



# **PROMOTING ELL PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT: CHALLENGES IN CONTESTED TIMES**

**M. Beatriz Arias, Ph.D.  
Milagros Morillo-Campbell, Ph.D.**

**Arizona State University**

**The Great Lakes Center for Education Research & Practice**  
PO Box 1263  
East Lansing, MI 48826  
Phone: (517) 203-2940  
Email: [greatlakescenter@greatlakescenter.org](mailto:greatlakescenter@greatlakescenter.org)  
Web Site: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

**January 2008**

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## ***Executive Summary***

This policy brief analyzes factors related to the implementation of effective parental involvement with English Language Learners (ELLs). As the largest growing segment of the student population, ELLs have increased in all states over the last twenty years. At the same time, parents of ELLs face daunting barriers as they try to become informed or involved in their child's school. These barriers, which include the inability to understand English, unfamiliarity with the school system, and differences in cultural norms and cultural capital, can limit parents' communication and school participation. Research supports the importance of parental involvement for improved student achievement, better school attendance, and reduced dropout rates regardless of socioeconomic background or ethnicity. Accordingly, and given the achievement gap between ELLs and English proficient students, it is very important to identify practices that may improve ELL parental involvement and thus student achievement. Yet many programs make little effort to promote ELL parental involvement, defining parental involvement only in terms of the schools' needs or in terms of a deficit-based perception of ELL families.

This brief analyzes characteristics of the ELL student and parent population; barriers to ELL family engagement with schools; and characteristics of traditional and non-traditional parental involvement models. Diversity in ELL parents and their communities speaks to the need for both traditional and non-traditional models for ELL parental involvement. With a dual-model approach, variation in language proficiency is acknowledged, communication is facilitated and maintained, and communities are recognized and integrated within the school culture. Accordingly, it is recommended that policy makers:

- Support the implementation of traditional parental involvement programs that are culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate.
- Fund the implementation of non-traditional parental involvement programs that reflect a reciprocal involvement in the school/parent community.
- Support the professional preparation of teachers who can identify community funds of knowledge for curricular development and school outreach.

- Support community-based education programs that inform parents about school values and expectations and work with parents to help them become advocates for their children.

# **Promoting ELL Parental Involvement: Challenges in Contested Times**

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## ***Introduction***

This policy brief analyzes factors related to the development of effective parental involvement for English Language Learners (ELLs). The authors explain that approaches to developing parental involvement in marginalized communities, including communities with ELL students, have often been based on deficit views of ELLs and have not recognized forms of social capital that exist in those communities. But these strengths can serve as a foundation for effective family and parental involvement.<sup>1</sup> In the current context of anti-immigrant and English-only policies in many jurisdictions, schools are doubly challenged to serve their communities in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways. This policy brief provides both an overview of the characteristics of the ELL population generally and a closer look at the Latino population specifically. It summarizes factors that inhibit parental involvement with schools, parents' views of their role, and innovative school efforts to promote parental involvement in ELL communities. Finally, it offers recommendations for policymakers.

## ***Characteristics of the ELL Population***

The last twenty-five years have witnessed significant changes in the demographic profile of the U.S. student population. During that time, the fastest growing segment of the school-age population has been English Language Learners (ELLs), doubling their numbers from approximately 2 million in 1989-90 to more than 5 million in 2004-05. In 2004-05, ELLs represented 10.5% of the total public school student enrollment. While ELL students are identified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in many government reports, for purposes of this brief the term ELL will be used to refer to students whose first language is not English, encompassing both students who are just beginning to learn English and those who have already developed considerable proficiency.<sup>2</sup> ELL students share one important educational variable — the need to increase their proficiency in English — but they differ in language, cultural background and socioeconomic status. The term ELL includes students from Native American communities, long-established language minority

communities in the U.S., migrant families, and immigrant groups who represent the most recent arrivals.

Table 1, below, indicates the top 10 languages spoken by ELL students by grade level in 2000. Spanish is the language spoken by most ELL students K-12. Today, more than 80% of all ELL students are native Spanish speakers. Asian languages (Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and Hmong) are spoken by ELLs at a much lower percentage (3%), but their numbers are on the increase. While Native American languages are not represented numerically in the top ten languages, more than 116 indigenous languages were counted in the 2000 Census.<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census reports that the Navajo language had the most speakers in 2000, with over 178,000 over the age of 5. Other North American indigenous languages with speakers over the age of 5 —including Apache, Cherokee, Choctaw, Dakota, Keres, Pima and Yupik — totaled over 203, 466 in 2000.

