

Thematic Article

# College begins in kindergarten: A path to higher education through family-school partnerships in a K-5 School

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## Abstract

As income inequality rises in the United States, students from low-income backgrounds and other excluded identities are more likely to remain in the lower income percentile, especially if they do not have college degrees (Kochhar & Cilluffo, 2018). Therefore, a critical approach is to focus on what happens before middle and high school, realizing that early childhood is a prime season for students to learn about college and their future. This study explored the practices influencing college-going aspirations for marginalized students in a K-5 school that engages teachers and families. The examination of the literature explores how schools prepare elementary-aged students to develop desires to go to college. The case study design collected data from observations, an administrative interview, and a document review. Findings revealed social and environmental practices influencing the attitudes and aspirations of students and families to attend college. The results have implications for curriculum and school culture to redefine the postsecondary conversation.

*Keywords:* college aspiration, college access, school culture, family-school partnership, postsecondary, college-going attitude

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Many students born into families from low-income backgrounds remain in the bottom two-fifths of the income distribution as adults. They have only a 5% chance of reaching the top fifth, particularly as income inequality increases in the United States (Kochhar & Cilluffo, 2018; Horowitz et al., 2020; Shiro et al., 2022). The challenge remains for students from excluded identities to complete K-12 education, transition into postsecondary, obtain college credentials, and progress in professional and personal pursuits.

Increasingly, educators are putting aside the myopic curriculum as the only approach to supporting students in middle and high schools as preparation for postsecondary aspirations. They seek educational practices that foster college-going expectations for all students and their families (Benner & Sargrad, 2020; Coneway et al., 2020; Fazekas & Warren, 2010). Approaches such as having increased college counseling, community study groups, or college fairs expose students to postsecondary options. However, focusing on what happens long before middle and high school is also vital. The often-overlooked early childhood years are an excellent time for students to learn about college and what it means for their future. Elementary schools can, therefore, develop a culture around postsecondary options and aspirations amongst family-school partnerships to minimize educational disparities.

This case study examined a K-5 institution focusing on an early college introduction. The school comprises 38% Black, 47.8% Hispanic/Latino/a, and 8.4% White students. Twenty-five percent of the student body speaks English as a second language. The school meets the needs of families from low-income backgrounds, with 79% of students on Free and Reduced Lunch.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 300 students are enrolled in grades K-5, and the student/

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<sup>2</sup> “The National School Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day. The program was established under the National School Lunch Act, signed by President Harry Truman in 1946” (United States Department of Agriculture).

teacher ratio is 11:1. The school started with a slow-growth approach, meaning it opened with kindergarten and first grade only, then grew by one grade level each year. As the school encourages a path to a four-year degree, it emulates the model in teacher qualification, and all teachers possess at least a bachelor's degree.

The school leadership keeps tabs on the local, state, and national data to understand trends and what qualifications job seekers require. In the state in which the school is located, 84% of jobs require credentials beyond high school, a combination of 49% four-year college degrees and 35% skills training (National Skills Coalition, 2018). Even more dismal is that only 25% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders are on track to earn postsecondary credentials. Opportunities are, therefore, incredibly limited without the necessary qualifications. The goal of the school demonstrates that the earlier and more often there are conversations with young children about careers, the more likely they are to be able to envision themselves going to college and attaining their dreams there. The school, therefore, grounds its ethos in early college introduction to prepare students for their local and global communities.

While college and career may seem far off for elementary-aged children, educating younger students is vital to their future success (IOM & NRC, 2015). Early childhood education is intricately linked with broader college and career readiness goals because early scholarship builds the groundwork for later victories in life (Coneway et al., 2020; Guilfoyle, 2013; Pulliam & Bartek, 2018). This study examined the preparation that influences a college-going culture on students, teachers, and families at the K-5 level, and explored the following key research question: What are the practices in a K-5 school influencing students' aspirations to pursue college?

## Literature Review

### School Culture

The meaning of school culture varies in the literature. However, for this study, school culture is the stable, underlying meanings that shape values, beliefs, and behavior over time. School culture contains traditions and ceremonies that build community and reinforce important values influencing performance (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Culture supports motivation and cooperation, shapes relationships and aspirations, and guides successful choices at every school level (Hobby, 2004).

