

involving latino parents

GETTING LATINO PARENTS INVOLVED IN EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES WITH THEIR CHILDREN HASN'T ALWAYS BEEN A PRIORITY FOR SCHOOLS. THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES FOR ATTRACTING LATINO PARENTS TO OUR CLASSROOMS CAN HELP PARENTS OVERCOME THE BARRIERS THEY MAY FACE.

Research indicates that tremendous academic achievement results when parents or family members become involved in students' education. Parental involvement can increase academic and language achievement; improve behavior, attitudes toward school and parent-child relationships; help parents improve their own self-confidence and expertise; improve home-school relations; and increase students' cognitive growth (Bermúdez & Márquez, 1996).

Unfortunately, getting Latino parents involved in educational activities with their children hasn't always been a priority. Some schools see parents as agents of service for the school rather than as equal partners in the educational endeavor (Sosa, 1997).

Parental involvement does increase achievement for Latino students, but many barriers need to be overcome in order to attain high levels of involvement. Developing effective strategies for attracting Latino parents to our schools and classrooms is critical if we are to reach those parents. Some common barriers include the following

(Bermúdez and Márquez, 1996; Cotton, Wikelund, 1989; Lindeman, 2001; Torres-Guzmán, 1995; Simich-Dudgeon, 1986; Sosa, 1997; Zelazo, 1995).

1. Inability to understand English. Parents may feel that no one in the school will listen to them if they cannot communicate in English. Their feelings of self-worth are diminished because they do not understand forms that are sent home and cannot help their child with homework. A lack of literacy skills in their own native language can create an even greater sense of helplessness and embarrassment. Illiterate parents believe they cannot offer their child any help, much less help or support their child's teacher.

2. Involvement equals interfering with school. Teaming with the school is not a tradition in the Latino culture. Latinos have a high level of respect for educators and treat them as professionals who should be left alone to do their jobs. Parents often feel that interference with school activities would be counterproductive.

3. Unfamiliarity with the school system. Parents new to this country or those who have had no experience with our schools do

not realize that they have a right to ask about their child's education.

4. Lack of education. Many parents feel that they do not have the required education to participate in schools. Parents feel inadequate having academic discussions with teachers because they are not familiar with educational terms. They believe that they might cause more harm than good if they try to help their children at home with homework.

5. Too many responsibilities. Parents often work two jobs, which interferes with their attendance at school meetings. Parents might also have very physically demanding jobs and may be too tired to attend school functions.

6. Negative experiences with school. Prior negative experiences with schools may also affect parents' willingness to become involved. If they have only been contacted by the school for negative reasons, then the chance of their becoming involved is slim.

*By Reyes L. Quezada, Delia M. Díaz and
María Sánchez*

7. **School personnel's negative or condescending attitudes.** Parents will tend to not visit the school if they feel that school personnel do not view them as equals.

8. **Lack of transportation and childcare.** The lack of transportation and childcare are major deterrents for Latino parents, especially in urban neighborhoods. Parents cannot attend meetings if they cannot get to the school site or if they have small children and no support for childcare.

Even though these barriers do not apply to every parent, they are significant factors for many Latino families. The school's role is to identify which barriers their parents need help overcoming and then develop programs that will help address those barriers.

Factors to consider when involving Latino parents

There are many strategies educators can use to increase Latino parental involvement. "Research has shown that Latino parents do respond to other more personal strategies when parents feel more comfortable such as invitations to informal *café y pan dulce* (coffee and sweet bread) gatherings before school, lunch invitations in the school cafeteria so that parents can eat with the teacher and students, after-school classroom demonstrations put on by the students, phone calls, home visits, after-school conversations in the school yard with parents who pick up their children, and informal school wide *charlas* (talks) for parents on topics of their choice" (Huerta-Macías, 1998).

Some strategies to consider include:

- Offer parents flexible schedules. Ask for their input.
- Offer transportation to the school site and childcare.
- Conduct home visits to invite parents to school.
- Ask parents for input regarding workshops or trainings.
- Send school information home in English and Spanish.
- Conduct meetings in English and Spanish, if needed.
- View parents as contributors and collaborators.
- Plan meetings as social events outside of school.
- Provide hands-on training.
- Make parents feel welcome.

Schools take action

Two schools that have taken an active role in involving Latino parents have been recognized by the California School Boards Association for programs that are innovative and exemplary, sustainable, connected to district goals, communicate with the community, meet the needs of all students and can be replicated easily. They are:

■ **Family Literacy Workshop**, *James Monroe Elementary School, Madera Unified School District.*

The purpose of the Family Literacy Workshop is to improve the reading ability of students, to improve parent support of literacy and English language development, and to improve school/parent communication, according to Principal Michele Pecina, who received the 2003 National Distinguished Principal Award from the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

The Latino parents of English Language Learners in preschool to sixth grade are identified and recruited by classroom teachers. About 80 percent of the school's students are Latino, and 60 percent are designated as English Language Learners.

