



## Success Indicator PI02: School leaders, staff and faculty facilitate and actively engage families with diverse cultural language backgrounds in efforts to welcome newcomer families. (5872)

**Overview:** Regardless of race or socio-economic status, the positive impact of parental engagement on student success is well documented (Gándara, 2011; Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015; Walker, Shenkar, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). These findings are challenged, however, when parents are not familiar with U.S. educational norms, are recently arrived and experiencing culture shock, and/or do not speak the language of the educators. Schools can address these challenges by reaching out to parents of ELs, when their children first enroll in schools.

**Questions:** What are the challenges in engaging new families with diverse cultural and language backgrounds in the school community? What can Local Education Agencies (LEAs), staff, and faculty do to reach out to and actively engage the families of newly enrolled English Learners (ELs)? How can the school community make itself more welcoming to families with diverse and cultural language backgrounds?

### What are the challenges in engaging new families with diverse cultural and language backgrounds in the school community?

The enrollment process can be intimidating for most parents the first time. For parents of ELs, the process is complicated by cultural differences, language barriers, and an unawareness of the resources available to them. Since first impressions will be remembered, the school community's initial efforts to welcome and engage parents can make a difference.

**Cultural differences:** Depending on the country of origin, parents may have views of education that vary considerably from the U.S. norms. For example, Chinese parents focus on afterschool education and Latinos do not feel comfortable interfering with the teacher's domain (Marschall, Shah & Donato, 2012). Therefore, in addition to the usual parent orientation, school might consider offering a separate or extra session for parents of ELs. At these sessions, facilitators (with translators as necessary) can explain topics that mainstream parents would already know. Topics might include the basic U.S. education system, what is expected and appreciated from parents, enrollment procedures, and where to obtain medical certificates, immunization records, school supplies, proof of residence, and proof of their child's age. In addition, Marschall et al. (2012) suggest providing a cultural broker, or a person who has shared experiences and a similar background as the community. This person can be a member of the immigrant community, a staff or faculty member, or someone from an agency working closely with the community. This person could also attend community events or offer a session at a community center with faculty or staff to answer parents' questions in a comfortable environment for the parents. As an additional benefit, the faculty and staff will most likely learn more about the community.

**Language barriers:** Many schools offer a variety of translation services, but they are only useful if parents are aware of them and know how to use them. As part of parent orientation, these services can be introduced and implement-

ed. Since immigrant communities can be very diverse, schools should also be careful not to make assumptions about what language parents or students speak. Nevárez-La Torre (2011) found that improperly conducted home language surveys resulted in assuming children speaking indigenous Mexican languages with Spanish last names speaks Spanish. The results were that ELs and their parents were expected to speak two languages they do not know. Moreover, the school may not provide services for uncommon languages. To address this problem, school should make certain the home language surveys are conducted properly and cooperate with the community to find translation resources. Schools may also find that parents speak a second (and possibly more common) language that their children do not, which may assist in finding translation services.

**Resources:** In addition to orientation services, schools can provide written documents (or audio taped versions of them) to parents and community centers to use as a reference. Already existing parent orientation booklets can be translated or written in simplified English and modified to include additional information for EL parents. Some of the information might include enrollment procedures, a list of documents needed to enroll and where to obtain them, school supply list and where to buy those supplies, translation hotlines, school calendars, an explanation of what to expect at a parent teacher conferences, and information about the ESL program. This handbook can also be distributed to community centers that work with parents of ELs to increase distribution and allow parents to ask questions from someone they already know. For an example refer to the following handbooks:

- Butler Area School District's Parent Student Handbook:
- <https://www.basdk12.org/cms/lib09/PA01916433/Centricity/Domain/75/K-6%20Parent%20Handbook%202015%20FINAL.pdf>
- American Civil Liberty's Union Know Your Rights Handbook:
- [https://www.aclupa.org/files/7313/8080/7050/SRH\\_10-2-13.pdf](https://www.aclupa.org/files/7313/8080/7050/SRH_10-2-13.pdf)
- New Jersey Department of Education Parent Handbook:
- <http://nj.gov/education/bilingual/resources/ParentHandbook.pdf>

Various researchers have found increased success when schools cooperate with community programs. Some examples include: refugee orientation programs, nutrition improvement programs, YMCA programs (Moore et al, 2009), community services, mental health support services, local churches, non-profit service providers, and Immigration Raid Aftermath Support programs, lawyers and legal services and child welfare agencies (Adelman & Taylor, 2015). School personnel can also direct newcomers to these programs and others that will assist them such as the free school lunch program (USDA, 2017) and their own ESL classes.

