

Don't Stop Stuffing The Backpacks!:

Parents of English Language Learners Share School-Home Communication Preferences

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Abstract

As communications in U.S. society become more digitally focused, many schools have transitioned toward using more digital technology for school-home communications. Across the country, many schools and teachers now disseminate information to students' parents using email listserv, text message, Twitter, Facebook, and other applications such as Edmodo or Class Dojo. Digital communication between school and home can have many benefits, including increased convenience and reliability and decreased environmental impact. However, moving school-home communications from paper-based flyers and letters sent home in children's backpacks to primarily digital media may have unintended consequences such as exacerbating the "digital divide" that still exists among students and parents with less financial and material access to digital technology. It is unclear whether increasingly digital school-home communication methods are more or less desirable to many parents of English language learners. This study involved surveys of Spanish-speaking and English-speaking parents of English language learner students in seven Head Start, Even Start, and elementary schools in four Indiana public school corporations. Parents were asked what type of information they wanted to receive from their child's school and how they would prefer to receive that information. Findings revealed that both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking parents expected to work with their students on academics at home and wanted information from their child's school about supporting academics at home. More Spanish-speaking than English-speaking parents reported that they would like to receive information from the school about specific ways to help their child with a variety of school readiness skills at home. These findings contrast with popularly held misconceptions that low-income parents (such as those participating in Head Start programs) and non-English-speaking parents are less interested in involvement with their children's education. The majority of both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking parents indicated a preference for receiving written material sent home in backpacks. Survey results indicated that technology dependent communication methods, such as email and teacher blogs, were the least desirable to the parents in this study. The article ends with recommended questions educators can ask about how their school communicates with parents.

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Parents of English Language Learners Share School-Home Communication Preferences

In this increasingly digital world, teachers and schools feel pressure to go “high tech” in finding the best ways to communicate with parents about school announcements, upcoming events, and even curriculum, standards, and classroom programs. As school began this year, for example, I received greetings from my children’s teachers via email, was invited to join a PTA listserv, and signed up to receive text alerts whenever my children’s teachers update their class webpages. I was digitally invited to view an online Powerpoint presentation explaining behavioral and academic expectations and homework procedures for one of my children’s elementary classes. While my elementary-aged children still bring home a communication envelope weekly, it is more often filled with extracurricular announcements than with critical school information. I must admit, I love the convenience of email and text alerts delivered straight to me when the school wants to give me information. But how does that communication format work for other parents?

As education is increasingly viewed as a partnership between schools, families, and communities, educators have more reasons than ever to communicate with families. In this age of accountability, parents may expect even more communication from the school about student achievement and school programming to improve educational outcomes. Yet school-home communication presents extra challenges for families for whom English is not a preferred language. Given all the information that could be disseminated and all the means by which this can be done, *what do parents really want to hear from schools, and how do they want to hear it?* In order to answer this question, we conducted a study with Spanish-speaking and English-

speaking parents of English language learning (EL) students in seven Head Start, Even Start, and elementary schools in four Indiana public school corporations. We wanted to learn what information parents and guardians expect to receive from schools, and how they prefer to receive such information.

Technologically equipped schools have more options than ever to reach out to families of students. Ever-increasing options include apps such as Edmodo and Class Dojo that enable messaging with parents, direct email, listservs, blogs, RSS feeds, Twitter, Facebook, and text messages. These communication tools join the former methods of direct mail, phone calls, home visits, and flyers sent home in student backpacks. While digital means of communication provide environmental benefits, increased convenience, and reduced costs in some cases, **we wondered about the potential language barriers of digital school-home communication as well as the well-documented “digital divide”** between families who are “wired” with home and mobile devices and families who do not have access to computers, smartphones, or other devices with regular internet access. Internet access is not the only barrier that concerns us as far as digital school-home communication. Parents and caregivers of English Language Learners (ELLs) may be hindered in school participation and communication if they are not proficient in reading English, are unfamiliar with the school system, or are unfamiliar with the cultural norms of the school. Most educators are aware of the literature supporting the importance of parental involvement with children’s schooling. Regardless of socioeconomic status or ethnicity, parental involvement is important in improved student achievement and school attendance, and reduced dropout rates (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008).

Of course, partnership between families and schools involves much more than one-way communication from schools to families. Too often the concept of parental involvement has

centered on parents coming to school for school-sponsored events, checking homework at home, and participating in fundraising efforts. We support a broad view of family involvement in children's education, predicated on the belief that families are valuable partners of schools and can contribute a great deal to education through their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), among other assets. This particular research project was narrower in scope, however, focusing on how parents and guardians prefer to receive communication from their children's school.

