the use (abuse) of cell phones in schools, to the direct violation of school rules by parents. Finally, concerns over lawsuits and other litigation were present in both the literature and in the data from the study.

In terms of the Chapter II section, *Sources of Overparenting Behavior*, the data revealed consistent themes as well. As predicted, parental anxiety over the future, particularly in terms of economics and social status, was a prominent feature of the data from the study. As in the literature, the theme of socio-economic status (SES) was prominent in the study data. On a related issue, the failure of parents to set limits, and hold children responsible for their own behavior (leading to the goal of ultimately responsible behavior), sounded a common theme in both the literature and the data.

On the issue of *Administrator Tenure and Stress*, as surveyed in Chapter II, the data revealed consistent information, both on the question of teacher ambition towards administration (they are not, for the most part, inclined to it), and on the shared sense by administrators that they are spending "just too much time" on parent-school issues and relations.

Given that the literature to date has been minimal on the question of aggressive parent-school relations and stress, the study seems to have filled a gap in the social science knowledge on this important topic.
Conclusions

Several administrators offered insight to the phenomenon of a small number of parents demanding, using, and occupying a disproportionately large amount of administrative time. This theme was an important, common thread throughout data collection, one that raises moral (re. the common good) as well as organizational issues.

Additionally, teachers were consistently viewed as largely protected by administrators, and therefore less susceptible to aggressive parent behavior. Although teachers were not, as a rule, seen as occupying the “front line” in dealing with parents (cf. the Time Magazine cover), they did seem cognizant enough of stressful administrator-parent relations to comment, in a number of contexts, that they “wouldn’t want [the administrator’s] job.”

Similarly, parents were portrayed as requesting that an administrator not inform their child’s teacher about an issue, either as a way of protecting their child from recognizing her own disability, or more often, as a way of avoiding any negative consequences of “reporting a teacher.” This theme directly echoed Thompson’s description in Chapter I: “There’s a real fear about going to the teachers, in terms of retribution against their child. They’ll call with a complaint about a class, but say, “Don’t let the teacher know it was me who called, because I’m afraid he’ll be angry with my child.”

There were multiple mentions of school- or district-wide policy measures that schools have taken regarding parents, in contrast to a pure case-by-case approach to school issues and parent concerns. (See below discussion about Maryland’s AIMS parent
In such situations, Thompson’s insight that teachers are essentially non-confrontational nurturers, while many parents are in jobs that prize advocacy and aggression (law, business), suggested a culture clash supported by the data.

Where schools and parents tend to occupy a collision course, it seems, falls into two main categories or contexts:

1. Cases in which a parent sees problems with a school policy, or a student treatment or placement issue, but where the school (with its hundreds of students to whom it is responsible) does not. Such parent-initiated contact where the school does not perceive a problem occupies a great deal of administrator time and energy, which could otherwise be spent on more pressing educational issues, from curriculum, to staff development, to giving more attention to the neediest students in a school. From the silly case of the school photos and the potentially perspiring middle schooler, to the daily barrage of emails, phone calls and in-person visits advocating special treatment for individual students (almost always contradicting a school’s informed professional judgment (IPJ)), this is the most time-consuming strain on today’s administrators, one that truly drains time from a school culture’s most important priorities, and simply drains a school culture.

2. Cases in which the school sees behavior or academic performance as a problem, but where parents disagree, either advocating for or defending their child. This is the classic case of the parent pushing for Honors placement for her average child (“He will rise to the occasion”), or of
parents (like defense attorneys) doing everything they can to deflect responsibility for their children’s antisocial or dishonest behavior. Such is the classic case of the off-campus drinking party (“How do you know my daughter was drinking?”), or any situation involving bullying, athletics, academic integrity, or the like (“Can you prove it?” and “Doesn’t the school/the other team/the coach/society bear some responsibility for this terrible thing that happened to [note passive voice] my child?”)

Recommendations for Action

In November, 2002, The Association of Independent Maryland Schools (AIMS) — representing more than 100 independent, college preparatory schools in Maryland and the District of Columbia — published and distributed its Statement on Parents and Independent Schools. With headings including such topics as “Parents and the Board of Trustees,” “Parents and the Faculty and Administration,” and “The Parents Association and the School,” the Parent Statement included the following provisions:

“To be successful, every independent school needs and expects the cooperation of its parents, who must understand and embrace the school’s mission, share its core values, and fully support its curriculum, faculty and staff. When joined by a common set of beliefs and purposes, the independent school and its parents form a powerful team with far-reaching positive effects on children and the entire school community.
“Working together, parents and school professionals exert a strong influence on children to become better educated; they also help them to mature by modeling adult working relationships based upon civility, honesty, and respect.

“In most independent schools, decision-making authority at the highest level resides in a volunteer Board of Trustees whose membership often includes current parents. The Board of Trustees does not intervene in the daily affairs of the school, such as curriculum development and hiring, evaluating, or firing of faculty and staff. Instead, the Board focuses on three areas critical to the success of any independent school: it selects, evaluates, and supports the Head of School, to whom it delegates authority to manage the school; it develops broad institutional policies that guide the Head in running the school; and it is accountable for the financial well-being of the school.

“AIMS encourages parents who are interested in high-level decision making to stay informed about the work of the Board of Trustees by reading school publications, talking to the Head of School, and attending appropriate meetings.

“Parents with concerns about the school or with decisions made by the administration or faculty are encouraged to inquire about and follow the school’s review process, but they should not expect the Board of Trustees to act as an appeals board.

“Parents play an essential and positive role in the life of an independent school. Not only are parents advocates for their children, they also support the faculty and administration through extensive volunteer activities and events.
“The relationship between parents and the faculty and administration is formally governed by the school’s written enrollment contract and handbook, in which its procedures are spelled out. When parents choose to enroll their child in an independent school, they agree to subscribe to its mission, follow its rules, and abide by its decisions. However, most teachers and administrators would agree that trust and mutual respect are the most essential underpinnings of effective working relationships with parents.

“AIMS encourages parents to work productively with teachers and administrators by staying informed about their child and important events in the life of the school. Thoughtful questions and suggestions should be welcomed by the school.

“Parents best support a school climate of trust and respect by communicating concerns openly and constructively to the teacher or administrator closest to the problem. Efforts by parents to lobby other parents will be viewed by the school as counterproductive.

“While parents may not agree with every decision by the school, in most cases, the parent and school will find enough common ground to continue a mutually respectful relationship. In the extreme case, however, an impasse may be so severe that the parent cannot remain a constructive member of the community. In such cases, both the parent and the school should consider whether another school would be a better match for the family.

“The Parents Association in an independent school provides a vital and much-appreciated service to school leadership and the entire school
community...The Parents Association neither participates in policy-making by the school, nor functions as a lobbying group.”

Touching on the most important issues of parent-school relations (many of them relating directly to the research and literature themes outlined in Chapter II), the Maryland Parent Statement includes directives to “embrace the school mission, share its core values, and fully support its curriculum, faculty and staff.” Moreover, it implores parents to behave in a “mature” way, “by modeling adult working relationships based upon civility, honesty, and respect.” The Statement, in short, educates parents on the limits of their power, and indeed, that of the power of the Board of Trustees, specifically noting that areas “such as curriculum development and hiring, evaluating, or firing of faculty and staff” are beyond their purview. Parents are further instructed to “follow the school’s review process,” to “support the faculty and administration” (and not just “advocate[] for their children”), and to “subscribe to [the school’s] mission, follow its rules, and abide by its decisions.”

Notably, the Statement concludes (right before discussing the issue of parent-school “separation”) with the following strong statement: “Parents best support a school climate of trust and respect by communicating concerns openly and constructively to the teacher or administrator closest to the problem. Efforts by parents to lobby other parents will be viewed by the school as counterproductive.”

The Maryland Parents Statement is one example of a thoughtful, wide-ranging and proactive attempt to define parent-school relationships, clarify expectations, and educate school parents about their appropriate role in their children’s schools. It does not
advocate a return to the “old days” of no transparency, and no parent access to schools – just as contemporary medical practices do not promote blind adherence to all doctors’ orders – but makes clear that there must be a reasonable balance between parents’ access to schools, and their influence on school decision making.