School leaders must synchronously manage mandated reforms and preserve the school culture in an ever-changing environment (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Given the challenge to meet reform mandates and honor identities in school, there is a specific need to uncover ways to support historically excluded students in their training for and pursuit of postsecondary aspirations. Students experiencing poverty, first-generation college-bound students, and students from African America/Black, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous backgrounds need school climates that foster positive support (Bowen et al., 2009; Schachner, 2019) because such environments are associated with increased academic achievement and social-emotional outcomes (Aslan et al., 2022; Morgan & Cieminski, 2021; Thapa et al., 2013).

As the current student population in the United States increases in racial and ethnic diversity each year (Irwin et al., 2022), defining school culture is imperative to embracing and engaging all identities within the space (Petriwskyj, 2010; Schachner, 2019). Yet, research shows that students from historically excluded backgrounds struggle in academic pursuits and, as a result, remain in the lower percentile for academic acquisition and, by extension, wealth accumulation (Assari et al., 2021). Studies by the Brookings Institution and the Federal Reserve System show astronomical disparities: the average White family has \$840,000 more than the average Black family (Bhutta et al., 2020; Shiro et al., 2021). The data demonstrates that educational achievement predicates career success and wealth accumulation, which promotes social mobility.

Therefore, there is a growing need to raise academic expectations and foster a college-going culture in schools, particularly for historically excluded students. Early college culture is important in underrepresented communities to prepare them for college attendance and persistence. College culture is an environment saturated with resources that expose students to postsecondary education. There are ongoing informal and formal conversations about pathways to higher education (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009).

Research advocates that college access begins with a college-going culture in schools, or the extent to which staff anticipates, encourages, and provides practical steps for all students to acquire what they need to matriculate into higher education (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Roderick et al., 2011; Schachner, 2019). It is, therefore, never too early to start building a culture where students are encouraged to think about the possibilities in postsecondary opportunities (Curry & Milsom, 2021; Guilfoyle, 2013). A school culture emphasizing college preparation can influence how curriculum develops, teaching happens, and how we address

family and community needs. When school culture develops mindsets that see college as a possibility, students, families, and communities begin to envision educational achievement (Brown et al., 2009; Carey, 2016; Tierney, 2001).

### **Attitude to College**

Familial support is a crucial factor influencing students' attitudes and aspirations for college (Hossler et al., 1999; Sommer et al., 2012). In addition, students are less likely to gain the necessary knowledge about higher education without the appropriate school culture, family influence, and guidance (Hossler et al., 1999; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; McDonough, 1997; Ross, 2016; Sommer et al., 2012). More so, families that have not attended college find it challenging to address issues related to college choice (McDonough, 1997).

There is value in preparing students early to develop college-going attitudes. Schaefer and Rivera (2012) aver that students become more reflective and realistic about their college and career options and success when given early expectations (Akos et al., 2007; Conley, 2010). Therefore, when schools intentionally shape programs and curricula centered on academic and personal growth in college readiness, there is an increased likelihood of college-going attitudes and aspirations (Cabrera & Nasa, 2002).

At the elementary level, though students might be younger, it remains imperative that they experience high expectations and become more aware of their preferences, which could lead to prolonged engagement in their educational journey and increase academic achievement (Aud et al., 2012; Schaefer & Rivera, 2012). If there is no support from school administrators and teachers, Martinez and Castellanos (2018) surmise that historically excluded students tend to experience lower academic expectations and are at risk of dropping out.

### **Parental/Family Aspirations**

Families play an essential role in promoting college with children, but their aspirations are often unrecognized, especially for families from under-resourced and underrepresented backgrounds. For example, a common misconception about Hispanic/Latino/a/x families experiencing poverty is that they do not have high aspirations for their children's education. Closer to the truth for this population is that education is a priority (Ceja, 2006; Gonzales, 2012; Kiyama, 2010). Despite the desire to prepare children for postsecondary options, families in these groups feel ill-equipped to address college aspirations (Fann et al., 2009; Kirk et al., 2011) and desire more information to help their children (Fann et al., 2009; Kiyama, 2010; Tierney & Auerbach, 2004). If these needs remain unaddressed, a lack of college-going knowledge will produce lower college aspirations and attitudes (Bohon et al., 2006).

