

# BEYOND OPEN HOUSES

**School promotes cross-cultural understanding among teachers and language-minority families**

BY THOMAS H. LEVINE, JASON G. IRIZARRY, AND GEORGE C. BUNCH

**F**or years, well-intentioned educators have arranged school open houses to encourage language minority families to participate in their children's education. These educators know that decades of research tout the benefits of schools partnering with parents. Yet the results of such events are often discouraging. More teachers than parents attend, leaving platters filled with uneaten cookies and teachers grumbling that "these people don't care about education. Our efforts are pointless."

At first glance, the predominantly white staff of Bethune-Chavez Academy (not the school's real name) doesn't appear to have a better chance of achieving success bridging the gap between schools and the homes of lan-

guage minority families. Staff in this small, inner-city high school work with black, Latino, and Asian-origin families in an underresourced district. Research has shown that promoting family participation is easiest in elementary school, and increasingly harder as students advance (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhuis, 2002). Contrary to expectations, however, Bethune-Chavez boasts a vibrant Latino parent organization that has become part of a vibrant parents' council. Active parent outreach on attendance issues helped produce a 91% attendance rate, well above the district average of 82%. One-quarter of the students who entered as English language learners (ELLs) were recently reclassified as Fluent English Proficient at the begin-

ning of their sophomore year. We believe that positive connections between the school and the community contributed to this outcome.

Schools like Bethune-Chavez need to be intentional to overcome the differing values, life experiences, and role expectations that often exist between white teachers and language minority families. If schools want to engage culturally and linguistically diverse families, they must move beyond seeing the problem as existing mainly



within ELLs' families and the communities from which they come. Staff must come to understand the culture of the school as well as the culture of students' families, and the ways in which those cultures do not connect with one another. How can school staffs do this? What did Bethune-Chavez do — and what might other schools try — to build connections across culture and language?

**LEARNING ABOUT ONESELF AS WELL AS THE "OTHER"**

Many teachers and administrators do not wholly understand the cultural differences that complicate their efforts to work with families. Similarly, school staff often underestimate the economic, educational, cultural, and linguistic challenges that discourage families from participating in their children's education in the ways that many teachers expect and value (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001; Valdés,

1996). The good news is that school personnel can engage in reading, research, and reflection that improves their work with culturally and linguistically diverse families.

To promote mutually enriching partnerships between schools and the families they serve, school personnel need help to see the culture of their own school — the values

and priorities they hold, the modes of communication they prefer, and the unexamined expectations they may

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**Resources for school staff**

*The Help! Kit: A Resource Guide for Secondary Teachers of Migrant English Language Learners*, by ESCORT. State University of New York at Oneonta, NY: Author, 2001. Available online at [escort.org/?q=node/153](http://escort.org/?q=node/153).

This compendium of research about best practices in teaching English language learners in content-area courses includes a chapter on fostering home-school partnerships. The chapter covers categories of parental involvement, factors that affect parental involvement, cultural considerations, and suggestions for parents of high school students.

*Myths and Realities: Best Practices for Language Minority Students*, 2nd edition, by Katharine Davies Samway and Denise McKeon. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007. The authors of this book challenge several myths that persist about the capabilities and needs of ELLs, as well as effective strategies for working with these students. The final chapter of the book specifically addresses working with parents.

*Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*, by Angela Valenzuela. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999. Valenzuela draws on her observations and interviews in a predominantly Mexican-American high school to suggest that the schooling experience for many Mexican-American students is subtractive. Valenzuela's work highlights the importance of relationships that value students' cultures and use them as a bridge to academic success.

have for the roles families should play in their children's education. School staff members have a difficult task in examining their own culture, especially those who are in the majority. The box above and references suggest resources and research findings to help staff recognize unexamined beliefs and behaviors that contribute to miscommunication.

In addition to seeking cultural self-awareness, school personnel should also learn more about the individuals and communities they serve. The majority of teachers and school administrators are culturally different from language minority students and their families, and these differences

can disrupt relationships between schools and families (Delpit, 1995). How can schools promote mutual learning between school staff and culturally diverse families?

**STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION**

**Advisors working as parent liaisons.** The principal and teachers at Bethune-Chavez implemented a system of advisors, allowing each staff member — the principal included — to track the academic progress of a small group of students and to serve as a liaison between home and school. The school made teachers' role as advisor one of its two emphases for professional development, and implemented several strategies to help teachers thrive in their new responsibilities for communicating with diverse families:

- The staff wrote scripts to guide

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some teacher meetings with families. For instance, all teachers' first meetings include an introduction to something personal about the teacher, explanation of the advisor's role, a review of data from prior grades, and then questions to the student and families about what they've liked about school, where they've struggled, and what help they need.

- The staff also used released time to develop an online system for sharing grade, attendance, and behavior data within grade levels, so that an advisor could call home with updates and specific requests from colleagues.
- The principal rehearsed with teachers the kind of discussion they'd need to have with parents to help all involved expect regular

contact with one advisor rather than individual instructors.

- The principal sought coaching from local experts, and continued reading in the field to push her own thinking about how to facilitate the staff's skill development in connecting across cultures and languages.