Additionally, the findings of this study suggest other means for defining and developing educational programs for parents as well as for school professionals. The researcher envisions workshops for parents (“How to Communicate with your Children’s School – and Advocate in a Way You Can Be Heard”) as well as professional development sessions for administrators and teachers alike (“How to Communicate with Parents – And Make Them a Partner with You in Raising their Children”). An additional area for possible practice would be to explore the question, “How do we stop this small percentage of aggressive, helicoptering parents in their tracks?” Are there things schools and districts alone can do, or can other parents (whose children inhabit the same schools, and also have needs) put pressure on them, rendering such aggressive, offensive overparenting conduct taboo?

As suggested by the research and other literature, the most promising solution to this educational leadership challenge would be a multi-faceted approach including parent education, staff development, and perhaps (budgets allowing) the creation of a parent liaison in each district or school to address the demands of the most anxious, demanding parents in the school community.
Recommendations for Further Research

As noted in Chapter I, this study included several delimitations, which may provide ripe areas for further research. Based on the findings of this study, further research seems to be warranted into the following areas:

1. The issue of differences among the various levels of schooling (elementary grades vs. middle school vs. high school). As several administrators in the study noted, “there are bigger issues at the high school.” A study dedicated to defining the differences in parent-school relations at the different school levels would prove professionally useful. The issue of how effectively students of different ages can be expected to advocate for themselves (absent parental involvement) would be a fruitful subsidiary question for investigation.

2. A comparative study of parent-school relations with respect to SES. In perhaps one of the most fruitful areas for future research, this study recommends future research on the issue of SES-based parent advocacy, and its effects on those schools that serve different socio-economic populations. Several participants observed sometimes-contradictory phenomena regarding this issue. Recall Participant 4 concluding, “In affluent districts, it’s all about wanting to get their kid every advantage, and so they become very competitive, and they’ll do anything to make sure their kid gets ahead.” Likewise, Participant 3, who stated, “I’d say in these high socio-economic districts, parents are the major cause of stress for
administrators and teachers. They are a major, major factor.” By contrast, Participant 2 elaborated on SES differences, having worked in various schools, noting parents to be “less of an issue in this [suburban] setting. And it’s kind of the reverse of what many people would think.”

3. In perhaps a closely related study, the issue of overparenting by a specific subset of the population. There was a general sense of frustration by administrators with the attempted micromanagement of schools – by parent “would be” or “wannabe” educators. This phenomenon may be tied to the notion that certain parents (largely mothers), regardless of SES, were unemployed or underemployed, and that their energies were therefore channeled towards their children and the institutions with which they came into contact – schools, doctors, camps, etc. Identification of those subsets of parents who are likely to cause the greatest amounts of stress would be helpful in developing programs or positions to deal with such overparents (see Practical Solutions, above).

4. The stressful effects of overparenting on children. As noted throughout this study, the important issue of effect on children was perhaps the greatest delimitation of the research. At the end of the day, when an administrator or teacher gets over a particularly difficult parent-school interaction, and is able to return to his or her own family, consider the plight of the poor child, for whom that aggressive, difficult, overbearing parent is the child’s only adult in his or her personal life. This area is particularly ripe, it would seem, for research into one participant’s observation that, “The drug and
alcohol issue in our high school, I think a lot of that is coming from the stress parents put on their kids that way. The parents are stressing out their kids.” While this research focused on parent stress on the schools, and somewhat on school stress on the students, the issue of parent stress on students is strongly suggested as a key area for future research.

5. A study of different geographic or political regions. While this study focused primarily on affluent, mid-Atlantic suburban school administrators, research on southern, western, or other regions may yield significantly different data. Such research may be linked to an SES study, as recommended in #2, above.

6. Study of non-public, parochial or independent schools. This could be accomplished either as a stand-alone endeavor (a study of a particular type of school), or as a comparative study (public vs. non-public). This may provide a fascinating look into some perceived differences among different types of schools (Does paying tuition affect a parent’s expectations?), or may show that “parents are parents,” and that perceptions of differences are not really accurate at all.

7. Research on different professional roles within schools. While this study covered a range of administrators, and a variety of professional experiences within individuals, it did not attempt to plumb the experiences of many important school professionals, from classroom teacher, to guidance counselor, to other professionals. The instant study covered participants who were or had recently been building principals, assistant principals,
curriculum specialists, and program directors. Recalling Participant 1’s observation that “guidance counselors see other thing,” we are reminded that one’s position within a school matters, and that this could be a ripe area for further discovery.

8. Specific research on teacher satisfaction and career goals. In light of ongoing teacher and administrator shortages, how have teacher, as well as administrator, career choices been affected by the overparenting phenomenon? Further interviews or surveys could measure teacher perceptions, attitudes, and feelings about parents, as well as their own jobs and aspirations, including their inclination to stay in education and/or pursue an administrative job.

9. The generalized state of parent-adult maturity (Akst’s *Self-Control Deficit*), which affects not only schools, but any context in which parents interface with institutions, including health care, the legal system, etc.

In summary, this research was limited to a narrow range of schools and school professionals, in terms of SES, geography, professional position, and its suburban, public school orientation. Further research is warranted in lower SES, different regions, and non-public schools, as well as with a wider range of school professionals. As the researcher’s driving force was to understand the relationship between aggressive parent behavior and administrator stress, in order to maximize professional commitment to education (including nurturing teachers who would become good administrators), further
research into the effects of parent behavior on school professional career aspirations would be an interesting and useful area for further study.
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APPENDIX A
Verbatim Transcripts of Qualitative Interviews

Participant #1 - December 13, 2007

Introduction (Researcher): “I am researching parent-school interactions in suburban middle and high schools. Please be as detailed and descriptive as possible. Your responses will remain confidential.

Researcher: “Can you describe one or two memorable parent-school interactions for me?

Participant: “The first thing I’d say is that there are a range of interactions with parents. Everything from the parents who email me four times a day, even during the summer. I had given one mother my home email – a mistake – and she continued throughout the summer to email me multiple times a day, with all kinds of parenting and educational questions. It was bordering on harassment. Then there are parents who make a few strategic “dive bomber” calls or emails a year to try to push me as an administrator into taking action that really they or their child should take for themselves.

Researcher: “Can you explain the term “dive bomber” for me, please?

Participant: “A ‘dive bomber’ is a parent who waits for a specific event or incident – a child overlooked at an awards ceremony or a bad grade on a report card – and jumps out and
attacks you, blames the school for the child's failings. I had a parent who came in over
the summer to complain about a grade, an 86. Now the girl had already graduated from
our high school, had already been accepted to Georgetown University. The girl was a
month away from going away to college, and the mother was still angling about a grade.
There was nothing anyone could – or needed – to do about it, and it was really a moot
point, but there was the mother, still complaining, still blaming the school.

"One of the incidents that really bothered me was a boy who had done a fairly nominal
research project – a high school student – and his mom, eager to get him into a top
college, was pushing this young man into entering all kinds of science competitions. And
he was showing every sign of not being motivated. In particular, he was missing
appointments with me, missing deadlines. Finally, in desperation, his mother called me,
and it was the day before a deadline to submit materials to a science fair, and the mother
asked me to send an email on the child's behalf – in other words, to pretend I was the
child. Now the child here is a seventeen-year-old boy, not really a child. I told the
mother that this was enabling behavior, and it would be better for the child to be called
from his classroom so that he could send the email himself, or that she could come to the
school to speak to her own son. At that point, there was dead silence, after which the
mother said to me, "I am asking you to do this." I did do it. I had known the mother for
many years. She's quite a vocal parent in the school. She does a lot of volunteer work.
She's on a lot of committees. And I felt a sense of almost panic at the time. I went to my
superiors, and we all "lost it" – laughed about it. Subsequently, the boy actually did enter
the fair and got some prize out of it. But it was a very, very telling moment. It was one
in which the parent essentially exercised her authority as our boss – as a taxpayer – and really, I think, disabled her son in the process.

Researcher: “How much of your time would you say you spend responding to or dealing with parent-initiated contacts regarding issues that you and your staff do not consider to be a problem, or that magnify the importance - and emotion - of an issue beyond what you would say was reasonable?

Participant: “Of the time that I have designated for parent conferences – I have other aspects to my job, obviously - I would say at least fifty percent of my time in parent conferences and phone calls is spent with aggressive, difficult parents, who – as you say – perceive a problem or a need where the school does not. The other fifty percent are making reasonable educational inquiries – asking for information, asking for resources.