The growth in the adult ELL population mirrors that of the K-12 population for the same years, showing an increase of 52% — from 14 million to 21.3 million adults — during the decade between 1990 and 2000.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1: Top 10 Languages Spoken by Limited English Proficient Children by Grade Level, 2000**

PK to 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade			6 <sup>th</sup> to 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade		
Number (1,000s)		Percent	Number (1,000s)		Percent
Spanish	1,359	76.1	Spanish	1,394	71.6
Chinese	46	2.6	French	58	3.0
Vietnamese	44	2.5	Vietnamese	57	3.0
Korean	25	1.4	Chinese	53	2.7
Hmong/Miao	24	1.3	Korean	31	1.6
French	20	1.1	French/ Haitian Creole	27	1.4
German	19	1.1	German	25	1.3
Russian	17	1.0	Russian	21	1.1
French/Haitian Creole	16	0.9	Hmong /Miao	21	1.1
Arabic	14	0.8	Tagalog /Filipino	20	1.0
<b>All languages</b>	<b>1,676</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>All languages</b>	<b>1,612</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1 percent Public Use Microdata Sample, 2000 cited in Capps et al., 2005

While the growth of ELLs has been evident nationwide, the impact on individual states has been uneven. Some states have traditionally had the largest numbers of ELL students; other states are experiencing recent unprecedented growth in the ELL population primarily due to

immigration.<sup>5</sup> Table 2 below identifies those states that have the highest ELL enrollment and those that have recently experienced significant growth. In the latter category are Nevada (354% growth) and Nebraska (350%), as well as four other states with rates over 200%: South Dakota, Georgia, Arkansas, and Oregon.<sup>6,7</sup>

The notable expansion of the ELL population, both adult and student, has led some policy makers to worry that lack of English skills and knowledge of school practices may affect parental involvement with schools. Furthermore, the recent anti-bilingual legislation introduced in four states and passed in three (California, Arizona and Massachusetts)<sup>8</sup> reinforces the perception that there is hostility toward native language use by schools. The nation is experiencing the highest growth of non-English speaking students at a time when linguistic tolerance seems to be at a nadir. School policies addressing ELL parental involvement are particularly important in this time when too many students are experiencing linguistic chauvinism and anti-immigrant hostility.

**Table 2: States with Differential Growth in ELLs by Grade Level, 2000**

	PK to 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade			6 <sup>th</sup> to 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade		
	Number of children (1,000s)	Share of all children (percent)	Percent change 1990-2000	Number of children (1,000s)	Share of all children (percent)	Percent change 1990-2000
<b>California</b>	620	20	44	437	12	55
<b>Texas</b>	288	15	30	232	10	42
<b>New York</b>	146	9	18	153	8	50
<b>Florida</b>	87	7	51	85	6	89
<b>Illinois</b>	82	7	72	76	6	84
<b>New Mexico</b>	23	13	18	19	9	33
<b>Arizona</b>	56	12	80	46	9	88
<b>Nevada</b>	18	11	354	15	8	224
<b>Nebraska</b>	5	3	350	6	3	233
<b>South Dakota</b>	2	2	264	1	2	131
<b>Georgia</b>	26	3	255	34	4	175
<b>Arkansas</b>	4	2	243	7	3	99
<b>Oregon</b>	19	7	214	16	5	177

Source: Capps, R., Fix, M., Murray, J., Ost, J., Passel, J.S., & Herwanto, S. (2005). *The new demography of American schools: Immigration and the No Child Left Behind Act*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute

It is important to state that while increases in the immigrant and ELL student populations have occurred concurrently, not all ELL students are immigrants.<sup>9</sup> Most ELL students are in the U.S. either as native-born children of immigrants or, in some cases, as children of native-born

parents.<sup>10</sup> Among students born in other countries, there is also great diversity: 30% have been in the U.S for 10 years or more; 48% for 5-9 years; and 21% for fewer than five years.<sup>11</sup> However, only about a quarter (24%) of ELL elementary students and less than half (44%) of ELL secondary students are foreign-born.<sup>12</sup> And yet, despite the fact that the majority of ELL students are native-born, the fate of all ELLs is inextricably linked to their families' status typical as immigrants and an inclusively hostile public perception of immigrants.<sup>13</sup> All ELLs and their parents are potentially subject to the consequences of the current anti-immigrant sentiment just outside the doors of even those schools that are conscientiously seeking to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