Schools should start early in reinforcing family college desires and introducing the idea of planning for college (Auerbach, 2004; Fann et al., 2009; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Conceptualizing college attendance in under-resourced and underrepresented communities is not necessarily a natural progression (Ceja, 2006). Therefore, to address equity in access to postsecondary education and its benefits, schools must intentionally equip both families and their children and further match expectations with a collective efficacy regarding college choice, college attendance, and college completion (Amaro-Jiménez, 2020; Kirk et al., 2011). Investing in families as motivational partners and resources in pursuing tertiary education could have a ripple effect on education, as a whole, as there is a positive relationship between parental encouragement and the choice their students make to attend college (Amaro-Jiménez, 2020; Auerbach, 2004; Ceja, 2006; Hossler et al., 1999; Kiyama, 2010; Mitchell & Jaeger, 2018). Furthermore, parental support significantly influences the early years but could decrease as students transition to higher grade levels (Fann et al., 2009; Hossler et al., 1999), so obtaining parental involvement in students' primary years is crucial.

### **Methodology**

Using a case study design, I focused on the unique structure of a K-5 school to provide descriptive and vibrant illustrations of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Stanford Prep is the assigned pseudonym for the school in this study to protect the confidentiality of the institution and participants. The case study offered an in-depth understanding of how Stanford Prep creates a college-attending attitude for students in K-5 as a reorientation and re-definition of college access. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board, and the school consented to observations and interviews.

This investigation's primary sources of information were direct observations at the school, an interview with the school administration, and document review (Yin, 2018). Direct observations occurred extensively to explore appropriate behaviors or environmental conditions relevant to desires of students to attend college. The observations were non-participatory and allowed me to situate amongst groups of students, staff, faculty, and families to record data without direct involvement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). I, therefore, observed the beginning of the school day for students, staff, and teachers. I also observed the before-class gathering in the cafeteria, where students met for breakfast and then community circle (a weekly gathering in the school gym of K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students for the first session and 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders for the second session, which included families). Additionally, I examined class interactions between students and teachers and the daily interactions of staff personnel in public spaces of the school building. Finally, I observed the physical components and condition of the school building to find evidence of a culture geared towards college enrollment.

I spoke with an administrator onsite at the school for the semi-structured interview. For the sake of this study, the participant is referred to as Sarah, and all other individuals referenced have an assigned pseudonym to protect their identity and maintain confidentiality. The semi-structured interview contained a few structured questions concerning school culture, mission and vision, and partnerships with the community and families. However, a semi-structured format allowed for emerging and relevant questions concerning events, facilities, and personnel as we toured the school together. The interview took a walk-and-talk approach, during which I spent several hours gaining contextual perspective. It was in a neutral and comfortable setting for the participant as she was integral in the school's operations.

Reviewing relevant documents was crucial in the study as I tried to understand school culture within the context of Stanford Prep's mission to educate every scholar about postsecondary options. I reviewed documents such as the school's proposal application submitted to the district, the family handbook, marketing materials such as the visitors' guide, and the school's website. Each printed and electronic artifact was scrutinized for patterns and meaning and to generate empirical knowledge about the phenomenon. Through the examination of documents, I gained holistic insight from the conceptual stage of the school to its current practices. The research questions and literature review guided the examination of the documents. Therefore, I used a consistent protocol to conduct a systematic review of the relevant artifacts to verify or corroborate the observations and interview findings. Some pre-determined codes such as "scholars," "family," and "college" were integral in thematic analysis. Even so, words were not simply lifted from the available documents; rather, I established the meaning of the document and its contribution to the study (Camic, 2021). As such, I considered the following factors in the examination of the documents:

1. The original purpose of the document and audience.
2. The language used – were similar terminologies used in the application, in brochures about the school, or on the website? For example, was the word "scholars" consistent across document types?
3. How does the text draw attention to practices in the school?
4. Are there multiple values related to the school culture that might create tension between the written word and the actual practice?

