

Reaching Out to Diverse Populations: What Can Schools Do to Foster Family-School Connections?

By Chris Ferguson

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Contrary to the assumption of many educators, research on family and community connections with schools has revealed that parents are interested in their children's academic success regardless of ethnicity, culture, or economic status, although they may not know how to help their children or may feel incapable of assisting them (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Scribner and Scribner (2001) found that

Parent involvement encompasses a multitude of complex phenomena. Differences in the family structure, culture, ethnic background, social class, age and gender represent only a few of the factors affecting interpretations of or generalizations about the nature of parent involvement. (p. 36)

This statement reflects a few of the factors that complicate and sometimes inhibit family involvement with schools, particularly for those families representing diverse populations. In their report, Scribner et al. (2001) also say that the way a family defines support and interest is through their own perspective. Unfortunately, many times the school's perspective and definitions of the family involvement in school are not the same as those of the families. These differing viewpoints can create barriers to meaningful participation. Schools that are successful in addressing these problems are able to

- **build on the cultural values of families,**
 - **stress personal contact with families,**
 - **foster communication with families,**
 - **create a warm environment for families, and**
 - **facilitate accommodations for family involvement, including transportation, translators, and other similar services**
- (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Boethel, 2003).

As illustrated in the Classroom Snapshot (page 2), teachers like Mr. Han who proactively reach out to parents rather than wait for them to come to the school are often successful in their efforts to foster effective family and community involvement in student learning.

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SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

Mr. Han is in his first year of teaching and has chosen to work in a high-poverty community in the Southwest that has a high percentage of Hispanic and American Indian students. He has been assigned to teach sixth grade science to 125 students.

Though Mr. Han graduated from an innovative and well-respected teacher preparation program, he worries that he is not prepared to meet or understand his students' needs. He knows that a common concern in many schools in the United States is that the ethnicity and culture of the students rarely matches the teachers. In his case, he and his parents were born in the United States, but his grandparents emigrated from Asia as teenagers. His family has always observed the culture of his grandparents' native country as they assimilated into their new country. While he is not "White," he is still different from his Hispanic and American Indian students.

As recommended in his teacher preparation program, Mr. Han has created a letter to send home to parents communicating the way he plans to conduct his class, explaining his grading procedures and inviting them to visit his class to observe his teaching. He wants the families to know that they have a stake in and can make a contribution to their children's education. Each week, he plans to send an announcement communicating the topics to be covered in classes and assignment due dates.

As he is photocopying this letter, one of the more experienced teachers, Mr. Atkins, asks him what he is doing. After listening to his explanation, Mr. Atkins tells him that inviting the families to school could lead to big problems. He also adds that because many of the parents of his students are not likely to be able to read the letter or will ignore it if they can read, sending the letter is useless.

Shocked, Mr. Han asks what kinds of problems can come from contacting families. Mr. Atkins replies that the school staff have always felt that the less contact families have with the school, the better. The idea is to keep them happy and keep them distant. Mr. Atkins goes on to say that there is no pleasing parents and families anyway, so it's best to avoid them.

Mr. Han stands with his copies in hand for a few moments and reflects on what he has just been told. It is in conflict with what he learned in college about best practices and the possible benefits of family and community connections with schools, but he doesn't want to be at odds with the other teachers. He takes a few moments to think about the possible consequences of going ahead and contacting the parents. Though he feels torn between what he has been taught and the cautioning words of an experienced teacher, he decides to continue with this project.

However, Mr. Han feels that Mr. Atkins might have a point about whether the families can or will pay attention to the letter. He has had little experience with either the Hispanic or American Indian cultures. If he was in his home community, he would go through one of the neighborhood elders to reach out to the families. He isn't sure what is appropriate for the families of his students. He decides to let his students help him determine the best way to get their parents to read the letter.

