

Redefining Latino Parent Involvement
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As educators, we often find ourselves throwing our hands up in despair unable to answer the golden question: What do we do to get parents involved? This frustration is compounded further for schools with a significant Latino population. Factors such as language and cultural barriers make it difficult to establish working school-parent relationships. This is a growing concern as the rate of Latino students continues to increase. To meet the needs of a changing population, schools must shift their approach. The traditional definition of parent involvement is no longer valid in today's changing cultural and economic landscape. What worked 40, 20 or even 10 years ago is no longer applicable to today's students.

It's essential to develop systems of parent involvement that distribute the responsibility of forming parent-school partnership among all stakeholders. As the only school counselor at a K-8 school in Los Angeles County, I was responsible for approximately 750 students, 88 percent of whom were Latino. By breaking down our parent involvement efforts along the lines of the three domains – academic, career and personal/social – I was able to successfully increase parental involvement, especially that of the Latino parents, in our school.

College/Career Domain

At our school, it's staff's philosophy to create a college-going culture. As a result, I decided to create our school's (and the district's) first college fair. When designing and planning the college fair it was essential to address common barriers that prevented Latino parents from becoming involved in school events.

Recognizing language as a barrier for our Spanish-speaking parents, I created the promotional fliers and fair handouts in English and Spanish. Every college/university was asked to bring a Spanish-speaking representative to help staff its booth. When one was unavailable, Latino fraternities/sororities were contacted. Many Greek organizations have service projects to complete and are more than willing to help. One university's Mexican-American Alumni Association provided our school with promotional material. A Spanish-speaking school counselor from our high school was in attendance providing information on preparing for high school. It would be impossible for a school counselor and office staff to create and translate all college materials. Therefore, I partnered with a local nonprofit organization, The Campaign for College Opportunity, which helped us by providing college-related materials in both English and Spanish. Our school marquee and mass phone calls promoting the fair to parents were in English and Spanish.

We're sensitive to the fact that many of our parents work long hours and don't have flexible schedules to attend multiple school events. We combined our college fair with the school's open house in hopes they would stop by the college fair while at the open house. The fair was scheduled an hour before the open house, late in the evening after most parents' work hours. Understanding that some may lose pay from work by attending this event led us to raffle away gift cards to local stores. The Campaign for College Opportunity agreed to provide us with the grand prize, a \$500 college scholarship.

Childcare is often an issue for our Latino parents. Our open house is traditionally seen as an opportunity to bring the entire family. Therefore, we promoted the college fair the same way. Materials provided fit all age groups, from informational handouts for parents, to promotional goodies such as buttons, Frisbees and knapsacks for the younger children.

We truly respect parents as equal partners. On a daily basis, the mothers gather prior to school dismissal to chat with each other outside our exit. For a few days prior to the fair, I joined in and chatted with the mothers about everyday topics. At some point in our conversation, I would mention the college fair and point to the flier I happened to have. I spoke from a parent's perspective. For example, "I like how this event is going to be in Spanish, so that we can ask as many questions as we want" or "Can you believe raffle prizes and a college scholarship are being given away?" I made sure to talk to the groups of mothers that were the most talkative and vocal within the neighborhood and encourage them to spread the word.

We weren't quite sure what to expect the day of the fair. We strategically set up the college fair booths along the entrance hallway. Parents had to pass through the booths to get to the classrooms for open house. By the time we started our college presentation, our multipurpose room was standing room only. The Campaign for College Opportunity distributed all of its informational folders and projected approximately 400 families in attendance. Our school administrators and staff were in awe of our 47 percent parent attendance rate at a K-8 college fair. There was no disputing the fact that our Latino parents wanted their children to attend college. Teachers reported higher rates of parent attendance at open house, particularly among junior high grades.

Academic Domain

At our school there was growing concern regarding our junior high students' academic success. Those failing math and language arts were placed on academic probation. For students to improve, parent involvement was essential. We recognized quickly that traditional parent-teacher contact wouldn't work and set about creating a system that charged all stakeholders – school counselor, teacher, parents and students – with the responsibility of creating a parent-school partnership.

