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EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:
Engaging Immigrant and English Learner Families in their Children's Learning

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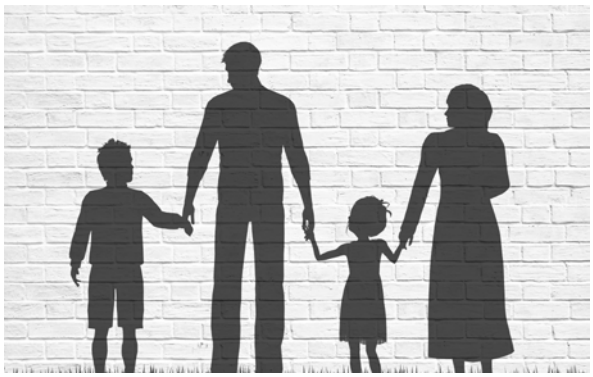
PART I: THE LONG ROAD TRAVELED



Last month, *Exploring Equity Issues* focused on the multiple obstacles that immigrant students face adjusting to their new lives in the United States. This month we address their families, specifically, engaging them in their children's learning. While the benefits of family engagement are well known, reaching immigrant parents and caretakers present many challenges – from both sides: educators and immigrants.

Why is it important to engage immigrant and English Learner (EL) families? According to the 2016 Current Population Survey, immigrants and their U.S.-born children now number approximately 84.3 million people, or 27 percent of the overall U.S. population. In 2015, English Learners (ELs) ages 5 and older represented nine percent of the U.S. student population (Migration Policy Institute, 2017).

A QUICK RECAP ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

More than 50 years of research indicate that family engagement plays a critical role in supporting children's learning, encouraging grit, determination, and will to succeed. Moreover, findings show that when families are involved, children improve in a range of areas: better grades, higher scores on achievement tests, lower drop-out rates, regular school attendance, better social skills, improved behavior, leading to better chances students will graduate from high school and continue their education (Henderson & Mapp, 2202; Smith, Stern, & Shatrova, 2008; Hayes, 2012; Shute et al., 2011; Fan & Chen, 2001).

YES, BUT WHO GETS INVOLVED?

Results of the study *Parent and Family Involvement in Education* from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2012, show that Latino and Asian parents are less likely to attend school or class events or volunteer or serve on school committees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). While 82 percent of White parents attended school-related events, only 64 percent of Latino parents and Asian parents participated. The same differences can be found in volunteering on school committees. Fifty percent of White parents participated in contrast with 32 percent of Latino parents and 37 percent of Asian parents.

The same study also shows differences in parent and caregiver participation when English spoken at home is taken into consideration. Families who speak English at home tend to participate more in schools compared with those who do not. Data indicate that in households where both parents speak English at home, 78 percent participate in class events compared to 62 percent if only one parent speaks English and 50 percent if no parent speaks English.

Immigrant families face many barriers as they try to become informed or involved in their child's school. These barriers, which include limited English proficiency, unfamiliarity with the school system, and differences in cultural norms, can limit communication and participation in schools. Given the increasing number of immigrant families and their relative low levels of engagement with schools, educators should consider the following approaches to promote engagement. It begins with acknowledging and changing some preconceptions.

CHANGING MINDSETS

Switch to an asset-based approach to immigrant families and their children. Deficit-thinking treats students' and families' cultural, language, and socioeconomic characteristics as causes of students' low academic achievement. Teachers with this perspective perceive immigrant students and their parents as a heavy load that needs to be lifted and assimilated into American society in order to succeed. Research studies have shown, however, that an asset-based model recognizes that the funds of knowledge immigrant families bring to school – including their language – provide a solid foundation for positive and effective interaction between school and families and nurture students' self-esteem and academic achievement (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009).

Acknowledge that immigrant and EL families are interested in their children's educational success.

Many schools interpret the low level of engagement as a sign of immigrant and EL families' lack of interest in promoting educational success. Research indicates that the majority of families, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, are interested in their children's educational achievement (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).The myth that immigrants do not value education is based on a deficit model that claims they do not have the knowledge or cultural capital to provide their children with high aspirations and a positive attitude (Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Olivos & Mendoza, 2010). This myth has been debunked by research studies and legal actions that document that immigrant families have high expectations for their children's educational attainments (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Orozco, 2008). Immigrant families have actively participated to improve the education of their children, including historical litigation cases, advocacy organizations, individual activities, and political demonstrations/legislation where parents and caretakers struggled and advocated for them (Moreno & Valencia, 2002).

