

A Circle of Caring

Susan Zimmerman-Orozco

Success in engaging Hispanic parents depends on creating a school culture that welcomes all.

Barely 20 minutes into the first Hispanic parent meeting of the new school year, principal Nora Dietz blinks away tears as she listens to Ana Paniagua, the mother of a new kindergarten student. Mrs. Paniagua's voice breaks as she relates the physical and emotional toll of leaving her life in El Salvador, the anguished goodbyes between her little boy Daniel and his beloved grandparents, and the wrenching uncertainty of ever seeing them all together again. It was a sacrifice, she admits, as many in the group nod empathetically, but one that she and her husband felt obligated to make to ensure that Daniel would grow up to be happy, with a good job so that he could be a source of support to his family and his community.

When Mrs. Paniagua sits down, Mrs. Dietz acknowledges, through an interpreter, that her story is the story of mothers everywhere.

I raised six children of my own, and I know how it is to have dreams and hopes for your children. That's why I thank you for coming to this meeting. So that you can tell me your dreams.... so that you can tell me how your school can help make those dreams come true.

At Captain James E. Daly Elementary School in Germantown, Maryland, where I serve as assistant principal, meetings like this one let our parents know that we are approachable and accessible in spite of language and cultural barriers. There is no dearth of research documenting how such conversations build strong relationships between parents and schools that lead to improved school readiness, higher student achievement, and better social skills and behavior.¹ But for us, reaching out to our Hispanic population is more than a matter of research-based practice; it's an expression of our core belief in Daly as a school of and for the community.

Making home-school connections is more important now than ever, as the sharp increase in Daly's English language learner (ELL) population has begun to affect the school's academic achievement goals, especially in reading instruction in the primary grades. In the last 10 years, our Hispanic student population has grown from 14 percent to 36 percent. This school year, almost 65 percent of our prekindergarten, kindergarten, and 1st grade students are English language learners, most of them Hispanic.

Perhaps even more significant, in addition to serving its surrounding community of landscaped townhouses and single-family villas, Daly is the home school to the last remaining trailer park in Montgomery County, Maryland, an affluent suburb northwest of Washington, D.C. More than 60 percent of our Hispanic students live in the trailer park, in many cases two or three families to a trailer.

By day, the trailer park is a sylvan mid-Atlantic version of a Central American village, complete with vendors of Mexican shaved ice, mangos with chili, crisp pork chicharrones, and spiced corn on the cob. By night, however, it transforms into a frightening, citylike barrio. Children come to school with tales of sleep disrupted by gang confrontations, police raids, family violence, and the desperation of mothers left to fend for families after fathers have been deported to Mexico or El Salvador. The trailer park community brings to Daly the same stubborn challenges that confront many inner-city urban schools. Building a bridge between these children's homes and a safe school learning environment is essential to their achievement.

Supporting Families, Growing Leaders

Three years ago, the Daly leadership team revised our school improvement plan to address the needs of the school's growing Hispanic population. The new plan incorporated many of the approaches described in "Six Strategies for Enhancing Hispanic Parent Involvement" on p. 67.

When we found that the Hispanic parents felt uncomfortable attending parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings, we organized an outreach initiative

that included monthly Hispanic parent meetings conducted in Spanish. At the initial meeting each September, we ask parents what topics most interest them. Following their suggestions, Daly teachers have spoken about our reading and math instruction and state assessments, our school counselor has spoken about bullying, police officers have addressed the issue of gang prevention, and community leaders have discussed Internet safety.

Experience has taught us that the key to building strong attendance is publicity and incentives. We publicize each meeting through bilingual fliers sent home in students' backpacks and calls placed in Spanish to our Hispanic families through the district's automated telephone service. At dismissal time on the day of each meeting, teachers place reminder stickers on students' outerwear and issue personal invitations to parents who pick up their children. Probably our most successful strategy to ensure attendance, however, is offering free pizza, free child care, and the opportunity for students to earn 10 Daly Bulldog Bones, tokens that enable them to purchase items from the school store.