### **What can LEAs, staff, and faculty do to reach out to and actively engage the families of newly enrolled ELs?**

**LEAs:** As leaders in the community, LEAs can hire bilingual employees, offer administrative support and professional development and set policies to help immigrant parents. In addition to linguistic support, studies have found that hiring bilingual faculty and staff will increase parents' comfort level and openness to communicating with the school (Gandara, 2011). When bilingual faculty and staff are not available, a member of immigrant community or a well-trained member of the faculty or staff could be a cultural broker to specifically support communication and understanding between the schools and the immigrant community (Marschall et al., 2012; Medina, Morrone, & Anderson, 2017). Having this person present at orientation activities will introduce them to the parents and begin a relationship of trust. LEAs can also support professional development regarding cultural differences, culture shock, and communication with the immigrant community, all of which will increase orientation programs' ability to engage parent. These programs should emphasize the positive attributes of the community and systematically disrupt negative talk (Molle, 2012).

Families may move to find work, reunite with other family members, or find a school with services for their children. This constant change in location creates difficulties in finding and transferring student records. LEAs can also assist EL families by requiring the student records are kept electronically and can easily and promptly be transferred if a student changes schools. Electronic records will aid new schools in developing an IEP for students and reduce complicated procedures that parents may not be able to accomplish (Nevárez-La Torre, 2011).



Lastly, school districts can offer one-stop enrollment (Eger, 2013) at non-working hours to lessen the burden for those with limited transportation options. Parents of ELs may be working more than one job, not have reliable method of transportation, and may need their older children to provide child care (Arias & Morrillo-Campbell, 2008; Vera et al., 2016). Additionally, having someone present from the ESL program and a cultural broker could answer questions and lessen the confusion during the first week of classes.

**Faculty and staff:** If faculty and staff explain what is expected of ELs' parents and encourage parents to have a voice, their participation (and their child's performance) will likely increase. Faculty and staff can begin by examining the resources available to them (interpreters, phone line translation services, their own linguistic abilities). Once they have a plan, they can reach out to newcomer parents and invite them to be more involved. Specifically, they can send them a welcoming letter, ask them to visit the class, chaperone for fieldtrips, participate in community activities or speak to students on Parent Day. Since newcomer parents may have had negative experiences in their past efforts to be involved with school activities, early contact will be advantageous.

### **How can the school community make itself more welcoming to new families with diverse and cultural language backgrounds?**

There is a consensus that US schools should welcome and orientate immigrants, help them increase their English abilities, and direct them to community services. Patten et al. 2015 adds that "friendliness, trust, invitation, open-mindedness, resourcefulness, information sharing, skill development and willingness to develop shared history with newcomers promote feelings of belonging and inclusion" (p. 133). During orientation programs, the school community can introduce them to the many programs that a school may provide for them. As examples, studies have shown positive reactions to ESL and literacy classes (Kanno & Kangas, 2014), meetings on the process of applying for college, workshops to encourage participation with specific ideas on how to be involved (Arias & Morrillo-Campbell), reading interventions, and parents as teachers' programs (Castagno & Hausman, 2017).

Less tradition programs that fill a need will also attract newcomers and increase their involvement in the school

community. As two examples, a school provided sewing rooms to make school uniforms and classroom curtains (Gandara, 2011), and another encouraged that parents organize a clothing drive (Arias & Morrillo-Campbell, 2008). The first provided a safe and welcoming environment, while the second increased contact with school and community, recruited volunteers, and built a network. These types of activities give parents a sense of empowerment and increase involvement in school functions. Vera et al. (2016) recommend activities like these to build a community and subsequently a voice, which may lead to involvement and leadership in the more traditional parent forums such as the PTA, or school boards.

To increase parents feeling of welcome at orientation programs and in general, members of school communities can become more welcoming to newcomers by increasing their cultural knowledge, paying attention to the school climate, and offering translators and bilingual materials for parents. Research offers some simple practices to make the school environment more welcoming:

- Make sure parents know how to get into the building, especially if doors are usually locked during the school day.
- Post signs in multiple languages.
- Display student work on the walls.
- Display the maps and flags of your students' native countries.
- Display a large map in the front lobby where parents can mark their native countries with a pin.
- Enlist a bilingual greeter to welcome students and families.
- Ensure that your bilingual staff and volunteers are visible. (Breiseth, Robertson and Lafond, 2011)

For additional ideas for parent engagement, see the Department of Education's Family and Community Engagement page at: <https://www.ed.gov/parent-and-family-engagement>

### **Research**

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