After introducing himself to his students on the first day of class, Mr. Han tells them that he wants their help on something. He explains that he has a letter to send home to their parents and asks the students for their help getting it to them.

At first, the students resist, saying their parents don't need this information. Typical of adolescents, they say they don't want their parents involved in school. They aren't babies. However, Mr. Han points out to the students that their families will probably ask them for this information anyway, so they might as well work with him to plan a way to communicate with their families. After more discussion and some careful encouragement from Mr. Han, the students decide to help him. He repeats this process in each of his classes. Each time, the students resist, say their parents aren't interested, but then, after more discussion and encouragement, agree to help.

Mr. Han says that there are always parents in a community that don't read, don't read very well, or possibly don't read English. He asks if this is true in this community? His students answer yes.

He then asks the students what they would do to get this information out to the families?

After much discussion, Mr. Han decides that he will get out of the school and onto the families' turf by

1. Visiting the reservation of the American

Indian students on Saturday: It is market day, so nearly everyone in the community will be in one place. Several students have volunteered to help him connect with the families of his students. The students also share that there is not a written language for their tribe. While Mr. Han can still give the family members the letters, he will need to explain everything as well. The students don't feel that a translator will be needed, but they will help out if any parents aren't able to communicate in English.

2. Going to see the Hispanic families in their

neighborhoods over the next week: Five students volunteer to be his guides and translators. One of the students says his mother translates documents for her boss at work. Mr. Han says he will call her at home tonight and see if she can help translate the letter so that he will have both English and Spanish versions.

Later, while talking to Mrs. Rand, another teacher with only a couple of years of experience, about this effort, Mr. Han realizes there is a vast difference in what he learned about family involvement in his teacher preparation program and the reality of making this happen

in the school community. He certainly hadn't been prepared for Mr. Atkins' reaction. He had thought since experts said this kind of action would prove beneficial, it would happen almost automatically. He also had no idea that his students would actually be the key to contacting the parents.

Mrs. Rand is so impressed with his efforts that she wants to accompany him on his visits, as they teach many of the same students. In fact, she thinks they should ask the other sixth-grade teachers to join them. She isn't sure that every teacher will participate, but she figures it won't hurt to ask.

The next morning, the school principal tells Mr. Han that he has heard about his plan to reach out to the students' families. Mr. Han braces himself for a possibly negative response, but is surprised instead. The principal praises his efforts. He has been talking to a principal from another school who had initiated a similar program the previous year. It has been a great success. He asks Mr. Han to keep track of what they learn this first semester, so they can form a committee to explore expanding the idea next year.

Mr. Han realizes that this effort is only a first step in his goal, but he feels great about discovering that his students could be such a powerful resource. More importantly, he learns that not all of the teachers are reluctant to reach out to the families of their students.

What to Consider

Reaching Out to Diverse Populations

E Epstein (2001) notes that there are “overlapping spheres of influence” (p. 76) that create forces on the school, students, families, and community members. Time, experience, beliefs, and daily routines continually impact the work of all those involved with children. However, she also states that schools can use various activities to anticipate any negative impact from these factors, and can, in fact, turn the negative into positive.

Like Mr. Han, when teachers and other school staff actively work to identify and address barriers, they, too, can promote family connections with schools. The key is to change the circumstances that prevent involvement and initiate actions to promote engagement. Effective programs (Boethel, 2003) consider such issues as the following:

- **When childcare is provided, parents don't have to worry about students' siblings disturbing meetings or other gatherings.**
- **When staff help to arrange carpools, those families who don't have adequate transportation can attend meetings and activities at the school or other community locations.**
- **When families are told that it doesn't have to be a mother or father who attends activities, then all of those involved in rearing the child feel welcomed to participate.**
- **When schools create take home learning kits, families are not limited in helping students by their lack of supplies.**

Reviews of research (Boethel, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002) on addressing the needs of the families of diverse populations suggests that if school leaders desire to increase family-school connections, school staff should take the following steps:

- **Adopt formal school- and district-level policies that address issues related to the involvement of families from diverse populations.** Schools should deliberately advance policies and actions that recognize the importance of finding and honoring the commonalities and differences among all population groups. To this end, staff in successful programs actively discover and adopt methods to bridge the gaps that inhibit the involvement of any stakeholder in supporting student learning.
- **Engage principals in active support of these programs.** Principals are critical to successful family and community involvement efforts. However, principals need professional development and adequate resources to implement and support these programs.
- **Help staff learn strategies for working with parents from all cultures.** Many times a small action or reaction can have significant cultural implications and result in disengagement or lack of participation of family or community members. School staff are commonly unaware of the impact of their actions. When staff are provided professional development and encouraged to explore contextual factors unique to a school setting, they will become more adept at discovering potential problems in participation and solving problems that have already blocked participation.

- **Help all families navigate the educational system.** Educators are very skilled at negotiating school environments; however, at times, they forget how foreign and difficult this system can be for new families. Providing parents with key questions to probe student understanding, information on school structures and policies, and other educational issues will help them to successfully work with the system to help meet the needs of their children.
- **Practice outreach rather than traditional approaches to involvement.** Traditionally, family and community involvement meant that schools asked families or community members or organizations to do specific tasks for them: raise money, supervise a school trip, or organize a party. This single dimensional process did not foster a collaborative or reciprocal process that benefits all of those involved. To change this traditional dynamic, school staff need to break the one-way flow of action and foster a two-way path of interaction. When school staff reach out to parents and invite them into the school to participate in collaborative efforts, and assist families in supporting their hopes and dreams for their children, a stronger family involvement program can result.
- **Practice trust- and relationship-building strategies and recognize that it takes time.** School staff have often avoided this “softer” side of involvement, even though the development of relationships in family-community-school programs is an important aspect of successful programs. Taking the time to conduct activities such as the one described below in the Putting It Into Practice section, can have a far-reaching impact on the viability and the quality of the effort.
- **Help families learn strategies to support students’ academic needs.** School staff commonly assume that their directions are clear and that family members have the skill and knowledge to perform the tasks they suggest. In reality, families often have limited experience with or skill for the tasks they are asked to perform. However, families can provide effective support for classroom instruction when school staff work with families to help them learn strategies that reinforce classroom learning.
- **Encourage the development of the total child as this greatly impacts academics.** School staff often state that it is not only the academic development of the child that is important to student success, but also the developmental readiness of the child to participate as an active learner. Sleep, food, health, and mental status are just a few of the important issues in this area. When the total child is not ready or able to participate in school, the academic development of the child will suffer.

The question for teachers like Mr. Han is, how can teachers involve families from diverse backgrounds to support classroom instruction?

Putting It Into Practice

In each of the four syntheses created by SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, the authors include recommendations for building effective programs that are based on the studies included. In the 2003 synthesis, *Diversity: Family and Community Connections with Schools*, Boethel recommends that schools engage in the following types of strategies that are common in programs that address student and family needs related to diversity.

1 **Welcome family members to the school**

Unfortunately, many schools and communities are starkly divided. This lack of positive interaction stifles family-school connections.

Strategies to promote positive interactions might include the following:

- *Post welcoming signs in hallways that direct families to a staff member who will make sure their needs are met.*
- *Invite family members to eat lunch with their children.*
- *Invite family members to visit their children's classrooms during instructional time when a new concept or resource is introduced so that they can experience what the children are doing firsthand.*
- *Have staff personally distribute leaflets in the community concerning school events, meetings, or other activities.*
- *Have staff make phone calls to invite families to participate in special events, meetings, or other activities.*

2 **Meet on their turf**

Though inviting family members to the school is important, school staff should also meet with families at locations away from the school campus to talk about ways they can foster home environments that support their children's learning.

