

# 12

## INVOLVING PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

Numerous outside factors contribute to a student's potential for academic success. It is especially critical that school staff gather information from parents of ELLs about their backgrounds. Of particular importance are the students' native languages and cultures, the length and quality of prior formal education in their native language, any previous education they have received in U.S. schools, the amount of time they have been in the United States, and the extent of their exposure to English.

Knowing the native language and culture of students will help you tap into possible support resources for teaching these students in their native language. It will also reveal the educational customs and expectations of both the students and their parents. Remember that parents of recent immigrants may be unfamiliar with the U.S. education system. They may not know their rights, they may not understand what is expected of them, and they may not be familiar with academic concepts such as "standards-based education."

Information about a student's prior education in his native language can help you gauge the challenges the student will be facing. Students who arrive in U.S. schools with appropriate grade-level achievement in their native language will make the transition to learning in English more easily.

Parents whose children attended school consistently in their native country may have a very different perspective about education and parental involvement than mainstream U.S. parents. Homework policies and expectations for parental involvement may differ from those in their native country, for example.

You need to determine what exposure a student has had to the English language, even if he has lived in the United States for some time. A student's English could be very limited—even for a child who was born in the United States—if his family speaks only its native language at home and in the neighborhood.

Involving parents and the community is not just the teacher's job. School and district leadership teams need to develop comprehensive plans for parent and community involvement that include the parents of ELLs, as well as members of the community who share their ethnicity and language. Therefore, in addition to the model presented below, we provide an example of a plan to involve parents and the community from a district with a growing number of Spanish-speaking ELLs.

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### **Epstein's Model of Parent and Community Involvement**

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A leading model of parent and community involvement was developed by Joyce Epstein at Johns Hopkins University (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997). It is a research-based model that delineates six types of parent and community involvement. These types, and sample practices of each, are depicted in Figure 12.1.

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### **How One District Engaged the Families of ELLs and Members of the Local Community**

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Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) recently worked with the leadership team in a small rural district in Wyoming to engage the families of ELLs and members of the local community in the education process. This district had a growing population of Spanish-speaking students but very limited financial and human resources available to serve them.

The district's parent and community involvement work was conducted at two levels. First, McREL helped develop school staff capacity to work effectively with parents and families by helping district and school staff members learn more about the families of ELLs. Second, McREL helped to increase the knowledge and skills of the

**Figure 12.1**

Epstein's Six Types of Parent and Community Involvement

Type of Involvement	Sample Practices
<b>Parenting</b> Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent education and other courses or training for parents (e.g., GED, college credit, family, literacy)</li> <li>• Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services</li> <li>• Home visits at transition points to preschool and elementary, middle, and high school</li> </ul>
<b>Communicating</b> Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conferences with every parent at least once a year</li> <li>• Language translators to assist parents as needed</li> <li>• Regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications</li> </ul>
<b>Volunteering</b> Recruit and organize parent help and support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School and classroom volunteer program to help teachers, administrators, students, and other parents</li> <li>• Parent room or family center for volunteer work, meetings, and resources for families</li> <li>• Annual postcard survey to identify all available talents, times, and locations of volunteers</li> </ul>
<b>Learning at Home</b> Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information for families on skills required for students in all subjects at each grade</li> <li>• Information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home</li> <li>• Family participation in setting student goals each year and in planning for college or work</li> </ul>
<b>Decision Making</b> Include parents in school decisions and in the development of parent leaders and representatives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, advisory councils, or committees for parent leadership and participation</li> <li>• Independent advocacy groups to lobby and work for school reform and improvements</li> <li>• Networks to link all families with parent representatives</li> </ul>
<b>Collaborating with Community</b> Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information for students and families on community health; cultural, recreational, or social support; and other programs or services</li> <li>• Information on community activities that are linked to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students</li> <li>• Service to the community by students, families, and schools (e.g., recycling, art, music, drama, and other activities for seniors or others)</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, and Simon (1997).

parents and families so that they could actively participate in school activities and their children's education.

### **District Activities**

**Assessing parent and family needs.** The district leadership team needed to know what families in the community wanted to learn. To get to know the community, the school staff gathered information about the parents and families of ELLs at a parent meeting at the beginning of the school year using two Spanish-language questionnaires.

One questionnaire was designed to gather basic information, such as where the family was from originally, how long they had lived in the United States (and in the local area), and what academic expectations the parents had for their children. The other questionnaire was designed to determine what the parents knew about school systems in the United States. It measured the extent of their knowledge on topics such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and standards-based education and whether they had previously had opportunities to learn how to communicate with their children's teachers and help their children with assignments. Staff used the results of both questionnaires to outline the content of parent meetings for the rest of the year.