In the last decade, ELL students have become increasingly isolated, segregated by language, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. In 2000, six out of seven elementary students and two out of three secondary ELL students lived in households where no English was spoken. Over the last five years, linguistic isolation has increased in school as well, where ELLs are highly concentrated in a few schools. One recent study found that, in fact, "Nearly 70 percent of K-5 ELL students are enrolled in 10 percent of the nation's elementary schools."<sup>14</sup> In these predominately Latino schools, ELLs are often "tracked" into English as a Second Language (ESL) ghettos,<sup>15</sup> where their exposure to native English speaking peers is further compromised.<sup>16</sup> Research has begun documenting the effects of such isolating trends; in an analysis of large city school districts, for example, Frankenberg and Lee<sup>17</sup> found decreasing Black and Latino exposure to White students: "Nationally, the average Latino English Language Learner (ELL) attends a school where over three-fifths of the students are Latino."<sup>18</sup> As noted above, in a school with a majority ELL population, there is little opportunity for social contact with native English-speaking peers.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, high levels of linguistic isolation highlight the dual challenges of teaching ELL students and involving ELL families in their children's education.

Linguistic isolation is not limited to Latino ELL students; some Asian ELL students also are isolated. While ELL children with parents born in India and the Philippines were relatively less likely to be linguistically isolated, almost 40% of all children with parents born in Vietnam and China were linguistically isolated and of low-income background. ELL children of Korean parents were also identified with relatively high levels of linguistic isolation, despite reported high parental education levels. What is clear is that ELL students overall generally attend schools that are linguistically segregated and that this pattern of linguistic isolation is on the increase, even in the new growth states.<sup>20</sup>

Given this segregation, it is not surprising that most ELL students are concentrated in a few schools. Nearly 70% of ELL students nationally enroll in only 10% of elementary schools, and in these schools ELL students account, on average, for almost 50% of the student body. This is

in strong contrast to the 5% of ELL students enrolled in the average low-ELL school.<sup>21</sup> Most schools with a large ELL student population have a large low-income population,<sup>22</sup> as confirmed by data from the 2000 Census that indicates a strong correlation between lack of English proficiency and poverty. In 2000, 68% of the ELL students in pre-K to 5<sup>th</sup> grade were low-income, as were 60% of ELL students in 6-12<sup>th</sup> grades. These rates are nearly twice as high as rates for English proficient students in comparable grades. With the higher levels of poverty come attendant hardships in schools.<sup>23</sup> For example, ELL immigrant students are typically concentrated in high-poverty schools that generally suffer from shortages of trained teachers and instructional materials. As a result, poor schools serving concentrated populations of low-income ELLs have a generally low instructional capacity.<sup>24</sup>

Schools with a high ELL population face the challenge of communicating with parents, many of whom have comparatively low levels of literacy in their native language, in addition to not speaking or reading English. Many ELL parents have not completed a high school education and have little formal education compared with native-born parents. The 2000 Census reports that almost half of ELL children in elementary school had parents with less than a high school education, and a quarter had parents with less than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education. In comparison, only 11% of English proficient children had parents without high school degrees and just 2% had parents who had not completed the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. In secondary school, a lower share of ELL students had parents without high school degrees (35%), but this was still several times the share for children of native-born parents (4%).<sup>25</sup>

Due to their race, class, immigrant status, language proficiency and level of education, many ELL parents fit the description of a marginalized group.<sup>26</sup> The term has been used to describe individuals who are labeled “outsiders” based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, immigrant status, and physical ability. Researchers describe “marginalized” parents as those who are not “involved at the same rate as many White, middle class parents.”<sup>27</sup> Marginalized parents often have limited exposure to schools, or prior negative experiences with school organizations. However, marginalized status does not mean that ELL parents are not concerned about their children’s education. On the contrary, research has confirmed that linguistically and culturally diverse groups share a deep concern about the education of their children.<sup>28,29</sup> Nevertheless, ELL parents frequently view their role in schooling very differently from the way that mainstream English speaking communities view their relationship with schools.<sup>30</sup>

How are schools reaching out to their marginalized populations? Are traditional parental involvement approaches appropriate for marginalized parents? What are key components to effective parental outreach and parental empowerment for ELL parents and families?<sup>31</sup> In the following section, we address key components of ELL parental



involvement. We propose that in order for schools to more effectively engage ELL parents, both traditional and non-traditional approaches to parental involvement need to be implemented in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways. We explore the barriers to ELL parental involvement that have been traditionally acknowledged and identify characteristics of non-traditional approaches for maximizing parental involvement. Finally, we recognize that in today's anti-immigrant and English-only climate, schools will be contested sites for the acculturation of this fast-growing population.