“On the first fifty percent, I field various levels of parent upset, from the mother emailing me four times a day, or calling me that often. We also have those types of situations where I had a horrid conversation with a parent after school just last week which was a fifteen minute conversation that was very unpleasant. The mother was incredibly upset at me. I had spoken with her daughter over a year ago about doing an enrichment project, and had never heard anything back from the girl. I speak with a lot of kids, so I assumed that she was not interested, since she never followed up. The mother came to see me fourteen months later to blame me, since I had not pursued the child to force her to do an extra project. It was not even part of her regular schoolwork. So the conversation with
the mother lasted about fifteen minutes. But then the follow-up conversation with the director of guidance, giving me background on the child and the family, giving me advice on how to speak with the parent if she called again, or how to draft a careful email to the parent when one of her super-aggressive emails landed in my inbox, that had to be shared and discussed with lots of other school administrators: the principal, the guidance counselor, the classroom teacher. So any one of these conversations can balloon into a substantial time commitment.

"In the spectrum of aggressive, we've had experience with aggressive to the point where we've been sued, where you have the feeling that the next phone call they're going to make is to their lawyer. And dealing with parents when you have this fear takes up an enormous amount of time. When looking at aggressive parents, you have to ask yourself, "Is this going to be a flesh wound, or a stab in the back? Is there going to be a lawsuit?" There is such a litigious mindset among some parents, and we are so vulnerable as school officials. Every conversation has to be discussed with other school administrators, because there may be history involved, and these conversations are enormously time consuming.

Researcher: "Do you think parent pressure influences decision-making in your school? Can you recall specific cases?"

Participant: "Yes. Parents absolutely influence the direction of the school. It's a continuum. On the positive side, I think of the school as being like a restaurant. In terms of programs
that we deliver – and I am involved in a lot of programs that parents attend and support - if a parent gives us honest feedback, I appreciate it.

“On the other side, there are less positive examples. We recently tested 720 first through sixth graders with a university-based mathematics test that was designed to cull the top three percent – in terms of mathematical ability. So basically, it was a special program for gifted students. When we got the results back, we had a sticky situation. Some of the kids – this was the second year of the program, last year was its pilot year – some of the kids who were in the program last year did not “test in” again this year. So we had a situation. So what we did, if a mother was highly vocal, was take the student in for the second year. Otherwise, we all knew we’d have a posse on our hands. We’d have parents demanding to see all the test scores. Mom wouldn’t swallow it too easily if, say, Joey, who only scored a 19 when the cutoff was 24, who was in the program the year before, was not chosen for the second year. So we took the ‘Joeys’ back into the program, ahead of kids who had higher scores, in order to avoid the wrath of the parents. We agonized over this decision. We even hid the fact from unsuspecting parents, whose kids did not get in, but who qualified, by not sharing this with them, since there were only a limited number of spaces. The decision was made politically, because we did not want those parents who would demand a second year – or to see all the scores - to blow up in our faces. And especially in a content area like Math.

“It’s not usually that the parents walk in the door and stomp their feet – although that happens too – but there are these more insidious ways that parents exert pressure on
decisions. There are certain parents who are “known to us,” and about whom the principal will say, “That’s so-and-so’s child. We better make the right decision for that kid.” We know who the parents are who are difficult – the ones who will write the letter to the superintendent, demand a meeting with the superintendent, the ones more likely to seek legal assistance if things don’t go their way. These are parents who will get on the phone -- on the parent network -- and start to lobby other parents into their camp, and arrange for a whole mob to storm the school. It’s both exhausting and time consuming to work around – and make decisions around – these kind of parents, and you feel guilty for giving preferential treatment to their kids, when other kids are clearly more deserving. It’s very difficult for the administrators, because there are grey areas. We’re dealing with kids, and development, and maturity.

"Some of the meetings are very sticky. Often these parents have an over-inflated view of their child’s ability. So, we try to avoid situations in which student abilities are discussed in a public forum. We know that Mrs. So-and-so is the kind of mother who, if her child is denied a certain teacher, or class, will rally other parents against the school. We try not to upset parents who we know will go and organize other parents to question school policies and decisions.

*Researcher:* "Would you say that parent-school interactions cause stress within your organization, i.e., among your teachers and administrators?"
Participant: "Yes, I think so. The teachers have the protection of the administrators, unless they've done something really unethical, which is rare. If the communication with the parent goes beyond something like, "Johnny isn't doing his homework," a school administrator – building principal, assistant superintendent, guidance counselor - will get involved in the conversation, to assist the teacher and help deal with the parents.

"Teachers know that administrators spend a lot of time dealing with parents, and they expect us to protect them from difficult parents. Most of this stress is on the administrators – not the teachers - when something goes wrong, or when the parent cannot protect his child from the realities of everyday school life.

"Most teachers do not want to go into administration because they see the kind of stress – from parent interaction – that administrators have to deal with. Over the last fifteen years, increasingly, there is less and less support on an adult-to-adult level, between the parent and the teacher or administrator. It's not a mutually supportive situation so much anymore. It is a rare situation when a parent will say to me, "I'm really glad about the way we handled that issue with my child. We need to stand together as adults." That's a very rare occurrence. Generally speaking, the parents' loyalty has shifted from an adult-to-adult relationship -where we are working together to help a young person - to a relationship that is highly defensive of children, and where the parents see themselves as the child’s advocate against the school. I think this shift is highly evident among administrators today. I have a colleague who recently commented to me that she is redefining her role as public servant with an emphasis on the word "servant."
“There is a sense of administrators being worn down by parents. I’m not sure we’re going to quit our jobs, but there really is a tendency to even miss certain issues — legitimate issues - brought by parents, because we are so used to being attacked by them that we sometimes miss things, because we are in such a defensive stance.

Researcher: “How does the stress experienced from parent-school interactions compare with other stressors - accountability, administrator-faculty relations, student discipline in the absence of parent intervention, curricular challenges, recruitment of staff, for example?

Participant: “All these stressors, taken together, make the school administrator’s job very stressful, more stressful than most outsiders would realize. But looking just at parent-school relations, this is a special stressor because it’s very personal. I honestly believe that people go into education to help kids, for a better future for our country, and not for the money or anything else. So these kinds of over-aggressive parents really do a lot of damage to that ideal. They may be a small number, but they act like a pin-prick that bursts our balloon. You may be having a really great day, helping a lot of kids, and then you get a phone call from an angry parent. We take it more personally than we do, for example, test scores. These kinds of communications are directed at us, and the parents are not objectifying the problem, but rather, blaming us. It’s qualitatively different from other stressors. It would be stressful enough if a parent called us, in a very cooperative and appreciative mode, saying, “Let’s get together to discuss my child,” because we are dealing with real children, with real issues – academic, social, behavioral, etc.
"But to add to this stress the enmity and anger shown by the really aggressive parents – like the one who yelled at me that her child had “never gotten an 86 before” – that really pushes us over the edge. When a parent says, “You better do something about it,” that’s a direct attack. And you never know, when you pick up the phone, that that’s what’s going to be coming out of the other end of the receiver. So you’ve gotta take that breath, and turn it around, and objectify the call, identify the real issue, settle yourself down, settle the parent down, and choose your words carefully, so you won’t be misunderstood – or possibly sued. Then you are in a high stress conversation with a person who is not a partner in the conversation, but an adversary.

**Researcher:** “In what contexts - academic, behavioral - do the most stressful parent-school interactions occur? In other words, what kind of cases do you see in which school and parent opinions and values don’t mesh, or where parents over-advocate, bully, or over-protect their children from reasonable consequences and other school decisions?

**Participant:** “I’m not the school psychologist, who may deal with the more social and emotional, but I do interface with many principals, and so I see it as mostly being about academic issues: placement, grades, college admissions. Partly this is due to my role, as GT enrichment coordinator, K-12. It’s also because these parents are in the context of their society – which is upper middle class, suburban, ambitious – and they are terrified that their kids are not going to make it, that they’re not going to survive in the future. And so the parents are operating with a certain amount of fear and terror about what’s going on, and that insecurity and fear is being projected onto the schools."
“I work a lot with high school kids, who say things like, “If I don’t get into Yale, I won’t be able to live with myself.” These are kids who have very high expectations, and their parents have very high expectations.

**Researcher:** “How many parents would you say come under the category of difficult or aggressive, along the lines we have been discussing? What percentage of your school population would that be? Are these parents consistently ‘in’ or ‘out’ of that group, or do they move from difficult to cooperative?

