



Success Indicator CC09: The school leaders actively recruit families to volunteer in the school and to serve on committees so that volunteer pools reflect the student body. (5868)

Overview: When English Learner (EL) families are involved in the life of the school, EL students value schooling more and receive better services (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Gordon & Nocon, 2008). Schools which have been highly successful in bringing EL families into the school community often consider engagement with EL families as part of a “broader commitment to educational equity” (Auerbach, 2009). However, EL families often face linguistic and cultural challenges when it comes to deeper levels of involvement, such as volunteering at the school and serving on committees. To recruit EL families as participants at the levels of planning, decision making, and implementation, schools must be intentional, strategic and culturally sensitive in their outreach to EL communities.

Questions: In what ways does family involvement in the planning and decision-making levels impact the experiences of ELs in schools? What barriers might EL Families encounter in their efforts to volunteer or serve on committees? How might school leaders promote the participation of EL families in committees and other decision-making roles in the school?

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EL families are often excluded from the discourse in our public schools. However, in many instances, EL parent engagement has been transformative for schools as they are forced to engage with voices that have been historically excluded (Nocon & Gordon, 2008; Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Houk, 2005). Auerbach (2009) suggests that schools that are the most successful in engaging EL parents often do so not out of a mere desire to recruit more volunteers in the current status quo, but rather out of a “broader moral commitment to social justice and educational equity.” This type of commitment involves bi-directional engagement in which schools are learning from and helping EL parents at the same time as EL parents are learning from and helping schools. In the long run, for EL parents to volunteer at the same rates as “mainstream” White English-speaking parents, they need to see school as being welcoming and reflective of their culture and values.

Giving EL families access to power and visibility in the school has the potential to improve the school experiences of all EL children; not just the children of the involved parents. Involved EL parents are better positioned to advocate for the needs of ELs and help bring in special programs and resources that meet the specific needs of the EL population (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Gordon & Nocon, 2008). Family members who volunteer or serve on committees show their children that school is valuable, and family involvement mediates the negative effect of poverty on student achievement (De Civita, Pagani, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2004).

What barriers might EL Families encounter in their efforts to volunteer or serve on committees?

Language, cultural, and value differences between the families of ELs and school communities may be barriers to their participation in school life. According to some researchers, when schools are structured according to White, middle-class norms, EL families may lack the cultural capital to navigate (Lareau, 1987). For example, schools typically ask families to participate at specific times of day, in specific locations, and within specific organizations such as PTAs. All the aspects of family participation that seem normal to parents from some cultural backgrounds can be unfamiliar to some EL families. Additionally, EL families face the specific issue of a language barrier and the need for a translator can make participation in meetings prohibitive (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002).

Arias & Morillo-Campbell (2008) list 5 specific barriers that discourage EL families from participating in schools:

(1) School-Based Barriers: Schools can have negative perceptions of EL families, including a deficit mentality in which EL families are seen as holding back their own children or not caring about education.

(2) Lack of English Language Proficiency: EL families may be hesitant to participate if they are not confident they can communicate with school personnel or other parents. For some EL families, it is impossible to participate without a translator. The need for translation can create stigma against EL families on the part of other parents or school staff (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002).

(3) Parental Educational Level: Many immigrant families have limited levels of formal education, which can cause embarrassment on the part of families and a condescending attitude on the part of school staff (Auerbach, 2009).

(4) Disjuncture between School Culture and Home Culture: Cultural differences can lead to clashing expectations between EL families and school staff. In some cases, EL families' cultural norms push against the very idea of parental participation in schools by making them reluctant to take on responsibilities that they see as belonging to school staff (Wong & Hughes, 2006).

(5) Logistical Issues: Work schedules and difficulty with transportation prevent many EL parents from participating in school life (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008).

How might school leaders promote the participation of EL families in committees and other decision-making roles in the school?

According to Davis (2000), "If the school does not actively seek the attendance of...families whose first language isn't English, they're unlikely to participate in events and volunteer activities." Schools must be proactive and creative if they truly wish to recruit EL families. Key strategies include:

1. Accommodate language needs: For families to participate, they must be aware of meetings beforehand and able to communicate once they arrive. In addition to being a necessary practical step, translating announcements and providing interpreters at meetings shows EL families that their participation is valued.
2. Meet at different times and in different settings: Many schools have found success engaging a diverse parent population by having meetings at community venues rather than on school grounds (Breiseth, Robertson, & LaFond, 2011). Having meetings in the community especially encourages families who may feel less comfortable in an unfamiliar school setting. Meetings should be flexible to find times to accommodate different work schedules (Breiseth, Robertson, & LaFond, 2011).
3. Capitalize upon existing personal relationships: Teachers or administrators who have good relationships with EL parents are strong resources for volunteer recruitment. Families are often more responsive to personal invitations from people they know. This has proven more effective than advertising events through impersonal flyers which families may feel are not "meant for them" (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002).
4. Use "Bridge Parents": Once some EL parents are involved in the school those parents are ideally placed to recruit more EL parent volunteers. Active parents can be designated to reach out to other potential volunteers from their language group (Breiseth et al., 2011).
5. Meet parents "where they are" to plant the seed for further engagement (Auerbach, 2009): Many traditional venues for parent participation (such as a PTA) are uncomfortable for parents who have little experience with the American school system. Schools can draw parents in by taking on a commu-



nity issue (e.g. a clothing drive for migrant children, Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008), or having a craft night with culturally familiar activities (Auerbach, 2009). Once EL parents are in the building and gain comfort with the school, they will begin to take on other roles (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008).

6. Build a group targeted towards EL parents: Some schools have created special parent committees dedicated to the advancement of the EL student population (Gordon & Nocon, 2008; Abrams & Gibbs, 2002). These groups can be a part of the PTA or separate from it, and provide a space for EL parents to form relationships with each other, to express concerns, and to make suggestions for improving the experiences of their children.

Questions for School Leaders

- Does my staff hold negative biases that EL parents “don’t care about education” or “don’t understand what their children need”?
- What barriers stop EL families from volunteering at my school?
- Is print material sent home to parents translated?
- Are there interpreters available for in-person interactions?
- What EL families are involved in my school? How can I begin to rely on them as a resource to learn more about barriers to parent involvement in my school and to recruit more volunteers?
- How can I change the content, location, or time of parent engagement events to draw in EL families?
- Would a special group targeted at EL families draw in more volunteers? Would I be willing to listen to that group and take their suggestions seriously?
- How can my school learn from EL families?
- Is my school organized in a way that legitimately treats EL families and students as equal to other families and students?

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