### ***Barriers to Parental Engagement***

Overall, the barriers that most often confront ELL parents regarding engagement with schools include the following: (1) school-based barriers; (2) lack of English language proficiency; (3) parental educational level; (4) disjunctures between school culture and home culture; and (5) logistical issues.<sup>32</sup>

School-based barriers for ELL parental engagement include a deficit perspective, a unidirectional approach to parental involvement, and negative school climate. Schools serving diverse populations have long been criticized for having a deficit view of ELL parents and communities. Some critics assert that the deficit perspective leads educators to view culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families as “the problem” rather than to consider and remedy their own deficiencies in working with diverse populations.<sup>33</sup> ELL parents are frequently perceived as lacking resources (e.g., experience, know-how, and education) to provide and support home educational experiences for their children.<sup>34,35</sup> This deficit perspective suggests that fault and responsibility lie with the ELL population rather than the school, and that the role of the school is to change the ways families interact with schools. Many educators assume that lack of parental participation is evidence of lack of parental interest.<sup>36</sup>

Schools are also criticized for limiting their approaches to traditional efforts at parental involvement, which are unidirectional: focusing only on what parents can do to support the school or support academic achievement rather than what the school can do to support families. Proponents of non-traditional parental involvement see parents contributing to school success in terms of informal activities such as nurturing, instilling cultural values, talking with their children, and sending them to school clean and rested.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, ELL parents have reported that an unwelcome school environment discourages them from getting involved.<sup>38</sup> ELL parents often experience confusion and frustration with an educational system that not only misunderstands their cultural values and beliefs, but places additional barriers that impede their full involvement in their children's schooling.<sup>39</sup> Immigrant parents, who are often dealing with culture shock, may see the

school as a completely foreign environment — one that they choose to avoid.<sup>40</sup>

In contrast, a welcoming school climate includes positive attitudes of the school staff toward the community, attention to details that facilitate parental accessibility to the school (such as interpreter availability and scheduling school meetings), physical space to accommodate parents and families, and support and encouragement for personal contact and communication. An alienating environment is, for most children, exacerbated if school personnel and teachers do not speak the parent’s native language and if translators are unavailable for meetings.

There are many steps that schools can take to address the barriers to parental involvement and to thereby increase participation. The first step is to create a school environment that is warm, caring, inviting, and receptive to parents.<sup>41</sup> Communication is a key to a welcoming school climate.<sup>42</sup> Communication can be promoted through the use of a home-school coordinator or liaison, home visits by teachers, sending out bilingual newsletters, providing a multilingual telephone homework line, or scheduling monthly meetings at a local community center. These opportunities support family school relations that build social networks. Table 3 summarizes communications activities (as well as other activities, discussed below) that schools can engage in to address the barriers to ELL parental involvement.

**Table 3. Addressing Barriers to Increased ELL Parental Involvement**

Barrier	Promoting ELL Parental Involvement
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provide home-school coordinator or liaison</li> <li>▪ Initiate home visits by teachers</li> <li>▪ Send out bilingual newsletters</li> <li>▪ Provide a multilingual telephone homework line</li> <li>▪ Schedule monthly meetings at a local community center</li> </ul>
School/Parental Perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Acknowledge parents’ cultural values</li> <li>▪ Incorporate community into curriculum</li> <li>▪ Invite extended family members to school activities</li> </ul>
Logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Modify meetings to accommodate parents work schedule</li> <li>▪ Provide child care to facilitate parental attendance at school functions</li> <li>▪ Arrange transportation to facilitate student involvement in school activities</li> </ul>

Parental factors that make involvement in school challenging include language proficiency, knowledge of schooling practices, and parental values. Lack of English language proficiency continues to be one of the most salient barriers to parental information and participation.<sup>43</sup> ELL parents cannot as effectively help their children with homework in English or express their concerns to school personnel.<sup>44</sup> Language need

not be a barrier to parental participation, however. All written materials sent out to parents should be in the home language and English, bilingual staff should be available to speak with parents when they come to school, and interpreters should be provided at meetings and events. Native language training should be available for teachers and ESL training for parents.