Recognize that immigrant and EL families have different cultural expectations.

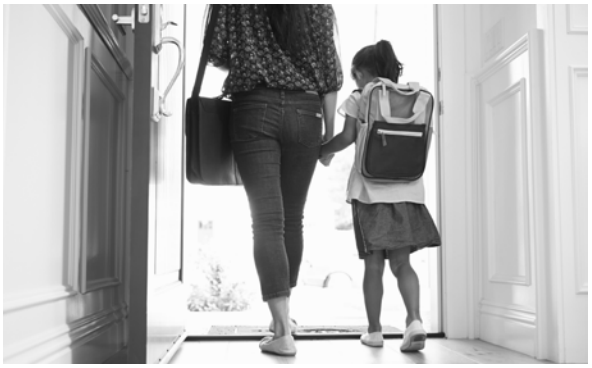
Many immigrants come from countries where parents and caretakers are not expected to participate actively in school-related activities. In addition, immigrants face different cultural expectations from teachers and schools (Kao et al., 2013). In other countries, students are expected to learn largely from their teachers. In the United States, however, families are expected to actively engage with the schools in a joint effort to educate their children. In order to address this issue, schools need to acknowledge this fact and develop strategies to inform families about the impact of family engagement and their role in advocating for their children.

Con Respeto (Respectfully) - Develop Two-Way Partnerships.

Several research studies show that the ways in which schools engage families influences why and how parents participate in their children's education. A welcoming, honoring, culturally-responsive and positive school environment creates conditions for parents of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to participate (Mapp, 2003). The findings of the ethnographic studies of Guadalupe

Valdez (1996) marked the beginning of an approach that attempted to change how schools worked with immigrant families. Initiatives to engage immigrants needs to use an approach where parents are seen as equal partners in two-way partnerships rather than passive participants that are invited to follow school initiated activities.

PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO – SPECIFICALLY?



In addition to changing the way immigrant and EL families are perceived and developing two-way partnerships, schools engage and sustain participation of families of linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds using the strategies described below:

LEARN ABOUT YOUR EL POPULATION

The first step in any relationship is to learn about each other. What languages do your immigrant and EL families speak? What countries do they come from? How many of your ELs are migrants, refugees? How many were born in the U.S.? Address these questions in a personal way – not through impersonal surveys. Help your immigrant families see you are interested in them. Parents and caretakers appreciate face-to-face communications. If they have trouble coming into the school – because they have work commitments, transportation challenges, or other reasons – try making phone calls.

CREATE A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

Provide families with information and/or materials in their home language. This should include even informal notices. Post signs in different languages. Establish a family room or bulletin board that highlights their cultures and languages. Embrace their cultures and funds of knowledge as assets for the school curriculum and overall school culture.

HIRE FAMILY LIAISONS THAT SPEAK THE MOST COMMONLY USED LANGUAGE(S) IN YOUR EL COMMUNITY

When budgets allow, hire school staff who speak the most commonly used languages. Reach out to bilingual parents to help bridge these gaps. Use family-to-family connections at the school and community level.

OFFER TRAINING TO YOUR IMMIGRANT AND EL FAMILIES

Help your families understand the U.S. public education system. Provide instructions in conversational terms, defining technical jargon clearly (or avoiding it altogether). Teach them how to advocate for their children. Provide family literacy and/or ESL classes. Remember to schedule activities at times when they can attend. Provide child care and interpreters if needed.

SUPPORT FAMILIES TO SUCCESSFULLY ENGAGE IN THEIR CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Immigrant and EL families may feel they cannot help with their children's learning because they do not understand English. Reassure them that they can help their children in school even when they do not understand the language. Immigrant and EL families can begin with the same strategies that apply to all families: provide a place where their child can do homework; check that their child completes homework each night; and ask their child to tell them about what he or she learned in school during the day. Then suggest that they read and tell stories in their native language.

Engaging immigrant and EL families is crucial to addressing the demands children face as they live and achieve in the U.S. Providing a welcoming, inclusive, and respectful environment to families in our schools helps ensure they are able to offer the support their children need to succeed.

Written by Maria del Rosario (Charo) Basterra and Phoebe Schlanger, MAEC.

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