Another concern expressed by our Hispanic parents, especially those from the trailer park, was the need for more after-school activities during the winter months when their children are usually forced to stay indoors once they arrive home. Daly is not a Title I school, and in these tight financial times, we were originally unable to provide stipends to fund traditional after-school activities. However, thanks to our partnership with local karate and Zumba (Latin dance-fitness) instructors, we were able to offer these classes on-site with scholarships. In addition, Daly teachers have stepped up to volunteer for after-school instructional programs that support not only Hispanic students but all students academically.

Daly teachers have traditionally been at the forefront of reaching out to Hispanic parents. For example, to help our English language learners maintain emerging English language skills over the summer, the staff organized and staffed an all-volunteer student outreach program at the community center near the trailer park, offering literacy, arts and crafts, computer, and sports activities once a week. Because of budgetary constraints, Daly cannot offer a traditional

summer school, but our staff felt strongly about the need to preserve contact with students throughout the summer as well as to remain a resource for academic support. Thanks to a massive book drive at the end of the school year, all students who attended last summer's program received free books.

As we've become more successful in building our Hispanic parent outreach, our focus is no longer just on attracting parents to school events or making home-school connections to address behavioral or academic issues. The crucial next step is nurturing Hispanic parent leaders to organize a self-sustaining Hispanic parent community that will become a full partner in school improvement.

Eager to jump-start the leadership-growing process, we arranged for successful Hispanic parent leaders from other schools to mentor our Hispanic parents in a structured goal-setting process. This past January, a group of 12–16 Hispanic parents and Daly staff began exploring barriers to Hispanic student achievement and developing an action plan for the establishment of a sustainable leadership voice at school.

Even as this project gets underway, however, we have been encouraged by the emergence of several Hispanic parents who have crossed the barrier of the previously all-white PTA and volunteered for PTA committee posts. These families have found their unofficial voices already—voices like that of Mrs. Aguilera, who, at her first PTA meeting, spontaneously offered to translate various PTA forms into Spanish. She explained,

I asked the PTA secretary at the meeting if she could give me the forms in Spanish so I could give them to my friends, but she said she didn't have them. So I thought, that's how I could help. I'll translate them. And that would help other parents, too.

A Core Belief in Including All

Thanks to our focus on serving the needs of the Hispanic and ELL populations, Daly Elementary School has made adequate yearly progress in these No Child Left Behind subgroups for the last three

years. Even more important than high-stakes assessments, however, is the school's growing relationship with the Hispanic community and the significant increase in Hispanic parents' participation in all areas of school life, including field trips, classroom volunteering, and fall parent-teacher conferences.

The school's success with its Hispanic community cannot be attributed merely to the implementation of a list of action items on the school improvement document, as instrumental as that may be. More important is the match between the school's core commitment to creating a welcoming school climate and nurturing personal relationships and the traditional Hispanic styles of interaction. Traditionally, the Hispanic culture is characterized by an emphasis on warm, personal interaction, a relaxed sense of time, and an informal atmosphere for communication.² Given these preferences, a culture clash may result when Hispanic students and parents are confronted with the typical task-oriented style of most U.S. schools.

The leadership team at Daly, in contrast, has been proactive in making home visits, periodically riding the buses to the trailer park to greet parents and listen to grievances, and intervening in home situations when children's health or safety is at risk. When Gabriela's teacher realized that her family had no electricity in their trailer, she alerted school administrators, who contacted the appropriate agencies and obtained warm clothing and food until the service was restored.

In another instance, Jose, an engaging yet academically at-risk 2nd grader, failed to come to school three days in a row. After phone calls went unanswered, we took a quick trip up the road to check on him. Although relieved to find he was recovering well from bronchitis, we were dismayed to learn that Jose's mother was anticipating a move back to El Salvador. She is undocumented and therefore not likely to return soon, but she shared that her plan was to send Jose, a U.S. citizen, back to the United States in a few months to live with an aunt in a neighboring state.

Knowing that Jose's academic situation was about to become even more precarious, we redoubled our efforts to provide the academic support he required to

establish a strong reading foundation, one that was sure to be tested by several moves within the next year between countries, schools, and living situations. Jose's mother, for her part, has delayed her return to El Salvador, despite economic hardships, because, she says, "Now I know it's important for him to learn well here first, so he can keep learning better later."

