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When Everyone is Involved: Parents and Communities in School Reform

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Education research repeatedly documents that parent and community involvement in education contributes to students' academic success. When families, communities and schools form partnerships to enable children's learning, everyone benefits — schools work better, families become closer, community resources thrive, and students improve academically. Language minority students and English language learners (ELLs) in particular, are considerably more likely to succeed when their parents participate in their education by helping with homework, attending school events, conferring with teachers, serving as volunteers, or participating in school governance (Bermúdez & Márquez, 1996; Tse, 1996). Likewise, when communities become active participants, they assist ELLs in overcoming multiple academic challenges. While the importance of forging partnerships with parents and communities is well recognized, specific barriers and strategies for overcoming these barriers exist for those concerned with the education of ELLs.

Importance of Parent and Community Involvement to the Education of ELLs

Research on parent involvement and its powerful influence is broad and clear. Comprehensive surveys of this research (Henderson & Berla, 1995; National PTA, 1998) document the following benefits for students, families, and schools.

- When parents are involved, students achieve more, regardless of socio-economic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parents' education level.
- When parents are involved in their students' education, those students have higher grades and test scores, better attendance, and complete homework more consistently.
- Students whose parents are involved in their lives have higher graduation rates and greater enrollment rates in post-secondary education.
- Educators hold higher expectations of students whose parents collaborate with the teacher. They also hold higher opinions of those parents.
- In programs that are designed to involve parents in full partnerships, student achievement for disadvantaged children not only improves, but can also reach levels that are standard

for middle-class children. In addition, the children who are farthest behind make the greatest gains.

- Children from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to do better when parents and professionals collaborate to bridge the gap between the culture at home and the learning institution.
- Student behaviors, such as alcohol use, violence, and antisocial behavior decrease as parent involvement increases.
- Students are more likely to fall behind in academic performance if their parents do not participate in school events, develop a working relationship with their child's educators, or keep up with what is happening in their child's school.
- Junior and senior high school students whose parents remain involved make better transitions, maintain the quality of their work, and develop realistic plans for their future. Students whose parents are not involved, on the other hand, are more likely to drop out of school.
- The most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to: 1) create a home environment that encourages learning; 2) communicate high, yet reasonable, expectations for their children's achievement and future careers; and 3) become involved in their children's education at school and in the community.

On their own, schools and families may not be able to support the academic success of every student (Kirst, 1991). In particular, ELL students, including immigrants and the U.S.-born children of immigrants, may not receive appropriate educational services due to a mismatch between the languages and cultures of the schools and those of their communities (Adger, 2000). In order to meet the multifaceted needs of ELL communities, many schools provide language classes, medical assistance, legal services, and childcare. In this community school model, the families are connected to schools, and receive much needed services. Increasingly, schools rely upon collaborations with local businesses, universities, medical centers, faith-based organizations and other community-based organizations (CBOs) to provide a quality education to all students, including ELLs. Partnerships between schools and CBOs can provide academic, linguistic, and cultural support for ELLs' success. These school/CBO partnerships offer appropriate programs that respect students' linguistic and cultural needs, and are accessible both physically and psychologically. In other words, they operate where and when schools and students need them and in ways that seem comfortable and useful. Furthermore, successful partnerships can offer and reinforce supports that schools assume students already have, such as health care and other social services. Successful partnerships are distinguished by program flexibility as well as by adequate resources for, and responsiveness to, meeting these broad needs (Adger, 2000).

Promoting partnerships between schools and communities has also been an

important topic on the nation's agenda (U.S. Department of Education, 1991) and the positive impact of such partnerships is well documented (Gargiulo & Graves, 1991; Espinosa, 1995). Research specifically suggests that schools of the future must be restructured with the assistance of the business sector and the community at large (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). However, restructuring will be effective only if it includes acknowledgement of barriers and specific strategies to address the needs and promote the involvement of these important players in the educational process.

Barriers to Parent and Community Involvement among ELL Populations

Often, language and/or cultural barriers prevent parents from feeling confident in their own ability to collaborate with schools and assist in their children's academic achievement. Below is a summary of the primary barriers that can impede full parent and community participation in the educational system (Ritter, Mont-Reynard & Dornbusch, 1993; Inger, 1992; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; García, 1990). Knowledge and understanding of these barriers is the first step toward bridging them.

