Reaching Out to Diverse Families

Research continues to point out that family involvement is a pivotal factor for children’s classroom success. This is true whether the family is rich or poor, whether parents finished high school or not, or whether the child is in preschool or in the upper grades. This is also true for families of all cultures and all ethnic backgrounds.

According to research findings by the Public Agenda, Americans believe public schools play an important role in binding our society together, especially as our nation becomes increasingly diverse. The majority of Americans believe public schools are more effective than private schools in teaching kids how to get along with people of diverse backgrounds. In other words, Americans see the diversity of our public schools as a strength.

Look at your school district and ask:

- How broad is the family involvement among non-English-speaking parents or parents of color?
- Do the families of all of our students know how important their role is? And if they know, does the school district help them fulfill it?
- Do we see strength in diversity? And if so, are we tapping into the full potential of that strength by effectively communicating with people of different colors and cultures?

Here are some strategies, suggested by the National Committee for Citizens in Education, that schools can use to reach out to families from various racial, cultural and language backgrounds and help involve them in their children’s education. The strategies are based on known barriers to involvement and are designed to build on each other or fit special circumstances; none of them is a cure-all by itself.

The tips for involving families with limited English skills may also be appropriate for families who fit in several of the other groups. Just because a strategy is suggested for one group does not mean it is exclusive to that group.

Reaching out to African-American families

.Inject African-American leaders to the schools to speak to parents and staff. Consult parents in planning culturally appealing events for families.

Arrange home visits (especially for families without phones), and call families who are not able to come to school functions. Make special efforts to accommodate families with pressing survival needs that make involvement difficult.
Solicit the help of Black organizations, churches, businesses and social clubs to promote family involvement in the schools.

Encourage African-American families to form a focus group to discuss special topics and concerns.

Ask African-American families how the schools can be more responsive to their needs.

Make sure African-American families are represented on district task forces and committees and in the district’s decision-making process.

Reaching out to Hispanic families

Publish basic information about the schools in Spanish.

Hire Hispanic teacher aides for classrooms, and arrange for child care, transportation and interpreters for school activities.

Plan social activities for families – dances, potluck dinners and graduation ceremonies, for example. Extend invitations to whole families, with special welcome to grandparents.

Furnish the Family Resource Centers in the schools with information, applications and forms such as:

- Driver’s license applications,
- Food Stamp application forms,
- Tax forms,
- Voter registration cards, and
- Directories of community services.

Schedule conferences and meetings with consideration for families’ availability and work schedules. Working parents frequently cannot attend daytime activities; Hispanic women are generally not available when it is time to feed their families.

Inform school personnel about the Hispanic community, its culture and its special needs.

Talk with families, not at them. Compliment families on their children’s behavior and performance. Praise them for their cultural values, such as strong family loyalty. Welcome their questions.

Encourage Spanish-speaking family support groups. They can provide Hispanic families with an opportunity to express criticisms and complaints, empower them to be advocates for their children and teach them how to deal with school personnel, policies and practices.

Provide opportunities for families to share information about their culture and traditions with students. Plan curriculum to include material on Latino history, politics, music and art.

Provide translators for parent/teacher conferences and other school meetings.

(More)
Reaching out to Asian-American families

- Treat families with respect. Recognize that Asian-American families provide strong support for their children’s education at home, even though they may appear reluctant to come to the schools.
- Translate information about school affairs and school policies. Keep written communications brief and to the point.
- Make meetings and parent classes interesting and relevant to Asian-American families. Deal with topics that address their needs and concerns. If you don’t know what those needs and concerns are, ask them. Contact appropriate district or community resource people to help with planning.
- Provide interpreters for conferences. It is preferable to have a community aide who is familiar with the school setting and can communicate the ideas of both parties. Community aides can also assist school staff in addressing issues in a culturally sensitive manner and inviting families to meetings or to visit classrooms.
- Use conferences as an opportunity to explain to families more about the American school system and the part they can play in their children’s education.
- Create a variety of roles for families in the school. Define family involvement to include the strong support given by Asian-American families at home. Do not push families to participate in ways for which they are not prepared.
- Offer inservice training for teachers, counselors and support personnel to raise awareness of cultural differences.
- Provide resources for school personnel to help them understand cultural differences. Include topics on Asian-American history, culture, values and current events.

Reaching out to families with limited English skills

- Welcome all families without questions about immigration status or identification papers, birth certificates or social security numbers.
- Find ways to communicate with families to learn about their children’s educational background.
- Recruit volunteers to promote communications with families who do not speak English. Make sure that the children are placed in a classroom appropriate to their age, grade level and abilities, and encourage them to participate in extracurricular activities.
- Prepare all information and messages sent home in the families’ native languages.
- Administer tests that are relatively free of cultural bias and in the primary languages of the immigrant students to determine placement at grade level or in a language assistance program. Place students in special education classrooms only when there is a disability and not because of limited English.
- Inform families, in their primary languages, why their children need a language assistance program, the nature of the program, available alternative programs, their right to refuse participation in the program and the procedures for leaving the program.

(Over)
Learn about cultural differences in attitudes, styles and practices related to education and the school in order to avoid practices that alienate culturally different parents.

Offer language classes or family literacy programs.

Help families organize support groups with other families newly arrived in the United States. Community organizations serving a particular ethnic group may be able to provide help and support for such groups.