Keeping communication Open: Positive Home and School Partnerships

Patricia Huizar
Andrew M. Greeley Center for Catholic Education
OBJECTIVES

Connecting with ELL families
Communicating Important Information
Parent Participation
Community Partnerships
Creating an Action Plan
Imagine that a new immigrant family has moved into the neighborhood your school serves. What is already in place to make this family feel welcome?

What programs does the school offer that would inspire and challenge their children?

What will still need some work?
Connecting with Ell Families
Learning about your ELL families provides an important foundation for everything else you do at the school. Even basic information about students’ ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, or the situations from which they have come, can help you match students with the appropriate services and programs.
• What do you know about your ELL students and families?

• What do you want to learn?

• Who on the staff works most closely with your ELL families?

• What would be valuable for your school-wide staff to know?
Strategies

- What countries your families come from?
- How many of your ELLs were born in the U.S.?
- What languages they speak (which may be at least two or three!)?
- If families who speak the same language, such as Spanish, did they come from different countries or different regions within the same country?
- The educational background of families and the school system of their countries
- If any of your ELLs are migrants, refugees, or students with interrupted formal education
- If your families have experienced war or another traumatic event such as a natural disaster.
Integrate Cultural Traditions of your ELL Families throughout the School

Becoming familiar with and including the cultural traditions of your ELL families within the larger school community not only enhances your ability to create a welcoming and respectful school environment – it has practical considerations as well.
**Reflection**

- What are your ELLs’ cultural behaviors and values?
- Which celebrations and holidays do they observe?
- How does your staff feel about the changes in your school population?
- How do they feel about working with ELLs?
Strategies

- Avoid scheduling important events such as conferences or tests on major holidays and celebrations that large numbers of students are likely to miss.
- Share information about cultural celebrations with teachers so that they are able to positively support them and incorporate them into lessons.
- Learn about, recognize, and celebrate special events or holidays throughout the school.
- Invite parents to share food, activities, and music at school events and in the classroom.
- Encourage students to share traditions in school assemblies, talent shows, potlucks, and fairs.
- Offer food that reflects the cultural influences of your families on the cafeteria menu.
- Be mindful that students who are fasting may be less energetic in the afternoon.
Create a Welcoming Environment for Families

A welcoming environment can make a tremendous difference for all families, including ELL families. Entering a friendly, vibrant atmosphere lets families know that the school is “an integral part of the community” (Houk, 63) and that they are valued members of that community.
Imagine that you have arrived in a new country where you don’t speak the language and where you will be enrolling your child in a local school. Think about arriving at the school for the first time, only to discover that no one at the school speaks English. Imagine the feeling of leaving your child in the hands of people with whom you can’t communicate. Now envision, instead, that someone who speaks English greets you at the door, and you see a picture of an American flag in the front hallway. What might you be able to accomplish as a parent in the second situation that you wouldn’t in the first?
Strategies

- Make sure parents know how to get into the building, especially if doors are usually locked during the school day.
- Post signs in multiple languages.
- Display student work on the walls.
- Display student and family photos on the walls.
- Display the maps and flags of your students’ native countries.
- Display a large map in the front lobby where parents can mark their native countries with a pin.
- Enlist a bilingual morning greeter to welcome students and families.
- Ensure that your bilingual staff and volunteers are visible throughout the building.
- Create a parent room (such as a lounge or classroom) with bilingual information and magazine subscriptions, a bulletin board, a lending library, and a computer (Houk, 58, 63).
- Include bilingual books in the school library and classrooms
- Your state chapter may have a “walk through” protocol, such as this guide from PIRC Vermont.
Make Personal Connections with Families & Show that you value their language

Getting to know ELL families helps build an important relationship based on trust, which in turn can pave the way to student success. While it will require additional time and effort, building a more personal relationship with ELL families early in the year will yield big dividends throughout the rest of the year (Hori, 40).
• What are the challenges in meeting your ELL families personally?

• What are some ways to facilitate more personal interaction?

• What is the current attitude towards ELLs’ native languages in your school?

• Is a student’s use of his/her native language encouraged or discouraged in the classroom?

