

Home Visit Tips for ELLs

The English-language learner (ELL) population is the fastest growing segment in K-12 education, and professional credentialing for teachers and administrators has been unable to keep pace with the needs of the students. Principals' abilities to respond to language and culture diversity are critical to meet the growing challenges that schools face in working with ELLs.

Consider the experience of one elementary school principal who recently expressed concern about her school being on a district improvement plan for the past three years. Although she knew her students were bright and intelligent, they failed to meet the state's reading and math standards for three consecutive years. She described her school as having a high-poverty student population and a large number of ELLs. This principal believed that enrolling in an English-language teaching certificate endorsement program would help her guide the teachers and the students out of this performance slide.

Principal leadership is essential in bridging school and home cultures of ELLs. While certification is one strategy to learn to meet the needs of ELLs, there are other grassroots methods that school leaders can implement. For example, to improve their support for ELLs, principals should make effective use of home visits.

Purpose

It is imperative for effective administrators to understand the match and the mismatch between home and school before attempting to bridge both worlds. *Education World* writer Sherril Steele-Carlin, in her article "Teacher Visits Hit Home," reports her conversations with school leaders about how home visit programs work. ELLs' academic performance is frequently linked to the congruence between their home cultures and the expectations and practices of school. Home visits by administrators and teachers com-

municate to families how much the school cares for their children and their well-being. This demonstration of care builds the foundational trust necessary to engage many parents of ELLs in their children's education.

As an example, over the summer one principal made home visits before the school year started, during which he learned the names and other crucial information about some of the families of the school's ELLs. After the school year started, a Somalian mother expressed her delight and surprise that the principal greeted her by her name, "Fatima," on the first day of school. As a result, she instantly found the school to be a welcoming place. And when the teacher later asked Fatima to volunteer in her son's classroom, she readily accepted the invitation.

Purposeful home visits often result in positive outcomes, as in Fatima's case. Visit ELL families to:

- Find out the language preference and proficiency of the parents and student;
- Learn the names of family members;
- Gather information about the ELL's previous schooling experience;
- Understand the parents' expectations for teachers and the school;
- Identify ways that school can support parents and vice versa; and
- Learn about community resources that parents find valuable.

Dos and Don'ts


In addition to identifying purposes for home visits, principals may benefit from some process suggestions. For instance, principals do not need to

begin by visiting every family, especially in schools with high ELL populations. Visiting two families in each language community is a start. Most families will appreciate the principal's efforts to accept the uncomfortable challenge to pronounce some non-English names. Write down names phonetically to help with remembering pronunciations. Principals can also try to learn from the families how to say "welcome" and "thank you" in the families' home languages.

The principal's modeling of home visits will motivate teachers to participate. Before most visits, principals should plan to partner with a teacher from the school and schedule the visit seven to 10 days ahead of time. Do not feel rejected if families decline; families may be busy or there may be other complications.

During the visit, the school team must be gracious in accepting drinks and snacks, if offered. However, it is appropriate to decline if allergic to certain food items. Also, do not go empty handed. Principals may bring appropriate small gifts or a school brochure, school contact list, school events calendar, as well as a list of community and school resources (e.g., where to find back-to-school clothing and supplies, and school meal information).

After each visit, principals should write notes and a summary of the visit. Try not to take notes in the presence of the families. Finally, it is nice to send a note of thanks to the family.

Principals can be overwhelmed by the growing needs of ELLs at their schools and by not knowing how to proceed. Home visits can serve as one entry point to support language instruction and cultural competence. When principals model the way, teachers will follow. 

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