



Success Indicator CC04: All security staff assigned to the main entrance and front office staff are trained in communicating effectively and respectfully to students and family members who have low English proficiency. (5863)

Overview: Welcoming and inclusive schools for ELs ensure that EL families feel connected (August & Hakuta, 1998; Lucas, et al., 2004; Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011), and maintain effective and respectful communication with students and their families (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Weiss, López, & Rosenberg, 2011). This effort to convey safety and appreciation for diversity is vital for all students at all grade levels, in all settings (urban to rural), particularly for ELs and students with disabilities (CII, 2011; Hawley & Wolf, 2011). Front office staff frequently interact with family members of ELs, while security staff may deal primarily with EL students both informally in hallway encounters and in disciplinary matters. Both office and security staff need communication skills in order to interface with ELs and their families in ways that promote their positive connection to the school community (REL Pacific, 2015).

Questions: How does the communication styles of front office/security staff impact the school experiences of EL students and families? How can school staff be better equipped to communicate with low English proficiency students and families?

How does the communication styles of front office/security staff impact the school experiences of EL students and families?

Front office staff members are often the first point of contact with EL families through phone calls, electronic communications, and interpersonal encounters. However, research has shown that many school staff members are ill prepared to provide a welcoming environment for ELs (Waterman & Harry, 2008). Language barriers frequently impede effective communication and collaboration between families and schools; these barriers can limit or even prevent oral and written communication, and diminish the possibility of establishing positive relationships between school staff and parents (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000, as cited in Waterman & Harry, 2008; Trueba, 2002).

In addition, “many school staff have little or no understanding of the life experiences and cultural values of culturally and linguistically diverse families such as those of their ELLs” (Waterman & Harry, 2008, p. 6). Schools must acknowledge and value EL families’ language and cultural values as strengths rather than deficits (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). Cross-cultural communication is essential to minimizing the confusion and frustration experienced by ELs and their families when they encounter school environments where their language, attitudes, values and behaviors often differ from others (REL Pacific, 2015). Skilled “cross-cultural communication involves: 1) understanding that there are different ways of communicating that reflect one’s culture; 2) acknowledging, respecting, and accommodating cultural differences in communication styles; and, 3) using strategies that remove barriers to communication that result from cultural differences” (REL Pacific, 2015, p. 5).

Schools and front office staff should provide a warm welcome to EL students and families. Planning for the arrival of newcomers, particularly individuals from other countries, provides a positive first impression (Coelho, 2004). Front



office staff should understand the routines for interacting with EL students and families and be trained in how to receive new students with low levels of English proficiency in a welcoming manner. Front office staff should also be provided with scripts for welcoming these families, along with a contact list of people who can provide assistance in the appropriate language (Coelho, 2004).

Security staff, who may include School Resource Officers (SROs), police officers, and security guards, must similarly engage in positive communication with students and families with low English proficiency. SROs interact with students throughout the school, while security guards or police officers may be assigned to work at the school's entrance and thus interact with parents as well. These staff must also create a welcoming environment and respond to student disciplinary issues in appropriate ways. Unfortunately, a disproportionate number of students of color are disciplined and punished in comparison with their white peers (Gay 2006), and confrontations between security staff and students are increasing (Keierleber, 2015). SROs and other security staff often lack the proper training to help them address their biases; recent data show that only 12 states require SROs to receive training in how to interact effectively with youth to reduce discipline problems through cross-cultural communication and knowledge of appropriate discipline (Keierleber, 2015). SROs can be critical for re-routing the "school-to-prison" pipeline that involves many students of color (Teaching Tolerance, 2015). In addition to effective communication skills, SROs must be skilled at distinguishing between student behaviors that warrant law enforcement intervention and those that do not (Teaching Tolerance, 2015).

How can school staff be better equipped to communicate with low English proficiency students and families?

Improving school conditions, such as making schools more welcoming and safe, is essential to improving learning outcomes for ELs (Hawley & Wolf, 2011). All school staff, including front office and security personnel, should be appropriately trained to communicate effectively with students and families with low levels of English proficiency (Teaching Tolerance Project, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Waterman & Harry, 2008). Additional recommendations for communication with LEP (Limited English Proficient) families include:

- Develop a written school communications plan to guarantee timely and effective communication with LEP parents;
- Keep on file a list of LEP parents who require languages other than English and make this list available to all staff members;
- Notify LEP parents regularly that free translation and interpretation services are available: a multi-language poster by the office explaining the resources available to LEP families can simplify communication;
- Train front office staff on when and how to obtain qualified language assistance, how to use interpreters when they receive or make calls to language-minority individuals, and how to use applicable record-keeping procedures; and,
- Train security staff and SROs to get to know students and develop cultural competency, support a positive school climate by adopting a social emotional lens to view interactions with students, shift from a focus on punishment to student development, and resist the criminalization of school behaviors.

(Adapted from Teaching Tolerance Project, 2013, p. 3, and 2015, p. 17)

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