Language skills. Inability to understand the language of the school is a major deterrent to the parents who have not achieved full English proficiency. In these cases, interactions with the schools are difficult, and, therefore, practically nonexistent.

Home/school partnerships. In some cultures, such as many Hispanic ones, teaming with the school is not a tradition. Education has been historically perceived as the responsibility of the schools, and parent intervention is viewed as interference with what trained professionals are supposed to do.

Work interference. Work is a major reason stated by parents for noninvolvement in school activities. Conflicts between parent and school schedules may mean parents cannot attend school events, help their children with homework, or in other ways become active participants in their children's education.

Knowledge of the school system. A great number of low-income parents view schools as an incomprehensible and purposefully exclusionary system. Lack of trust is often the result of misunderstanding the perceived intentions of each party. Sending home communications in English only and scheduling meetings at times when parents cannot attend serve to reinforce parent apprehension. The lack of involvement that results from mistrust and apprehension is often misperceived by schools as a lack of concern for the children's education.

Self-confidence. Many parents of ELL students believe that their participation does not help schools perform their jobs as educational institutions; as a result, they separate themselves from the process. Parents who feel uncomfortable in the school setting are less likely to be involved than those who have developed a sense of equal partnership.

Past experiences. Many non-English speaking parents have had negative education experiences of their own, and these memories linger through adulthood. In some cases, these parents have fallen victim to racial and linguistic discrimination by the schools. Negative feelings toward home-school interaction are often reinforced when schools communicate with parents only to share bad news about their children.

Supporting Parent and Community Involvement for ELLs

Research on effective practices for all students has identified a number of factors that support parent involvement, many of which are especially relevant to parents of ELLs. For example, parent involvement in children's education is higher if school policies and teacher practices are designed with parents in mind (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1992). A salient feature of exemplary parent-involvement programs is respect for cultural diversity and active efforts to strengthen the native language in the home (McCollum & Russo, 1993). When parents' home language is limited, they serve as poor models for children acquiring the language. Home language loss can also have "serious [negative] consequences for parent-child relationships" (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Therefore, certain pedagogical models, such as family literacy or developmental bilingual education, may facilitate parent involvement. Family literacy programs support education for the whole family, connect parents to their children's schooling and increase student achievement (Mulhern, Rodríguez-Brown, & Shanahan, 1994). Developmental bilingual education models, because they are designed to develop both languages, facilitate family communication.

Research shows that schools can involve and empower parents of ELL students to fully participate in the education of their children. Following are concrete examples of how schools can immediately increase parental involvement and subsequently establish mutual trust and respect between themselves and parents:

- Translate parent meetings and informational materials into community languages;
- Offer adult English classes and family literacy programs;
- Make explicit unstated rules and behavioral expectations (for example, that parents are expected to attend parent/teacher conferences);
- Invite and encourage parents to volunteer at the school; and
- Offer power-sharing relationships by encouraging parents to form advocacy groups and enabling them to share in decision-making about school programs and policies (Delgado-Gaitán, 1991).

A similar set of outreach strategies was outlined in a more recent study of how to successfully involve Hispanic parents (Espinosa, 1995). Many of these recommendations are relevant to parents of all languages and cultures:

- *Personal Touch*. Written flyers or articles sent home have proven to be ineffective even when written in Spanish. Thus, it is crucial to also use face-to-face communication, recognizing that it may take several personal meetings before the parents gain sufficient trust to actively participate. Home visits are a particularly good way to begin to develop rapport.
- *Non-Judgmental Communication*. In order to gain the trust and confidence of Hispanic parents, teachers must avoid making them feel they are to blame or are doing something wrong when their children do not do well. Parents need to be supported for their strengths, not judged for perceived failings.
- *Perseverance in Maintaining Involvement*. To keep Hispanic parents actively engaged, program activities must respond to a

real need or concern of the parents. Teachers should have a good idea about what parents will get out of each meeting and how the meeting will help them in their role as parents.