• Do parents know where to get information in their language? How do teachers approach this issue?
Strategies

- Hold a special back-to-school event or picnic for ELL families in which they have time to meet you, other school leaders, their children’s teachers, and school staff.
- Create a welcome DVD in multiple languages. This may even be a great student project!
- Provide staff the opportunity to learn some common phrases in your families’ languages, as well as cultural gestures.
- Create an “ambassador” program in which students and parents are trained to give tours.
- Discuss with parents the value of strong native language skills and being bilingual.
- Encourage parents to read or tell stories to their children in their native language.
- Offer parent sessions, workshops, and classes in parents’ native languages (Meyers, 44).
- Include books in students’ native languages in the school and classroom libraries (Freeman, 42).
- Make resources available to students in their native languages to support content learning.
- Inform parents that they are welcome to bring their own interpreter to a school meeting.
- Provide training to all staff on why maintaining students’ native language is important and how to support students’ bilingual development.
- Offer staff guidance on how to respond to parents’ questions and comments.
II. Communicating Important Information

"Each of you has been given a simple, yet powerful tool..."
One of the greatest challenges for schools and ELL parents is communicating with each other. While educators may feel frustrated that they can’t get their message across to parents, parents may be just as frustrated that they can’t communicate easily with the school and their child’s teacher. Like your other parents, however, ELL parents want to know what’s happening with their child.
Reflection

- How would you describe the communication at your school with ELL parents?
- Have you had some success stories?
- Have you explored all of your available options?
- Are you familiar with applicable local, state, and federal regulations regarding translations and parent access to information?
Strategies

- Hiring, when possible, staff that matches the linguistic needs of your population.
- Developing an ongoing relationship with community organizations.
- Scheduling home-school communication time into the school day for e-mails or phone calls Using parent phone trees (65-66).
- Find out what translation and interpreting resources are available in your district.
- Use school staff to help interpret on a rotating or scheduled basis so that the same individuals aren’t frequently pulled away from other duties.
- Ask parents how they prefer to receive communication (phone, e-mail, text message, etc.). Ask parents which language they prefer – it may be English.
- Inform parents that they can bring an interpreter to the school or that one can be provided.
- Avoid using translation websites, which are imprecise and often inaccurate.
Make Enrollment Possible for ELL Parents

School enrollment is a complicated process for any family. There are forms to be filled out, decisions to be made, policies to be read, programs to learn about, and questions to be answered.
Reflection

- Think through your enrollment process step by step. How does it work for ELL families?
- Do parents get all of the information they need?
- What might be some possible obstacles to that process?
- Which steps do you think need improvement?
STRATEGIES

- Bilingual staff
- Translated forms
- Enrollment night
- School liaisons
- Welcome centers
- Welcome kits
- Technology

Make sure all of the information available for parents and staff at the beginning of the year is accessible throughout the year.

Ask parents who enrolled their children after the beginning of previous school years what their experience was like and what could have been improved through a survey or questionnaire.
Provide Opportunities For Parents To Learn More About Important Topics And Skills

For parents who are not familiar with the U.S. educational system, there is a lot to learn – and it’s pretty complicated! If your ELL families aren’t “involved” in activities and events, one reason may be that they need more background information about our school system in a language they understand.
Let’s return to the hypothetical new country where you are preparing to enroll your child. Imagine that you are handed a thick booklet with information about standardized testing, grading systems, and college applications written in a language you don’t understand. Where would you begin in order to help your child?
Whenever possible, offer parents the opportunity to attend workshops in their native language about complex topics such as:

- Information on how to check school websites to track their child’s progress
- Parent-teacher conferences
- Standardized testing
- Gifted programs
- Special education services for speech, hearing, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, etc.
- The college application process
- Information on the benefits of reading at home
III Parent Participation
Look for ways that ELL parents can help with children’s schoolwork.

