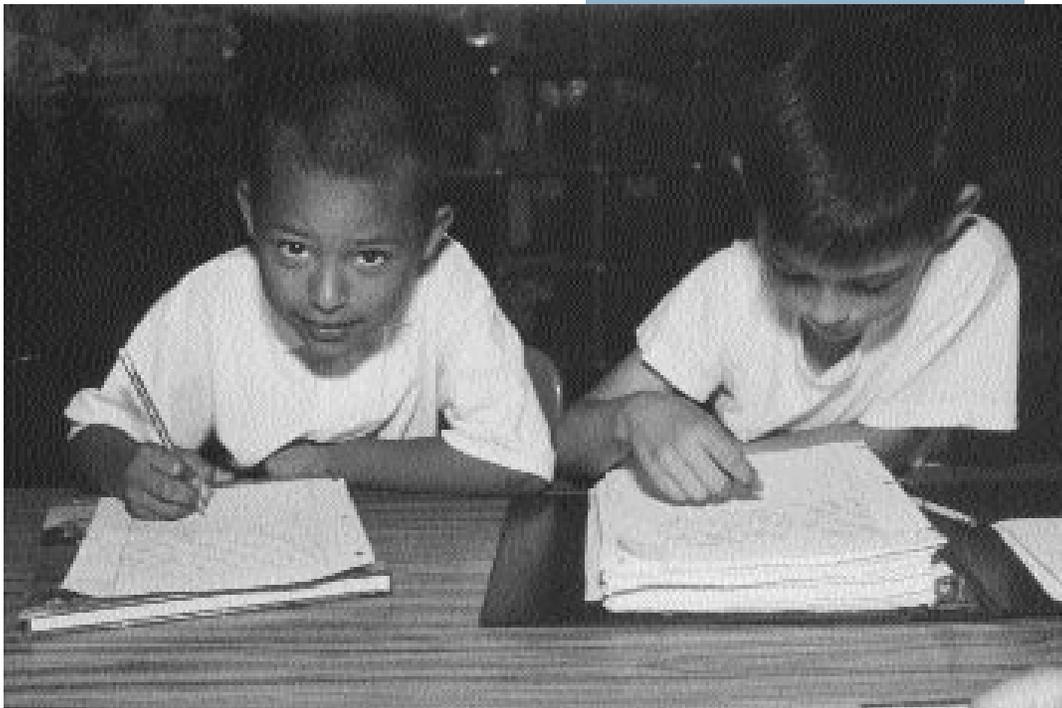


*Family
and
Community
Involvement*

Reaching
Out to
Diverse
Populations



*Southwest
Educational
Development
Laboratory*



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Introduction

Your job as an educator has grown more complex, more challenging. It used to be that knowing about curriculum, student learning or assessments met the grade. But increasingly educators are encouraged to become experts in parent and community engagement, especially as schools come under more public scrutiny than ever before.

Parent involvement has always been an important issue to educators, but the way schools have responded varies widely. Some treat community engagement as an afterthought, others take it more seriously and develop comprehensive outreach plans. Now engaging parents and community members has grown just as critical to a school's success as lesson planning, classroom instruction and testing.

Why Is Community Involvement Important Now?

Schools across the country are growing more racially and ethnically diverse. For years, minority populations were concentrated in border states like California, New Mexico and Texas and in urban areas like New York, Chicago and Boston. Changing demographics require educators to not just think more critically about how to engage culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the decisions affecting public schools, but act on it.

Engaging these important communities is critical to improving public education. School improvement efforts have more staying power when parents and community members understand them. Failing to involve all community members in decisions affecting public education often results in apathy, distrust or confrontation.

Parent Involvement = Student Success

Teachers, principals and superintendents know that parents' interest and involvement in their child's learning can have a profound affect on a child's success in school. Studies show when parents and community members are engaged in schools, students perform better, attendance increases and dropout rates are lower.

Schools involve parents and community members in many ways. Parents help with homework, community members assist with school events or make decisions with teachers and principals about how to improve student achievement. Some volunteer as a teacher's aide or chaperone a field trip or collaborate with community groups to build support for a neighborhood school.