**Participant:** “I would say 30 percent. Because of my position [GT/Enrichment], this is the 30 percent of the school that I deal with, mostly.

“They are pretty consistent. They don’t go, for example, from being dive bombers to being lambs. Once they become that kind of aggressive parent, that’s pretty much who they are. I deal with parents from K-12, so when I’m dealing with really aggressive first grade parents, I often say to myself that I hope I retire before their kids reach high school—because I can hardly take them now.

“Here’s a telling story: One of our kindergarten teachers was out for two weeks – her father was dying – and the substitute was adequate but not as good as the regular teacher. So this group of parents got together – remember, this is kindergarten! – and met at different people’s homes, and came up with a list of demands. Because they were
worried about two weeks in which a kindergarten teacher was out, that their children
were going to fall behind in the curriculum.

“And one mother, who was the self-appointed representative of the group, came into
school for a meeting with me and the principal. The mother has a Ph.D., but is not
working – not exactly keeping her own career on track - and she said to me, right after
our meeting, “Can this school district get my kid into Harvard?” The kid is in
kindergarten.

**Conclusion (Researcher):** “Is there anything I haven’t asked that you would like to add?

**Participant:** No, thank you.

**Researcher:** “Thank you so much for your time.”

**Participant:** Thank you for letting me participate.
Participant #2 - December 14, 2007

**Introduction (Researcher):** "I am researching parent-school interactions in suburban middle and high schools. Please be as detailed and descriptive as possible. Your responses will remain confidential.

**Researcher:** "Can you describe one or two memorable parent-school interactions for me?"

**Participant:** "So, I just came out of this meeting with a consultant and this parent. The student is a female student – a general ed student – whose mother essentially has been emailing the girl’s teachers two or three times a day, asking for specifics about the lessons, the homework – basically wanting the teachers to give her a blow-by-blow of everything going on in the school that day: the assignments, the student’s affect, her grades. This has been going on since September. In addition, the mother doesn’t want the teachers to address the student on a one-on-one basis. The girl is uncomfortable knowing she needs extra support, and the parent is really demanding special ed services for a regular ed student - from the regular ed teachers, without any of the special support staff involved. The mom has hired a consultant – who is flying in from Maine on a monthly basis - to meet with a team of teachers. And it’s just taking a lot of our teacher and administrator time. And it’s basically a memorable experience because everyone in the district knows this parent, and has really been involved with this parent. So, it’s a constant, daily issue of walking the line with this parent, and providing what the student needs without it"
getting out of control. It’s really teetering on the edge of getting out of control at this point, so we really need to figure out how to keep that from happening.

“Another memorable experience is that we have a parent who is not actually allowed to enter our school anymore - because of a civility policy that was implemented in our district two years ago in response to this parent and her antics, for lack of a better word. Basically, she threatened two lawsuits on teachers. She made regular appearances in teachers’ classrooms without signing in. She’d confront teachers about things in front of the students in the class. Really was very aggressive and harassing the teachers about different things. It got to the point where the student was carrying a cell phone – even though cell phones are not allowed to be used by students in our school - and would text the mom under her desk about things going on in class – about something the teacher would say and the kid not like - and then the mom would show up in the classroom five minutes later. Then the mom would take up the issue and confront the teacher, in front of the other children, while class was supposed to be going on.

“We have two parents, currently, who, under this policy are not allowed to be on school grounds – since they cannot act civilly towards the teachers and administrators.

Researcher: “How much of your time would you say you spend responding to or dealing with parent-initiated contacts regarding issues that you and your staff do not consider to be a problem, or that magnify the importance - and emotion - of an issue beyond what you would say was reasonable?
Participant: “I would say, in an eight-hour day, overseeing about 350 students and the staff that go with them, I spend about two hours a day responding to parent-initiated contacts. Over a variety of issues. There can be social issues – such as bullying. It can be over academic issues, complaints about teachers, safety concerns. Issues about trips we are going on.

“I had a call just this morning about our vocal music teacher. She was calling on kids to sing in class, and that was making some students uncomfortable. And the call wound up lasting half an hour, with the parent wanting to talk to me about our vocal curriculum – about what would be amenable to the parent, but still within our curriculum, to move forward from what had happened in class.

“In about twenty-five percent of the calls I get, there really is no issue at all. But in the other seventy-five percent, where there may be a real issue, so many of them are overblown, blown way out of proportion. In many cases, the student can advocate for him or herself. She could have come to me, or even to the teacher, and said, “I feel nervous, uncomfortable singing in front of the whole class.” And we could have easily worked things out – and quickly – with the student. But now it becomes this whole parent thing, and lasts a half an hour.

Researcher: “Do you think parent pressure influences decision-making in your school? Can you recall specific cases?”
Participant: “Absolutely. We have a “house” system in our school, and with rising enrollment, we need to create another house. And an enormous, inordinate amount of time was spent by all of the administrators in our building – the principal, assistant principals, guidance counselors - brainstorming and planning the best way to roll this out to our parents. A lot of what we do is try to anticipate parent concerns and criticism, and we work very hard to avoid that. We try to “market away” those concerns. Sometimes, in extreme circumstances, we’ll just can[cel] things, you know, if we think parents won’t support them, if we anticipate too much “push back.” And this is even in cases where we, as educators, think something is educationally sound.

“An example would be a trip that we wanted our students to take out West, during spring break, tied to our environmental science curriculum. But when we heard that some vocal parents had some concerns – about their children traveling too far – it never got beyond the initial planning stages. It was really kyboshed once we knew that some parent support wouldn’t be there.

“An even better example would be our Math curriculum. We’ve had a lot of changes in our Math curriculum, and some real “Math wars” in our district. All of it generated from parents. Our district Math supervisor has left the district, for a few different reasons. But one of them is that she got a threat from a parent, over the summer, and she got to the point where she felt she really couldn’t work here any longer. So we actually changed some of our Math sequence, not because we thought it was better for kids, but to
eliminate the parent complaints at the end of the year. The parent complaints got so bad that it was something we just didn’t want to deal with.

**Researcher:** “Would you say that parent-school interactions cause stress within your organization, i.e., among your teachers and administrators?”

**Participant:** “Absolutely. Less so for teachers. The parents in our school don’t really go to the teachers. They go directly to the administrators or the guidance counselors. There’s a real fear about going to the teachers, in terms of retribution against their child. They’ll call with a complaint about a class, but say, “Don’t let the teacher know it was me who called, because I’m afraid he’ll be angry with my child.”

“Teachers are aware of how much time we administrators spend dealing with parents. They say to me all the time, “I don’t envy you. I would never want your job.” They think that the worst part of our job is dealing with parents.

“But we do not – other than some of the cases I told you about – have a ton of nasty parents, at least not at the middle school level.

“Most of their issues can be worked out fairly agreeably. I think there are bigger issues at the high school, where the stakes are higher – with sports teams and GPA and college and things like that. But, even at middle school, it still takes away too much time from things that are much more worthwhile. We just spend too much time explaining ourselves and
marketing what we do, to the parents. And most of us really resent it, since we all feel that this is not what we’re supposed to be doing, which is teaching kids – and not dealing with this whole consumer culture.

**Researcher:** “How does the stress experienced from parent-school interactions compare with other stressors - accountability, administrator-faculty relations, student discipline in the absence of parent intervention, curricular challenges, recruitment of staff, for example?

**Participant:** “It ranks just below accountability issues, like test scores and curriculum – and the standardization of schools - issuing from the central office. And then I would say our most stressful thing is parent relations. Even though we work in a pretty nice community, the parent stress is real.

**Researcher:** “In what contexts - academic, behavioral - do the most stressful parent-school interactions occur? In other words, what kind of cases do you see in which school and parent opinions and values don’t mesh, or where parents over-advocate, bully, or over-protect their children from reasonable consequences and other school decisions?

**Participant:** “I’d say the biggest one is the issue over student discipline and the consequences we hand out. Parents are always arguing that the consequences are too harsh, or, if their child was the victim, that the punishment wasn’t strict enough. The second would be the parents’ concerns about their children’s academic success – about grading, and about class placement, especially for our 8th graders as they are heading toward the high school.
Researcher: “How many parents would you say come under the category of difficult or aggressive, along the lines we have been discussing? What percentage of your school population would that be? Are these parents consistently ‘in’ or ‘out’ of that group, or do they move from difficult to cooperative?