ELL parental educational level and lack of previous exposure to U.S. schools can also be obstacles. It is not unusual for immigrant families to have limited formal education or uneven exposure to schooling,<sup>45</sup> and school personnel often believe that this lack of experience limits parent's ability to understand and support their child's educational development. For parents themselves, limited schooling is often a source of embarrassment, which fuels their intimidation by instructional staff.<sup>46</sup>

ELL parent perception and expectations regarding the roles of teachers and parents in the educational process often differ from those of the schools. Many ELL parents perceive their role as providing nurturing, teaching values and instilling good behaviors. They are often reluctant to take on responsibilities they traditionally view as being in the school's domain, regard teachers and schools as "the experts" and deferring to them on tasks related to actual learning.<sup>47</sup> Parents and families of ELLs may value home educational involvement more than involvement at school.<sup>48</sup> Schools, on the other hand, frequently assume that parents will offer help with instructional tasks at home.

In order to address divergent cultural norms and values, schools can acknowledge parents' cultural values and view them as strengths,<sup>49</sup> incorporating them into the school curriculum. For instance, while many ELL families value collectivism,<sup>50</sup> which focuses on interdependent relations and the well-being of the group, schools most often stress individual competition. Another common value of the ELL community is the support of the extended family,<sup>51</sup> including respect for elders. Schools can recognize this strength by inviting participation of extended family member such as elders to school activities. Schools can benefit by developing an understanding of the cultural values reflected in school policies and those that children bring with them.

Finally, logistics is an area that limits ELL parent presence in schools. ELL parents often have labor-intensive work schedules, which limit their ability to attend parent teacher conferences and open house events. Transportation needs may affect the ability of students to stay after school for tutoring or extra-curricular activities.<sup>52</sup>

### ***Promoting ELL Parent Involvement***

Diversity in ELL parents and their communities speaks to the need for both traditional and non-traditional models for ELL parental involvement. With a dual model approach, variation in language proficiency is acknowledged, communication is facilitated and

maintained, and communities are recognized and integrated within the school culture. These approaches have been found to promote ELL parental involvement.

### **Traditional Models for ELL Parental Involvement**

Traditional typologies of parental involvement offer suggestions for how parents can support student academic achievement within different contexts. One of the most-cited typologies is Epstein's, which describes six areas that schools could focus on to help families and communities become informed about and involved in educational activities.<sup>53</sup> These six areas are useful in sketching the territory where schools might attempt to better welcome and work with families, especially through linguistic and cultural accommodations: (1) assisting families with parenting and childrearing skills, and creating home conditions to support learning<sup>54</sup>; (2) communicating with families about school programs and student progress with two-way communications<sup>55</sup>; (3) recruiting efforts to involve families as volunteers and audiences<sup>56</sup>; (4) involving families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curricular-linked activities<sup>57</sup>; (5) including families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through councils and organizations<sup>58</sup>; and (6) collaborating and coordinating with the work and resources of community-based agencies, colleges and other groups to strengthen school programs.<sup>59</sup> Epstein indicates that an action team made up of teachers, parents and administrators is essential to drive the implementation, development and monitoring of these practices.<sup>60</sup> Many parental involvement programs approach this framework as a developmental model, with each strategy building upon the others. Based on our review of the literature, we suggest that programs using Epstein's typology to accommodate the ELL parent population need to embed cultural knowledge into the framework for their efforts.

### **Non-Traditional Models of ELL Parental Involvement**

Non-traditional models of ELL parental involvement are based on developing a reciprocal understanding of schools and families. These relationships situate the cultural strengths of family and community within the school curriculum, parental education, and parent advocacy. Non-traditional models of involvement include parental empowerment as well as integration of community into school curriculum. Generally speaking, in addition to having practices that are culturally and linguistically appropriate, developing ELL parental involvement includes supporting families,<sup>61</sup> promoting communication,<sup>62</sup> and advocacy for empowerment.<sup>63</sup>

