

Reaching Out to Diverse Families

A Closer Look at the Research

When families are involved in learning, the research shows that students achieve more, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic, or racial background, or the parents' education level. Despite these well-known findings, many schools struggle with getting large numbers of parents involved; particularly minority and lower-income families, and those with limited English skills. Repeated research shows that the low participation rates of diverse families can be attributed far more to differing needs, values, and levels of trust than it does to families' lack of interest or willingness to get involved. How does school staff close the parent involvement gap in concert with the student achievement gap? Below is a brief synopsis of recent research findings and ideas for putting these findings into practice.

1. Make Involvement Meaningful

A 2002 study of Mexican-American families found that the "quick-fix" solutions educators often applied to complex problems rarely resulted in increased involvement of those families. Families felt the come-to-our-event mentality was superficial and insincere. Instead, Mexican American families wanted staff to actively listen with sensitivity to their concerns and issues. Programs that deeply explored the issues of race and culture were more likely to result in meaningful family involvement.

Ideas for putting it into practice

Collaborate with families on ways to be involved. Ask families how they want to be involved and how the school can make that happen.

Take time to talk to families about what they believe and about their hopes for their children. Engage families in an activity that explores the values that parents express about their children's future.

Use families' "fonts of knowledge" in designing meaningful family involvement connected to the curriculum. How can families contribute their experiences and knowledge to lessons on plant life in a science class, on the economy in a social studies class, or construction in a math class?

2. Start at the Beginning

Studies of Southeast Asian and Latino families found that parents had high aspirations for their children to do well in school and to continue their education past high school. Often, however, parents did not fully understand the U.S. system of education and their role in it.

Ideas for putting it into practice

Actively welcome students and families. Smile! Let parents know that they are welcome in the school building. Encourage staff to greet and talk with all parents in a friendly, caring manner.

Connect and involve family and community members who speak the native language to provide support and serve as a resource to non-English-speaking families.

Recruit staff and volunteers who speak the same language. Provide resources for families in their native language. Both are good ways to demonstrate that parents are valued in their child's learning. Involving Families 23

Invite families to celebrate the school's diversity. Encourage families to share their cultural traditions and history.

Give parents a "school roadmap to learning" to help them navigate the education system. Devote time to explaining school expectations for student learning and conduct. Specify how parents can help their children, and how what children learn and do at this level will help them at the next level of their education.

Hold classes for non-native English speakers that center on English terms and concepts used by schools, i.e., for report cards, tests, co-curricular activities, etc.

- **Meet families where they are.** In many cultures, personal contact means more than written notes. Conduct meet-and-greet walks in students' neighborhoods. Hold special meetings on parenting skills at the local community center, library, or church. Ask staff to make phone calls that personally invite families to school events.

3. Connect Families to Student Learning

In a study exploring the relationship between student achievement and parent actions, caregivers of 41 economically-disadvantaged African-American third and fourth graders were given books and asked to promote reading the books at home. The study found a significant relationship between the number of books read in the home and the students' reading achievement. Researchers concluded that schools that gave students books to read at home and gave parents reading strategies to use could see higher student reading skills.

Ideas for putting it into practice

Give families specific strategies to do at home that strengthen targeted learning skills.

Don't assume parents know how to be involved, know what to do, or know what their children are learning. At conferences and workshops ask school staff to show families how to reinforce classroom skills at home.

Tie family involvement activities to student learning goals. Encourage staff to ask themselves how each activity will boost student learning or other school goals.

Give families supplies, resources, or options to complete home learning projects. Some families may not have the markers, paper, glue, or scissors needed to complete a project. Work with the school and public libraries to make computers with Internet access more available to families who are supporting student learning.

Tackle the tough issues with parents, like explaining state standards and assessments, analyzing student data, and how to apply for college or post-high school education.

4. Understand and Work with Families' Cultures

A 2001 study of 450 Navajo students from 11 schools in the Navajo Nation—one of the lowest performing subgroups of students nationwide—concluded that Navajo students could improve academically if schools made better connections to their families and cultural traditions. The study found that students who performed well academically were greatly supported by their mothers in this matriarchal society. It also found that Navajo students need not be required to assimilate into U.S. society to achieve, but that engaging Navajo families with traditional cultural values in relevant school activities could spur student achievement.

Excerpted from *Building Trust with Schools and Diverse Families*. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. December 2003. <http://nwrel.org/request/2003dec/textonly.html>. And *Reaching Out to Diverse Populations: What Can Schools Do to Foster Family-School Connections?* Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. September 2005. <http://www.sedl.org/connections>.