The Challenges

Even though there are many positive outcomes associated with parent and community engagement, educators still struggle with how to involve parents in the issues affecting public schools—especially parents from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Less parent involvement is also likely in lower income neighborhoods and in areas where parents have little formal education or speak a language other than English. For teachers and principals in these communities, parent and community engagement becomes a source of frustration, even disappointment.

Why is something that makes good sense so challenging to implement in these communities? After all, it's not that parents don't care about their children's future. Far from it. Parents want to play a role in their child's learning. They want to work closely with teachers and principals. They want what's best for their child's future. So, why do educators have little success engaging these parents?

Re-think Your Approach

The answer, in part, may lie in how schools think about parent and community engagement. Too often, schools expect families and community members to get involved on their own. Many schools are finding out the hard way that it's not enough to post an

occasional flier promoting meetings or events. Too often, these fliers end up in a crumpled ball at the bottom of a student's backpack. Or, school staff rely on parents to see the fliers when they visit the school—when few parents rarely visit school in the first place. If a school uses the same old approach to involve families and community, it will get the same old lackluster results.

How Successful Schools Do It

Successfully involving parents in the decisions affecting your school requires hard work, but the long-term results are well worth it. Involving hard-to-reach parents and community members requires strengthening ties to community leaders, following through on commitments, developing trust and building relationships. It requires a firmer grasp of the cultural and language barriers that may sidetrack educators' good efforts, and building this cultural awareness into your efforts to engage parents and community members.

Does this mean educators now have to be cultural experts? Well, to some degree—yes. Schools that successfully engage parents and community members are knowledgeable about cultural differences and how those differences affect a community's perspective on education issues. Sometimes, it's simply a matter of knowing who to turn to for help. Educators might enlist the help of “cultural expert”—a local minister or social services counselor, for example, who knows the community or communities in the neighborhood.

Is This Guide for You?

This handbook is designed for teachers, principals, superintendents and other educators who want to begin to develop meaningful parent and community involvement in public education in culturally and linguistically diverse communities. This guide is not meant to be the definitive book on community engagement. Instead, the strategies we've outlined in this guide will help get you started.

SEDL's Expertise

SEDL has extensive experience working with public schools to foster meaningful parent and community engagement. What we've

learned from this work and from interviewing organizers, parents and community members is that obstacles to parent and community involvement can be overcome. Building greater participation requires an understanding of how culture, socioeconomic status and other factors influence parent and community participation. You must earn the trust of minority communities that have traditionally felt shut out of the decisions affecting their children and their neighborhood schools.

We've talked with leaders from Hispanic, African-American, Native American and Asian communities to understand what keeps parents and others from participating in school activities. Their best advice is highlighted throughout this publication. Together, we've developed engagement strategies to increase participation among family and community members from low socioeconomic and diverse backgrounds.

The Diversity in Dialogue Project

Family and Community Involvement is the third in a series of publications produced by SEDL's Diversity in Dialogue project. This project focuses on how to engage culturally and linguistically diverse members of the community in the decisions affecting public education.

*Family
and Community
Involvement*

**Reaching Out to
Diverse Populations**

strategy 1

Know Your Community

Where do teachers, principals and superintendents begin? How can you meaningfully involve parents in ways that go beyond parent-teacher night or a signature on a report card? How will your school work with parents to set goals, implement reforms and evaluate whether they are improving student achievement?

Encouraging more parents and community members to become involved in your school begins with knowing your community. This means identifying leaders and education issues that your community cares about most.

A good way to begin identifying leaders in your community is to talk with individuals who lead the local Chambers of Commerce, community colleges, churches, cultural foundations and social service agencies. City Council members and owners of established, neighborhood businesses also are good sources. Seek out commu-



Who's who in your community:

7

- **Identify the religious, cultural, political, civic and social organizations in your community that work with minority and low income parents and residents**
- **Identify parents, community advocates and business leaders who are well respected and have credibility with culturally and linguistically diverse populations**
- **Create a contact list that has the most up-to-date information about leaders and organizations and what issues matter to them most**
- **Meet regularly with as many community leaders and groups as possible to discuss ways you can work together**
- **Follow-through regularly with community groups on next steps; share information**

nity groups and businesses that have long-time roots in the community. Learn who carries influence and clout in your community. Find out who gets things done. This becomes increasingly important as you build community support for school improvement efforts.