**Home visits.** Before the school year began, each advisor made home visits to most students' homes, sometimes bringing an interpreter. These staff members spent time getting to know families and introducing some of the unique features and expectations of the school. Home visits can be a useful way to promote trust, communication, and family's understandings of a school's expectations. For some families, an impersonal, photocopied letter home, even if

translated, is not a culturally appropriate way for a teacher to begin a constructive relationship. One staff member believed that these visits "gave us a lot of leverage before school even started; [families] knew a little bit of what we were about and began work on that wall of trust issues that parents and teachers have with each other." This paid extra dividends, the teacher noted, if problems arose later.

Arranging effective home visits is not simple. Families may worry that teachers are checking up on them. Teachers with no training or guidance may reinforce their own stereotypes about cultures that explain their students' performance.

To increase the odds of teachers learning about the culture of families, as well as families learning how they can play a role, home visits can be

designed to help teachers learn about the “funds of knowledge” that exist in a household and community. “Funds of knowledge” are the bodies of understandings and skills to which children have access simply by being part of a family and community (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). For instance, teachers visiting Latino families in a town near the Mexican border discovered knowledge of plant life, metallurgy, mining, as well as insights into comparative politics and economics. Thus, students brought knowledge that could be activated and built on during biology and social studies classes if teachers knew more about them (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

**Perhaps the most powerful mechanism for drawing families into the school and into meaningful collaboration was the use of twice-a-year exhibitions as a student requirement for advancing to the next grade level. Almost 90% of students' families participated in these student presentations of work.**

In this approach, teachers might enter only three students' homes as learners over the course of several visits. They might develop and then use questionnaires to guide interviews with families.

**Exhibitions.** Perhaps the most powerful mechanism for drawing families into the school and into meaningful collaboration was the use of twice-a-year exhibitions as a student requirement for advancing to the next grade level. Almost 90% of students' families participated in these student presentations of work. In the first exhibition of each year, students presented their goals for the year to just an advisor and families. At

the second exhibition, at the end of the year, five students and their families listened to students present projects and assessments of their own progress. The principal commented, “I can't tell you how many parents left with tears and smiles and pride like they've never felt. And it's interesting,

### Bethune-Chavez Academy

(fictitious name)

Located in a major urban area in California

Grades: 9-11

Enrollment: 213

Staff: Principal; part-time assistant principal; 12 subject-area teachers; 2 paraprofessionals

Racial/ethnic mix:

African-American:	52%
Hispanic:	40%
Asian:	6%
White:	0.5%
Native American:	0.5%
Other:	1%

Limited English proficient: ranged from 38% when school opened to 21% in third year

Languages spoken: Spanish, Khmer, Mien, Vietnamese, Arabic

Free/reduced lunch: 70%

Special education: 23%

parents will come out in droves if their kids are performing.” The wider community had some history of a “black-brown divide” between blacks and Latinos. The exhibitions seemed not only to help the school establish better communication and trust, but helped families appreciate other students and families across cultural and linguistic lines.

Strategically targeted professional development helped advisors prepare themselves and their students for exhibitions to families. The school's second professional development focus for one year — writing across the curriculum — aimed not only to infuse writing into all subject-area classes, but also to help all advisors work with their students as they completed their personal empowerment plans, self-assessments during the year, and end-of-year exhibition projects.

Just as teachers had a script to guide their opening meetings, the staff created protocols to help advisors and parents know when to ask ques-

tions, offer criticisms, and express appreciation for students' work. The staff also used professional time to develop a parent rubric, facilitating parents' assessment and discussion of student work. The rubric was translated into all the relevant languages. Parents not only saw their students' work, but had a chance to understand what skills were being taught, and what constituted good work.

**Building cultural and linguistic resources within the school.** The principal of the school, a white educator able to speak Spanish with families, intentionally hired bilingual staff members. Five of 12 subject-area teachers spoke Spanish. Though not all could also serve as cultural interpreters, other teachers called on the bilingual teachers when communicating with parents. The principal also created a position for a parent coordinator, and hired a Spanish-speaking parent for this position. That paraprofessional wrote scripts for non-Spanish speaking teachers, some of whom made calls to homes with simple, immediate feedback, prefaced with apologies about their lack of Spanish. This paraprofessional also made phone calls about attendance and served as a liaison in other ways for Spanish-speaking family members.



Thus, while sending teachers out of the schools to know the community and local families is one key strategy for promoting cross-cultural communication, building human resources within the school is an important, complementary strategy. Even where schools can do this, they may not have access to human resources within their school or district to help translate or interpret for every possible culture or language group. Bethune-Chavez, for instance, did not have staff to help families who spoke Khmer (Cambodian) or

Mien. In such cases, other family members or community volunteers may have the bilingual and bicultural skills needed to bridge the gap.

The ultimate aim of efforts like these is not just to make homes and schools more open to each other, but to help all of us open our heads and hearts, to grow in what we know, believe, and value.

Schools can design ways to promote mutual learning and understanding, both among their own staff and student families. This essential work provides key support for the

language acquisition and academic success of ELLs.

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