

Engaging ESL Parents Through Literacy



Study after study has found that families are key to a student's success. For example, the 2002 annual synthesis of studies on parent and family involvement conducted by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory concluded that "the evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and throughout life."

The question then becomes: How do you successfully implement a meaningful parental engagement strategy?

The Springdale (Arkansas) School District, which has a large population of Hispanic families, can attest to the benefits and influence of involving parents through family literacy. Using a grant from the National Center for Family Literacy, the district implemented the Toyota Family Literacy Program, which serves schools with at-risk populations of Hispanic and other immigrant families based on the family literacy model of parents and children learning together. Results show that this approach can impact adequate yearly progress (AYP) and build a school climate that supports all aspects of parent engagement. Eight schools implemented family lit-

eracy activities during the past two years and have seen increased student achievement, significantly increased parental self-efficacy in supporting their child's academic success, and strengthened relations across all stakeholders in the school community.

Parents as Learners

As a part of the program, parents of K-3 students attend adult English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction as well as participate in their child's learning for 30 minutes per day. Adult language classes and the time that parents spend with their own children in the classroom form the basis for long-lasting student achievement and parent participation in schools. The other component to the family literacy program is a time during the day when the adult ESL teacher

brings in outside resources for parents to learn about effective parenting, community resources, nutrition, and other areas important to their family's success.

The school climate changed for parents and staff as a result of these activities. The program now has a waiting list of parents who want to learn how they can help their children thrive. Teachers have become engaged in new ways with parents who they have never met and they eagerly volunteer to go into the parents' classroom to teach math or language arts.

Scaling Up

Our next step was to take the success of the literacy program to the entire school. Because staff recognized that students in all grades were struggling with organized writing, we decided to focus on one writing organizer model throughout the entire building.

After one semester of successful implementation, we gave select parents the same tool to use at home. We identified three students in each classroom who needed focused help in writing, and then teachers and I made personal phone calls or home visits to invite families to participate.

As a result, 85 percent of invited parents attended a meeting called Warm Up to Writing, which was held in the cafeteria with a standing-room-only crowd. The teachers were amazed by the attendance and follow-up conversations with parents. Many parents were empowered for the first time with a strategy to truly help their child at home. Because of the personal invitations, parents who could not attend the event asked for a one-on-one conference with the teacher to gain knowledge to help their child in writing.

Ultimately our school, which had been in Year I of Improvement to meet AYP, met standards that year and the following year. When I asked teachers what were the key factors of our success, overwhelmingly they indicated family literacy.

Successful Implementation

As other districts model our approach to family literacy, the question I'm asked most often is how we did it. Here are the five elements that helped us effectively implement our approach to family literacy.

Use a team approach. From central office administrative staff to the office staff at the school, everyone needs to be informed. Sharing success stories from current programs will lead to buy-in from all staff members. In Springdale, the family literacy programs initially began in three elementary sites. Due to their success, we expanded to five additional elementary schools and one middle school.

Make it personal. A personal invitation from someone at the school can make all the difference in promoting family literacy and boosting parental engagement. Identify the parents who should attend based on current student achievement data. Then invite

them personally, via a phone call or home visit.

Break down barriers. Many parents cannot attend school events because of transportation issues. Others come to school but aren't able to communicate in English. It is the school's responsibility to help eliminate such barriers. This could involve home visits by teams of teachers, a meeting in the main building of an apartment complex, or providing a bus to bring parents to the school.

Ninety percent of our students live in poverty and do not have access to books in the summer months. To combat this shortcoming, our staff visit students' homes twice a week during the summer months to continue to build relationships and to ensure access to literature.

Gain teacher support. Because the staff can make or break a program by their level of participation, it is vital to get their input before developing a school plan for family literacy.

Be specific. In collaboration with staff, identify a specific skill to focus on buildingwide. Then determine one strategy that the entire school will concentrate on to help children acquire the skill. This will ensure that parents who have multiple children in the same building will not be overwhelmed.

Too often, we give open invitations for parents to come to school, yet classroom teachers and principals are disappointed when the parents who most need the information don't come. Because parents whose children aren't doing well typically avoid coming to school, schools must deliberately intervene. Family literacy is a focus that yields tremendous results—not just for students, but also for multiple generations and the entire community. 

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