Don't forget to overlook less visible community leaders, too. Reach deep into the community to find lesser known, but just as influential advocates: a local grocer, a grandmother, a block captain or housing project leader. While these community members may not be as high profile as others, they are tuned into the issues confronting the neighborhood and can help you craft school events or meetings with these issues in mind. They also know what motivates community members to get involved in schools. Ultimately, parents and community members become involved in schools when they see how education affects what is most important in their lives.

As you connect with community leaders and advocates, provide them with information about your school's reform efforts, demo-

graphics, student achievement results and a calendar of upcoming meetings and events. As you build relationships with these leaders, encourage them to participate in school activities, tutor students, contribute funds or sponsor school activities at their business. They can also encourage their employees or members to become more involved. Work with your school staff to identify how best to tap the expertise and resources in your community.

What issues does the community care about most? Find out by asking your community.

- **Conduct formal and informal surveys, both written and by word of mouth. Ask parents if they talk regularly with their child's teacher. What concerns do they have about their child's education? In what ways do parents want to be involved in school? How do they view their child's school?**
- **Attend monthly meetings of different groups representing parents, community members and business leaders. What concerns do these groups raise about public education? How do views vary from one group to the next?**
- **Hold a series of neighborhood coffees in parents' homes and visit work sites to find out from employers and employees what they think about schools. If they were the principal, what school improvement efforts would they put in place?**



strategy 2

Get Smart about Communicating with Parents and Community Members

Think back to the last conversation you had with a parent about your school. Was it confrontational or positive? Do most of your conversations with parents involve crisis situations or do they focus on meaningful discussions about how to improve student learning? Do parents leave feeling as if their opinion doesn't count? Or do they feel respected and heard even if you agree to disagree? How do you know? In what ways do you follow-up with parents?

Communicating with parents regularly is an important way to engage them in the life of a school. But too often contact with a parent occurs only when a student is in trouble or does poorly in class. Instead, work closely with your colleagues to develop strategies for communicating more often with families and community members. Whether it's greeting parents daily as they drop off students or regularly involving community members in decisions about student learning, you are making an important connection with parents and asking them to help shape the school's direction.

That's not to say this effort is not without its challenges. In lower-income neighborhoods, struggling parents may juggle two jobs or care full time for young children with little time left over for school activities or meetings. Some families may be wary of public schools because their own experience in school was bad. Still others face language barriers.

How do you overcome these obstacles as you reach out to families

from lower socioeconomic and linguistically diverse communities?
By getting smarter about how and what you communicate.

Rather than rely on students to convey information, develop strategies to reach out directly to parents:

- *Neighborhood walks:* Walk door-to-door in your community with two to three teachers representing different grade levels. Talk to parents whose children attend your school and hand out relevant information.
- *Phone home:* Ask school volunteers to call parents and personally invite them to a school event, set up a telephone hotline for parents and place phones in classrooms so parents can talk directly to teachers. For homeless families, visit shelters and talk with parents in person.
- *Tap different media outlets:* Promote school events and community meetings in neighborhood newspapers and on community cable stations.
- *Create a school newsletter:* Keep parents and community members apprised of the most current information with the help of a weekly or monthly newsletter.
- *Camera! Film! Action!* Create short videos for parents focusing on the issues they care about most such as helping their child with homework or how to volunteer as a teacher's aide.



One district in Tulare, California, has created an annual calendar jammed with student work and lots of helpful information for parents, including safety tips, arrival and dismissal times, and information on how to directly contact the superintendent and school board. The district invites parents to meet with their child's teacher at any time during the school year. It also includes a tear-off sheet that parents sign and return to the school noting they have talked about the information in the calendar with their children. You may want to consider designing a similar district calendar that collects all the important information parents need to know in one place.

- *Develop parent folders:* Compile important information—such as the school's mission, goals and policies—in a folder and distribute widely to parents and community members. Consider adding a school calendar (see box), tips for parents or volunteer activities for community members.
- *Visit families:* Help place some parents at ease by meeting them where they are most comfortable—in their home. Be aware that some families may feel uncomfortable with this idea so be sure to find out what is most appropriate.
- *Send home a district calendar:* Design a calendar in languages reflective of your community that highlights important contact information and district dates such as parent-teacher conferences and early dismissals. Highlight student art throughout the calendar.

