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Family Literacy Nights . . . and Other Home-School Connections

A community builds a bridge between teachers and culturally diverse parents.

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During an in-house professional development course that focused on creating effective learning environments for culturally and linguistically diverse students, teachers discussed the difficulties they experienced getting the parents of English language learners involved in the school community. Sharing her frustration, one teacher told the group,

OK, I understand that we're all different, and I know that all parents want what is best for their children. But we're here [in the United States]. They're here. If I were in another country, I would do as [people living in that country] do. When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Several teachers nodded in agreement.

Although the teachers participating in the course were dedicated to helping culturally diverse English language learners succeed academically, many expected families to quickly become part of the mainstream culture. For the most part, they could not find ways to involve the parents of these students in meaningful, ongoing communication. The teachers' frustration underscored the district's need to build a cultural bridge between diverse families and the school.

A Diverse Student Body

Approximately 16 percent of the 7,000 students attending the Methuen Public Schools in Massachusetts live in homes in which English is the second language. The majority of these students speak Spanish as their first language. Thirty percent of Methuen's second language learners have been identified as having limited proficiency in English and receive second language services at school, including sheltered English immersion—which provides content-area instruction and clarification in Spanish when students require it for comprehension—and English language development. The district also provides ongoing English as a Second Language (ESL) support for students who are in classes with native English speakers but who still require English language support. For many years, the district has supported a Parent



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Advisory Council (PAC), which, in theory, involved non-English-speaking parents in the operations of district schools. In reality, however, few parents and teachers regularly attended PAC meetings.

In response to a request for proposals from the Office of English Language Affairs, the Methuen Public Schools submitted a three-year plan to develop and implement Parent Partnership for Achieving Literacy (PAL), a program designed to improve the education opportunities of culturally and linguistically diverse students by increasing communication between home and school. PAL's overarching goal is to build a bridge between teachers and culturally diverse parents by helping parents understand the literacy practices of schools while making teachers aware of the strengths that exist within culturally diverse families. The PAL program, which targets teachers and families of preK-3 students, includes community outreach, parent workshops, and in-house professional development.

As part of its commitment to the program, the district provided a central meeting place located within walking distance of many students' homes and released the supervisor of English Language Acquisition for 10 hours each week to direct the program. The federal government awarded the district approximately \$418,000 during a three-year period. A portion of these funds was used to employ four bilingual and bicultural coordinators who work with parents, each from a different Spanish-speaking territory or country.

A Community Collaborates

PAL staff, education consultants from the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, and community members collaborated to create a program that would be responsive to the community's needs. Parent coordinators were knowledgeable about the strengths and needs of the area's culturally diverse community. They understood the strengths of bilingualism, the community's strong work ethic, and the value parents placed on education. They also understood the community's needs: Many parents had limited ability in English and were unfamiliar with the schools' expectations for parent involvement.

University consultants shared education practices and underlying theories, including the importance of a solid foundation in one's first language and ongoing, meaningful exposure to print in any language. They also discussed school literacy practices, such as storybook reading and mainstream discourse patterns, which often follow the initiation-response-evaluation sequence.

Early in the planning phase, PAL staff met with parents, community members, school administrators, and teachers to identify barriers to home-school communication. The group found two primary concerns. First, parents from different cultures were expected to conform to the expectations of the school, even though these parents often didn't know or understand these expectations. Second, teachers wanted to communicate with parents, but they often viewed the parents through their own cultural lenses. The PAL staff determined that a dual approach could address these barriers: It needed to more thoroughly educate culturally and linguistically diverse parents about the culture of the school, and it needed to implement in-house professional development to help teachers recognize the strengths within these families.

The team set up an initial timeline for achieving project objectives. The timeline included conducting Family Literacy Nights, modeling mainstream literacy practices for culturally diverse parents, creating a library of education materials, encouraging parents to attend ESL classes, and providing professional development for school staff.

Community Outreach

Early in the program, the parent coordinators visited schools, local stores, and social service agencies to distribute bilingual posters and flyers that described PAL's goals and services. Parent coordinators also made phone calls to parents of incoming kindergarten students and set up appointments to visit the families at home. Within the first two months of the program, the parent coordinators were in direct contact with 57 parents of students in grades preK-1.

The parent coordinators facilitated the first of many Family Literacy Nights. The popularity of these two-hour meetings, which are held twice each week, has steadily grown. During Family Literacy Night, parent coordinators read storybooks to students and model reading strategies for parents. In small groups, parents practice such reading strategies as picture walks, which use illustrations to predict events in the story. Parents who have attended several sessions often volunteer to be guest readers and to model strategies for newcomer parents.

The PAL program has established a lending library of multilingual books, audiobooks, and educational games. Parents are invited to come to the center to use and borrow these materials. Parent coordinators explain the educational value of such games as *Candy Land* and *Chutes and Ladders*, which are commonly found in mainstream homes but are often unfamiliar to the district's culturally diverse families.