ELL parents may feel intimidated by or unprepared to help with homework or other schoolwork, especially if they have limited educational or English skills (Zarate, 9).
Reflection

- What kinds of support do you expect your parents to give their children in terms of schoolwork?
- What kinds of resources and educational background (and language skills) do parents need in order to give their children that help?
- What are other ways parents can help?
Strategies

- Provide a place where children can do their homework
- Check that homework is completed each night
- Ask their children to tell them about what they learned each day
- Keep in regular contact with a teacher or staff member about their child’s progress
- Ask teachers about any questions that arise
- Learn more about homework help programs through before-/after-school programs and the public library
- Read and tell stories in their native language.
Look for ways that ELL parents can participate and volunteer. There are a number of ways to include parents in the school community and to bring them together with other families at the school. This might include school visits, volunteering, or activities that draw upon their skills and hobbies.
How likely are ELL parents at your school to sign up for events or volunteer?
Do they know about all of the opportunities at the school?
Are there certain events or places in the school where your active parents tend to gather?
Do you know what skills and talents they might have to offer?
Strategies

- Invite parents to visit the school and their child’s classroom regularly (Houk, 66).
- Invite parents to speak with their child’s class about their native country, a hobby, or their job.
- Encourage teachers to have an inviting activity ready for visiting parents.
- Encourage parents to volunteer in the classroom, main office, lunchroom, or library; during events or field trips; or in a student club or after-school program (Meyers, 45). (Keep in mind that volunteering may include simple things like preparing items for an activity – such as cutting out shapes and organizing supplies.) Judie Haynes offers a number of ideas in Working with Bilingual Parent Volunteers on EverythingESL.net.
- Find out what your parents’ skills and hobbies are, and look for ways to draw on their talents.
- Find ways to bring ELL and non-ELL families together through student performances, a student cultures night, storytelling, workshops, and exhibits (Meyers, 46).
Think outside the box about parent engagement.

One of the most important steps in engaging ELL parents is to realize that they may be coming from a very different cultural perspective when it comes to the educational system and their role in their child’s education (Houk, 66).
● Make a list of five things you hope or expect that “involved” parents will do at your school.

● What do parents need to know in order to participate in these events?

● What challenges might ELL parents face in participating in these events?
Form small focus groups with ELL parents and an interpreter. Ask the parents:

- How they define their role in their child’s education?
- What their concerns, priorities, and hopes are regarding their child?
- What kinds of events they would be interested in attending?
- The obstacles that discourage them from participating and changes that would help
- Events where being part of a larger group might make them feel more comfortable.
Consider alternative schedules, locations, and kinds of events.

Sometimes, when families can’t come to the school, the school has to go to the families. Meeting families in other settings such as community centers or churches can provide an informal way to start building a relationship, especially if ELL parents feel shy or nervous about going to the school.
Reflection

- Do you experience low attendance at family events held at school?
- Have you ever held any school events in the community?
- Were they successful?
- Why or why not?
Strategies

- Visit your students’ neighborhoods. Find out where families are congregating and who local community leaders are that can connect you with parents.
- Collaborate with apartment complex managers to make a recreation room available for families.
- Plan events in the community and put them on the school calendar before the school year starts, setting aside funds, such as Title I or Title III grants, to provide support for the events.
- Consider giving parents a few different options for meeting times based on teacher availability.
- Consider contacting parents’ employers about parent schedules or holding conferences closer to parents’ workplaces.
- Don’t limit yourself to meetings. Ask your families what kinds of events they would find enjoyable, beneficial, and convenient.
Look for successes

Encourage your staff to look for all of the different ways, big and small, that ELLs’ families (including parents, siblings, grandparents, and other relatives) support their children’s well-being and education. While we expect all families to manage these responsibilities, ELL families may be going to extraordinary lengths to meet their children’s basic needs.
• What is a typical day like for your ELL students?
• Does that differ from the typical day of your other students?
• Where are they sleeping?
• Who is taking care of them?
• How do they get to school every day?
• What do they do after school?
• What challenges are they facing in their daily lives?
Learn what you can about your ELLs’ routines (which will vary tremendously), including the responsibilities they have in their families. Share what you learn with your staff (observing confidentiality rules) and encourage your staff to look for all of the ways, big and small, that ELLs’ families and extended families are supporting their children’s well-being and education.

Find out whether these responsibilities are taking a toll on students’ school work or health, and if so, brainstorm some ideas with staff members about possible solutions.
IV
Parents as Leaders
Encourage ELL parents to take on leadership roles

While ELL parents may be underrepresented in leadership roles, some guidance and encouragement from school leaders can go a long way in building their confidence.
Do your parent committees reflect your ELL population?

