English Language Learners and Parent Outreach

Citation: Preparing to Serve English Language Learner Students: School Districts with Emerging English Language Learner Communities. Zehler, et al. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. Institute of Education Sciences. [pp 24-6] 2008

Outreach to parents.

Families of English language learners often do not understand schooling practices (such as homework policies, field-trip procedures, parent-teacher meetings) and are uncomfortable coming into schools. Specific and regular efforts to reach out to parents can help them to understand such practices and to feel more comfortable visiting schools. For both schools and districts the first step is to identify local and other resources to provide interpretation and translation support for communication with parents and others in the English language learner community.

Examples from the literature

• Establish connections with students’ homes.

In the majority of documents reviewed, establishing connections with students’ homes was regarded an integral part of an English language learner program. Thus, for example, in Brunn’s (2000) study of a rural Midwestern school district the parents were involved in developing and implementing the English language learner program together with the students, teachers, and school and district administrators. While consensus building was difficult at times, Brunn stresses the importance of involving all stakeholders. The Mid-Continent Comprehensive Center (2005) notes the cultural differences in views about parent and school contacts.

• Broaden opportunities for interacting with parents.

Wrigley (2000) emphasizes the need to cultivate links between home and school by going beyond translating documents into the families’ native languages. She describes a school in rural Virginia whose principal greatly increased the participation of Hispanic parents through a series of parent meetings, conducted in Spanish, on the importance of parents’ involvement in their children’s education. Hamann (2003) describes what some called the ultimate home visit, as teachers from one Georgia district traveled to the areas in Mexico that were the original home communities of students in the school. Hamann’s discussion of the Georgia project also makes clear the role that local community and business members can play in developing infrastructure and resources to meet the needs of English language learner students.
and their families. In the district studied by Hill and Flynn (2004), the focus was on developing staff capacity to improve communication with parents, identifying the needs of parents (through surveys in their native language), and making efforts to ensure that parents were able to actively participate in their children’s education. Findings from a needs assessment conducted by an advisory council showed that parents could benefit from training in such areas as their rights and responsibilities under the NCLB Act, effective communication at parent-teacher conferences, English classes for adults, and services in the community.

Other recommendations for encouraging parents to participate include offering English classes for parents, holding regular parent meetings, and involving other members of the community who speak their language. Wainer (2004) provides examples of innovative strategies for engaging parents in the school, such as offering more scheduling flexibility for school meetings and providing interpreters, offering food and babysitting for parents for school gatherings, and providing language and family literacy classes.

• Structure opportunities for communication with parents as part of the daily school environment. Hill and Flynn (2004) recommend making an effort early on to ensure that the families’ languages and cultures are represented in the school and that someone on staff is able to communicate with the families. They point out that paraprofessionals do not need to meet the NCLB “highly qualified” requirements if they are hired as translators or to work with parents. Wainer (2004) suggests offering opportunities for parents to communicate in the home language with the school (such as translation services available for registration, bilingual “office hours” each morning, and specific instruction in the students’ language about the school system and classroom).

**Reaction Questions:**

1. What are the current practices that enable school personnel to learn about the cultures represented in our school/district? What barriers are there to learning about the cultures represented in our school/district/state?

2. What are the current practices that enable parents to be active participants in their child’s education? What barriers are there to increased parent involvement in our school/district/district?

3. What school and community resources are available to enhance communication among schools, parents/families, and the community at large?
Application Questions:

1. What practices/procedures can we put in place to increase knowledge about the cultures represented in our school/district/state? How can we measure the impact of increased knowledge about cultures, i.e., on reducing the barriers and increasing the connection with parents/families and the community?

2. What practices/procedures can we put in place to enable parents to be more active participants in their child’s education and the school community? How can we measure the impact of increased family participation, i.e., on reducing the barriers and increasing the connection with parents/families and the community?

3. In what ways can the school facilitate collaboration with and among other community resources and agencies to enhance communication efforts?

These questions were developed by the following stakeholders working together within the IDEA Partnership:

Role: Family Member
Location: California

Role: School Psychologist
Location: California

Role: Special Education Administrator
Location: Florida

Role: National Comprehensive Content Center Staff
Location: Texas

The IDEA Partnership located at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs. 2009