To minimize subjectivity in the review and analysis process, I incorporated a peer debrief with a faculty member with expertise in the content area (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The peer reviewed my findings, asked follow-up questions, and provided feedback on areas needing further exploration.

The research questions and literature review guided the observations, interview, and document review. I concentrated on college-going culture and attitudes and listened for or observed evidence of these practices. I coded the observation notes, interview data, and documents to formulate significant statements and meanings, which were interpreted and sorted into themes, as presented in the next section.

## Findings

The data collected established an understanding of school culture and college-going aspirations. In summary, the daily greeting, implementation of structure, curriculum, and language tools such as chants and celebrating accomplishments demonstrated Stanford Prep's culture. Additionally, the data revealed college-going attitudes between students, teachers, and families, beginning as early as home visits and extending to campus events for families.

### The Daily Greeting

Standford Prep holds to its value of focusing on college the second a child walks through its doors. I sat silently in the lobby, waiting for the school's front doors to open and observing each staff person getting ready to greet the congregating body of students outside. What came next was uniquely positioned as a student-centered activity. Two staff members stood at the door as the children formed two lines. Each child was greeted by name and with a handshake. Next, they were individually asked, "Why are you here?" With intentional eye contact with the staff, each child responded, "To climb the mountain to college." No child entered the building without being greeted, questioned, and required to make eye contact and respond. This ritual is a daily practice at Stanford Prep.

### The Dualistic Role of Structure

While the halls were lined with blue and orange tape for students to navigate quickly to classrooms and through transitions, there were also "structured expectations" in how students conducted themselves in the academic environment. The structure tethered between the physical environment and the temporal structure of activities and practices. For example, students proceeded along the blue and orange lines in a military-like fashion, coupled with the requirement that all students wear uniforms, which staff members checked for infractions.

During our tour, Sarah commented that structure helped to "facilitate academic success." The reference to the *structure* was further emphasized in reviewing the school's document, *Application for a Charter for the Proposed [Standford] Prep School*. The use of the word "structure" frequently occurred in the document and explicitly stated, "We create structure and order by placing special emphasis on daily, weekly, and annual rituals, enabling students to anticipate a routine within the charter school that is often lacking in their families and their communities." The document further adds that creating an environment of order and structure was essential to its mission of college-going attitudes.

### Songs and Chants

Forster (2006) proposed that using songs and chants in the younger classroom has neurological and linguistic benefits. These are fun and child-friendly tools for language acquisition to improve speech rhythms, intonations, and pronunciations (Forster, 2006; Shin, 2017). A case in point: Mrs. Jackson (pseudonym) gestured for students to stand, counting down, "3 and 2 and 1...." The class, in unison with choreographed gestures and movement, echoed the following chant:

We write to persuade,  
And we write to inform.  
We write to convey,  
What we really want to say.  
We use strong words because language is power.  
And we have to get to college every minute, every hour.

Harnessing the students' energy, Mrs. Jackson praised their beautiful choral chant and asked for three claps and stomps on the count of three. "1, 2, 3. 'Clap! Clap! Clap! Stomp! Stomp! Stomp!'" With a nonverbal gesture, the students sat back down on the rug.

In another observation, the cafeteria, which was overwhelmingly quiet for more than fifteen minutes, suddenly swelled in a chant of "one school, one vision, together we are on a mission." The teacher leading the chorus called, "Why are we here?" to which the scholars responded, "To climb the mountain to college." The community circle in the gym echoed college chants where children dressed in college attire took turns rousing their peers to join the various choruses. The chants emphasized college vocabulary and gave teachers more scope to practice language learning skills (Forster, 2006; Shin, 2017).

### Celebration of Accomplishments

A successful school must have a culture emphasizing a positive learning approach. Stanford Prep believes in joy for students to achieve at the highest level and that students will succeed if they enjoy the learning process (Application for a Charter for the Proposed [Standford] Prep School, 2010). The 3<sup>rd</sup> core value of the school emphasizes this belief: "A no-excuses school culture, infused with joy and rigor, spurs academic achievement."

