



WORKING TOGETHER TO SUPPORT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS:

School-Family-Community Engagement

PERC Research Brief • June 2016



Authors: Rosemary Hughes, Rebecca Reumann-Moore, Jeannette Rowland, Joshua Lin

When schools, families, and communities work together, student outcomes are better. This brief focuses on the ways family and community engagement can enhance schools' efforts to improve outcomes for ELLs and highlights specific strategies schools can use to more effectively engage families and communities.

Overview

In Philadelphia, a growing and increasingly diverse population of English Language Learners (ELLs) is intensifying demands on the city's public schools as they work to meet the educational needs of these students. As in many cities across the country, educators in Philadelphia are searching for ways to more efficiently and effectively meet the needs of ELLs and close long-standing achievement gaps¹ between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers.ⁱ

As a group, ELLs are diverse, coming from a variety of native languages, cultures, and educational backgrounds, posing unique opportunities and challenges for schools. To best meet the diverse needs of these students, schools require resources and services that extend beyond those present among staff and programs within the school itself. Families and communities possess information, skills, and other resources that can help schools better learn from and meet the needs of these learners. This brief focuses on the ways family and community engagement can enhance schools' efforts to improve outcomes for ELLs and highlights specific strategies schools can use to more effectively engage families and communities.

This brief is part of a larger project focused on better understanding the characteristics and needs of ELLs in Philadelphia's public K-12 schools as well as how schools are serving these students. Leaders in district and charter schools commissioned the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium (PERC) to work with them on a series of studies to determine how best to meet the needs of ELLs. A qualitative study launched in November 2015, followed by a quantitative study in April 2016.

Schools with strong ELL student achievement, and whose approaches to serving them reflected an array of programmatic models, were selected to participate in the qualitative study. Specifically, we examined student growth on the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State (ACCESS) for ELLs² to identify schools whose ACCESS growth scores were categorized as 'Reinforce' or 'Model' (the two highest tiers on the district's school performance framework). We then consulted with leadership from the Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs in the School District of Philadelphia to ensure the sample included adequate coverage of the various programmatic models employed throughout the district.

This brief is built on input from a wide variety of stakeholders:

- two interviews with Deputy Chief of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs in the School District of Philadelphia,
- two focus groups with Multilingual Managers and one Curriculum Specialist in the Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs in the School District of Philadelphia,
- interviews with administrators and/or ELL program leads at five district and four charter schools exhibiting success while serving a broad range of English Language Learners,
- focus groups with ESL teachers and general education teachers in two district and three³ charter schools, and
- an interview with the Bilingual Education Advisor in the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

A full report describing the methodology and overall findings of the larger project, including an analysis of students' paths to language proficiency and exit from ESL programs, will be disseminated in August 2016.

¹ Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress have consistently shown **large gaps in achievement** among ELLs compared to their native English-speaking peers **for some 40 years**. In high school, ELLs tend to have **lower GPAs and earn fewer course credits** and are **more likely to drop out** compared to their native English-speaking peers.

² We utilized ACCESS growth indicators reported in the School District of Philadelphia School Progress Reports in 2013-2014 and 2014-2015.

³ At one charter school and one district school, only ESL teachers participated in a focus group.

What Does ‘Engagement’ Mean?

There is no one-size-fits-all definition of family engagement. School communities (*i.e.*, administrators, teachers, students, families, community members) should collaboratively work together to create a shared definition of engagement that aligns with their needs.ⁱⁱ For teachers and students to benefit from family and community engagement, such engagement must be intentionally designed.

When developing a local definition of engagement, school communities should consider the following core characteristics of meaningful engagement:

- **Bi-directional and mutualistic.**ⁱⁱⁱ School-family-community relationships should be built on trust and respect for what each stakeholder has to offer. All stakeholders should feel as though they have a voice in the process and are a valued member of the team. Additionally, all stakeholders should feel as though they benefit in some way from the partnerships.
- **Varied.**^{iv} Families and community members engage in students’ learning in a variety of ways both in and out of school. Thus, a wide variety of opportunities for engagement should be offered to families and community members ranging from traditional (*e.g.*, parent-teacher conferences) to non-traditional (*e.g.*, reading to ELLs in their home language in the classroom).
- **Intentionally integrated.**^v Engagement strategies should be goal-oriented and focus on student learning and achievement. Successful school-parent-community partnerships are not stand-alone projects or add-on programs but are well integrated with the school’s overall mission and goals.

Why Does Family and Community Engagement Matter?