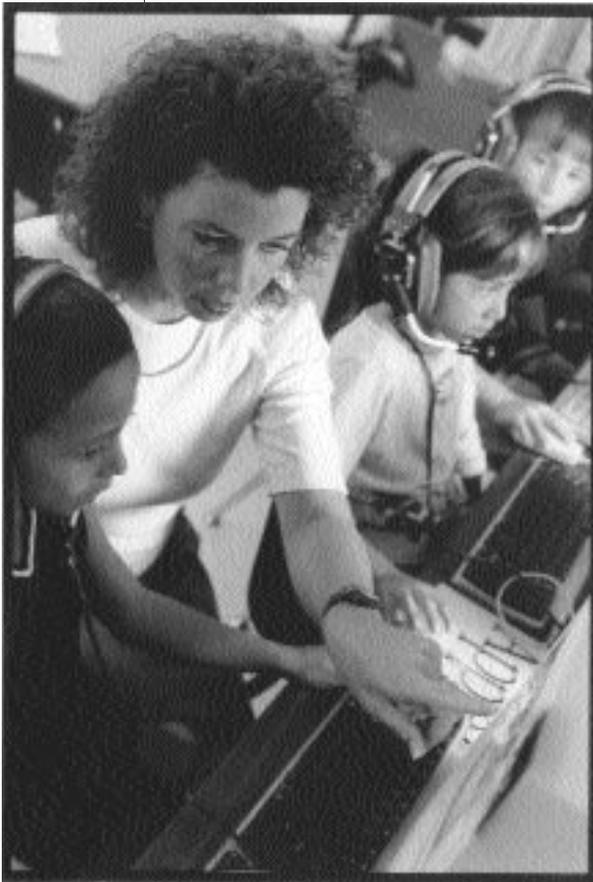
Successful schools vary the way they communicate with parents and community members. And, many communicate both in print and verbally because some parents don't take the time to read information or may not read at all. They also identify staff members who are fluent in languages reflective of the community.

Core to this effort is keeping parents and community members up-to-date on what's happening in your school. Provide information about school curriculum, student achievement, new reform efforts, events and ideas to help children learn. Whatever information you provide, make sure it's relevant to parents and community members.

strategy 3

Provide Extra Help for School Staff and Parents

Unfortunately for educators, there is no official manual on engaging hard to reach parents and community members. And, for all the emphasis on parent and community involvement, few colleges of education offer courses to future teachers, principals and superintendents on Community Engagement 101. This means it's up to districts and schools to help staff members understand, design and implement parent and community engagement strategies.



This work typically begins by working with staff members to craft a common definition of public engagement by examining the school's goals, brainstorming how involving parents and community help meet those goals and exploring the obstacles that may get in the way of these efforts. Integral to this work is staff understanding of the importance of family and community involvement in the daily life of a school.

Provide all staff—from teachers to custodians to cafeteria workers—with opportunities to learn more about the cultural and language barriers that hinder parent

As you work with colleagues to define public engagement in your school, consider these questions:

- **What is our school's mission?**
- **What are our goals over the next year?**
- **In what ways did our school engage families and the community in setting these goals?**
- **Is our community united with us on these goals?**
- **What role will parents and community members play in helping us meet our goals and overall mission?**
- **How will we measure results?**
- **In what ways will we report back to the community and families about those results?**

engagement. Invite different “cultural experts”—community leaders, business owners and parents—to discuss at staff meetings how different cultural perspectives may influence a parent’s role in their child’s education. Share tips and strategies. Identify what additional training or help staff might need. From these conversations, develop an overall community engagement plan for your school with the help and direction of all staff members.

Here are some subjects to explore:

- Understanding your community’s culture and attitudes about public schools
- Developing a parent and community outreach plan
- Collaborating with parents to understand how their child learns best
- Involving parents and community members in the daily life of your school

Just as training is important for educators, so too are workshops and resources for families. Traditionally, parents and community members served as audience members at a school play or fans at a sports event. Training that helps families and communities better understand the deeper role they can play in schools and how to perform this role lays the groundwork for successful schools. Think about holding an informal workshop or providing resource materials that deepen understanding about the issues parents and community members care about most.