Participant: “Really aggressive parents, I would say, make up only about one or two percent of our parent body. But they can take up as much as thirty percent of our time spent on parent concerns. There are also times when, depending on the specific issue, a normally non-aggressive parent can become an aggressive one. For instance, in this Math case we spoke about, you can have normal, rational parents, and this issue has caused them to really take out the daggers. So, when it comes to a single issue, they – these normal, nice folks - become nasty and aggressive people. In terms of what percentage of parents “ever-ever” fall into this category, I would say maybe six percent.

Conclusion (Researcher): “Is there anything I haven’t asked that you would like to add?

Participant: “Yes. I have had experience teaching both in low-income, urban schools, as well as the affluent suburban school I am now in. I find the parents to be less of an issue in this [suburban] setting. And it’s kind of the reverse of what many people would think. For most parents, I find them very removed from the life of the school. Part of that, I think, has to do with the fact that this is middle school, where you see the least parent involvement. Also, in the urban districts, many parents feel they need to advocate for
their kids, whereas here, there is more trust, generally, that the teachers and administrators are doing what they can for the best interest of the kids. And that keeps the parents more content than in the low income schools.

**Researcher:** “Thank you so much for your time.”

**Participant:** “Thank you, I’ve enjoyed it.”
Introduction (Researcher): “I am researching parent-school interactions in suburban middle and high schools. Please be as detailed and descriptive as possible. Your responses will remain confidential.

Researcher: “Can you describe one or two memorable parent-school interactions for me?

Participant: “Alright. So, I can think of two stories, so I’ll start with them first. My first school principal position was at a middle school that was fifty minutes from my home. So, by the time I got to school in the morning, I usually had to go to the bathroom. One day I come into the office, and a parent is waiting for me. And she says, “I have to see you.” And I say, “Alright, but I have to first go to the bathroom.” And she got really annoyed at me. I’ll never forget that, because I said I would be right with her, but that wasn’t good enough. Another story is, when I was principal of a grade 3 to 6 school, I had some students who were throwing rocks at cars during recess, and the school was right on the corner of a very busy street. One of the rocks hit the window of a car, and the teachers brought in five kids from the playground. They weren’t sure which one was the thrower. And I also had the irate person from the car that was hit sitting in my office, waiting for me to resolve this. So, to make a long story short, I questioned the kids, and finally one kid admitted to it, and he started to cry. And so I called his mother to explain the situation, and the mother said to me, “Well, how do you know he did it?” And I said,
“Because he just told me he did, and he’s right here in the office with me. Would you like to speak to him?”

**Researcher:** “How much of your time – when you were a building principal - would you say you spend responding to or dealing with parent-initiated contacts regarding issues that you and your staff do not consider to be a problem, or that magnify the importance - and emotion - of an issue beyond what you would say was reasonable?

**Participant:** “I would say that about fifty percent of the time, the issues were parent issues. When I was a primary school principal, the parents made a big deal about recess time. They got an *ad hoc* committee together, and they were pushing for more recess. And the teachers were not for it, because they felt they needed more academic time. Now, this was a primary school, grades pre-K to 2. So I had to deal with both sides. And the parents, regardless of the weather, they wanted more recess. Now, I left that school before the issue was resolved, but I heard that the parents continued to push and push. And the parents have a lot of power. They’ve always had a lot of power.

“Of the parents I have dealt with, most of them are pretty affluent and well educated. In those districts, the parents are extremely demanding. And sometimes they’re unreasonable. I had another incident where a parent faxed her son’s homework in every day because he was irresponsible. And then she told the teacher not to give the kid anything but an ‘A.’ So I had to tell her that faxing in homework every day was not
appropriate. I would say most parents, if you took the time to explain things to them, could be reasonable. But of course you also had your crazies.

**Researcher**: “So, it took some effort to get them to come around?”

**Participant**: “Yes. Time and effort. We had this kid in the elementary school – one kid in the whole school - who would bring his skateboard into school and fool around on the front steps of the school, right on a busy street. Since he was the only kid doing it, I didn’t have to institute a school-wide ban, I just called the parents of this one kid, to tell them he had to stop bringing the skateboard to school – because it was dangerous, and it – or he- could go into the street. Well, they were so incensed, because, as they said, this skateboard was “so much of his persona,” that they set up a meeting with me, and they came in to meet. And it just so happened that, that morning, as they were pulling into the school, they saw their own kid skateboarding, and almost falling into the street and having an accident. So, when they came in, they went from roaring lions to mild lambs, understanding that I was right. Sometimes I was able to change their minds, their way of thinking, their framework.

**Researcher**: “Do you think parent pressure influences decision-making in your school? Can you recall specific cases?”


Great interview, but less effective once he got to teaching. Difficult students, and the
whole first year was a disaster. Normally, I would give a teacher another year, you know, because teachers can become great even after a bad first year. But the parents in that class actually signed a petition against him, and I had to deal with the scenario that, if I gave him another chance, none of the next year's parents would want their kids in his class. So, the parent pressure had a lot to do with my political decision not to rehire him.

**Researcher:** “Would you say that parent-school interactions cause stress within your organization, i.e., among your teachers and administrators?

**Participant:** “Absolutely. Absolutely. Yes. In my case, I left administration because of the stress, brought on mostly by things involving parents. When I was a principal, at one point, my car actually got vandalized by parents, because they were unhappy with a decision I had made. That was a very traumatic experience. I actually had to seek counseling for it. It was my first elementary school principalship. We had decided not to renew a non-tenured teacher who had a lot of political clout in the town. She was well connected. She had lived in the town for twenty-five years. She had taught parochial school, taught piano lessons. And she found out about our decision, and she rallied a group of parents. And they picketed my school and they vandalized my car. They key-scratched both sides of my new car. And it was horrible. It was like $1,500 worth of damage. And after that, I parked my car in the police station lot next to the school.
Researcher: “How does the stress experienced from parent-school interactions compare with other stressors - accountability, administrator-faculty relations, student discipline in the absence of parent intervention, curricular challenges, recruitment of staff, for example?

Participant: “I think that, with all the other areas you mention, you have some control over them. You can manage your curriculum, adjust to board policies, but parents are unpredictable. And parents have a lot of power. The old saying, that the parents get together at ShopRite or in the parking lot, and talk about school, that can get very stressful. You can control some of the other causes of stress, but parents you really can’t.

“I’d say in these high socio-economic districts, parents are the major cause of stress for administrators and teachers. They are a major, major factor.

Researcher: “In what contexts - academic, behavioral - do the most stressful parent-school interactions occur? In other words, what kind of cases do you see in which school and parent opinions and values don’t mesh, or where parents over-advocate, bully, or over-protect their children from reasonable consequences and other school decisions?

Participant: “Let me think. There were always academic cases, like the faxed homework story, or the parent complaining about grades. Since I was mostly an elementary school principal, I think you find academic issues more in the higher grades, in high school and even middle school. In the elementary schools, teacher complaints, where parents didn’t like teachers, were probably the most common form of criticism and complaint. That
was a major issue. Parents wanted to request teachers. And if there wasn’t a district
policy against requesting teachers, it was very stressful. Because parents would request
having or not having a particular teacher all the time.

**Researcher:** “How many parents would you say come under the category of difficult or
aggressive, along the lines we have been discussing? What percentage of your school
population would that be? Are these parents consistently ‘in’ or ‘out’ of that group, or do
they move from difficult to cooperative?

**Participant:** “I would say ten to twenty percent. You know how it is: the 80/20 rule. Twenty
percent of the parents cause 80 percent of the problems, the stress. And the twenty
percent pretty much stayed the same. You know, they always had to find something to
complain about. Like the mother who complained about the dangers of head lice in an
after-school problem, which I wasn’t even responsible for. She always had something
she was unhappy about, and always let us know it. And then there are the parents that go
directly to the Board of Ed, bypassing the principal and the superintendent. Particularly in
the high socio-economic districts.

**Conclusion (Researcher):** “Is there anything I haven’t asked that you would like to add?

**Participant:** “Thinking of all these stories again, I’m glad I’m not a principal anymore. I don’t
ever want to go back into that fire."
Reseacher: “Thank you so much for your time.”

Participant: “Thank you for listening to me.”
Introduction (Researcher): “I am researching parent-school interactions in suburban middle and high schools. Please be as detailed and descriptive as possible. Your responses will remain confidential.

Researcher: “Can you describe one or two memorable parent-school interactions for me?