Further evidence of joy was the celebrations of achievement in the community circle. The joy dynamic was not mere applause but the physical hoist of the student on the shoulder of the Head of the School as all students roused cheers of celebration. The Head of School pounced around the gym, with an ecstatic student gleaming about the achievement and reveling in the chants of her classmates celebrating her success. Other notable recognitions for which scholars aspired were (1) the golden dictionary awarded to the scholar for using the most “WOW” words in their vocabulary or (2) the award of the “prop stick” to the scholar who was living out most of the school’s values for that week.

### **Curriculum and Language**

While the curriculum was paced and driven by assessment performance data, there was also an emphasis on college preparatory language. As mentioned, chants were a core component in many activities. For example, at the close of breakfast in the cafeteria, a chant directed by a teacher had the scholars counting by twos, fives, and then tens. The teacher called the name of another scholar to begin the next mathematical build each time. The curriculum was, therefore, evident in the chants as in these call-and-response scenarios where teachers engaged the students in making visual and auditory connections with phonemes and mathematical concepts. Teachers extended the practice in the structured instruction time and began each class session with a call and response of, “Why are we here?”

Teachers and administrators spoke with language directed to college-going attitudes and culture. All students were referred to as “scholars” to facilitate tertiary language, making them more prepared for college language and culture. Sarah consistently referred to the students as scholars in the interview. In addition, Mrs. Jackson demonstrated this during one of the classroom observations: “I think we are ready for the story...Are you ready to hear about Liliana’s morning routine?” The class responded with a soft “Yes,” but Mrs. Jackson was unconvinced. In a calm and neutral tone, she says, “If we are ready for the story, I should see my prepsters sitting properly in scholarly position, and when I ask if we are ready, I should hear enthusiasm.” Re-asking the question, the class sits with their hands folded and backs straight and responds with a loud and convincing “Absolutely.” “That is more like it,” smiles Mrs. Jackson. “That’s the Stanford Prep way!” These formats supported the ongoing informal and formal conversations, creating pathways to college (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009).

### **Attitudes to College**

The school’s shared vision believed that all students could attend a college or university of their choice, given the proper preparation (Knight-Diop, 2010). From the moment I entered the campus, there were banners with “I will be a college graduate.” The school buzzed with personnel dedicated to all students pursuing postsecondary education (Knight-Diop, 2010). The desired aspirations lingered throughout the building as the hallways echoed with interactions that intentionally emphasized college-going attitudes.

Sarah shared the larger vision of the school as she emphasized that all practices strengthened the goal of going to college so that students understood the rigor and expectations of why they were scholars at Stanford Prep. Teachers were an integral part of this process. Sarah shared, “We grow our own.” She added that in professional development sessions, teachers learned the rituals and expectations, and the follow-through was for all teachers and staff to fulfill the values of Stanford Prep. “This should be a place you want to send your child,” she commented.

There was an emphasis on the relationship between staff, teachers, and students as inherent in transmitting college-going attitudes. For example, small advisory groups occurred each morning by grade level. Sarah emphasized that these relationships were critical to engaging and preparing scholars for success at all academic levels. The visibility of the Head of the School was also notable. He greeted all students he encountered by name and with enthusiasm, which brought visions of pride to their faces. Like the rest of his team, he chanted, cheered, questioned, and sought responses in an all-familiar language intended to get little minds wondering.

### **Family Aspirations**

The most surprising finding is the strong home-school partnership pursued by the school. Starting with home visits and family orientations, Stanford Prep engaged families in conversations about their hopes and dreams for their children while infusing how the school would support students in reaching their goals (Application for a Charter for the Proposed [Stanford] Prep School, 2010). The school believed that its responsibility was to

help families help their children. According to Sarah, the school's "University Nights" workshop supported families in understanding homework and how to assist students. The workshops focused on building academic skills and providing behavioral techniques to help students at home.