These topics are a good place to start:

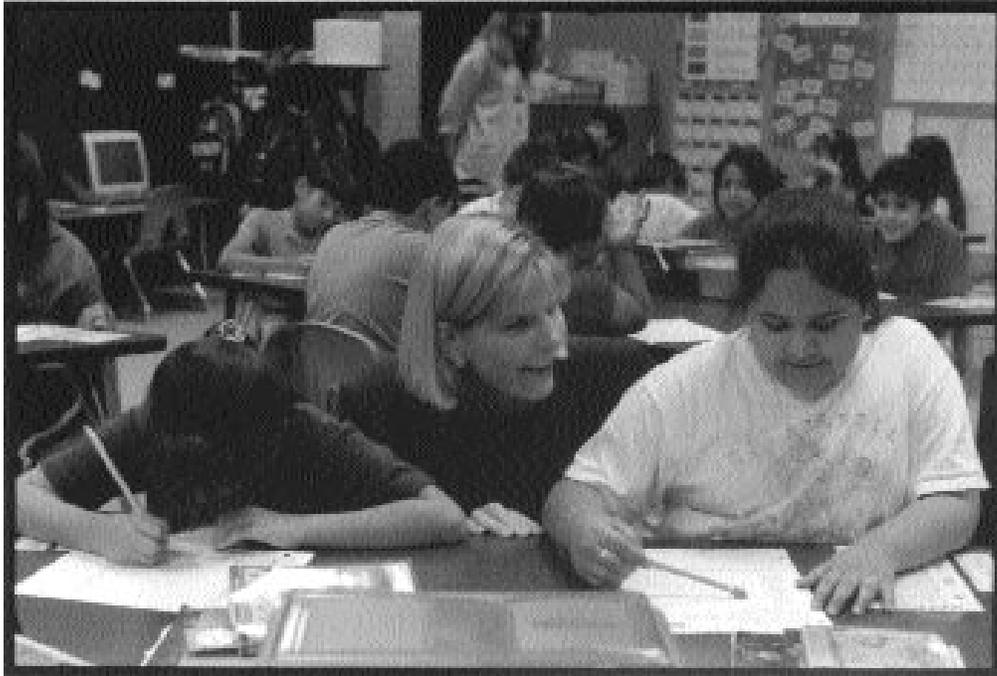
- What a good school looks like
- The nuts and bolts of our public school: the budget, curriculum, student learning and other issues
- How the school system works
- Creating a home learning environment for your child
- What it takes to be a school volunteer

Other helpful areas to explore focus on the nuts and bolts of running a school: budgets, curriculum, reform efforts. Explore ways to deepen parents' understanding about these issues and others so they can make informed decisions about what's best for the school.

You may also want to provide families and community members with volunteer training in different areas including tutoring, student supervision and front office duties. Be sure to give some thought to where and when you'll hold these workshops or training sessions. Key to this effort is making them as accessible to as many parents as possible.

Here are some ideas:

- Create a family resource center in your school that is devoted to informal gatherings, workshops or meetings with parents and community members. Keep schedules flexible so parents can attend sessions at night, during the day or on weekends.



- Consider repeating the same workshop more than once to accommodate as many participants as possible. Provide transportation if possible.
- Hold workshops in neighborhood churches, community centers, restaurants and other locations that are close and comfortable for community members.



strategy 4

Bridging the Gap Between Families, Communities and Schools

Imagine visiting your neighborhood school and being greeted by a security guard and a metal detector. You walk through drab hallways to the main office. The secretary is preoccupied. All in all, the experience leaves you feeling unwelcome, a bother. It's not the kind of school environment most of us would want to return to any time soon. Schools can be an intimidating place to visit—for parents and community members.

Contrast this scenario to a school that goes out of its way to welcome families and community. A big welcome sign greets visitors. The hallways are filled with colorful student work. School staff—from the security guard to the principal to the custodian—greet visitors with big smiles. School staff, who speak languages other than English, are available to translate. Visitors are immediately made comfortable. They feel appreciated and valued. They are part of the family.

These two descriptions demonstrate an important point: it's up to school staff to help visitors feel welcome and at ease. The more families and community members feel welcomed in the school, the more likely they are to come back. Everyone in your school, including the security guard, is an ambassador for the school. Slowly, parents will take more ownership and pride in their child's school and the role they play. What's more, they deepen their understanding about the critical role they play in helping their children learn.