Participant: “Sure. Math placement is always an issue, and in our recent round of math placements, for 5th graders coming into our 6th grade, we changed our guidelines for getting into the accelerated program. Because we were finding that too many of our kids were being misplaced under the old system. Summer is always a difficult time of the year for us, but this was especially hard. In one case, I spoke to the mother, the father, both parents together. Numerous times. They called the assistant superintendent, who, of course, referred them back to me. And we placed their child, initially, in the non-accelerated class, with the understanding that, if she did really well, we could transfer her into the accelerated class. Well, the parents said that their child would be so devastated by this, that they approached me, during our back-to-school ice cream social, to break the news to the kid. Right in the middle of our cafeteria, surrounded literally by hundreds of people. It was unbelievable to me, that they would put their child in that position. It was stunning. They were so relentless.
“Then there was the case of a kid running for student council. We had issued clear guidelines about what kids could and could not say in running for office. So this one kid makes a poster that says, “Let’s get Crunk,” which stands for crazy drunk, with a picture of a bar. And they had been told that if they hung inappropriate signs up, they would not be able to run for office. So, we told this boy he could not run for student government office. And his father came into school – we tried to talk to him on the telephone, but he started screaming, hung up the phone – came into the assistant principal’s office, and he was ranting, raving, pounding his fists on the desk, just totally out of control. Because he felt that his son deserved to run, even though he hung up the inappropriate posters.

**Researcher:** “How much of your time would you say you spend responding to or dealing with parent-initiated contacts regarding issues that you and your staff do not consider to be a problem, or that magnify the importance - and emotion - of an issue beyond what you would say was reasonable?

**Participant:** “Interestingly enough, it’s probably only about 45 minutes to an hour a week that I deal directly with parents. That’s me either talking to them in person or on the phone, or them emailing me and having to get back to them. But what our parents tend to do is they go to our guidance counselor. Indirectly, I probably deal with those types of situations a couple of hours a week, because the guidance counselors will come to me and ask me about a situation, about a student or family. And the good news is that the guidance counselor can often take care of situation where I don’t have to get directly involved. So directly plus indirectly is about 2 or 3 hours a week, during the school year.
"During the summer, it's much much more, because that's when our class assignments, our teacher assignments go out, and the whole math placement issue. I spend at least an hour or two a day then, in the summer. Addressing parents' concerns and complaints about their child's placement.

**Researcher:** "Do you think parent pressure influences decision-making in your school? Can you recall specific cases?"

**Participant:** "Absolutely. Just last week, we had to close our school due to weather. A number of families were out of electricity for a day or two. And at a board meeting in the middle of all this, the board president [and a parent in the district] requested of the superintendent that the kids not have tests – or make them turn in assignments - when they returned to school. A whole bunch of kids were anxious about all this work they would have to do, that would be due on the day they returned to school. So the district sent out a letter that said the kids would not have to take any test or hand in any assignment this week. The teachers were livid, they thought this whole decision was overlooking their professional judgment. They said they would not have been unreasonable in their demands, but now for a whole week they could not give any tests.

**Researcher:** "Would you say that parent-school interactions cause stress within your organization, i.e., among your teachers and administrators?"
Participant: “Yes, definitely. The teachers feel a lot of stress from parents, a lot of pressure to give kids good grades, to cater to parents’ desires. There is a lot of pressure in our district for kids to get into a good college. The drug and alcohol issue in our high school, I think a lot of that is coming from the stress parents put on the kids that way. The parents are stressing out their kids.

“My teachers often tell me that they could never deal with the kind of pressure I face as an administrator, with all the parent pressures.

Researcher: “How does the stress experienced from parent-school interactions compare with other stressors - accountability, administrator-faculty relations, student discipline in the absence of parent intervention, curricular challenges, recruitment of staff, for example?

Participant: “It’s kind of hard to separate some of this. Parents are often a part of curricular and teacher issues. I would say that a good deal of stress comes from the parents, from the board and a small but vocal group of parents.

Researcher: “In what contexts - academic, behavioral - do the most stressful parent-school interactions occur? In other words, what kind of cases do you see in which school and parent opinions and values don’t mesh, or where parents over-advocate, bully, or over-protect their children from reasonable consequences and other school decisions?
Participant: “Other than the academics we talked about [Math placement, post-snow day
testing], I would say: Athletics. Big time, especially as they get into the high school.
With playing time, they try to dictate to the coach who to play, what strategies to use.

“The other area is when kids have problems socially, like with bullying. Some parents
are convinced it’s a big issue. I’m not. In all honesty, a lot of the parents are bullies.
They’re just so aggressive. They interfere. If their child comes home and says, “Suzie
made fun of me,” then they come into school “loaded for bear,” wanting us to do
something about Suzie. And they really don’t allow their kids to solve problems on their
own. They’re constantly taking up the charge for their own child, whether it be with a
teacher or another child. And they’re very aggressive in that. They’re going to make
sure that their child is treated the way they, the parents, think they ought to be treated.

Researcher: “How many parents would you say come under the category of difficult or
aggressive, along the lines we have been discussing? What percentage of your school
population would that be? Are these parents consistently ‘in’ or ‘out’ of that group, or do
they move from difficult to cooperative?

Participant: “I would say probably 10 percent. And if they are difficult, they’re just difficult.

Conclusion (Researcher): “Is there anything I haven’t asked that you would like to add?
Participant: “In affluent districts, it’s all about wanting to get their kid every advantage, and so they become very competitive, and they’ll do anything to make sure their kid gets ahead. And that creates an interesting dynamic in a school that’s really not supposed to be about that kind of competition and selfishness.

Researcher: “Thank you so much for your time.”

Participant: “Okay.”
Participant #5 – December 21, 2007

**Introduction (Researcher):** “I am researching parent-school interactions in suburban middle and high schools. Please be as detailed and descriptive as possible. Your responses will remain confidential.

**Researcher:** “Can you describe one or two memorable parent-school interactions for me?”

**Participant:** “Yes. The first happened about 3 years ago, when we received reports about kids showing knives on the school bus, and selling them in our school. These kids are in middle school. We confirmed the truth of the reports, although we never caught the kids red handed, and when we called in the parents, rather than them being supportive, one of the mothers called us liars, and in fact threatened me on several occasions, to the point where I had to file a police report for my protection. The irony is, this year, that mother—who I always tried to keep a supportive relationship with, in terms of her kid—she called to tell me that she had, in fact, found many of the knives in the kid’s room, and thanked me for what I had done to her son. The thing is, when she was being so protective, so defensive, I was really afraid she was going to come and get me, to hurt me.

“Another case just happened recently. This one mom called, after we posted the school photo schedule for this year. She called to complain that her daughter was scheduled to have her picture taken after she had gym class, and she might still be perspiring. So, I had to explain to the mom that we have 640 kids in the school, that we teach PE all day...”
long, and that I couldn’t – I wouldn’t - rearrange the whole school schedule for her child, but that she could always get her picture taken on the make-up day.

Researcher: “How much of your time would you say you spend responding to or dealing with parent-initiated contacts regarding issues that you and your staff do not consider to be a problem, or that magnify the importance - and emotion - of an issue beyond what you would say was reasonable?

Participant: “I’d say about, on average, about 45% of my time. Yeah, it’s a huge percentage here. I had a situation just today, with a parent who has a problem with her kid’s education, and wants us to pay for a private school education for her. So, the mom emailed me, and blind copied the superintendent, so I had to go through the kid’s whole file, her whole case history. It took hours just to deal with that one email, which is pretty common here. I had to deal with people in my building – the guidance counselor, the child study team – as well as the parents, as well as the superintendent. Now, this is a child with severe school phobia, which the parent is now blaming on bullying that she claims took place in our school, which is not really true. So, I had to track down and summarize the whole history of the real problem – the school phobia – and review the child’s whole file, and it just took a really, really long time.

Researcher: “Do you think parent pressure influences decision-making in your school? Can you recall specific cases?
Participant: “Yes, it does. In one recent case, I had to deal with a non-tenured science teacher, who is in her third year, but who was out on maternity leave for a while. And I’ve had a lot of parent complaints about her. And so information like that can certainly influence my decision of whether or not to keep her here, and I didn’t. I let her go.

“And I had another science teacher, as it turns out, and we have a “loop turn” program here – where the teacher moves up a grade with the students – but I had so many parent complaints, people who were adamant about their children not having this teacher 2 years in a row, that I did not keep her in the school either.

