

Reflection on Parent Engagement During School Closures Due to the Pandemic

By Andrea Greimel

I have been working as a bilingual early childhood educator on the westside of San Antonio for 32 years. Prior to that I taught young bilingual learners in Mexico for 4 years. This month I am retiring. I have been grieving the fact that my last group of little ones suddenly could not come together in our classroom to learn, and that I would end my career in front of screens in my living room rather than dancing and singing and building and painting and laughing and all that great face-to-face, hands-on, spontaneous, unpredictable and wonderful stuff that has been my life for such a long time. Normally our time together after Spring Break in early childhood is a wonderful time when the children have really come to know one another and their teachers. They know the routines and expectations. They have some strategies for problem-solving and conflict resolution. This brings a sense of security, which allows a much more sophisticated level of communication, more good jokes and fun, creativity and great learning gains. I don't normally believe that young children should be on screens very much, so the new imperative was sobering and fraught with misgivings for me. Nonetheless, I forged ahead and started to try to engage students through the platform called Seesaw.

Initially there was a stop-and-go period when families had to make a huge shift in every area of their lives, many having lost jobs, suddenly with all their kids at home all day, many suffering from food shortages, and everyone operating in the context of fear of the contagion, especially those families with multiple generations under one roof or with family members who have underlying conditions, putting them at greater risk. Many of my families did not have internet service. While our school district provided every child with a tablet, it was not a familiar device for many and we needed to do lots of troubleshooting. Eventually all my families gained access to Seesaw, and my kiddos began to respond daily to the lessons and activities I was posting. While some families dabbled and then participated intermittently, others became my dedicated core of engaged learners.

There is an irony in this experience that has caused me to reflect. While the coronavirus has physically separated me from my students and families, it has also served to bring us together in a powerful new way. Early childhood educators have long recognized the fact that parents are the child's first teachers. In the current context, I have gained an entirely new and inspiring perspective on my students' parents as educators. In addition, parents are communicating with me about the insight into teachers and teaching that they have been gaining during the school shut-down.



Ms. Greimel (middle) at a literacy event.

The pandemic has required a huge shift in the locus of responsibility for the ongoing engagement of children (especially young children and children with special needs) with the educational process. Parents now share with professional educators, in a fairly equal division of labor, the responsibility to keep children engaged in learning. Of course, there is great diversity among parents in their ability to engage in these new and sudden conditions for schooling given the wide range of life situations. I am very concerned about the ways this virus has laid bare and exacerbated many of the disparities in our country, especially in terms of access to high quality education. But I am also deeply touched and filled with hope to observe directly the great dedication, patience, and love that has characterized the daily engagement of so many parents with their young children in ongoing learning at home.

Under normal circumstances, I consider myself fairly strong in the area of parent and family engagement. I greet my families every day upon arrival, take leave at dismissal, and interact with parents at these times daily. I visit the homes of all students twice a year and meet with all parents at school for conferences twice also. I bring families and parents into the classroom three times a year to share their stories and culture with students and families. I participate in all the campus-level family engagement events as well. These experiences have given me some knowledge about my families that have served to help me to incorporate my families' cultures into my classroom.

My current experience of providing learning experiences and receiving daily responses from families, interacting with individual kids and their parents at a distance about the learning—it has allowed me a delightful glimpse into the real interactions between parent and child as they engage in learning together. I have seen very busy moms and dads, with multiple kiddos in the home, blossom into creative, joyful, resourceful and encouraging educators of their own children. In these families, I cannot help but imagine that this difficult experience has uncovered or reinforced a very enriching form of family interaction that will serve their children well for a lifetime.

For my families and kiddos from San Antonio’s westside, we have the added richness of learning in two languages. Every child in my classroom is acquiring a second language. I have observed tremendous efforts on the part of parents to continue to support their child’s learning in both languages, regardless of the dominant language of the household. I feel that the parents have gained very useful insight into their child’s process of language acquisition and how they can support it.

Likewise, I have recently had very rewarding conversations with parents—perhaps some of the most cherished gifts I take away from my career—where parents have expressed great thankfulness for educators, for the up-close model of teaching and positive encouragement and ways of communicating with young children that this situation has provided for them. I began my career as an early childhood educator in Mexico. I experienced

a very special form of parent engagement with teachers in the education of the young child there. I called it “cómplices,” or accomplices. I certainly have found this type of collaboration every year with many parents on the westside of San Antonio. It is this relationship with parents in large part – especially parents who face great challenges and adversity in their daily lives – that has kept me going back to the classroom for so many years. This year, my last year of teaching, I am deeply thankful to the parents of my students for showing me in full force their courageous complicity with me in their child’s academic success. I know that their future interactions with their children, their schools, and their teachers will be strengthened forever.

Andrea Greimel has an M.A. in Bilingual-Bicultural Education and has been a bilingual early childhood educator for 36 years, primarily in Edgewood ISD and San Antonio ISD, on the westside of San Antonio.

In 2018 she was a finalist for the Texas Teacher of the Year Award. In 2019 she was named Toyota Family Teacher of the Year (national runner-up), she received the Trinity Prize for Excellence in Teaching from Trinity University, as well as the HEB Excellence in Education Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2020 she received an NEA Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence.



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