

## PARENTS MAY NEED MORE SUPPORT BEFORE BECOMING ENGAGED IN SCHOOL

As educators, we have long understood that students benefit from strong home-school connections. In fact, more than 100 years ago, the National Parent Teacher Association was formed for the express purpose of strengthening the relationship between home and school. Initially, the home-school connection was commonly characterized as mothers volunteering in classrooms and supporting school activities.

Educators have begun to think of the home-school connection in broader terms. Educators understand that it is not only parents who support students, but also other family and community members. Educators also recognize that the home-school connection takes many forms and goes beyond parents volunteering in classrooms.

As we deepen our understanding of home-school connections, it is important that we consider how relationships between home and school are affected by the increasing cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity in our schools. In this column in the fall 2009 *JSD* (available online at [www.nsd.org/news/jsd/](http://www.nsd.org/news/jsd/)), we wrote about parent involvement, which we define as the actions parents and families take at home and school to support the education of their children. We discussed how cultural, linguistic, and economic differences might affect the ways in which families are involved in school.

In this issue, we discuss parent engagement, a second kind of home-school connection. Parent engagement, also termed family engagement, encompasses parents and educators working together to meet the organizational goals of the school.

Parent engagement differs from parent involvement in that the focus of parent engagement is improving the educational experience for all students in the school, not just the parents' own children. Serving in formal governance groups, such as site-based decision-making committees and PTA, is an example of parent engagement.

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Formal governance groups play an important role in schools. Unfortunately, schools often struggle to get culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse parents involved in these kinds of groups. The limited participation of parents of diverse backgrounds is often mistakenly attributed to parents being too busy or unconcerned to be involved in these groups. We find there are two much more likely explanations.

### 1. SOME ARE NOT INVITED

First, some parents are rarely, if ever, asked to participate in these kinds of groups. Schools, of course, do solicit parent participation, but it may not reach parents of all backgrounds. A typical approach to seeking representatives for site-based committees or parent organizations is to send an announcement in the form of a flyer or mass e-mail. While some parents may respond to this type of communication, many will not.

When the school finds that the response to the communication is less than desired, the school will often make personal contacts. Because certain parents have established relationships with the school or are more convenient to access, there is a tendency for schools to call on them. These parents are often very similar to those who are likely to respond to the initial call for participation. This results in representation coming from a limited portion of the school community.

To increase the diversity of representation on formal governance groups, schools need to consciously reach out to culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse parents and invite them to participate. Personal contact sends a strong message that the school truly wants to engage parents. It is important to keep in mind that one contact may not be enough. If the school does not have an established relationship with a parent, several interactions may be necessary before the parent feels comfortable enough to accept the invitation.

### 2. THE STRUCTURE MAY BE UNFAMILIAR

A second reason that participation in formal governance groups may be limited for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse parents is that the structure and operating procedures of these groups may be unfamiliar. Whereas some parents are used to working in organizations



In each issue of *JSD*, Patricia L. Guerra, above, and Sarah W. Nelson write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. The columns are available at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).



that have specific rules and policies, other parents may be more comfortable with organic or informal structures. Joining a group that is governed by strict policies and procedures may be intimidating. This is particularly true if the head of the group assumes that all members are familiar with the rules and procedures and provides little orientation for new members. Even when orientation is provided, it may be insufficient for parents who have never participated in this kind of formal structure.

One school we worked with wanted to increase the diversity of representation on its site-based decision-making committee. We helped the school develop a specific recruiting and orientation plan. Every teacher in the school nominated a culturally, linguistically, or economically diverse parent who had not previously participated in a school governance group. The teacher provided a brief paragraph that explained what assets the parent could bring to the school and any other information the teacher thought would be helpful in the recruiting process.

The school leadership team reviewed the nominations and selected 10 of the parents to pursue. The leadership team used a combination of home visits, phone calls, and personal notes to establish a relationship with each of the 10 parents. All of the parents were then invited to a meeting that was held at the home of one of the parents. At this meeting, the leadership team explained the purpose of the site-based decision-making committee and the role that parents played on the committee. The leadership team asked the parents to consider becoming members.

Several of the parents expressed interest in serving, but also indicated they had concerns about their ability to do so. They did not believe they had sufficient knowledge to provide guidance to the school on the kinds of important matters the site-based committee was charged with considering. The parents worried that they would waste time by asking too many questions. They also expressed concern about their ability to participate in meetings held in English when their primary language was Spanish. The leadership team asked the parents whether they would consider serving on the committee if the team could find a way to address their concerns. Eight of the parents agreed. The other two indicated they would be happy to assist, but could not commit the necessary time.

To address the parents' concerns, the school provided an in-depth orientation. The presentation and all of the materials were in Spanish. The parents had an opportunity to ask questions and to make suggestions about how the committee should function. At the end of this session, the parents indicated they wanted to serve, but still did not feel competent to do so. To address this concern, the leadership team met with the parent representatives before each site-based committee meeting. The leadership team reviewed

## Parental support takes many shapes

In the fall 2009 issue of *JSD*, we wrote that parent support takes a variety of forms — involvement, engagement, and empowerment — and used that space to cover parent involvement.

If schools only recognize traditional forms of parent involvement, it is possible they will overlook the contributions of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse parents. We have developed five categories that describe ways in which parents may be involved in their children's education.

**Parenting:** Some parents view the roles of schools and parents as distinct. The parents' job is to socialize the child, while the school's role is to educate. Schools may not recognize socialization that occurs at school — eating lunch with children — as involvement.

**Communicating:** When parents view the roles of school and home as distinct, they may not initiate contact with schools but will respond to communication or make themselves available as needed.

**Demonstrating academic support:** Many families work hard to ensure that their children have appropriate dress, space to study, and permission to skip household duties.

**Declaring importance of education:** Through their words and actions, families show how they value education even when they aren't able to assist with homework because of language differences.

**Conveying trust by granting autonomy:** While some may view parents' lack of involvement with course selection or college applications as a sign of not caring, parents may be signaling their trust that children can and should take responsibility for their own educations.

the agenda, explained the issues to be discussed, and allowed the parents to ask questions. This preview meeting helped the parents feel more confident about participating in the formal committee meetings.

One additional strategy the school employed was to alternate the language of the meeting. One month the meeting was held in English, with Spanish translation provided. The next month, the meeting was in Spanish with English translation. This sent a strong message that the school was also willing to adapt to the needs of the parents.

As diversity in schools grows, engaging parents of all backgrounds in school improvement becomes increasingly important. The key is to purposefully reach out to parents and to provide the support they need to participate. We might be surprised to learn how much we can increase parent engagement if we simply ask. ■