

INVOLVING PARENTS AT SCHOOL

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## Involving Parents at School

This working paper explores reasons to encourage parents of English language learners (ELLs) to be involved in the learning process at the middle school level. Barriers to parental involvement of language minority students will be identified and successful, research-based strategies to increase parental involvement will be introduced. Five specific strategies to involve parents at school for 2008-2009 will be introduced. The paper concludes with a summary of what has been shared.

### Why Should Parents Be Involved?

#### *Parent Involvement is Crucial*

“Numerous studies show that, regardless of the economic, ethnic, or cultural background of the family, parent involvement in a child’s education is a major factor in determining the child’s success in school” (National Parent Teachers Association [PTA], 2008).

Particularly during the adolescent years, the relationship between children and parents can set the foundations for success or failure (National Middle School Journal, 2008; Santrock, 2007; Sticht, 1983; Sticht, 2008). Many parents of ELLs have a low regard for themselves and for the value they can contribute to their children (Ada, Campoy & Zubizarreta, 2001). Middle school students are frequently in conflict with parenting styles and their own need for structure and support (Santrock, 2007). ELLs at the middle school level also deal with the layering of cultural norms and expectations from home countries, families, schools, peers, community, and the United States (Ada, Campoy & Zubizarreta, 2001; Allison & Rehm, 2007; Santrock, 2007).

In addition to the specific concerns of adolescent ELLs in the middle school years, research on building academic skills in English shows the value of assisting ELLs to make connections between what they are learning and their schema or background (Echevarria, Vogt

& Short, 2004). Involving parents in classroom curriculum is a way to open dialogue between parents and children and to increase the quality and quantity of the connections between what is being learned and the schema the ELLs bring to the classroom.

#### *Challenges to ELL Parent Involvement*

Frequently language minority parents in the United States of America (USA) are challenged by their own education gaps. Some parents are not functionally literate in either their native language or in English. Findings from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) survey that indicated that 11 million (5%) of approximately 216 million adults in the United States of America were non-literate in English (National Assessment of Adult Literacy [NAAL], 2003b; NAAL, 2003a). Many of these same parents are working multiple jobs at low income levels to support their families. In many cases, the priorities associated with overcoming innumerable obstacles to support their families keep language minority parents away from involvement with schools (Assets for Colorado Youth, 2005; Wood, Rogers & Yancey, 2006). In many schools, ELL parents believe they are not welcome at the meetings and seminars held for parents at the school. Parent meetings at most schools are conducted in English, during the evening, in large-group settings, and without any child care or supplementary transportation service provided. Language and cultural minority parents are also extremely sensitive to perceived attitudes on the part of monolingual parents whose children attend the same school (Assets for Colorado Youth, 2005).

#### Parent Involvement Strategies that Work

##### *Build-in opportunities for relationships with parents—Parent Breakfasts and Parent Nights*

Starting with an idea inspired by the movie, *Field of Dreams*, Burton invited parents to a parent breakfast once a month. Four parents responded to Burton's initial invitation in 2002. He

continued to keep the opportunity open. Four years later 30 to 40 parents regularly come to the Parent Breakfasts. Together parents and administrators have planned and conducted four Parent Nights at the school (2006).

*Provide Parents Something They Need and Value*

Sticht (1983, 2008) observes that a consistent finding from research on adult literacy from 1972 to 2003 indicates that, “as the parents' educational levels increase, so do the educational achievements of their children, and this intergenerational relationship holds for 9, 13, and 17 year olds and persists into adulthood” (Sticht, 2008, p. 2).

In 2000, a university education professor invited an urban middle school principal to "give me 50 of your most academically challenged students who need additional support to be educationally successful." The collaborative project began in 2001 by tutoring 25 middle school students twice a week. This quickly led to the creation of a program to teach parents English as a second language, enhanced by offering weekly family dinners with a guest speaker providing information of interest to the parents. This second program was soon expanded to include more courses for parents, eventually evolving into offerings from four organizations providing four integrated programs. The focus of each program was on enriching the environment in which the students lived and learned and then empowering them to take advantage of the opportunities at hand (Wood, Rogers & Yancey, 2006).

Five Strategies to Involve Parents at School for 2008-2009

Because of the intergenerational transfer of better health, inspiration for learning, oral language and literacy from parents to their children, and the effect this has on the school achievement of children, policies and funding decisions for education should be based on

the expectation that one of the best investments [to] make for the education of children, is an investment in the education of adults (Sticht, 2008, p. 3).

While funding priorities will already have been set for the school year, investment of time and investment in the parents by inviting more constructive collaboration with the school without placing increased demand on limited family resources can result in significant positive consequences for ELL students and for the ELL classroom.

#### *Homework Requiring Student-Parent Dialog and Family History or Family Stories*

As students participate in multidisciplinary thematic units, they will be required to make conscious connections between their individual schema and the content being studied. Part of these connections will come from completion of interactive homework assignments, requiring dialog between the students and the parents or other adults in the family. These dialogs will be conducted in the language spoken by the parents. Part of the students' assignment will be to transform this dialog into inputs they can share in English with their collaborative learning teams. Sometimes the dialog will revolve around family histories or family stories. Dialogs will also be required to discover family awareness and opinion about important issues being studied in school, e.g., global warming.

#### *Family Literacy Activities*

Family literacy activities will form a part of each on-going unit throughout the year, with specific events timed to celebrate significant annual milestones. Students will be encouraged to take home reading and to read to parents or to siblings or to both (in English or in native language). Parents will be invited to share their memories and ideas related to classroom content in the form of taped conversations collected by the students' at home and played in the classroom as part of content coverage. Books will be made available for students to take home and share

with their parents and siblings. Family literacy dinners will be planned—to be held in or near the school library—with baby-sitting services provided. Parents and students will be invited to bring “pot-luck” dishes and guest speakers will be scheduled based on parent interest.

#### *Student-led Parent-Teacher Conferences*

Working with students’ portfolios assembled throughout the year, students will lead their parents through conferences with the teacher at the times set by the school for parent conferences—or at other times requested by the teacher, the student, or the parents.

Conversations during these conferences will focus on success, learning, and building skills.

#### *Multimedia Celebrations of Learning*

Throughout the year, students will be working on multidisciplinary projects that will have, as part of their learning products, multimedia products (e.g., PowerPoint presentations, PhotoStory3 movies, recorded presentations). Parents will be invited to come to school for these celebrations. Some of the celebrations will be timed to coincide with Family Literacy Nights. For parents who cannot attend the school function, a CD or DVD version of the presentation will be made available for students to take home and share with their parents.

#### *Parent Contributions in the Classroom*

Parents will be invited to add value as they can in the classroom. As different multidisciplinary projects begin throughout the year, students will explore what connections they may be aware of between the focus of the projects and their own families. One of the initial assignments will be a homework where students engage in dialog with their parents about the project to discover any insights or experience the parents may be able to share with the class—possibilities for this contribution range from a guest speaker presentation to a special food using spices studied in the unit. Parent contributions will be tracked and parents will receive

appropriate recognition on Family Literacy Nights. Students will earn extra points for their parents' involvement.

### Summary

This working paper explored reasons to encourage parents of English language learners (ELLs) to be involved in the learning process at the middle school level. Barriers to parental involvement of language minority students were identified and successful, research-based strategies to increase parental involvement were introduced. Five specific strategies to involve parents at school for 2008-2009 were presented. The paper concluded with a summary of what had been shared.

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