**Developing parents' understanding.** After completing the needs assessment, McREL took a number of steps to ensure parent participation. Intensive outreach was conducted: Flyers were sent home and follow-up phone calls were made (both in Spanish) to ensure that a reasonable number of parents participated in scheduled meetings. McREL staff conducted monthly on-site family meetings, with all training and activities conducted in Spanish.

To develop the necessary knowledge and skills to help their children, parents are encouraged to actively participate in the decision-making aspect of schooling. To aid in this area, McREL offered training on the following topics:

- **Parent rights and responsibilities under NCLB.** Parents learned that they can expect to have their children taught by a highly qualified teacher, become proficient in English while learning academic content, and be tested annually for their English language proficiency. Parents can expect to know if their children have been identified and recommended for placement in an ESL program and learned that they have the right to accept or refuse these services. They can also expect to receive information on their children's performance on tests of academic achievement.

- **Standards-based education.** Staff shared the Wyoming standards for language development with parents. Parents learned that their children's proficiency in personal, social, and academic uses of English would be expected to increase with these standards.
- **Communicating effectively at parent-teacher conferences.** McREL based its training on this topic on Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's (2003) advice for parents on preparing and participating actively in parent-teacher conferences. Parents were encouraged to ask the teacher what strategies will be used to help their children gain knowledge and skills in content areas, how their children's performance will be assessed, and what they can do at home to help their children learn. Parents were also advised to plan a follow-up conference with the teacher to stay abreast of their children's progress.
- **Availability of ESL classes and other services in the community.** The district formed a partnership with the local community college, whereby college staff attended a parent meeting and invited the adults to attend ESL classes in the evening. The teachers of the ESL classes distributed brochures explaining the courses and indicating the community centers where they would be held. At the end of the year, the college's ESL teachers presented the parents with awards for hours of coursework completed. Parents also learned about additional community resources, such as summer reading programs at the library, year-round activities at the town recreation center, summer school, community agencies that assist with health issues, and summer employment opportunities for teens.

**Encouraging parent involvement.** Parents from other cultures may view their role in their children's education differently than U.S. parents. For example, instead of asking their children questions about a story—asking them to predict the outcome, for instance, or having them interpret the story based on their own experiences—immigrant parents from rural areas of Mexico and Central America are more likely to use the story to teach a moral lesson (Valdes, 1996).

To help the parents in the Wyoming district contribute more actively to the education of their children, McREL offered training at the monthly meetings on increasing the knowledge and skills parents need to help their children with the acquisition of English, literacy development, and academic proficiency in different content areas. McREL also offered training on increasing the knowledge and skills parents need to effectively collaborate with their children's teachers, specialists, and paraprofessionals.



### Three-Year Parent and Community Involvement Plan

See Appendix C for an example of a three-year parent and community involvement plan, based on the experience of the Wyoming district.

### Recommendations

Based on the experience in the Wyoming school district we examined, we offer the following recommendations to help schools involve parents and the community in the educational process.

***Begin with the school itself.*** Make it evident through visuals that different languages and cultures are represented in the school. Visuals could include signs that say “Welcome” or “Visitors Must Check in at the Office” in another language, as well as artwork representing another culture (or cultures). Reallocate library resources for buying books that are written in other languages and represent various cultures. Use other financial resources to purchase classroom materials that will broaden all students’ understanding of different cultures.

***Use bilingual staff to the extent possible.*** If bilingual staff members are available in the district, use some of the approaches and ideas discussed earlier in this chapter to guide their training and work with the parents of ELLs. It is important to note that bilingual paraprofessionals are exempt from NCLB’s “highly qualified” requirements if they work solely as translators or on parental involvement issues.

***Involve the community.*** Besides involving the parents, it is important to search out other community members who share the same native language as the newcomers. Include them in all plans for building not only a family-school partnership but also a family- community-school network.

***Hold regular meetings.*** Hold monthly or bimonthly meetings to inform parents how they can participate in decision making at their children’s schools, along with other ways they can contribute to their children’s education. Be sure to extend the invitation often and in several ways. During meetings, actively engage parents by having the facilitator check for understanding, ask for personal stories, and ask what else they would like to learn.

***Offer ESL classes for parents.*** Districts can form partnerships with community colleges and other agencies to offer ESL classes to the parents of ELLs.

## **Summary**

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The unique qualities of ELLs and their families justify the need for modifying approaches typically used to involve parents in the school culture. A three-year comprehensive plan can be advantageous when planning for parent and community involvement, as it broadens a leadership team's knowledge of various types of participation.