Successful schools create good reasons for parents to come back. Parents who lack formal education or speak a foreign language understand little about the public school system. They are less likely to reach out to their child's school. Still others encounter other barriers. For example, in some cultures, teachers are viewed as authority figures and parents are less likely to ask teachers questions. These parents will rely on educators to explain their opinion which is valued and respected.

Schools can help build bridges by:

- Alleviating language barriers by identifying staff who can serve as translators during parent-teacher meetings, school events, parent workshops, training sessions and home visits.
- Hiring a community liaison who can promote cultural understanding among school staff and has strong ties to the community.
- Assisting parents with little formal education by showing them how to work with their children in ways that do not require



Tips for Involving Parents and Community Members

- **Explain to parents what volunteer opportunities are available in your school.**
- **Be specific about what help you need from parents and community members.**
- **Invite parents to fill out a volunteer form when they register their child for school.**
- **Find a reliable parent to serve as a volunteer coordinator who will develop a data base of information from completed forms, arrange for training and prepare a day-by-day schedule.**
- **Provide a comfortable, friendly space for volunteers with tables, a coffee pot and supplies.**
- **Show your appreciation by recognizing parent and community volunteers in person or at different school events.**
- **Kick off a school meeting with a children's performance or hold a raffle afterwards and give away door prizes, perhaps a free trip to the zoo or a gift certificate to a local restaurant.**
- **These tips are designed to reinforce the importance of parent and community involvement, help schools meet their goals for improving student achievement and build relationships among parents, community members and schools.**

Adopted from *It Starts on the Frontline* (April, 2000)
National Public Schools Public Relations Association

literacy such as asking their child questions about school assignments and school-related events.

- Conducting interviews with families and community members about their beliefs about how children learn and what role families and schools play in children's lives.
- Inviting families to share their cultural traditions, crafts and knowledge with school staff.

Some schools have a designated room where parents can meet with teachers, check out resource materials such as books or videos, visit with other parents and conduct workshops tied to school issues or volunteer activities. A community bulletin board posts job listings, social services information, library hours or a schedule of upcoming community events. Some schools film parent workshops so parents who are unable to attend can later watch the session on video. Consider creating a parent and community room in your school.

Honoring and validating families and community members who support your school is critical to encouraging and sustaining meaningful involvement. It is not only an important way of thanking them, but these efforts create an atmosphere of recognition and inclusion.

Regularly Evaluate Your Public Engagement Efforts

Just as a teacher evaluates a student's progress from year-to-year and makes adjustments, so too must school staff evaluate the impact of public engagement efforts. You'll want to know whether your hard work is producing results. Be sure to involve all staff members in this effort. This way, everyone is clear on what is working, what is not and how to improve it.

Here are some questions to consider:

- Are you meeting your goals and objectives in terms of involving families and community members in your school?
- How are parents and community members contributing to decisions about student learning?
- Are school events, workshops or training sessions well attended by school staff and families? Why or why not?
- In what ways have you integrated language and culture reflective of your community into the school, events and curriculum?
- Are interpreters readily available?
- Do you have a community or parent liaison with strong ties to the community?
- Is your school warm and inviting? Is there a family center?



Taking the time to assess how people are reacting to your communications efforts is also important. Ask parents and community members for ways to improve communication. Respond to what they say by talking about how you will incorporate some or all of their advice as you refine your community engagement plan. Share these reactions with school staff.

Looking for More Ideas? Take a Look at These Resources

There are many publications in the field on parent and community engagement that address some of the learnings SEDL gathered from the field including knowing the community, helping to overcoming barriers and understanding the concerns that affect the participation of the linguistically and culturally diverse populations in schools. A listing of organizations is also offered for additional information and resources.

Ballen, J., Moles, O. (1994, September). *Strong families, strong schools: Building community partnerships for learning*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Online. Available: <http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/families>

A handbook for strengthening families, along with supporting research by the U.S. Department of Education. Of special interest are Chapter 2 that describes how schools can welcome parents and recognize their strengths, and Chapter 3 on how to connect communities with families and schools.

