
Building School Partnerships With Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

After many efforts to lift the achievement of its high numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students, a district in Massachusetts realized that the missing link was parent involvement. Ms. Colombo describes a program the district created to improve relationships between teachers and families and the enormous difference it has made in each side's understanding of the other.

BY MICHAELA W. COLOMBO

EVEN before the superintendent opened the large, thick envelope containing the standardized test results from the Massachusetts Department of Education, he knew he had a problem. Each year, his mainstream students were scoring just above the state average, but the scores for culturally and linguistically diverse learners lagged far behind. He had no reason to believe this year would be different. This was not a small problem for his district. Approximately 20% of the district's 7,000 students were culturally and linguistically diverse, the

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majority coming from Caribbean families.

Over the past several years the district had instituted a full-day kindergarten program, committed to a new integrated reading program, and consistently reviewed and updated the curricula for core academic subjects. The superintendent expected teachers and administrators to participate in extensive professional development for each major initiative, and the staff responded to the challenge. All of this effort had resulted in a slight increase in reading achievement for culturally and linguistically diverse children in grades K-3, yet their scores continued to fall far below those of mainstream students.

Lower test scores were only part of the problem. In general, teachers reported more instructional and behavioral problems for students from culturally and linguistically diverse families. Teachers identified lack of school preparedness and insufficient family involvement as key factors that interfered with the academic achievement of these students. Though the teachers knew that parent participation was important, and mainstream parents typically attended school activities, the parents from culturally and linguistically diverse families remained conspicuously absent. A few individual teachers had created classroom programs to increase parent participation, but not much had been done systemwide. Teachers wanted the children to succeed, they wanted higher test scores, and they remained frustrated with the ongoing lack of parent involvement. The parents needed to take an interest.

For many years experts have touted parent/teacher relationships and the resulting shared under-

standings between home, community, and school as instrumental in creating school environments of acceptance, caring, and high expectations.¹ Family involvement has a powerful influence on educational success, but it's not an equal opportunity practice. Parent/teacher relationships are formed with relative ease when groups share a common culture, language, and background. Relationships that must bridge cultures and languages, however, require more effort to create and sustain.

DISCONNECT BETWEEN TEACHERS AND FAMILIES

The unopened envelope sat on the superintendent's desk as his mind wandered to the many conversations he'd had with the director of bilingual services. There had been many changes in the district since he had relocated to this midsize northeastern Massachusetts city to accept his position nearly 15 years ago. The population of culturally and linguistically diverse families continued to grow each year, but almost all of the teachers and administrators were from mainstream, middle-class backgrounds. The director of bilingual services had suggested that perhaps this explained the lack of involvement on the part of parents who were new to the district and often to the country. Though the district had implemented extensive professional development, the training offered teachers little more than a cursory reference to cultural and linguistic diversity. None of the training focused specifically on identifying the strengths and "funds of knowledge" (the ways of knowing, learning, and acting) that exist within culturally and linguistically diverse families.² For the

most part, teachers viewed students and families through mainstream lenses, and so they saw deficits rather than strengths and opportunities.

The superintendent thought about his culturally and linguistically diverse parents, and he understood that they might have no idea how to become involved in their children's schools. Some parents trusted teachers to be the experts and felt it was disrespectful to question classroom practice. Others, for a variety of reasons, were not at ease inside the schools. As one parent explained, "I just don't feel comfortable going to the school. My English isn't that good, and I didn't know what to say to the teacher."

Each day, the district's culturally and linguistically diverse students not only had to learn to read and calculate, they needed to navigate their way between two very different worlds as they moved between home and school. "Is it possible to bridge these worlds?" the superintendent wondered.

He took a deep breath, opened the envelope, and looked at the test scores. His fears were confirmed. He picked up the phone and called his director of bilingual services. The district needed a long-range plan to make a real difference for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Full-day kindergarten was important, the reading program had been implemented, teachers were working hard — yet the district needed to do more. The relationships between teachers and families had to improve if the district was to achieve its mission of promoting educational excellence for all children.

Nearly nine months later, using funds from a competitive federal grant, the district implemented the Parent Partnership for Achieving

Literacy (PAL) program.³ The superintendent named his director of bilingual education services as the director of PAL. They both knew that PAL would not be a silver bullet that would immediately improve academic achievement and test scores in the district, but a large body of research on parent involvement suggested that PAL had the potential to make a difference. The challenge would be whether PAL could bridge the gap between parents and teachers.