The Family Literacy Workshop consists of six sessions, each being about three hours long. Each session includes a visit to the library and a reading of a "family book." Using the Natural Learning Cycle model, everything presented is introduced, demonstrated and modeled. Guided practice follows with participation, while a performance assessment concludes the learning.

An English Language Development experience is taught and practiced every week, and a discussion and practice activity with a whole-group review of the upcoming parent and child activity is also conducted. Library time is provided for families to check out books for reading and use in the week's homework assignments, along with a review of their learning experiences and how they will be used to do the homework assignments.

District data indicates an increase in Academic Performance Index scores by as much as 20 percent over a two-year period. Parent interactions with their children are assessed using a Parent Interaction Observation Checklist. A parent self-assessment and a survey are also conducted by the school to

determine how knowledgeable parents feel about the various topics covered and about the fundamental literacy learning methods and the techniques needed to teach and master them.

Community presentations have been given at several school sites regarding the success of the program. Inquiries from 12 schools have been reported and district personnel continue to support and disseminate program information. Over the past three years more than 690 families have participated in the program.

■ **Parents Take P.A.R.T. (Parent Assisted Reading Training)**, *Franklin Elementary School, Redlands Unified School District.*

The P.A.R.T. program targets siblings of identified English Language Learners and Title I students who will be entering kindergarten at Franklin Elementary School. Christina Christopherson, principal at Franklin Elementary School, a year-round Title I school with 740 K-5 students, implemented the program in 1999. Educators at Franklin felt a need to help Latino families and their children to be better prepared academically at the start of kindergarten, and to have families feel a stronger connection between the home and the school.

Administrative staff and a community liaison contacted 10 families to participate in the initial pilot program. Each week a representative from the school made home visits to each Latino family, delivering a tub with appropriate instructional materials and demonstrating the use of the materials in a developmental and sequential manner.

As a result of its effectiveness, the program evolved into an on-site parent participation pre-school program that now serves 30 pre-school children and their families.

The program has had a positive effect on teachers, families and the community. First, it provides Latino parents and students with the opportunity to attend preschool at the student's future elementary school, offering a preview and a unique sense of belonging for parents as well as students. Second, open communication develops between the preschool teacher and the kindergarten teachers, which facilitates development of a stronger sequential instructional program. Third, children in the program are screened for speech and language services, learning

disabilities, health services and other primary interventions as needed.

P.A.R.T. also offers Latino parents workshops on language development, effective reading strategies, parenting skills, emotional and physical development, academic readiness and community services. Literature in Spanish and English is made available for parents to check out, in addition to

developmentally appropriate games from the parent resource center.

Latino parents also participate in the "Coffee with the Principal," where families share their concerns and suggestions for improvement of school programs.

Parents in the program have a stronger connection with community organizations through presentations and workshops by the

city library, Healthy Start, YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs and the Family Service Association of Redlands.

Evaluation of the program has been conducted through parent and teacher surveys. Already, there has been an increase in parent participation and attendance by as much as 30 percent at family night programs. More parents now participate in weekly parent education classes, tutoring and volunteering.

Results of the parent-teacher survey indicate that parents feel more connected to the school and their children, particularly non-English-speaking and limited-English-speaking Latino families. The parents also report that their own English skills have improved as a result of volunteering to tutor in the preschool classroom.

Kindergarten teachers report that students are entering class with better verbal skills and higher levels of cognitive development compared to students without the P.A.R.T. preschool experience. Assessment results for students who have participated in P.A.R.T. indicate they are at or above grade level, and English Language Learners come in with an enriched vocabulary.

The success of the program has prompted two other elementary schools in Redlands to develop on-site preschool programs. Further, in 2002 the school received both the California Distinguished School Award and California School Achievement Awards from the California Department of Education.

Building on cultural values

Many Latino parents are very much involved in their children's education, but educators may not be aware of the kinds of positive support parents provide in the home. Parental involvement does not solely revolve around academic scaffolding in the home. It also encompasses important teaching about real life and the world around them (Torres-Guzmán, 1995).

Latino parents often do not know that they can become involved just by talking to their children about the importance of having a good education. As educators we need to realize the powerful impact that parents can have on children and on their education. More effort must be made to involve parents in their children's daily educational experiences. This is part of the answer to making

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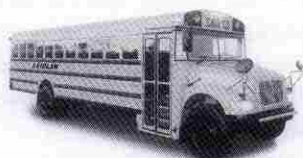
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students feel successful educationally and in the world around them.

In planning school-community collaboration programs, schools need to build on the cultural values of Latino parents, stress personal contact, foster communication, cre-

ate a warm and positive environment, and facilitate and structure accommodations for parent involvement (Scribner, Young, and Pedroza, 1999).

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Reyes L. Quezada is associate professor, Learning and Teaching program, School of Education, University of San Diego. Delia M. Díaz and María Sánchez are bilingual teachers and graduate students in the Learning and Teaching Program at the School of Education, University of San Diego.