Sarah further commented that many students at Stanford Prep would be first-generation students when they attend college if other family members, in the interim, did not pursue a degree. Therefore, the school wanted to generate postures leaning toward going to college in families as well. Sarah noted that "many of our families now wish to go back to school themselves. They say, 'How can I expect my child to do something I never did.'" Sarah also offered that a handful of family members have begun pursuing a college education because of their exposure to the values of Stanford Prep, possibly creating generational change in their families.

Once again, the community circle time played a vital role in the school's mission and values as the event embraced the regular attendance of families. The presence of family members, including younger and older siblings, lined the periphery of the gymnasium. Families willingly participated when students echoed chants and administrators encouraged other forms of engagement. Central to the partnership between families and the school was the recognition that this was a shared responsibility and shared ownership of the students' challenges and successes (Application for a Charter for the Proposed [Stanford] Prep School, 2010).

### **Discussion**

The unique ways the school shapes a culture of attending college are essential to the success of Stanford Prep. The school focuses on building a thriving college-going culture by integrating students, teachers, leaders, and families into rituals and practices to shape the school's identity (Deal & Peterson, 2016). McClafferty et al., 2002 suggest three necessary conditions for supporting college-going culture actively: (1) the leadership in schools must be committed to building college-going culture, (2) all school personnel are consistent in the message they communicate to support student's college aspirations and attitudes, and (3) school counselors must be prepared to work with teachers and families in the preparation and readiness for college. Stanford Prep exhibited the first two of these critical components. While school counselors were not at the elementary level, the practices incorporated teachers and families to facilitate college-going attitudes. In recognizing these partnerships, the school situates a needed and nuanced perspective that family engagement in varied forms engenders postsecondary readiness (Fann et al., 2009; Morgan, 2019). As a result of engaging families and the community, the school also reshapes the attitudes of other stakeholders, not just students' attitudes. Family engagement is vital to students' success and is treated with importance by leaders and teachers in the school.

The school's invitation to families as integral parts of the process dismantles the ideology that family engagement should focus on homework, grade checking, and being present for parent/teacher conferences. While family engagement positively impacts academic achievement, involvement with homework and grade checking have minimal effects on achievement. Instead, a positive impact on academic achievement is more effective through early home literacy and preserving a strong hope that children will flourish in college (Fann et al., 2009; Froiland et al., 2013). Because early family expectations have sustained effects on children, family engagement mechanisms for young children that also target elevating parental expectations must be developed. According to Lawrence (2015), families are likely to raise their expectations because they adapt to a higher expectational norm or recognize relative advantages for their children due to characteristics identified in other students or the school.

Building a college-going culture in elementary and secondary schools increases students' chances to attend postsecondary institutions, especially for historically excluded students. Even with effective teaching and learning, students change their attitudes toward college based on exposure, school climate, and culture (Jayakumar et al., 2013; Knight & Duncheon, 2020; McDonough, 1997; Roderick et al., 2008; Weinstein & Savitz-Romer, 2009). Stanford's sustained commitment to school culture aimed at sending children to college embodies expectations that prepare students primarily from historically excluded communities (Oakes, 2003; Oseguera, 2013).

The evidence suggests that the culture embedded in the school's rituals, structure, and policies builds commitment and ignites motivation, which nurtures identity and connection to the school (Deal & Peterson, 2016). The environment is joyous, optimistic, caring, and supportive, and the context is infectious. Even further, learning is fun and engaging in the classroom but equally so for teachers and families. The approach to teaching and learning attests that culture influences not only the actions of stakeholders within the school but also their motivation and spirit (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

The school's core values support the research that students exposed to college and career development activities begin to develop and expand their sense of these options (Akos et al., 2007; Jayakumar et al., 2013; Schaefer & Rivera, 2012). Creating a college-going attitude emanates from the school's vocabulary, curriculum, documents, activities, and physical structure. The environmental conditions position the physical artifacts in the school as everyday encounters, embedding the memory of a desired learning atmosphere.