Meaningful engagement of families and communities can benefit students in direct and indirect ways, including:

- **Helping schools develop a more holistic understanding of student needs.** When school communities better understand students’ educational history, home literacy environment, and cultural heritage, values and beliefs, they can be more culturally responsive and student-centered in their instructional approaches and support systems.
- **Increasing access to resources and supporting learning.** Families and community members can play a critical role in reinforcing what students are learning in home and out-of-school time programs; and integrating literacy and academic language into conversations in their home languages to better support students’ application of these skills in English. Additionally, partnerships with families and communities can provide families with access to education and support programs to improve their own literacy and language skills, as well as provide students with access to non-academic support services (*e.g.*, social and emotional development programs, mental health or counseling services, college and career readiness counseling and programs).
- **Improving student outcomes.**^{vi} Strategic school-family-community partnerships are associated with higher levels of academic achievement, improved school attendance, higher graduation rates, greater enrollment in postsecondary education, and more positive attitude toward school.

How Can Schools Engage Families and Communities?

This brief utilizes an engagement framework designed by Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University. It offers a clear, concise organizing structure that can help school communities focus and design engagement strategies that fit best for them.

In her framework, Epstein outlines six types of engagement. Schools, families, and community members can plug into any number of these types in a wide variety of ways. Within each type, we provide some examples of strategies used by Philadelphia schools that participated in this research. These examples do not provide an exhaustive list, but rather, serve as concrete, realistic illustrations of local strategies schools discussed during our interviews and focus groups.⁴

EPSTEIN'S FRAMEWORK:

1. **Parenting.** Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.
2. **Communicating.** Communicate with families about school programs and student progress. Create two-way communication channels between school and home that are effective and reliable.
3. **Volunteering.** Improve recruitment and training to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Enable educators to work with volunteers who support students and the school. Provide meaningful work and flexible scheduling.
4. **Learning at Home.** Involve families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities.
5. **Decision Making.** Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and other organizations.
6. **Collaborating with the Community.** Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, and colleges or universities.^{vii}

Parenting

Administrators and teachers in several schools discussed the role that educators can play in helping parents better understand the process of language development, as well as the education system in general. This occurred through parent-teacher conferences, informal conversations with parents, and progress notes sent home to families.

In learning and acquiring another language, there's a cultural context to it. I was meeting with a family...and the mother was trying to say my child is slow, and they don't get it. And I was trying to say...She's not slow, she's capable of learning, but these are the other challenges she has that other native speakers may not have. So, understanding how they're learning English is different. Trying to explain that to parents. – General Education Teacher

⁴ The inclusion of these strategies in this brief are not meant to provide an evidence-based endorsement of these strategies, as no part of our research project measured the implementation or impact of these strategies.

In Epstein’s framework, ‘parenting’ also includes strategies that assist schools in understanding families’ backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children and how these influences at home might affect learning the classroom. One school used community walks, as well as festivals and cultural celebrations in school, to provide opportunities for teachers to better understand the cultural heritage of the students they serve. Another school attributed their efforts to best understand the home experiences of students as a factor in the success they are seeing in their program. They met weekly as a team and talked about how the student’s home experiences might influence what they were seeing in the classroom and how they could modify their approach to be more responsive to these home experiences.

We try to look at the child as a whole. Where do they need support at home? They’re not doing any of their homework. Well, did you know they’re being raised by their grandparents who don’t speak English? Oh, okay, well, maybe we’ll just modify this homework. Maybe they can just read to their grandparents in the language, and the grandparents just check it.

- General Education Teacher

Communicating

Schools utilized a variety of methods to communicate with parents in their home language to discuss student progress. In some schools, teachers and other staff assisted informally with translation and interpretation for parents; this was especially common at schools where many ELLs and some staff speak the same language, most often Spanish. Other schools utilized community partners for their interpretation needs.

That’s something that I really see different, especially in Philadelphia as students are coming through school here, is how we treat those students and their families, because their families are important too. How we contact mom, and respect that; letting her be aware of what’s going on in her home language...I think that it’s important to instill that in teachers and to give support for that, how to communicate with families who speak another language, who have a different experience of America, who may be first or second generation, or refugees who may be experiencing trauma. [This school] has the mindset and mission to support that. – General Education Teacher

Volunteering

Two schools created opportunities for families and community members to teach and reinforce learning by coming into the classroom and working with students in their home language. One school invited parents into the classroom to read books to students, so students could practice literacy skills in their home language.

One of the things we’re trying to build this year as we continue to be better at this is to build some opportunities for parents to come in, and we can get some bilingual books...So if kids are having rich interaction with text in their first language, it will bridge interaction with text that they have in English with similar types of text.