Parental education encompasses both family literacy and understanding school community. Family literacy moves beyond simply

transmission of skills, and shifts to acknowledging and integrating ELL parents' own literacy practices, skills, and abilities.<sup>64</sup> While integrating parents' own literacy background and experiences, family literacy may involve teaching ELL parents how to read and write, then supporting them as they learn to create situations in the home that encourage reading and writing with their children.<sup>65</sup> Programs such these are grounded in what ELL parents already do; the programs account for cultural differences and support and reinforce parents' growth in knowledge and skills.<sup>66</sup> In his research, Sampson sought to understand how poor Latino parents prepare their children for schools, and he argues that schools need to do a better job of teaching parents about the U.S. educational system.<sup>67</sup> In order to support and strengthen ELL parental involvement, ELL parents must be provided with an understanding of the school community that is historically situated in the mainstream culture dominated by middle class, English-speaking norms.

Integration of community into schools can begin when schools support ELL parental involvement opportunities by validating the cultural capital and "funds of knowledge" those parents possess. Luis Moll and his colleagues refer to funds of knowledge as the essential bodies of knowledge and information found in local households used to survive or to thrive.<sup>68</sup> Studies on funds of knowledge have developed over time as researchers, teachers, and schools worked collaboratively to build a school curriculum based on parental input. These studies indicate that families and communities have untapped resources that can be utilized in the classroom.<sup>69</sup>

Studies have documented parent-initiated efforts at the school and community levels, describing efforts to mobilize parental advocacy for the educational needs of their children.<sup>70,71</sup> For instance, Lopez examined how migrant families viewed the development of a strong work ethic, through labor-based jobs, as an opportunity to teach their children why an education is valuable.<sup>72</sup> Parents in this study emphasized that without an education, a life of hard work was the most probable outcome for their children's future. They viewed this as proactive approach to parent involvement in the educational process through "real-life" scenarios and opportunities.<sup>73</sup> Table 4 below summarizes the components of traditional and non-traditional approaches to ELL parental involvement.

**Table 4. Traditional and Non-Traditional Approaches to ELL Parental Involvement**

<b>Traditional</b>	<b>Non -Traditional</b>
Assists families with parenting and childrearing skills, and with creating home conditions to support learning.	Develops reciprocal understanding of schools and families.
Communicates with families about school programs and student progress with two-way communications.	Situates cultural strengths of family and community within the school curriculum.
Includes recruiting efforts to involve families as volunteers and audiences.	Provides parental education that includes family literacy and understanding school community.
Involves families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curricular-linked activities.	Promotes parental advocacy that informs and teaches parents how to advocate for their children.
Includes families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through councils and organizations.	Instills parental empowerment through parent-initiated efforts at the school and community level.
Collaborates and coordinates with the work and community-based agencies, colleges and other groups to strengthen school programs.	Implements culturally and linguistically appropriate practices in all aspects of communication.

***Successful Non-Traditional ELL Parental Involvement Programs***

Non-traditional ELL parental involvement focuses on family integration into the school culture. We begin with examples of two successful family literacy programs that support families, and follow with one community-based program known as The Parent Institute for Quality Education,<sup>74</sup> which promotes communication. Then, we review ELL parent-initiated efforts as they navigate the school system to access power and become advocates for their children.

**Supporting Families**

Researchers have documented two family literacy programs that have sought to integrate parents’ resources to promote children’s learning and literacy development in the home. In the Intergenerational Literacy Project (ILP) in Chelsea, Massachusetts, participants from different ethnic backgrounds attended classes that supported parent literacy development as well as family literacy in the home. Parents who participated in ILP

increased their use of reading and writing outside of the school setting and the engagement of their children in literacy activities.<sup>75</sup> *Proyecto de Literatura Infantil* [Children's Literature Project] in California targets Spanish-speaking families and capitalizes on the language resources of Latino families. To promote literacy, parents meet to listen to and discuss children's literature. Activities offered by this program also promote literacy development at home. In addition to understanding and becoming more familiar with what their children were learning, parents developed more confidence in their reading and writing abilities, and created networks with other parents who had participated in this program.<sup>76</sup>

### **Promoting Communication**

An example of community-based education provided to parents is the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE). This program, which began in California and has since expanded to communities in other states, offers a nine-week parent involvement education program. Classes have been taught in sixteen languages and are provided in the participant's primary language by instructors trained by PIQE. The cost of this program is between \$200 and \$300 per parent, "depending on the area, size of schools and student demographics."<sup>77</sup> Participating schools cover the costs with funding from different sources (e.g. special grants, Title I, No Child Left Behind).<sup>78</sup> Using educational techniques addressed by Freire, the classes aim to do the following:

1. Establish and maintain a supportive home learning environment;
2. Communicate and collaborate with teachers, counselors, and principals;
3. Navigate the school system and access its resources;
4. Encourage college attendance;
5. Identify and avoid obstacles to school success; and
6. Support children's emotional and social development.<sup>79</sup>

Initial studies conducted after the program's inception reported its effectiveness in promoting parent participation in the schools.<sup>80</sup> Recent findings revealed that the children of Latino parents who graduated from San Diego's PIQE achieved a 93% high school graduation rate and 79.2% student enrollment in college or a four-year university.<sup>81</sup> To date, more than 375,000 parents representing various school districts in California have participated. The program has also expanded to other cities such as in Phoenix, Arizona and Worthington, Minnesota, graduating 25,000 more parents.

## Parental Advocacy and Empowerment

Non-traditional ELL parental involvement includes parental advocacy and empowerment. Because this view sheds light on a reciprocal approach between schools and parents, we present the following examples of efforts driven by parents in California and Arizona. The first example reviews the work achieved by a parent-initiated committee. The second highlights how parental involvement is developed within a program that would not normally be considered a parent involvement practice. The process of empowerment documented in these studies underscores the work achieved by parents to shift the power differential often present in schools. Schools can learn from these efforts by creating opportunities for parents to meet and discuss specific challenges regarding their children's schooling. Schools that wish to empower parents should support these types of parent initiated endeavors and be open to the topics that will be driven by parents, meeting their needs as appropriate.

One of the focal points of an ethnographic study conducted in California was the work of *Comite de Padres Latinos* (COPLA), established by parents after determining that they needed to understand how the educational system worked. Parents invited teachers and administrators to COPLA meetings in an effort to create parent representation, as well as to learn more about their rights and the tools needed to support their children with homework and other academic needs. This setting provided a forum for dialogue between parents and the school. Many changes took place throughout a process that involved program outreach, parent advocacy, participation in decision-making processes, and increased involvement in the school community. Moreover, COPLA parents were involved in other leadership roles within the school, such as in the implementation of a Family Literacy Project (FLP). Literacy skill development by parents and students who participated in FLP also demonstrated the influence of parent involvement in the development of students' critical learning.<sup>82</sup>

A second study conducted in Arizona focused on a group of parents whose children were enrolled in a school's Migrant Education Program (MEP). It illustrated how parents could get involved if provided with appropriate opportunities.<sup>83</sup> "The Bridge," developed and implemented by parents, was first established to assist children enrolled in the MEP to meet their basic clothing needs. Involved parents gained access to local knowledge to build and coordinate service delivery, and they created social networks to promote services and recruit volunteers. This engagement promoted unintended parental involvement outcomes. Among these were parent advocacy to gain access to school and community resources, development of partnerships with diverse stakeholders, and active participation in school functions. With the knowledge gained, parents were able to shift the power differential in their



favor as they learned how to navigate the school system and become stronger advocates for their children's needs.

### ***Recommendations***

As much as ELL parents may want to become informed and involved in their children's schooling, the too-frequent reality of current anti-immigrant sentiment and English-only policies makes access to school sites more difficult than ever for many parents. It is important to recognize that while English-only policies may restrict teachers' use of instructional language, in communication with parents, schools may use the native language. Schools may choose to use translators and interpreters for school and teacher conferences, or teachers and staff members may be able to directly use native language in communication with parents. The challenge today is for schools to offset the negativity felt by some parents due to English-only policies and political pressure for more restrictive immigration policies, with the view toward educating ELL students and fostering the parental participation that is a key aspect of educational opportunity and academic achievement. The attitudes of teachers and administrators can have a significant impact on parental involvement. Teacher training institutions can assist by addressing cultural aspects of local or statewide ELL student populations.<sup>84</sup>

Accordingly, it is recommended that policy makers:

- Support the implementation of traditional parental involvement programs that are culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate.
- Fund the implementation of non-traditional parental involvement programs that reflect a reciprocal involvement in the school/parent community.
- Support the professional preparation of teachers who can identify community funds of knowledge for curricular development and school outreach.
- Support community-based education programs that inform parents about school values and expectations and work with parents to help them become advocates for their children.

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