PAL employed a dual approach to increase the overlap of school, home, and community influences by building bridges between mainstream teachers and culturally and linguistically diverse families. Teachers took part in professional development to enhance their cultural awareness and improve their knowledge of the strengths and needs of the children and families. At the same time, PAL workshops, meetings, and informational mailings helped culturally and linguistically diverse families understand the expectations of mainstream teachers and schools. PAL's underlying philosophy was that parents and teachers wanted the best for all children. Parents, community members, and teachers collaborated to decide on the structure and content of PAL's teacher and family workshops.

ACCESSING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

For PAL to make a difference, it needed to capitalize on the strengths of both teachers and parents and at the same time meet their needs. Identifying teachers' strengths and needs was easy. Teachers who had been successful with culturally and linguistically diverse students enjoyed talking about strategies for classroom instruction and connect-

ing with families. As they talked about what they had done well, it was possible to identify what other teachers needed to know. Identifying the strengths and needs within families, however, presented PAL's first obstacle. Culturally and linguistically diverse parents were not involved in the schools, and the district's mainstream administrators and teachers could only speculate about the families' strengths and needs.

After receiving notification that PAL would be funded, the director reached out to all culturally and linguistically diverse families in the district. She drafted a single-page description of PAL, which explained that the primary goals of the program all had to do with improving literacy. She invited parents to meetings to discuss their needs and concerns. What were parents already doing in their homes to improve literacy, and how could teachers capitalize on these practices? She sent the notice, written in Spanish and English, home with students in grades pre-K–3. She also posted the notice in neighborhood markets, churches, and social service offices.

The PAL director used similar notices to recruit four bilingual/bicultural parent coordinators who knew the district's culturally and linguistically diverse community. The parent coordinators became the core of the PAL program. They worked with parents, teachers, the PAL director, and university faculty members to help shape the structure and content of PAL's professional development and community outreach components.

Three university faculty members worked with the parent coordinators. Though the professors were experts in the field of literacy, as members of the mainstream cul-

ture, they were largely unfamiliar with the district's culturally and linguistically diverse community. As they taught parent coordinators about early literacy and how to capitalize on existing family literacy practices, the parent coordinators taught the faculty members about the specific strengths and needs of the community. The families clearly valued education and understood the importance of English literacy and academic achievement. Many parents spoke limited English and worked many hours at low-paying jobs to provide for their families. They tried to help their children with homework, but their schedules and their limited English often stood in the way.

The parent coordinators also spent considerable time talking with teachers and observing classrooms. They became familiar with classroom routines, academics, and expectations, and they shared their knowledge with culturally and linguistically diverse parents. They also contacted parents for teachers and provided translation services during meetings when necessary. The parent coordinators made it easier for teachers to reach out to parents, and they made it more comfortable for parents to come to schools.

The parent coordinators networked with families regularly and used the information they gained to continually reshape and refine the services that PAL offered to families. Initially, family literacy nights were held two evenings each week. Parents and children attended together, and parent coordinators demonstrated school literacy practices and ways parents could help at home. Eventually, in response to parents' requests, homework help was offered four days a week, and family literacy nights were expand-

ed to provide classes for parents in computers and in English as a second language (ESL).

The superintendent allocated several rooms in a centrally located building and arranged for a custodian for day and evening meetings. His ongoing commitment was crucial and ensured that PAL had the support of building principals. Principals allowed PAL staff members to meet with teachers during grade-level team meetings and also provided access to computer labs, cafeterias, and gyms.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: MAKING USE OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

PAL professional development focused on helping teachers understand and capitalize on the strengths within the culturally and linguistically diverse families and rejected the notion that differences were deficits to be overcome. PAL used a multistage approach to professional development. Parent coordinators, teachers who were successful with culturally and linguistically diverse students, and the PAL director met first to discuss what mainstream teachers needed to know to work effectively with the students and families. Based on these discussions, they drafted a list of potential professional development topics. Then they met with building principals and mainstream teachers during grade-level team meetings to explain the PAL program and share potential professional development topics. Teachers' suggestions for professional development were added to the list of topics. Teachers also indicated the best days and times for them to attend professional development workshops.

During PAL's first three years, 92

mainstream teachers participated in five professional development courses, which included cultural awareness, the intersection of language and culture, second-language acquisition, second-language literacy, instructional grouping, sheltered English content, and parent/community involvement. To encourage participation, teachers received three in-service credits for each course they completed. According to one teacher, "Each meeting helped us to understand something different about the children."

