Creating Culturally Responsive Parent Engagement
Principal Shares Strategies for Success

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Creating an atmosphere for purposeful parent engagement and partnership that is culturally responsive and that permeates throughout a school district begins with governance and school administrative leaders, the superintendent and school principal. These leaders set the tone for parent engagement that establishes a rhythm of student success that can permeate a district, the school and the community.

There is abundant evidence in the literature that underscores the impact of engagement on achievement, graduation rates and college readiness. This article will address the question of implementation: What can I do to ensure that culturally responsive engagement takes place? It also shares effective and proven strategies used in schools that serve a diverse student body, particularly at the secondary level.

There is power in reflecting on this question with a positive intent to deepen our skills as professional educators. No matter where we are in the equation to support parent engagement - whether we are beginning or we are experienced teachers or whether we are advocates or not of parent engagement - it is useful to spend some honest, thoughtful time considering the question of how we are engaging with parents and why we are doing so (or not).

Elements of an Engagement Atmosphere

We can look forward to much more success in student achievement by creating a culturally responsive, positive environment for parent engagement. This is critical because it sets a stage of readiness for engagement for parents, teachers, administrators and community members to work more closely together. Seven critical elements are evident in this type of atmosphere:

- Having a commitment to consult and engage parents in school decisions that impact the quality of education provided;
- Creating a school culture where parents are seen as important partners in the school’s efforts to increase student success;
- Developing and posting around the school a code for effective parent engagement;
- Operationalizing the code by involving school staff and parents in a community of practice;
- Articulating high expectations for success in the engagement process;
- Measuring regularly and ensuring that the quality of engagement is high and focused on the anticipated outcome of success for every student; and
- Implementing specific steps for parent engagement and evaluating the impact
on student success.

In considering the quality of how we are engaging with parents, it is useful to take time to reflect on the following questions and to engage in thoughtful analysis of our personal practice in parent engagement as educators.

- As an educator, do I consistently value and acknowledge the strengths and gifts that parents from diverse backgrounds and languages can bring to the teaching and learning process? How do I do so?
- Am I willing to implement varied approaches to engage parents from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds meaningfully as partners in a community of learners?
- Do I facilitate engagement that is relevant to parents' context and needs, and do I set the tone of respectful readiness to begin to partner effectively with a diverse group of parents?
- As an educator, do I pro-actively invite all parents to be part of critical thinking activities, sharing in meaningful planning with them? How do I do so?
- Do I promote positive parent engagement practices with colleagues, teachers, staff and others in the school and advocate the mutual benefits of such engagement for parents, teachers and students?
- How would I describe my state of interaction with parents: tired, enthusiastic, stressed, forced, open, relaxed, or willing to hear and implement new ideas and perspectives?
- What am I doing regularly to assess the quality and responsiveness of our engagement and to keep parents meaningfully engaged by providing them with feedback that is useful?

Successful Strategies

Following are our reflections on some of the highly successful examples of culturally-responsive parent engagement that have been evidenced in one Texas school district. Under the leadership of then-principal Rogelio López del Bosque, Ed.D., Eastwood Academy is an internal charter school within the district. In November of 2007, the school was awarded the bronze medal by the U.S. News and World Report as one of the top schools in the nation and made the Texas Board for Educator Certification Honor Roll in 2006-07 and 2007-08. The school population comprises 85 percent low-income students, primarily Hispanic, and was one of only five high schools in the district to receive an exemplary rating from the Texas Education Agency at the high school level in Houston.

As a former recipient of the Administrator of the Year Award in 2006-07 for the district's east section, Dr. López has elevated student scores dramatically in all content areas. He attributes this success in large part to a dynamic staff and to purposeful and meaningful parent engagement strategies. Following are a synopsis of some of the effective strategies Dr. López has used successfully in his school.

Set high expectations for engagement. The acknowledgement of high expectations for successful parent engagement sets a tone that will benefit students, teachers and
community. The same high expectations that are set for students also should be set for teachers, staff and parents.

Create space and time to plan together. A sincere commitment at the building level in this school resulted in the creation of a designated appropriate space and time to plan together for engagement to occur. The principal created a school that feels welcoming and positive yet not patronizing through his expectations of how parents are to be welcomed and respected. An open door policy for teachers and students is critical and for the parents as well.

At the beginning of each school year, create a plan with staff on how to involve parents, explore the benefits of such involvement and what you will be doing to bring everyone, staff and parents, together. Key topics words that parents like to discuss are rigor, discipline and communication.

Begin with the premise that parents do care and know what they need for themselves and their children. Key questions to ask: Does the school know what parents’ needs are? What opportunities have been provided or will be provided for parents to give feedback? How will the school use this information in a meaningful way to respond to their needs? What needs do they have that could be provided through community services? Issues that may arise at home where there is no support do affect the learning process. It important to actively listen to parents.

Find local resources to support engagement and promote the value of diversity. Attend and sponsor local community functions. For example, as parents’ requested information and knowledge about technology, Dr. López offered a space for classes in technology and was able to provide a computer for each participant through his outreach and connections with the local business community. Open the school and the library for the entire community in addition to students’ parents.

Publicly acknowledge and celebrate parent engagement. When parents are recognized, they feel appreciated and valued and always respond enthusiastically. The principal at this school planned celebrations on a regular, ongoing basis for parents and staff to participate together. He also acknowledged the contributions of parents through awards and recognition ceremonies that valued and honored their contributions. Parents were encouraged to participate in site-based management and decisions, the school-community advisory board, school field trips, and parent-teacher organization fundraisers and student interventions.

Become a parent engagement advocate. Rather than perpetuating the erroneous myth that parents do not care or are not involved, pro-actively affirm that parents do have high expectations for their children and that they care deeply about their academic success. To counteract any blaming and negativity, be an advocate and cite examples of successful parent engagement. Be responsible for generating a different mindset with ideas about how to engage parents successfully.

Ensure ongoing communication and monitoring of engagement. Continuously seek ways to maintain the momentum of engagement, sharing successes, checking and
adjusting strategies and moving forward together. Parents really do want to know what is happening in school. They also want to participate but may feel unwelcomed or intimidated because of language barriers between parents and teachers. Therefore, plan for meetings to be held in the language of the community, with sufficient child care support and during times that are convenient for parents. Offer feedback and ask for feedback on a regular basis and make a point of de-mystifying school procedures and school jargon for parents. When parents develop that needed level of trust and confidence in the school, they begin asking more and more questions related to implications of grades, attendance, testing and higher education.

Keep the focus on children’s academic success at the center of all engagement activities. This means aligning talk to action and focusing on keeping parents informed and involved, making them an integral part of the teaching and learning process for student academic success. Parents are eager, willing and ready for engagement. As their children’s first teachers, they have much to offer. Parents are the integral component of keeping the public in public schools and of helping to create a climate where high school graduation for all students is ensured.

Creating and maintaining effective parent engagement is a process that requires both the will and the skill to form relationships with parents and community that are long-lasting, focused on academic success and mutually respectful. The execution of these and other effective strategies can yield significant results that improve the quality of the teaching and learning process for generations to come. We must practice on being true and caring listeners of parents rather than simply hearing what they have to say.

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