As a university professor who has worked for years with migrant students and their families, I often hear my graduate students—who are teachers themselves—ask this question: “How can I work with migrant students who are in my class for only a few short months? Many don’t speak English, and I just don’t know what to do.”

Many educators struggle to meet the needs of migrant students. They must implement instructional strategies that facilitate English-language acquisition and content area knowledge, while at the same time addressing state standards and assessment requirements. They must have a solid understanding of the cultural and social dimensions of the lives of these children. They need resources, translators, and, above all, support in learning how to provide the children of migrant workers with their best chance for academic success.

Who Are Migrant Workers?

Migrant workers are often referred to as “invisible people” because they belong to one of America’s most marginalized and undereducated populations. Their livelihood derives from harvesting a variety of crops, and they move frequently. Migrant farm workers are a resource that is vital to the nation’s agricultural industry, but the educational progress of their children lags far behind mainstream standards.

These children, many of whom speak little or no English, may attend as many as three schools in one academic year as their families travel from worksite to worksite. The key to migration patterns is the availability of seasonal jobs; families move to keep up with the harvest in various parts of the country.

There are three primary migrant streams, or patterns, in the United States. Workers along the East Coast travel throughout Florida and other Atlantic Coast states; workers in the Midwest travel largely in Texas, Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana; and a third stream of workers travels along the West Coast.

Thirty years ago, the patterns were more solidly established, but today there is considerably more variation. For example, families from Texas may travel to either the East or West Coast, or both. According to a 2005 report from the U.S. Department of Labor, the median income for farm worker households is between $15,000 and $17,499. Thirty percent of farm worker households live below the poverty level, and this number is increasing.

What Principals Can Do

Principals play an increasingly important role in the education of migrant children. They can provide guidance to teachers who need support; advocate for these children in the larger educational community; support professional development that better prepares teachers to work with this population; and believe that these children deserve our best efforts in the short time they might be with us.

Principals must reach across their constituencies—families, students, and teachers—to approach the challenges presented by migrant students as a collaborative initiative. Here are some suggestions:

- Make sure your school is welcoming to diverse families. Post greetings and messages on display boards in both Spanish and English;
- Honor the cultural backgrounds of all students. Schedule speakers from the community to talk with children about their lives and their work;
The arts can be a great equalizer. Call upon the talents of community artists, actors, and musicians;
Plan an evening fiesta to celebrate the work of students and families from all backgrounds;
Connect with migrant advocates in your community. Labor leaders, employment specialists, health providers, and church leaders are good contacts. It also helps to know about resources to which you can refer families needing social services;
Make sure that at least one individual in your building speaks Spanish and can be available to help with translations as needed. Community volunteers can be a good source for translators;
Schedule professional development sessions that focus on strategies for working with linguistically diverse children;
Make sure that teachers have access to bilingual books and other materials that can help them with classroom instruction;
Encourage flexibility in scheduling parent conferences. Migrant parents often work long hours, so Saturday and early morning appointments can be very helpful;
Provide materials that reflect cultural and linguistic diversity in the school library and classrooms;
Send home materials in both Spanish and English; and
Set an example for advocacy-based initiatives so that other school leaders will learn from your example.

Online Resources
Following are links to Web sites that contain information about working with migrant children and their families.

Center for Applied Linguistics—www.cal.org. The focus of this site is literacy and language. There is information relating to English-language learner concerns, assessment, literacy, pedagogy, advocacy, and professional opportunities.

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs—www.nacea.gwu.edu. This site, which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education Office of English Language Acquisition, serves as a starting point for accessing information on language, education, and legal concerns.

Tolerance.Org—www.tolerance.org. The Southern Poverty Law Center sponsors this site, which provides valuable resources related to fostering literacy and diversity in schools and beyond, including working with parents and community members.

ColorinColorado—www.colorincolorado.org. This site provides bilingual resources for educators who work with English-language learners. Materials include family resources, school documents (in Spanish and English), classroom ideas, and more.

For Further Reading
These print resources provide in-depth information on issues related to migrant farm workers:


Romanowski, M. H. (2002). Meeting the needs of migrant students. Principal, 82, 42-47.


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