- ESOL Teacher

The other school engaged culturally and linguistically similar tutors, many of whom immigrated to the U.S. and learned English here, to help teach and reinforce English language development in the classroom.

Right now I'm bringing in volunteers from [one of our community partners]. Mostly college students, and also student teachers who are bilingual to help to teach and reinforce, because it is hard to explain possessive nouns or possessive adjectives to her...[the student being tutored] just needs to see people that look like her - who have come to the United States when she came like around the same age or even later than she came - who are now in college is just a huge thing, but also just to have an academic conversation in the language where she is really strong; and actually we are lucky that we are connected to those resources, and it has been really wonderful... - ESOL Teacher

Learning at Home

Teachers talked about the importance of exposing students to opportunities to practice and apply language and literacy skills in their home language, as these experiences reinforce learning in the classroom and eventually transfer to language and literacy development in English. Teachers and administrators in one school discussed the importance of encouraging students to access community-based programs for literacy development (speaking, reading, and writing) in their home language, as well as encouraging family members to continue to speak with their children in their home language.

Schools utilized their knowledge about literacy levels in students' homes to guide their strategies for supporting learning at home. For example, one school shared the following strategies for students who lived in high-literacy households,

...Encouraging parents to speak to their child in their first language, and continuing to speak to them at a very academic language, so they are building the vocabulary in their first language, which helps with transferability. For a child that's very literate in their first language, encouraging [them] to continue to read and write in their first language. Giving them opportunities outside of school, like in International Ambassadors where they get to actually do some writing in their language and teaching other kids in their language. Encouraging that literacy so that the skills get transferred when I'm talking to them when we're in ESOL. - ESOL Coordinator

For students who lived in households with limited literacy, the teacher encouraged families to continue to speak to their child in their home language - focusing on conversational language development.

With my kids that don't have the literacy skills, I've noticed that their parents also tend to not have the literacy skills, which is fine. Just continuing to encourage them to speak to their child in their first language, but being aware ourselves that they have multiple barriers, so they will need scaffolding, and they will need it for a longer time.

- ESOL Coordinator

Decision-Making

District leaders and charter school administrators described instances in which community members actively contributed to programmatic decision making. In response to issues with transitional bilingual education, the School District of Philadelphia convened a collaborative working group which consisted of teachers and community members charged with developing programmatic recommendations for improvement. The result was a shift to dual language programs. One district leader described this process:

The group [of] teachers and community members and administrators [came together] to work through some of the concerns about transitional bilingual education. [The] outcome was a recommendation to switch to dual language. . .New requests for bilingual programs are coming from the community and school. We make sure they have the population to support it. There are a few schools where communities have shown interest. We've started to talk to those principals about it. – District Central Office Leader

As the district leader highlighted, at times decisions about programming are initiated by the community members who advocate for changes that are in the best interest of the school community. In fact, one of the participating charter schools was founded by a community-based organization which sought to create a charter school as an alternative to the neighborhood schools that, at the time, were struggling to meet the needs of ELLs.

Collaborating

Community members and organizations have knowledge, skills, and services that can be engaged to fill gaps in school-based resources. For example, staff at one high school discussed the unique needs that high school students have for sex education programming and navigating conflicts between education and the need to financially support their families. An administrator at another school described connecting with community-based organizations to better understand the resources that are available in the community and the ways in which they can utilize those resources in serving their students.

Some of the ways that I'm trying to keep connection with the community is just finding out if there's a New Year event...going to the event, and if there is a special church celebration and the kids are performing something...Going to the park when they do their celebration; the Cambodian temple does a big celebration...so that the community sees you there and the kids see you there. I think that's the best way to get them bought [in] so that they will come and do things here.

What's Next?

While the information contained within this brief is not exhaustive, it is designed to be used as a platform to begin more intentional conversations about school-family-community partnerships in service to ELL students. We encourage school communities to discuss strategic ways that schools, families, and communities can work more closely to enhance student learning and increase access to non-academic supports for these students. PERC is interested in expanding the current research activities to more deeply and broadly examine the ways in which schools across the city are partnering to support the needs of ELLs and the relationship between these partnerships and student outcomes.