Davis, D., (2000, June). *Supporting parent, family, and community involvement in your school*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Online. Available: <http://www.nwrel.org/csrdp/index.html>

This guide provides ideas and suggestions taken from research on family and community involvement in schools and can help school staff and others design a long-term approach to garnering the positive involvement of all concerned.

Funkhouser, J.E., Gonzalez, M.R. & Moles, O.C. (1997). *Family involvement in children's education*. An Idea Book. U.S. Department of Education. Online. Available: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/FamInvolve/>

This is one of an occasional series published by the U.S. Department of Education. An Idea Book discusses how some schools and their communities have overcome key barriers—finding the time, increasing their information about each other, bridging school-family partnerships. It is based on case studies of 20 successful schools from around the country. They include elementary and secondary schools and districtwide programs that receive Title I money.

McGroarty, M. (1999). *Partnerships with linguistic minority communities*. Arlington, VA: TESOL: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. <http://www.tesol.org>

This paper explores how effective community partnerships can be formed and sustained from the classroom to the school district to community organizations and businesses. It also examines the roles of teacher training and professional educational organizations in developing successful partnerships.

Moles, O.C. (ed.) (1996). *Reaching all families: Creating family-friendly schools*. U.S. Department of Education. Online. Available: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ReachFam/title.html>

This booklet is offered to stimulate thinking and discussion about how schools can better involve all families, regardless of family circumstances or student performance. It presents school outreach strategies that are based on broad experience, which can help even seasoned educators do a better job of making their schools family-friendly.

National Council of Jewish Women. (1996). *Parents as school partner: Research report*. NCJW. Online. Available: http://eric-we.tc.columbia.edu/families/NCJW_child/index.html

The data collected from the Parent as School Partners activities provides information from “voices in the field” through parent, teacher, and principal focus groups, including superintendents’ surveys. It contains a compilation of replicable school-based programs for enhancing parent involvement and a literature review. It considers policies, programs, practice and research to determine the status of current knowledge in the field of parent involvement.

U.S. Department of Education. (2000). *Let’s go to school together (Vamos juntos a la escuela)*. Online. Available: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html>

This 15-minute video offers tips for Spanish-speaking parents to help them become involved in their children’s learning, from infancy through adolescence. It features real-life vignettes of Latino parents and families dealing with topics such as reading, mathematics, and college preparation. It also comes with Spanish language booklets and brochures.

White-Clark, R., & Decker, L.E. (1996). *The hard-to-reach parent: Old challenges, new insights*. Online. Available: http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/families/hard_to_reach/

This publication is a must read book. It debunks many of the myths about the assumptions and stereotypes made about the lack of involvement of the “hard-to-reach” parent. It provides some basic and common sense ideas drawn from different sources to assist in the understanding and recruitment of parents.

Other Resources

Be sure to check out these organizations. They offer information on school and community partnerships and issues important to linguistically and culturally diverse populations. Some lead to other organizations, others provide materials, and all can be accessed through web sites.

BUENO Center for Multicultural Education
University of Colorado @ Boulder
Ed. Bldg. Rm. 247
Boulder, CO 80309
Tel: 303/735-2566
Fax: 303/492-2883
rodolfo.chavez@colorado.edu

Center for Research on Education, Diversity and
Excellence (CREDE)
University of California
College Eight, Room 201
1156 High Street
Santa Cruz, CA 95064
Tel: 831/459-3500
Fax: 831-459-3502
<http://www.cal.org/crede>

Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk
(CRESPAR)
John Hopkins University
3503 North Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21218-2498
Tel: 410/516-8800
Fax: 410/516-8890
<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar>

Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA)
5835 Callaghan Road, Suite 350
San Antonio, TX 78228-1190
Tel: 210/444-1710
Fax: 210/444-1714
<http://www.idra.org>

ERIC Database
<http://ericir.syr.edu/ERIC>

National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE)
George Washington University
2011 Eye St. NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20006
Tel: 202/467-0867
Fax: 800/531-9347
202/467-4283 (within DC area)
<http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu>

National Coalition for Parent Involvement
In Education (NCPPIE)
3929 Old Lee Highway Suite 91-A
Fairfax, VA 22030-2401
Tel: 703/359-8973
Fax: 703/359-0972
<http://www.ncpie.org>

U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20202-0498
1-800 USA LEARN
<http://www.ed.gov>