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## Cultural liaisons serve as bridge between community and school

Educators in schools serving large populations of culturally diverse students often have backgrounds that differ from the students and families they serve. This cultural mismatch can make developing strong school-community relationships a challenge. One strategy for addressing this concern is the use of a cultural liaison. A cultural liaison is someone who has standing within a community culture group and is willing to serve as a link between the community and the school. A cultural liaison helps school personnel better understand the values and norms of the community and helps community members negotiate the structures of the school system. We had the opportunity to work closely with a school that used a cultural liaison as part of a program to raise science achievement among English language learners.

Schneider Middle School in Pasadena, Texas, wanted to work more closely with parents to improve science achievement. One of the challenges they faced was connecting with Latino parents, particularly Spanish-speaking parents. The school developed the LIFT Parent Academy, which brings parents to school twice a month to learn about the science curriculum and how to support science learning at home. The science specialist, who is African-American and grew up in the community, serves as a cultural liaison between the school and the African-American community. She did not have the same relationship with the Latino families in the community. In order to reach Latino families, a parent volunteer who was well-known in the Latino community was hired to work with the LIFT program. Using the cultural liaison approach, the school developed a program that raised science achievement and helped the school become more culturally responsive. (For more information about the LIFT Parent Academy, visit [www.stellarcenter.txstate.edu/research.html](http://www.stellarcenter.txstate.edu/research.html).) Schneider Middle School liaison Maria Luisa Garza and science specialist Amy Jolivet House write about the benefits of a cultural liaison to the success of the LIFT program and to their own growth.

In each issue of *JSD*, Sarah W. Nelson and Patricia L. Guerra write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. Guerra ([pg16@txstate.edu](mailto:pg16@txstate.edu)) is an assistant professor and Nelson ([swnelson@txstate.edu](mailto:swnelson@txstate.edu)) is an associate professor in the Department of Education and Community Leadership at Texas State University-San Marcos. Guerra and Nelson are co-founders of Transforming Schools for a Multicultural Society (TRANSFORMS). Columns are available at [www.learningforward.org/news/authors/guerranelson.cfm](http://www.learningforward.org/news/authors/guerranelson.cfm).

## THE BRIDGE BETWEEN CULTURES RUNS IN BOTH DIRECTIONS

By Maria Luisa Garza

I am the liaison for our LIFT Parent Academy. We are building a bridge that helps parents understand what their children are expected to know and what they are learning. We teach parents in their own language, Spanish. This program opens the door to learning and shows parents what the school has to offer. The most important thing the school and the parents have in common is that we want our kids to get the best education we can offer.

I have to admit, I wasn't expecting to be front and center as one of the speakers at our meetings and was a bit nervous at first. I had my doubts I was the right choice for this. I thought that maybe I wasn't what the parents and the school needed. On the other hand, I am a parent who wants the best education for my child, and that is what all parents want for their kids. I feel I am a representative for all the parents in the school. I live in the same neighborhood as our students and parents. Some are my next-door neighbors. Some have my personal cell phone number, and they know they can count on me whenever they need me. Whenever they have everyday questions or problems, I am their friend and translator. They know I will give them my honest opinion

## WE ARE ALL EQUALS IN THIS VENTURE

**By Amy Jolivet House**

**M**rs. Garza is well-known in the community and often helps others because of her command of English and Spanish. Because of her connectedness in the community, she has been able to go beyond being the Spanish voice of the program and has lent her credibility to me, giving me entrée to the parents. Sometimes this has been as simple as introducing me. In other instances, it has involved her being my cultural tour guide as we visit businesses in the area. She has made me comfortable in places that I would not have frequented because of my inability to speak the functional language used there. By helping me navigate her world, she has built my confidence, and I am able to go back, by myself or with my family, and be a familiar face. I know that there are often errands for the program that she could do just fine without me, but she is working diligently to let the community know that she and I and LIFT are

all linked. I often tell her that the parents accept me because of her. Her trust in me has let the parents know that they can trust me, too.

I have taken the opportunity she has created for me and used it to develop genuine rapport with our families. The parents see that I am not just a teacher; I am also a parent. Our children are in the same schools. I have the same concerns and cares for my family as they do. We frequent the same stores and businesses. We may not speak the same language as we go about our daily activities, but our lives share many common elements, including the desire for growth and success for our children. During our meetings or outside encounters with the parents, the camaraderie is obvious to all. Smiles, handshakes and kind words are always exchanged. The parents feel my regard and respect for them and Mrs. Garza. We are all equals in this venture.

Under Mrs. Garza's tutelage, my Spanish is improving slowly. This experience, more than any other, has increased my empathy for monolingual Spanish-speaking parents. It is no easy task to

acquire a new language as an adult, and I am acutely aware of my shortcomings when I try to speak. I feel the same hesitation that the parents feel when they try to speak in English. I try to push myself when I'm with the parents so that they will know they are as safe with me as I am with them when they are reaching for words. We often all laugh at ourselves in the meeting as both sides push toward common ground.

Truly, Mrs. Garza and I have affected each other as this work challenge has evolved into a genuine love and respect for each other. She is changing me, and I am changing her. We are wives, mothers, and women finding out that our worlds often collide in sick children, stubborn husbands, crazy pets, and a love of what we do. This carries over into our meetings, and I hope that our parents see us as a model of friendship, trust, and how barriers can just be imaginary lines to step across.

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**Amy Jolivet House is the science specialist at Schneider Middle School, Pasadena, Texas. ■**

and guide them to the best solution possible.

Working in the LIFT program with Mrs. House is the best part of the package. Think about two women with totally different backgrounds, cultures, and ideas working side by side for eight hours a day. It could have been a disaster, but it wasn't. This is a match made in heaven. We could never be so different, yet so the same. I have started teaching Mrs. House a few words in Spanish. She practices

with me, and, at our meetings. I have seen that our parents feel comfortable approaching her. When I see her trying to communicate with parents in Spanish and they try to respond in English, that blows my mind. The parents see that Mrs. House treats them as equals, that they are not beneath her even if they don't speak English. Mrs. House opened up to the parents. She introduced them to her family and jokes around with them. Most importantly, she accepts me for who I

am: a proud Hispanic woman with two teenagers, a husband, four Chihuahuas, a house, and everything that comes with that package. I have begun to build a bridge welcoming her into my world. But that bridge runs both ways. Mrs. House has rubbed off on me, too. We are friends.

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**Maria Luisa Garza is the liaison for the LIFT Parent Academy at Schneider Middle School, Pasadena, Texas. ■**