-
- ⁱ Gwynne, J, Stitzel Pareja, A., Ehrlich, S., & Allensworth, E. (2012). *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools: A Focus on English Language Learners*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research. Retrieved from https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/ELL%20Report_0.pdf
- Kena, G., Aud, S., Johnson, F., Wang, X., Zhang, J., Rathbun, A., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., & Kristapovich, P. (2014). *The condition of education 2014* (NCES 2014-083). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>
- ⁱⁱ WIDA. (2015). WIDA. (2015). *Family Engagement*. Board of Regents at the University of Wisconsin System. Retrieved from http://www.hendry-schools.org/cms/lib8/FL01903259/Centricity/Domain/144/WIDA_Focus_on_family%20engagement-English.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v Van Roekel, D. (2008). *Parent, Family, Community Involvement in Education*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association Education and Policy Department, Center for Great Public Schools. Retrieved from: http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB11_ParentInvolvement08.pdf
- WIDA. (2015). WIDA. (2015). *Family Engagement*. Board of Regents at the University of Wisconsin System. Retrieved from http://www.hendry-schools.org/cms/lib8/FL01903259/Centricity/Domain/144/WIDA_Focus_on_family%20engagement-English.pdf
- ^{vi} August, D., & Hakuta, K. (1997). *Improving schools for language minority children: A research agenda*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Retrieved from: <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/5286/improving-schooling-for-language-minority-children-a-research-agenda>
- Epstein, J. (2001). *School, family and community partnerships*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Henderson, A., & Berla, N. (1994). *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement*. National Committee for Citizens in Education.
- Henderson, A.T., & Mapp, K.L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools. Retrieved from: <https://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>
- Jeynes, E.H. (2007). The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement. *Urban Education*, 42 (1), 82-110. Retrieved from: http://msan.wceruw.org/documents/resources_for_educators/Relationships/Relation%20Parental%20Involvement%20and%20Secondary%20Student%20Achievement.pdf

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the many people who contributed to this brief.

The leadership and commitment of PERC's inaugural Governance Committee served as the catalyst for launching our ELL research agenda:

- **Tonya Wolford**, Deputy Chief of Research and Evaluation, School District of Philadelphia
 - **Melanie Harris**, Chief Information Officer, School District of Philadelphia,
 - **Naomi Johnson-Booker**, Chief Executive Officer, Global Leadership Academy
 - **Cynthia Figueroa**, President and Chief Executive Officer, Congreso
 - **Kathleen Shaw**, Executive Director, Research for Action
-

PERC's Research Advisory Committee supported this project by encouraging faculty members to lend their expertise and experience to inform the research design, data collection tools, and analysis.

- **Nancy Butler Songer**, Dean, Drexel University School of Education
 - **Pam Grossman**, Dean, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania
 - **Gregory Anderson**, Dean, College of Education, Temple University
-

The content of the brief was shaped by the willingness of administrators and educators to share their approaches to and experiences in serving ELLs:

- Alexandar McClure Elementary School
 - Esperanza Academy Charter School
 - Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School
 - Francis Scott Key Elementary School
 - Furness High School
 - Lewis Elkin Elementary School
 - Mariana Bracetti Academy Charter School
 - Mastery Charter Thomas Elementary Campus
 - Northeast High School
 - Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs at the School District of Philadelphia
 - Pennsylvania Department of Education Division of Instructional Quality
-

Valuable feedback provided by RFA's Executive Director, **Kathleen Shaw** further strengthened the accessibility and utility of the brief.

We are also grateful for the technical support provided by **Tonya Wolford**, Deputy Chief of Research and Evaluation, **Allison Still**, Deputy Chief of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs, **Adrienne Reitano**, Senior Research Associate, and **Kelsey Weir**, Program Coordinator from the School District of Philadelphia.

This brief was produced through the leadership and support of RFA's communications team: **Alison Murawski**, Director of Communications, and **Rachel Greene**, Graphic Designer/Communications Assistant.

We are grateful for the continued support of our Program Director at the William Penn Foundation, **Elliot Weinbaum**.

Although PERC's Governance and Research Advisory Committees provided technical advice and the William Penn Foundation provided the funding to support PERC, this brief reflects the interpretations of the authors only.

WHAT IS PERC?

PERC is an innovative, cross-sector partnership designed to provide robust analysis on some of Philadelphia's most pressing education issues. Housed at Research for Action (RFA), an independent non-profit education research organization, PERC's research agenda is set by the School District of Philadelphia and representatives of the city's charter school sector. PERC draws on the rich research expertise in the city—both within RFA and from Philadelphia's three major research universities—to produce rigorous, timely, and actionable research aligned to the information needs of the city's public schools.

Contact Us

 **Web:** www.phillyeducationresearch.org

 **Phone:** 215-586-3816

 **Email:** rhughes@researchforaction.org

 **Twitter:** twitter.com/PHLedResearch

Our Partners



RESEARCH
for ACTION

Special thanks to the *William Penn Foundation* for its generous support of PERC. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the William Penn Foundation.



Copyright © 2016 Research for Action