Parent Coordinators

Through their involvement in the design and implementation of PAL, parent coordinators have developed the skills necessary to work collaboratively with parents and to share project goals and decision making. In response, parents have become comfortable expressing their needs and perceptions. They want to help their children do well, but they sometimes don't know how.

Unlike mainstream parents, who share the culture of the school and therefore prepare their children to participate in that particular setting, culturally diverse parents often can only guess at the behaviors expected within schools. For example, mainstream parents often demonstrate that they value education by questioning teachers; culturally diverse parents may consider it disrespectful to do so.

Through ongoing workshops that include presentations, hands-on practice, and debriefing sessions, university consultants have helped parent coordinators understand the types of literacy practices and discourse that generally occur in schools as well as those that often occur within culturally diverse homes. School literacy practices include such activities as storybook reading, in which teachers prompt students to recall and recount information that has just been read. Home literacy practices often include more purposeful literacy, such as writing letters, paying bills, and reading magazines, newspapers, flyers, or religious materials.

During Family Literacy Nights, the bilingual parent coordinators engage parents in workshops in which they explain, model, and provide hands-on experience with common literacy practices, including the various components of storybook reading. The coordinators explain the importance of these practices in helping young children understand that print has meaning. Using such materials as brand-name products, recipes, flyers, newspapers, and magazines, parent coordinators discuss and model research-supported strategies to help children develop an awareness of print, letter and word recognition, and sound-symbol relationships.

Parent Power

The PAL staff collaborates with parents to solicit ideas and suggestions to improve the program. When parents indicated that they would like to learn more about services offered within the schools, PAL staff brought in guest speakers to address such topics as Title I, special education, and ESL. As a result, parents' understanding of the system has grown. When parents thinking about attending parent-teacher meetings have felt intimidated by the structure of the school, they have asked parent coordinators to accompany them. When they have been unsure of their English in a school setting, parent coordinators have been there to translate and interpret.

Parents also requested family ESL classes and homework help for their children. These were included in Family Literacy Nights, and attendance has steadily increased. This family approach to ESL has enabled parents to attend classes to improve their English while their children complete their homework.

The PAL program is in its third year of funding and has evolved to meet the needs of the school system and its culturally and linguistically diverse community. The program continues to provide Family Literacy Night, ESL, and homework help two nights a week; on average, 25 parents and 45 students attend regularly. Interviews with teachers and parents have indicated that PAL has helped improve students' reading and math skills and has increased parent participation.

To quantitatively measure PAL's effectiveness, the district is using Student After-School Youth Outcomes (Miller & Surr, 2002), a Likert-type instrument that measures students' academic progress, homework completion, perseverance with academic tasks, and interrelationships with teachers. Results of the study will be available this summer.

Teaching the Teachers

During PAL's second year, its primary goal was to increase teacher awareness of the strengths of culturally and linguistically diverse families. PAL staff and six teachers formed an advisory team to identify the professional development needs of teachers in grades preK-3. The teachers indicated that they were interested in professional development that focused on second language acquisition, teaching culturally diverse learners, ESL strategies, and literacy for English language learners. On the basis of the teachers' interests, the program subsequently offered a series of 16 professional development workshops.

PAL staff and university consultants agreed that participation in Family Literacy Nights had the

potential to increase teachers' understanding of the strengths of culturally diverse families. This field experience was added to teacher professional development requirements. To receive inservice credits (which can result in salary increases), teachers were required to complete 12 workshops and attend two Family Literacy Nights.

Thirty-five of approximately 100 teachers completed the PAL professional development series. Many indicated that they particularly valued the workshops that created a sense of dis-equilibrium. For example, when discussing a demonstration that taught teachers to decode simple words in Arabic, a teacher commented, "This workshop made me feel the frustration that second language learners must feel." Referring to a workshop that involved reading *The Three Little Pigs* in Serbo-Croatian, another teacher said,

This situation was uncomfortable and made me think of my little guys. They look at me, and I think they're not listening; it's probably because they really don't understand what I'm saying.

More than 90 percent of teachers interviewed reacted positively to this experience. One teacher spoke about her reaction to an ESL class:

The positive sense I got from the women [in attendance] put a whole new light on my impression of that community, an impression that is very positive. One woman whose English was very limited and whose struggle [to learn] was intense so impressed me that I still think of her today. I had to tell her how proud I was that she would do this for herself even though I knew how hard it must have been.

Implications of PAL

Low-income and culturally diverse students are more likely to be successful when a partnership develops between home and school (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). For a relatively modest financial investment, PAL has empowered many culturally diverse families in Methuen to improve their English and actively participate in their children's education. At the same time, Family Literacy Nights provide an important in-house professional development opportunity for teachers. The district anticipates that more than 80 teachers will participate this year.

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