Because multicultural courses that rely on lecture often serve to perpetuate stereotypes, courses included at least four hours of participation in PAL's family literacy program, working with culturally and linguistically diverse families outside of school. As one second-grade teacher pointed out, "It breaks down misconceptions when you work one-on-one with anyone." Another teacher mentioned that she had learned about children's strengths.

"They are bilingual. They can speak English, and when they speak in Spanish, they speak in incredibly rich and beautiful sentences."

CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

The PAL program provided a variety of services that extended an invitation to culturally and linguistically diverse parents to participate in mainstream schools. PAL was responsive, rather than prescriptive, and it evolved to meet the needs expressed by the families. Among the activities at the twice-weekly family literacy sessions were parent/child storytelling, shared reading in English and the home language, hands-on math activities, additional homework support, and ESL classes for parents. In addition to guest speakers who represented such district programs as ESL, Title I, gifted and talented education, and special education, a children's librarian from the community library spoke to parents on a monthly basis, and li-

brary use increased. According to the librarian, “PAL children see me and say, ‘I know you.’ To parents I’m a familiar face. There are five families who now come on a regular basis, and culturally and linguistically diverse parents are beginning to register their children for a variety of library programs.”

When parents voiced the need for additional homework help for their children, PAL personnel responded and opened the center to parents and children after school four days a week. The district provided transportation from children’s schools to the PAL program. Once children completed their homework, they visited a variety of math and reading stations, where they participated in educational games, activities, reading, and storytelling. The gym was used for organized games that reinforced academic concepts. As one parent coordinator explained, “The children love coming to the center, where they can get the help they need with homework. They really enjoy the enrichment activities, too.” Parent pick-up time provided an opportunity for parents to talk with PAL staff and learn about their child’s progress.

After a year of family literacy sessions, parents indicated that they understood classroom literacy better and, with the help of the ESL classes, would be better able to communicate with mainstream teachers. According to one parent, who first received PAL services and later became a parent coordinator, “PAL created opportunities for parents who don’t speak English and don’t know about the American school system. PAL helped parents understand how to help their children and communicate with teachers.”

Parents also made it clear that they needed flexibility. The district

had an excellent Even Start program, but the program guidelines required parents to accompany their 3- to 5-year-olds to morning sessions four days a week. The restrictions made it easier for the program to use age-appropriate literacy practices, and the strict attendance guidelines were intended to maintain continuity. Unfortunately, the inflexibility of the program also created barriers to participation.

Although PAL’s target group was children from grades pre-K–3 and their families, if one child in the family met the age requirement, all siblings were invited to attend PAL sessions. This alleviated child-care issues and often made cross-age tutoring possible. A student volunteer who was studying early childhood education at a local university facilitated educational play groups for the youngest children. Extended family members including aunts, uncles, and grandparents were also welcome at all PAL sessions. The parent coordinators conducted home visits for those parents who were interested in the program but could not attend sessions.

In its first four years PAL provided services to approximately 450 culturally and linguistically diverse families. Attendance was consistently high. Often as many as 20 parents and 40 children were present at the evening sessions. One January, temperatures were so low that weather forecasters warned of frostbite, yet 30 families braved the cold and attended family literacy night.

High levels of attendance and participation in the PAL program indicate that culturally and linguistically diverse parents want to be involved in their children’s education and will participate when an invita-

tion is extended. Professional development courses were well attended, and many mainstream teachers felt they gained important knowledge of the families and children. Surveys of teachers have demonstrated an increase in their cultural awareness as measured by the Cultural Diversity Awareness Inventory.

The district used the Survey of Out-of-School Youth Outcomes (SAYO) to learn if teachers saw progress in the children who participated in PAL. SAYO results indicated that PAL children had made statistically significant progress in the areas of reading, verbal communication, and overall behavior. One teacher who was interviewed about students’ progress said, “I can really see a difference in the children who attend the PAL program. They are happier, more relaxed, and are doing better in their classes.”

The latest scores on state tests show that the English and math scores of the district’s culturally and linguistically diverse students have increased slightly. Scores for these children still trail those of their mainstream peers, but both the superintendent and the director of bilingual services knew from the beginning that PAL’s value would be most evident in changes over the long term.

1. Joyce Epstein, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2001).

2. Luis C. Moll, “Literacy Research in Community and Classrooms: A Sociocultural Approach,” in Robert B. Ruddell, Martha Rapp Ruddell, and Harry Singer, eds., *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*, 4th ed. (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1994), pp. 179-207.

3. The PAL program was originally funded by a three-year federal grant from the Office of English Language Affairs (T288S010406-02). Today it is funded by 21st Century Community Learning Centers, in collaboration with the school district. **K**

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