- **Bilingual Support.** All communication with Hispanic parents, written and oral, must be provided in Spanish and English. Having bicultural and bilingual staff helps promote trust.
- **Strong Leadership and Administrative Support.** Flexible policies, a welcoming environment, and a collegial atmosphere all require administrative leadership and support. As with other educational projects or practices that require innovation and adaptation, the efforts of teachers alone cannot bring success to parent involvement projects. Principals must also be committed to project goals.
- **Staff Development Focused on Hispanic Culture.** All staff must understand the key features of Hispanic culture and its impact on their students' behavior and learning styles. It is the educator's obligation to learn as much about the culture and background of their students as possible.

Outreach efforts need not be limited to parents. Schools can identify and access community organizations able to provide opportunities for out-of-school experiences that enrich children's lives. These organizations can keep children safe, mobilize needed services, and provide children with opportunities for productive use of free time. In neighborhoods that are rich with resources, it is taken for granted that children will be exposed to opportunities for experiential learning, travel, recreation, and experiencing the arts. When ELLs lack opportunities to be exposed to community resources - because of language, financial, or cultural barriers - CBOs are in a position to make deliberate and concerted efforts to provide these opportunities (Schorr, 2000). Additionally, schools can serve as a resource and referral agency to support the overall strength and stability of the families by having access to family literacy programs, vocational training, ESL programs, improved medical and dental services, and other community-based social services.

An Effective Model

Schools and school districts throughout the nation have established meaningful policies and practices to involve parents and the community. For example, the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) has established that each school site, preschool through high school, develop a long-range parent involvement plan that is an integral part of the general school improvement plan. The plan must address the needs of parents of linguistically and culturally diverse and impoverished students, and require that each school assess the effectiveness of its plan in involving these parents. Additionally, the district requires:

- all school communications to parents be issued in the major languages of the district's linguistically diverse students;
- all public meetings with parents to be translated between English and the major languages of the district's linguistically diverse students; further, that the language of communication

used to conduct the meetings will not always be English with translation provided into the parents' languages, but, instead, that meetings will also be conducted on a regular basis in the languages of the parents and translated into English.

- all one-to-one communications and meetings between a student's parent(s) and the school be conducted in the language of the parent(s); further, that the student may not be utilized as the translator.

SFUSD also recommends that schools go beyond the traditional ways of engaging and empowering parents to include strategies that:

- Provide flexible hours for holding meetings so that parents are able to attend;
- Enable familiarity with their students' communities;
- Provide parents with access to information, planning and power structures;
- Teach parents about school institutions and structures;
- Involve parents in professional development efforts;
- Recognize the contributions of parents and communicate respect to parents; and
- Identify sources of knowledge that parents possess and incorporating them into curricula.

Conclusion

Bermúdez and Márquez (1996) highlight the fact that efforts to involve the community in the education of ELL students invariably lead to the involvement of parents. Thus, there is a three-way link between parents, schools, and the community. When the partnership between any two of these stakeholders is strengthened, the other two are consequently strengthened. Additionally, enabling and empowering parental and community involvement is an important component of school reform for all students, and the barriers to effective involvement and their proposed remedies merit everyone's consideration. For ELLs, the need to examine and establish effective involvement programs is especially crucial to academic success. Given the established benefits associated with engaging parents and communities in school activities, it is worth the time and effort to create bridges that will allow them to communicate effectively between these two important worlds of children.

Resource Guide

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Organizations

America Reads

<http://www.ed.gov/inits/americanreads/readnow.html>

Center on Family, School and Community Partnerships

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm>

Communities in Schools

<http://www.cisnet.org/index.html>

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education

<http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/>

National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education

<http://www.ncela.gwu.edu>

National Parent Teacher Association (PTA)

<http://www.pta.org>

National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs:

<http://www.pta.org/programs/invstand.htm>

Northwest Regional Education Laboratory (NWREL)

<http://www.nwrel.org>

Parent and Community Involvement Resources

<http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/library/parent.htm>

Partnership for Family Involvement in Education (PFIE)

<http://pfie.ed.gov/>

The Southeast Asian Culture and Education Foundation (SEACAEF)

<http://www.seacaef.org>

United States Department of Education

<http://www.ed.gov>

Links to each state's parent resource centers:

<http://www.ed.gov/Programs/bastmp/PRC.htm>

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