“We also have a lot of celebrations in our school – particularly for our 8th graders – and we were trying to cut down on them by eliminating one, and replacing it with something more educational. But now we’re doing both programs – the celebration and the educational program – because the parents got into a real uproar. They did not want us to eliminate one of the events.

“Parents are more hands-off with our major, curricular issues, except for the “Math Wars” we’ve been having, where we are debating which kind of math curriculum to adopt – reform math or traditional math. And our district has also launched a blog, for parents to get more information and have more of a stake in their children’s education. So some parents have written hurtful, personal attacks – of our teachers and administrators – on the blog. They even posted the home address and phone number of the person who was supposed to be our new superintendent, and encouraged people to
write to and call him at home, to complain about the reform math program, and to
courage him to not take the job here. So, the man felt so harassed that he actually
didn’t take the job here, and we’re stuck with an interim superintendent.

*Researcher:* “Would you say that parent-school interactions cause stress within your
organization, i.e., among your teachers and administrators?

*Participant:* “Absolutely. For the most part, we try to protect our teachers, unless the teacher is
clearly wrong. But the parent complaints and criticisms, they definitely cause stress all
around – on the teacher, on the administration, even on the kids. I mean, the kids know
when their parents are on a tear, are angry with the school and the teachers.

“In terms of teachers shooting for administrative jobs, my teachers tell me all the time
that they would never want my job, that they don’t know how I do it. I think they
perceive my job as really stressful, that dealing with parents is stressful. But they also
really appreciate when I stick up for them. For instance, we had a case where a teacher
had assigned book reports, and one girl, who did a book on the Holocaust, drew a
swastika on her report, like the one on the book’s actual cover. So this one parent went
nuts, wanted us to meet with a rabbi, give sensitivity training to our teachers. But I really
protected the teacher, and she was so appreciative. She felt horrible, but the parent was
really being obnoxious and unreasonable.
“And I do think that this is a tough career choice. Every day, almost, I ask myself, How much longer can I keep doing this, keep going back into the lion’s den with these people [the parents]? 

**Researcher:** “How does the stress experienced from parent-school interactions compare with other stressors - accountability, administrator-faculty relations, student discipline in the absence of parent intervention, curricular challenges, recruitment of staff, for example? 

**Participant:** “Well, I would say my biggest stressor – my greatest challenge – is actually with my teachers, with trying to get them to help make changes in our school. They tend to be very resistant. But my next biggest stressor, for sure, is the parents. And you know, we all went into education to work with kids, but we spend most of our lives, it seems, dealing with their teachers and parents. But thank God for the kids! If it weren’t for them, I don’t think I could really do this job. 

**Researcher:** “In what contexts - academic, behavioral - do the most stressful parent-school interactions occur? In other words, what kind of cases do you see in which school and parent opinions and values don’t mesh, or where parents over-advocate, bully, or over-protect their children from reasonable consequences and other school decisions? 

**Participant:** “Well, definitely behavioral. There are always the issues of “My child didn’t do that” or “You’re not being fair to my child.” Often, there are issues of student interactions with each other, like bullying or social exclusion. And there are also the
cases of student-teacher interaction, silly things like “The teacher didn’t accept my child’s late homework.” These are not really academic issues. It’s not about the grade, but about the perceived slight that a child may have felt when a teacher wasn’t absolutely kind or gentle with him or her. And that really grates on some parents.

“And parents can just be ridiculous, to the point where it’s not even about their child but about them. This week, for example, we had a group of parents who, every year, provide a holiday breakfast for the faculty, and they’ve always done it in the teachers’ room. But the problem is, our teachers’ room is really small, and only a few teachers can fit into it at a time. So, we asked them if we could do it in the cafeteria, so we could all eat together. And they gave me such a hard time! Even though the breakfast was supposed to be for us, they wanted to decorate the teachers’ room like they always did. I had to go back and forth with them like 6 times before the thing was resolved. It was ridiculous.

“We really don’t have the issue of parents pressuring us to switch their kids’ teachers, because we have a house system, in which each kid has a whole team of teachers. We won’t switch just one teacher, and I’ve never had a parent opt for switching their kid’s whole schedule and whole peer group.

**Researcher:** “How many parents would you say come under the category of difficult or aggressive, along the lines we have been discussing? What percentage of your school population would that be? Are these parents consistently ‘in’ or ‘out’ of that group, or do they move from difficult to cooperative?
Participant: “Aggressive, I’d say about 60%. We have a very aggressive parent body. And they can be sweet as pie about it. But they want what they want. As far as difficult, that’s a much smaller percentage, maybe 5 or 10%. And they are repeatedly difficult, incident after incident, year after year.

Conclusion (Researcher): “Is there anything I haven’t asked that you would like to add?”

Participant: “No, but I really look forward to reading your completed dissertation.

Researcher: “Thank you so much for your time.”

Participant: “Thank you.”
Participant #6 – December 21, 2007

Introduction (Researcher): “I am researching parent-school interactions in suburban middle and high schools. Please be as detailed and descriptive as possible. Your responses will remain confidential.

Researcher: “Can you describe one or two memorable parent-school interactions for me?

Participant: “Sure. A couple of years ago, I was a math supervisor for the district and a student’s parents were nitpicking about their son’s grades. The student had received a B+ in his math course, and the parents were taking a fine-toothed comb to every test, every quiz. They even brought in tests from their older daughter, two years older, who had had the same teacher, and brought in tests of hers. And they were comparing the partial credit given on each, from different years. And when the teacher showed them the range of grades in the class, while hiding kids’ names, the parents accused her, and said, “Well, we don’t believe you. We think you probably have another set of grade books.” It was crazy. Ridiculous.

Researcher: “How much of your time would you say you spend responding to or dealing with parent-initiated contacts regarding issues that you and your staff do not consider to be a problem, or that magnify the importance - and emotion - of an issue beyond what you would say was reasonable?”
Participant: “I probably spent more time talking with parents directly as a math supervisor than I do as a school principal. In our high school, with 1,400 students, we may not hear from more than 2 or 3 really aggressive parents in a week – but those 2 or three parents! Unless you are willing to say, “No,” with no considerations for circumstances, a single conversation over a single issue can last 40 minutes or more, and that’s just when you – and other school personnel – are in the meeting or on the phone with the parents directly. And then there’s all the clean-up work, the internal meetings. So, by trying to be polite, to show them some courtesy, it can really drag on. So, it probably amounts to 2 to 3 hours a week, per parent, which is like 6 to 8 hours, depending on how many parents attack the school in a given week.

“About 90% of the time, we try to back the teacher or the supervisor, but if the teacher has made an error, you try to convince the teacher to compromise, which does not always happen, and then you have to spend even more time working on the teacher.

Researcher: “Do you think parent pressure influences decision-making in your school? Can you recall specific cases?

Participant: “It would be naïve to say ‘No.’ The biggest issue is when we make placement decisions for the following year. While we try to follow a pretty objective process – basing September’s placement on the prior June’s grades - we do listen to parents who don’t agree, or who offer extenuating circumstances, like all 4 grandparents died in one year. Sometimes they just beg for a second chance. And we sometimes bend. Like we
had a kid this year who just missed the cutoff for 5 different AP classes. So I asked a
teacher, a U.S. History teacher with room in his class, if he could take the kid. So, I think
we rarely do this, that it’s the exception, but if you ask the teachers, depending on their
personality or mood, they might tell you that we always cave when a parent puts pressure
on us.

**Researcher:** “Would you say that parent-school interactions cause stress within your
organization, i.e., among your teachers and administrators?”

**Participant:** “Certainly. For many teachers, the mere presence of parents causes stress. They are
intimidated by parents. As soon as they hear a parent has called, they think the worst.
They think there’s going to be conflict. That it’s going to be confrontational. And one of
our mantras, as administrators, when parents call us, is “Have you spoken to the teacher?
Because there are always two sides to a story, and maybe the story your child has told
you isn’t the whole story.” Teachers can even be hypersensitive to a legitimate parent
question. I would say that most parent questions are legitimate. But teachers who feel
they’ve been burned before are pretty wary of parents. If they’ve had even a few
negative interactions with certain, hyper-aggressive parents, that experience colors their
perceptions of other parents. Remember, these teachers went into the profession to deal
with kids, not their parents. So when a parent calls, they often get anxious, defensive,
insecure. Especially if they’ve had experience with an administrator not backing them up
with a parent.
Researcher: “How does the stress experienced from parent-school interactions compare with other stressors - accountability, administrator-faculty relations, student discipline in the absence of parent intervention, curricular challenges, recruitment of staff, for example?