While considerable effort encourages a college-going culture, losing children's cultural knowledge and values may be possible. Since the practices within the school focus on getting students to assimilate into the American idea of college, the school loses social awareness and ignores the function and structure of students' identities (Hecht & Shin, 2015). For example, the ritual that requires students to greet with a handshake and direct eye contact ignores cultural norms not centered on Eurocentric ideologies. The school has a higher representation of Hispanic/Latino/a/x students, where respect is often expressed by not looking adults in the eyes (Valdivieso & Nicolau, 1992). Acknowledging students' cultural positionality and funds of knowledge should complement rather than counter their college-going aspirations (Kiyama, 2010).

Further practices intended to reduce problems with discipline, provide structure, and shape the school's climate may or may not be effective. For example, the implementation of the physical structure and "structured expectations" led to public debate about neoliberal governmentality in schools and the function of power where individual freedom and expression are antithetical to halls lined with tape, students marching in orderly form, wearing uniforms, and the check for infractions all to improve educational attainment and prepare students for workplace expectations (Freidrich & Shanks, 2021). According to Ansari et al. (2022), there is minimal evidence confirming that the practice, for example, of school uniforms and the environment it creates impacts social behavior and issues of economic and educational equality. Paradoxically, uniforms can worsen inequity. For students from under-resourced backgrounds, the cost of a uniform may be prohibitive, engendering barriers before students even arrive on campus (Reidy, 2021; Sabic-El-Rayess et al., 2020). So then, practices such as constantly maintaining militant order and noting uniform infractions beg the question of the link to more significant postsecondary outcomes.

### **Considerations from the Case**

This case examines school culture, family engagement, and educational disparities for historically excluded communities regarding college-going aspirations and attitudes in younger-aged students. The study contributes to the literature regarding social and environmental practices influencing students' and families' college-going attitudes and aspirations. The results have implications for curriculum and school culture to redefine the postsecondary conversation.

While school culture is fundamental to accomplishing the mission and vision, the school must consider how it establishes valued outcomes and the means to achieve them, such as how culture functions within the environment (Hecht & Shin, 2015). Focusing on a task-oriented and process-oriented definition of school culture will likely have sustaining effects regarding college-going attitudes and aspirations in which students' identities, cultural norms, and backgrounds are not lost in assimilation (Medne & Lapina, 2019). Utilizing both approaches could center students of color and other marginalized identities. The practices and activities should acknowledge students' and families' ways of being and their funds of knowledge.

The school serves families from economically challenged backgrounds in a neighborhood experiencing gentrification.<sup>3</sup> The school should, therefore, seek to look at how the change in the community could have real and complex consequences for students. The examination spawns a series of questions: How is residential stability or institutional composition changing the school's mission (Pearman, 2019)? How does the school continue to redefine family engagement in a changing environment? What resources are necessary to provide families with the generational knowledge capacity to prepare all members for college aspirations, attendance, and completion?

The school's recognition that every student has the potential to achieve and excel in academics is commendable. However, as the school evolves as a model targeted at early childhood college aspirations and college-going attitudes, it should consider (1) the options for creative thinking in a structured environment to prepare students as global citizens, (2) the range of postsecondary options for students to explore their interests and skills, and (3) the definition of college for the school. As context for the latter, does the description rely on

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, gentrification means the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents.



traditional access to a four-year college? Notably, all the college apparel in the daily activities and those displayed around the school were from traditional public and private universities – Vanderbilt University, the University of Denver, Davidson College, Lafayette College, the University of Northern Colorado, etc.

### Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

I realize that this study only occurred at one school site. Examining several schools with a similar model could provide more robust data. Another limitation is that only the voices of a few participants are in this study. Central to students' college aspirations is the influence of families. Therefore, the school is a rich platform for future data-informed decision-making. Gathering data about postsecondary attitudes and aspirations from teachers and families through surveys, interviews, and focus groups will assess the development of college-going aspirations at the elementary level. While the institution is relatively new and does not have evidence of students transitioning to college because of the early exposure to college-going culture, the school should consider how to maintain relationships and track the academic journey of its alums. The model is unique, and it would be beneficial to explore a longitudinal study to analyze the model of “college starts in kindergarten.”

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