Our first step was to educate our parents on how the school system works and resources available to them. We truly believe our parents wanted to be involved but did not have the tools and knowledge to do so. I met individually with all parents of students on academic probation to explain their rights and responsibilities. I let the parents know their students were in danger of failing math and language arts and the impact failing these classes would have on the child's high school coursework and performance on the high school exit exam.

We talked about the quarterly reports our district provides for parents. Although this report is completely in English, I gave parents information on how to read the reports. A significant number of Latino parents lack sufficient education to understand the technical reports our districts provide. This can be intimidating and is a major reason why parents avoid meetings and conferences. I provide them with much reassurance as I explain the report. My speech often goes something like this (in Spanish of course): “These reports can be so confusing. When I first saw one of these I felt the same way. I had no idea what it meant. I am going to teach you a trick that I use to read these things. You’re going to learn how to read a report in English without even reading it.” I proceeded to explain the color coding system on our reports, how often they were updated and their right to request a copy. The fact that they could request information, reports or a parent-teacher meeting surprised many of our parents. I explain my role as the school counselor and let them know if they feel they aren’t being helped, they can call me to help facilitate. Many of our parents were unaware of these rights and were very appreciative. Soon after these meetings, parents seemed more interactive, from greeting me if I walked through the office or approaching me with a quick question or letting me know that they just met or left a message with a teacher.

We realized misunderstandings regarding what constituted parent involvement would continue unless we worked with parents to come to an agreed definition. Many of our grade 6-8 teachers don’t speak Spanish and find it difficult to communicate with Latino parents. To facilitate communication, we created a weekly progress report. We created the form in English with Spanish “subtitles.” We developed a coding system to assist our Spanish-speaking parents, for example MA=missing assignments, NMA=no missing assignments, P=passing, NP=not passing. During initial parent meetings, we described the progress report and its coding system. We explained that the teachers, the school counselor and administrators would monitor and inform them of student progress. We provided specific examples of how we expected parents to be involved in the process. Additionally, we held students accountable for facilitating parent-teacher communication by obtaining comments and signatures from teachers and turning in the report to parents.

We encouraged parents to call the school on Fridays if they didn’t receive a report, which was a rarity. To verify the reports were received, we created them in carbon copy format. Students turned in a copy to the school counselor and took two copies home: one for the parents to keep and the other for them to sign and return to school. In the past, many parents expressed concern that it was difficult to monitor homework from home and they had to rely on the word of their child. They were excited to see they now had a way of receiving and sending information on a weekly basis.

Our school witnessed a dramatic improvement in parent involvement. Anyone looking at our school from the traditional perspective of parent involvement might say little had changed. However, our Latino parents’ influence and involvement in their children’s education was apparent. We noticed an increase in students going to teachers for help or staying after school for tutoring or to complete homework. The response from students was often, “My mom told me to get help” or “My mom told me I had to stay and make up the work.” What was most dramatic was that many of these students showed significant improvement within the first quarter of probation. By the end of the year, the majority of students initially placed on probation were now passing their classes.

Personal/Social Domain

Our school promotes an open-door policy for parents. Our community is located in an urban area where exposure to gangs and drugs is common for many of our families and students. Therefore it's crucial that parents remain active in their children's personal and social issues at school.

Our Latina mothers feel it is important to teach their children appropriate behavior and respect. Identifying this strength allowed us to draw parents into personal/social issues. We emphasize that their children's safety is our main priority. I often introduce myself at the beginning of the year and inform them that I was always available to listen to questions or concerns. There is little we have to do to involve our families in these areas. Whether it is related to bullying, violence or issues such as self-injurious behavior and depression, our parents are quick to respond. When discussing such issues with parents we always frame them within the context of, "How can we as a school offer you support in this area?" Additionally, parents often bring to our attention issues going on in the neighborhood that they feel are affecting students, such as cyberbullying, gang or drug activity. Understanding that personal issues are important to parents, we make sure their concerns are heard and don't go unnoticed.

Redefining our old view of parent involvement and examining it through a different lens allowed us to address the barriers preventing Latino parents from becoming involved. By working with all stakeholders and via the three domains, we've been able to redistribute the responsibility of parent-school partnerships among all stakeholders so we're working smarter and not harder.

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