Participant: “AP and Honors placements are probably the most stressful. Discipline actions can also cause a lot of stress. It’s pretty rare for a parent to say, “Thank you for disciplining our child, for teaching him a lesson.” More times than not, the parent becomes the advocate for the child. And we think they’re not acting like good parents. For example, when it comes to alcohol or drugs, they’ll say to us, “Yeah, but we all drank and smoked pot when we were teenagers. What’s so bad with this?” And we need to remind them that it’s illegal, as well as dangerous. And we say, “We’re not trying to crucify your child, but there are consequences for doing wrong.” We don’t have a whole lot of discipline issues, but when our debate team went on a trip to Boston, and got caught drinking, we’re going to react to that.

Researcher: “In what contexts - academic, behavioral - do the most stressful parent-school interactions occur? In other words, what kind of cases do you see in which school and parent opinions and values don’t mesh, or where parents over-advocate, bully, or over-protect their children from reasonable consequences and other school decisions?

Participant: “We get some athletic situations, like when a kid gets cut from a team. Sometimes there are issues of playing time. For the most part, our athletic director takes care of this. There are parents, of course, who are convinced that their kid doesn’t get more playing
time because the coach doesn’t like the kid, but most coaches – and I’ve been a coach myself – they just want to play the best athlete. A kid would really have to be despicable for a coach not to play him or her, if they’re the best athlete.

Researcher: “How many parents would you say come under the category of difficult or aggressive, along the lines we have been discussing? What percentage of your school population would that be? Are these parents consistently ‘in’ or ‘out’ of that group, or do they move from difficult to cooperative?

Participant: “I’m thinking 2 or 3 percent, the really hard-core difficult ones. And it may even be lower than that, maybe 1 or 2 percent. They’re the ones that should never have had kids. And the others are just sometimes the mother bears who, when they see their kid has been hurt, rush to the scene, but as soon as the crisis is over, they return to being normal people. But it’s still pretty rare that a parent will thank you for a decision you’ve made that the child or parents don’t like. They’re not going to say, “Thanks for teaching my kid this lesson.” They will downplay the seriousness of an incident, like student drinking, or they’ll all of a sudden start pushing for honors courses, because they’re nervous their kid won’t get into a good college.

Conclusion (Researcher): “Is there anything I haven’t asked that you would like to add?

Participant: “There’s one more story I thought of. We don’t let juniors drive to school and park on our campus, we just don’t have enough room. So, a few weeks ago, one of my
colleagues – she’s on staff and her son’s in the high school – she goes away to a conference, and tells her junior son he can park in her spot while she’s gone. And the kid gets reported to me, and I have to tell the kid – normally one of my assistants would do this, but his dad is a friend and his mom’s a colleague – that he needs to move his car. In our school, parking spaces are fiercely competed for. A senior will “key” a junior car if it’s in a senior space. So, I tell the kid, who calls his mom, and within 5 minutes she calls me and starts yelling at me. At that point, the mother bear had trumped the colleague.

“Despite all of the examples we’ve talked about, I still think the cup is half full. Most parents, whether their kid gets a bad grade or gets cut from a team, I see the mother bear instinct come forth, because they really love their kids, which is a good thing. Most of the time, they just need to vent. It’s only in the cases where certain parents are out of control a lot of the time. They kind of ruin it for everyone – the school, the other parents, and most of all, their own kids.

**Researcher:** “Thank you so much for your time.”

**Participant:** “I hope it helps you.”
APPENDIX B
Association of Independent Maryland Schools (AIMS) 
November, 2002

STATEMENT ON PARENTS AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

To be successful, every independent school needs and expects the cooperation of its parents, who must understand and embrace the school's mission, share its core values, and fully support its curriculum, faculty and staff. When joined by a common set of beliefs and purposes, the independent school and its parents form a powerful team with far-reaching positive effects on children and the entire school community.

Working together, parents and school professionals exert a strong influence on children to become better educated; they also help them to mature by modeling adult working relationships based upon civility, honesty, and respect.

In practice, the greatest impediment to effective teamwork between independent schools and parents grows out of misunderstandings about school decision-making processes: Who makes decisions in independent schools? How are those decisions made? Independent schools must communicate their procedures to parents, who, in turn, share the important responsibility to become informed members of the school community.

PARENTS AND THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

In most independent schools, decision-making authority at the highest level resides in a volunteer Board of Trustees whose membership often includes current parents. The Board of Trustees does not intervene in the daily affairs of the school, such as
curriculum development and hiring, evaluating, or firing of faculty and staff. Instead, the Board focuses on three areas critical to the success of any independent school: it selects, evaluates, and supports the Head of School, to whom it delegates authority to manage the school; it develops broad institutional policies that guide the Head in running the school; and it is accountable for the financial well-being of the school. In the conduct of its official business, the Board acts only as a whole; individual Trustees, including the Board Chair, have no authority to act unless specifically authorized to do so by the Board acting as a whole. 1

- AIMS encourages parents who are interested in high-level decision making to stay informed about the work of the Board of Trustees by reading school publications, talking to the Head of School, and attending appropriate meetings.

- Parents with concerns about the school or with decisions made by the administration or faculty are encouraged to inquire about and follow the school's review process, but they should not expect the Board of Trustees to act as an appeals board. In a day school, trustees often interact with others within the school community and hear concerns about the daily operation of the school. As a matter of good practice, the trustee reports those concerns to the Head of School.

PARENTS AND THE FACULTY
AND ADMINISTRATION

Parents play an essential and positive role in the life of an independent school. Not only are parents advocates for their children, they also support the faculty and administration through extensive volunteer activities and events.

The relationship between parents and the faculty and administration is formally governed by the school’s written enrollment contract and handbook, in which its procedures are spelled out. When parents choose to enroll their child in an independent school, they agree to subscribe to its mission, follow its rules, and abide by its decisions. However, most teachers and administrators would agree that trust
and mutual respect are the most essential underpinnings of effective working relationships with parents.

• AIMS encourages parents to work productively with teachers and administrators by staying informed about their child and important events in the life of the school. Thoughtful questions and suggestions should be welcomed by the school. It is incumbent upon the school to provide parents with timely and pertinent information.

• Parents best support a school climate of trust and respect by communicating concerns openly and constructively to the teacher or administrator closest to the problem. Efforts by parents to lobby other parents will be viewed by the school as counterproductive.

• While parents may not agree with every decision by the school, in most cases, the parent and school will find enough common ground to continue a mutually respectful relationship. In the extreme case, however, an impasse may be so severe that the parent cannot remain a constructive member of the community. In such cases, both the parent and the school should consider whether another school would be a better match for the family.

THE PARENTS ASSOCIATION
AND THE SCHOOL

The Parents Association in an independent school provides a vital and much-appreciated service to school leadership and the entire school community. Because the Parents Association is so important, and its volunteer activities potentially so wide-ranging, AIMS recommends the following steps to structure and clarify the Association’s role.

• The Board of Trustees, in consultation with the administration, should develop a set of written by-laws for the Association that make clear its procedures and role as a service organization.
• The by-laws should clearly state the Association's mission to support the decisions and policies of the Board and administration. The Parents Association neither participates in policy-making by the school, nor functions as a lobbying group.

• The finances of the Parents Association should be supervised and regularly monitored by the school and should be part of the school's annual audit process.

• The Head of School should be closely involved in the Association nominating process. Cooperation and teamwork between the Head of School and the officers of the Parents Association are crucial to the health of the school community.

• It is appropriate that the Parents Association advertise its activities and events. However, the Association is not a public relations arm of the school and should play no role in the school's efforts to communicate about itself.

The Association of Independent Maryland Schools (AIMS) is an association of more than 100 independent, college preparatory schools in Maryland and the District of Columbia, representing more than 40,000 students and more than 5,000 teachers, administrators, and staff. It was organized in 1967. AIMS works in cooperation with the Maryland State Department of Education and is a member of the Maryland chapter of the Council for American Private Education and the National Association of Independent Schools.

1 See the excellent Trustee Handbook by Mary Hundley DeKuyper, published by the National Association of Independent Schools.