We know that parental involvement with schools is important, and that school-home communication is one piece of parental involvement. But what specific information and communication method works best for parents? We surveyed parents using a paper questionnaire available in both English and Spanish. At the five early childhood education sites (Head Start and Even Start programs), participants were attending school-based parent meetings and the response rate was between 88 and 100 percent. At the two elementary sites, questionnaires were distributed at parent/teacher conferences and via letters sent home in student backpacks and the response rate was between 38 and 48 percent. A total of 82 parents participated in this preliminary phase of research. The survey asked parents what kind of information they wanted to receive from schools, both in explicitly academic areas and in areas such as parenting skills and community services. Parents were also asked the delivery method by which they prefer to receive communication from the school.

Findings: Information parents want from schools

In the majority of instances, **more Spanish-speaking than English-speaking parents reported that they would like information from the school about how to help their child at home.** In the top five responses, both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking parents wanted information on the following topics: Parenting and discipline skills, ways to help with reading, ways to help with handwriting, and how to prepare for school. In addition, the Spanish-speaking parents also wanted information on the following topics: Ways to learn English, books children should read, and ways to help develop vocabulary.

Regarding school services, highest responses among English-speaking parents included names and phone numbers of school counselors, tutoring information, tips for helping a child become a better reader, and health information. Highest responses among Spanish-speaking parents included tips for helping a child become a better reader, how to help with homework, how to contact the school if a child is absent, and how to get involved at school. Among both groups, the choices selected least often were information on special education services and contacts for social services and agencies such as food stamps and WIC.

These findings raise a number of questions. How much might these responses reflect the need for Spanish-speaking parents to be better prepared for customs and procedures typical for U.S. schools—such as whom to call when a child is absent? How much might it reflect not knowing the roles of school officials, such as school counselors? How much might it reflect that parents already know about social services from other sources? While the findings raise many questions, the data clearly support the proposition that parents do indeed want more communication from schools. **The high number of responses related to helping children**

academically at home indicates parental interest in being involved in their children’s education. This point is significant because of the popular misconception that some parents do not intend to be involved in their children’s schooling. This stereotype is commonly held against parents who are marginalized by poverty, such as those who might participate in services like Head Start. **Responses to this survey indicate that both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking parent respondents expect to work with their students academically at home.**

Findings: How parents want to receive information from schools

The clear majority of Spanish-speaking parents (79%) indicated a preference to receive written material sent home in backpacks. Among English-speaking parents, two responses were popular: written material sent home in backpacks (72%) and informational sessions, meetings, or workshops held at school (64%). **Across both language groups of parents of Head Start, Even Start, and ELL students, the least desirable modes for receiving information were also those that are most technology-dependent: email, websites, and blogs.**

What should educators take away from this research study?

Educators should know that for the most part, English-speaking and Spanish-speaking parents expressed interest in the same types of information from schools. Spanish-speaking parents expressed a strong desire to help their young children’s literacy development (including information about books children should read and how to encourage vocabulary

development and English skills). Responses from parents from both language backgrounds indicated their interest in helping children’s academic and literacy development at home. The other primary finding is that **both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking parents of Head Start and Even Start students, as well as Spanish-speaking parents of elementary ELL students, strongly preferred written information sent home in backpacks over any digital method of school-home communication.** Since participation in Head Start and Even Start programs is related to household income, this finding could be related to financial access to internet connection or to mobile data plans as well as access to computers or smartphones or other mobile computing devices. While parents of both language backgrounds preferred paper-based communication sent home in backpacks, Spanish-speaking parents’ stronger preference over English-speaking parents could be language-related, or specifically related to schools’ likelihood of sending home printed information translated into Spanish rather than digital information translated into Spanish. In order to verify these findings and learn more detail, we plan to expand our study to include more elementary schools and some middle and high schools, update the survey to ask more specific questions about smartphone usage, and improve our data collection methods to yield a higher response rate from parents.

How can educators apply these findings to their own schools?

In order to interpret how these findings might help an individual school, or district, we encourage educators to ask these questions about how their school communicates with parents:

- Have we ever asked parents and guardians *what information they wish they had* about our school? About school procedures? About the U.S. educational system?

- Have we ever asked parents and guardians *what they would like to know* about helping their child academically at home?
- Have we asked parents and guardians *how they would like to receive information* from the school?
- Have we asked parents and guardians about their access to internet, and have we analyzed the collected data to learn about digital divides at our school?
- Have we looked at our translation resources in relation to the types of information we send out to parents? Do we only translate school-home communication on required topics, such as parent-teacher conferences and testing?
- Have we given parents information on their areas of educational concern, in the languages they need? What online resources are readily available for parents in their preferred languages? How can we disseminate this information to families?

Family involvement is a broad and important topic, and it is our intention that this study might help educators in their mission of forging strong partnerships with families from all language backgrounds—as well as encourage schools to investigate their own school-home communication practices and how they match families’ interests and preferences.

References

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