Core Function → **Parental Involvement**

Effective Practice → **Parents of ELs are well integrated into the school community.**

Success Indicator PI04: School hosts events that bring together families of diverse backgrounds to explore and share cultures on a regular basis (e.g., potluck meals, parent groups) not only during a designated annual week or month. (5874)

Overview: School communities are strengthened when faculty and leaders host events that bring diverse families together as a means of celebrating and sharing languages and cultures. Because culture is dynamic and complex, deep interpersonal connections between families cannot be meaningfully achieved through school events that occur only a few times a year. Rather, schools can promote on-going, meaningful, and rewarding social interaction through regular family activities, such as: communal meals, art, sporting events, and parents' night out. As families and staff have opportunities to interact on a regular basis, they might not only gain greater awareness and appreciation for the uniqueness of each other's cultures, but also discover commonalities they share.

Questions: What does research say about traditional ways schools attempt to integrate EL parents into the school community? What approaches do current researchers recommend to facilitate connections among families of diverse backgrounds? What steps should schools take to design a program aimed at building inter-cultural family connections?

What does research say about traditional ways schools attempt to integrate EL parents into the school community?

Schools traditionally have sought to integrate EL parents into the community through a holiday approach, or inviting them into class or to school events to talk about and celebrate holidays specific to their culture, or to share their culture at certain times of year, such Cinco de Mayo (Lustig, 1997; Hayes-Bautista & Chamberlin, 2007; Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 1997). Despite efforts to move towards a more on-going integration of student culture in schools, Gao (2006) found that teachers and principals reported defaulting to this approach where they had either hosted a multicultural day or week. The involvement of EL parents tends to be confined to having them and their children dress in ethnic clothes, bring in ethnic food, and perform an ethnic dance (Gao, 2006; Rothenberg, 2000; Sensoy et. al., 2010).

Researchers have cautioned against the holiday or multicultural day approaches, contending that singling out ethnic groups for attention during specific times of year reinforces the belief of parents and students that these linguistic minority cultures are not worthy of year-round general recognition (Franklin et. al., 1997). Additionally, having parents perform superficial, token cultural acts once a year (e.g. art, food, and religious traditions) may have the adverse effect of distancing these parents from the community by inferring to them that they are not part of the 'normal' American culture (Lustig, 1997). When schools spotlight "foreign" cultures at designated times of year, sequentially and in isolation, as opposed to intensively and systematically integrating these cultures into the daily life of school, it creates a dichotomy between a normative white American culture (historically based in western Eurocentric worldviews) and all other international cultures (Hurd, 2008; Lustig, 1997). This dichotomy results in othering immigrants whereby native residents are considered normal and immigrants are exotic (Epps & Furman, 2016). For example,

Hurd (2008) found that when a high school in California celebrated Cinco de Mayo, it had the paradoxical effect of marginalizing Mexican-descent students and families by highlighting the differences between white Americans and Mexican-Americans.

What approaches do current researchers recommend to facilitate connections among families of diverse backgrounds?

As Suarez-Orzoco (2019) writes, authentic, ongoing communication between immigrants and native residents is "the lynchpin of an effective strategy to improve host society reception of immigrants, and ultimately facilitate a more rapid and smooth integration process" (pg. 25).

By providing opportunities for families to socially interact with one another, schools can facilitate cultural knowledge building between parents, foster inter-family partnerships, and help break down cultural misconceptions and negative attitudes towards unfamiliar cultures (Suarez-Orzoco, 2016). Furthermore, the parents build meaningful connections with one another thereby reducing parental feelings of social-psychological isolation (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012).

Activities and practices that generate positive connections between people or groups of people is at the heart of building a school's community (Weil,1996). There are a variety of activities that can promote inter-family partnerships.

- **One-on-one citizenship mentorship programs**: Immigrant and refugee parents can be matched with native parents who help them pass the citizenship test or otherwise do what is required to become legal citizens. Suarez-Orozco (2016) suggests that even though the specific intention of such a program is to help parents become citizens, there are likely to be corollary effects such as native parents helping immigrant parents with professional, educational, and health services while the immigrant parents benefit natives by sharing their languages, cultures, experiences. One-on-one programs are meaningful, ongoing, and provide positive experiences for both native and host parents.
- **Family space or room where parents can eat, drink, and talk**: King & Goodwin (2002) recommend that schools provide a safe space for parents to communicate their thoughts with each other.

- **Potlucks and communal meals**: When parents of diverse backgrounds eat together and share food, they are given a chance to engage in authentic social interaction (King & Goodwin (2002).
- **Group walks**: As a way for parents to interact with one another authentically and informally (King & Goodwin (2002).
- **Parents' night or workshop**: Can be a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly event aimed at getting parents in the same room together to discuss their opinions on the school, share information about other parent or school related events, and review school problems and possible solutions (Guo, 2009).

What steps should schools take to design a program aimed at building inter-cultural family connections?

There are three main approaches researchers recommend for designing inter-cultural family activities: forming family programming committees, engaging with community organizations, and creating a parent resource center.

- **Family programming committee:** Schools facilitate the organization of a committee of parents who design programs which bring diverse families together. In order to make the committee inclusive to EL parents, information about the committee is presented in languages and modes accessible to all parents (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Guo, 2009; Mattingly, 2002).
- E**ngaging with community organizations:** If school faculty/staff oversee designing programs, as opposed to a committee of parents, they need to know what sorts of activities parents would enjoy participating in. Researching and reaching out to community organizations serves to help school personnel with gaining knowledge about the various activities and events parents are inclined to get involved with (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Sanders, 2001; Walker, Shenker, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2010).
- **Parent resource center:** Schools can provide an area where parents know to go to get information about upcoming school events and to talk with other parents. A well utilized resource center can be helpful in spreading the word about activities for parents through paper fliers and poster in multiple languages and informed parents who hang out in the resource center and spread the word orally to other parents (Davies, 1991; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013).

The school community strengthens when parents learn about each other's viewpoints on education (MacPherson, 2004; Gao, 2012). EL parents have a lot to offer other parents about ideas on school policies, because EL parents may come from countries where beliefs and practices towards the education system are different than in America (Gao, 2009). Simultaneously, EL parents and other parents will find that they have a lot in common when it comes to the larger goals of education: helping students learn as much as possible, become critical thinkers, become engaged citizens, and gain social and career opportunities (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Gao, 2006). Ultimately, providing regular opportunities for parents to discover their commonalities leads to the breaking down of implicit biases, xenophobia, anti-immigration fears, and the building up of a cohesive community of parents (Suarez-Orzoco, 2016).

Resources

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