An Unbroken Circle

We like to think that our willingness to seek out Jose's mother and other parents like her has given us a reputation as a school that cares about each student and family on a personal level. Surprisingly, the sign that we may have succeeded came from an unexpected quarter, not from our neediest families but from one of our most affluent.

One Friday evening last fall, as Mrs. Dietz and I prepared to close up the building, we were approached by Mrs. Del Valle, a Hispanic parent whose comfortable suburban house is socially and economically light-years away from the trailer park a mile up the road. Knowing that her daughter, Lili, attends Daly and does well in school, we were curious about what her concern might be.

Mrs. Del Valle had repeatedly, if politely, declined our personal invitations to participate in Hispanic parent outreach efforts. In fact, when we spoke with her individually about the importance of these efforts last year, she waved us away, dismissing us with a curt, "No thank you. We don't need that." We were pleasantly surprised, therefore, when Mrs. Del Valle explained,

This week my husband and I have our anniversary. So we thought we would celebrate by getting together a Thanksgiving dinner—the turkey, the potatoes, the vegetables, the dessert—and we want to give it to a family, someone who doesn't have any. Can you help us do that? I know that you really care about our families. Of course, we don't want anyone to know.

Mrs. Del Valle's offer is a reminder that parent outreach is not just about reaching out to disenfranchised, economically challenged parents to

raise student achievement. Certainly it's much more than ticking off a checklist of prescribed action steps for building home-school connections. At its most meaningful, parent involvement is about creating a community of trust, a school culture in which families want to give back to the school as much as they may need to take from it.

At the end of this typical week of ordinary school-parent interactions, most of the Daly Elementary School community was probably not aware that they had successfully launched one of their most powerful weapons in the battle for higher student achievement. On this particular evening, Mrs. Paniagua, a Hispanic mother with few material resources, and Mrs. Del Valle, one who had more than enough to share, had figuratively joined hands, closing the circle of parent involvement at Daly Elementary School in support of the hopes and dreams of every child within.

Six Strategies for Enhancing Hispanic Parent Involvement

Remove language barriers between the parents and the schools. Provide culturally sensitive translators. Increase the number of Spanish-speaking school staff. Create a telephone or electronic messaging service to parents in Spanish. Increase written communications in Spanish. Develop a core of Hispanic parent volunteers.

Address economic obstacles that hinder parental involvement. Recognize that economic survival is a primary concern that limits the ability of many parents to attend school meetings. Coordinate with local agencies to support sponsorship and referral systems for Hispanic families and their children. Advocate for local families with various social services agencies.

Schedule activities to make transportation easier for parents. Conduct meetings, activities, and workshops in a location parents can reach by public transportation or walking. Ensure that hours of teacher conferences, activities, meetings, and workshops match the hours Hispanic parents are available.

Empower and motivate parents to get involved. Encourage parents to participate and become part of the school governance. Encourage parents to maintain Hispanic culture and language. Invite them to come to class to talk about their home country and experiences.

Promote teacher-parent relations. Take time to listen to parents and respond with an open communication style. Make home visits to parents who cannot come to the schools. Realize that some parents may lack formal education and have difficulty helping their children with school work.

Acknowledge and empower parental aspirations. Actively listen to what inspires and

motivates parents and students, and nurture these aspirations. Implement parent training programs. Invite successful Hispanic professionals to school. Offer English language classes for parents. Ensure that the school environment is safe and nurturing for children. Create shared governance among parents, students, and school personnel.

Endnotes

¹ Henderson, A. T., Johnson, V., Mapp, K. L., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York: New Press.

² Zuniga, R. (1992). Latino families. In E. W. Lynch and M. J. Hanson (Eds.), *Developing cross-cultural competence*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Author's note: Parent and student names are pseudonyms.

Susan Zimmerman-Orozco is assistant principal of Captain James E. Daly Elementary School, Germantown, Maryland; susan_zimmerman@mcpsmd.org.
