



Strengthening Families and Building Community Through Family Literacy

A collaboration between the Baylor University School of Education and a neighboring middle school has helped to transform the community through academic enrichment for students and English-literacy programs for parents.

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by Randy M. Wood

As Latino parents we have to help our children in every way possible. Simply because we don't speak English very well doesn't mean that we can't support our children to succeed in school. We value education, and there is much that we do at home every day. And staying involved in the school to watch over them is an extension of our parental responsibility (Gaitan, 2004).

Assisting a group of parents to help their children started with a simple request from a university education professor to an inner city principal: "Give me 50 of your most academically challenged students who need additional support to be educationally successful." What followed has become an ongoing lesson in how achieving educational success is a family and community affair.

Even if parents want to help their children, they will struggle without the use of English and an understanding of American education. This article describes a community-based collaboration between the Baylor University School of Education and a local middle school that aimed to build family legacies and transform the community through academic enrichment for students and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for parents.

Research and experience show that many at-risk students come from non-English speaking families. This reality has underscored research that shows there is a strong relationship between children's early reading success and parents' own reading behaviors. This research led to a multiphase program at César Chávez Middle School in Waco, Texas.

Meeting Students' Needs

Meeting students' needs was the first phase of this program. Baylor University students tutored selected at-risk students at Chávez for 45 minutes, twice a week, for a year. During the tutoring sessions, the tutors learned that many of the students came from families where the parents did not read, write, or speak English. In addition, the parents did not understand what American education was all about.

To get these families engaged in the school, a yearlong study of literacy was started. It developed into a family literacy program known as LEAF (Learning English Among Friends). LEAF was the result of a partnership between the Baylor University School of Education, Chávez teachers and administrators, and the school's campus decision-making committee.

The committee—which is made up of business and community leaders, parents, teachers, and friends of the school—met monthly to discuss ways to improve the school and increase parental involvement. This group endorsed the LEAF project as a major way to reach the families of South Waco, where César Chávez Middle School is located.

Now in its fifth year, LEAF serves more than 300 adults, who meet weekly to study ESL in seven different locations throughout Waco. These adults work hard to improve their English skills in writing, reading, and speaking.

More Than an ESL Program

Several factors enhance the work of LEAF, which is much more than an ESL program. First, the parents attend the program in the school building, where they see the warm and caring

environment in which their students are learning. Second, leaders from the community come in periodically to share information about what is happening in the community and to let the parents know how they can become more involved. Third, parents get to experience success in education at all levels by gaining the ability to read at home in English to their children. Finally, parents are taught positive parenting skills they can use to help their children and to improve their own classroom performance.

Originally considered the crowning project of César Chávez Middle School, LEAF provides a strong foundation for a program we refer to as Strengthening Families, Building Communities in South Waco. This family literacy program reaches out into the South Waco community using Baylor University students as teachers and mentors. The program has received several major grants during the past four years.

Two major academic components making a significant difference in the success of the middle school students grew out of the LEAF program. In the tutoring program that launched the initiative, a pair of Chávez students is matched with a Baylor University School of Education novice (a freshman education major) for tutoring, twice weekly. This enrichment program has helped the school, which is more than 90 percent Hispanic, significantly raise its achievement level.

Also this year, 50 students who failed to pass the state assessment in math are receiving specific tutorial help by participating in a new program called Cool Literacy Math. This program is an attempt to bridge the gap between language and math concepts.

The support of GEAR UP Waco, a federally funded \$11.5 million program to encourage students to attend college and parents to be involved in schools, has made these programs possible. A new GEAR UP Waco grant has enabled us to expand to four additional Waco middle schools. Through all of these programs, we are able to show how the university, workplace, and schools can form a true collaboration to meet the English language needs of families.

A Partnership Based on Common Concerns

The initial success of LEAF's multipartner collaboration stems from a common concern for and attention to the environment in which students live and learn. Each organization considers the family the most influential context for learning, followed by the school and the community. Each program attempts to transform the students' environment and the respective programs address key elements in each venue. Whether it is enriching classroom curriculum, tutoring after school, or teaching parenting skills, the focus is on enriching the environment in which the students live and learn, and then empowering their families to take advantage of the opportunities at hand.

With parent, teacher, and community support, many students are being helped. This joint effort by multiple entities provides a strong basis for families in a truly holistic way and works to end the cycle of poverty through education.

Reference

Gaitan, C. D. (2004). *Involving Latino families in schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

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