Who is advocating for your ELL students?
Strategies

- Make sure that qualified interpreters are available so that parents can feel comfortable communicating their ideas in their native language.
- As your ELL parents become more familiar with the school policies and environment, ensure that ELL parents are represented in the PTA and parent advisory groups.
- Offer your ELL parents frequent and convenient opportunities to share input, ideas, and concerns with you and your teachers in a variety of venues (Houk, 67).
- Take parent input seriously, and don’t ask for it until you are prepared to listen.
Look for ways to make parent leadership more sustainable.

Parent leadership can be lost easily as students get older and transition to new schools. Think about putting a mentorship program in place to keep new parents engaged.
• Think about your strongest parents at the school. How do you plan to replace them once their children move to another school?

• What barriers exist to developing bilingual leaders?
Strategies

- Form a panel of ELL parents to address questions and concerns.
- Designate parent leaders in each language group to engage other parents.
- Brainstorm with your ELL parent leaders about ways to recruit and mentor new parents.
- Learn from your parents’ experiences and find out what they think will make a positive impact on future parents who are new to the U.S. school system.
- As parents prepare to step away from leadership responsibilities, ask them if they would be willing to mentor new parent leaders who are joining the community.
- Ask them for recommendations of other parent leaders that they have gotten to know.
V. Community partnership
Community organizations are a valuable ally in engaging ELL families, whether it’s by providing key services such as interpreters and medical care or educational opportunities such as GED, ESL, and citizenship classes. These partnerships can benefit your family and your partners alike, and they may lead to great opportunities for your students as well!
Reflection

- Have you built any relationships with organizations in the community?
- If so, what are the successes and challenges you’ve experienced?
- Which social services do your families need most?
Strategies

- Consider offering local organizations free space in your school as a way to encourage them to bring their services closer to your families (Houk, 70).
- Ask your families which organizations they think would make good partners for the school community and which issues are of concern to them.
- Find out if your district has a community education department that might be able to support a partnership with a local organization.
- Invite members from the community to inform parents about their services, such as a local librarian, a nurse, or a firefighter.
Creating a plan of action
A good place to begin developing a new approach to family engagement is by soliciting ideas from the school’s ELL community — they know what they need.
REFLECTION

● Is there currently an avenue for teachers, parents, and students to share ideas about family outreach ideas at your school?
● Who tends to come to you with ideas about engaging or supporting your ELL students and families?
● What steps can you take to start that conversation and let the community know that their ideas are welcome?
STRATEGIES

Ask for feedback from:

- **Staff**: Ask people across the school community what could be done to better engage ELL families. In what kinds of situations do they interact with ELL students and families? How could that interaction be improved?

- **Parents**: Get feedback on bilingual families’ perceptions about the most burning needs for improving bilingual family involvement. This could be done through a survey about setting initial priorities and followed up with focus group conversations on selected topics.

- **Students**: Don’t forget to ask the students what they think – even the young ones! What information would really help their parents? What would make school events easier for their families to attend?
Perhaps the juices are starting to flow and you are excited, but you know that it will be tough to find the necessary resources for your ELLs in this budget climate. The good news is that, with creativity and effort, you can fit some of these strategies into your existing structures.
- What sources of funding are you currently using for ELL family outreach?
- Are you familiar with Title I and Title III guidelines?
- Are you familiar with ESSA?
- Who offers local grants for family literacy and outreach?
Find out how familiar your staff or district contacts are with Title I/Title III possibilities.

Look for grants targeted to ELL, minority, Latino, and at-risk students, with a special focus on family literacy, parent outreach, and science and math initiatives (such as STEM). Possible sources include local foundations and businesses, as well as larger national family literacy initiatives, such as Reading Is Fundamental or FirstBook. Verizon, Dollar General, Toyota, and Target also sponsor nationwide literacy initiatives. Lee & Low Books offers a list of literacy grants on their website.

Look for volunteers such as ELL staff or parents with fundraising experience to search for grants.

Consider pooling your resources with other schools in the district for family events and outreach initiatives. You may even be serving the same families who have children of different ages!
Final thoughts
Final Reflections

Which ideas would best fit your ELL population?

Are there any that you could implement within the next month?

What about in the next year?

If you are only able to focus on one major area this year, which will be the most important/plausible within your school community?

What are your next steps for getting started?

Who will be your partners in this effort?
The information used for this presentation was taken from Colorín Colorado.

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References