Strategies to promote meeting on the families' turf might include the following:

- *Conduct meet-and-greet walks in the students' neighborhoods.*
- *Offer classes to parents on strategies to improve home reading or other homework activities at a local community center, library, or church.*
- *Hold special meetings on parenting skills at a local community center, library, or church.*

3 **Remember once is not enough**

Once first contact is made, school staff need to continue to contact parents on a regular schedule.

Strategies to promote a continuous cycle of interactions might include the following:

- *Let families know communication is not a one-time action. Give them a timeline of when to expect periodic documents or actions.*
- *Repeat key actions on a weekly or monthly basis. For example, if families know to expect communications every Friday, they will look for this information. These communications can be about the next week's assignments, upcoming events, or suggested learning strategies to use at home.*

4

Make use of all communication channels

Though sending notes home is an easy strategy, many times these notes are not very effective.

Strategies to promote increased communication might include the following:

- *Reinforce letters by placing additional announcements on local radio, community bulletin boards (paper and electronic), and other news sources. When using letters or other announcements, ensure they are translated into the home languages of the students. Schools can tap into local organizations, businesses, universities, or churches with translators who can provide these services at no cost.*
- *Create classroom phone trees or e-mail lists for announcements and ride sharing. If families don't have phones, create a phone/word-of-mouth communication system. Many public libraries have Internet capabilities that families can access for e-mail or Web browsing. Schools can work with these public agencies to make these services more available to families who are supporting student learning.*

5

Avoid reliance on a select group of volunteers

Sometimes, when one parent is given too much authority or responsibility, other parents are shut out.

Strategies to promote a wide spectrum of involvement might include the following:

- *Ask volunteers to bring "a friend."*
- *Involve students in presentations at community organizations that also support the school to raise awareness and support of special programs or instructional processes. Make contact and recruit new resources, partners, and participants at these meetings.*
- *Conduct focus groups with different combinations of family members, school staff, community members, and students on varied topics to determine student needs. For these efforts, make sure that every student group is represented. Gather names of potential participants from those attending the focus group meetings.*

6

Take time to talk to parents about what they believe

One of those common assumptions in education is that everyone has the same beliefs or understandings about student learning. This is actually seldom true.

Strategies to develop shared beliefs might include the following:

- *Meet with family members and talk about key classroom issues such as student learning and classroom expectations. These sessions can be formal or informal.*
- *Engage family members in an activity that explores the values that parents express about their children's future.*

Schools or teachers may want to use these strategies one at a time, as a series, or as an idea bank for planning activities that are more contextualized to a specific location.

For More Ideas on This Strategy:

The **Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL)** has several products that teachers like Mr. Han can use to reach out to diverse populations.

The following product was created by the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, part of SEDL's current regional educational laboratory contract, and may be downloaded from the Resources section at no cost at <http://www.sedl.org/connections/>:

Diversity: Family and Community Connections with Schools (2003)

This document is a synthesis of the research on family and community involvement with schools that relates directly to issues of diversity. It includes discussion of 64 research studies related to the roles that families can play in improving academic achievement among minority, immigrant, migrant, English language learner, culturally diverse, and economically disadvantaged students.

The following SEDL products were developed under other contracts and can be purchased through the Web site or downloaded at no cost at <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/>:

Building Support for Better Schools: Seven Steps to Engaging Hard-to-Reach Communities (2000)

This practical guide is designed for educators, civic leaders, community organizers, or anyone else interested in involving traditionally hard-to-reach communities. This guide introduces the seven steps for engagement: know your community, identify the issues, designate facilitators, train facilitators, recruit participants, locate a meeting site and handle logistics, and follow-up with participants. The explanation for each step includes suggested activities. Also available in Spanish.

Family and Community Involvement: Reaching Out to Diverse Populations (2000)

This handbook is designed for teachers, principals, and superintendents who want to develop meaningful parent and community involvement with culturally and linguistically diverse community members. This guide introduces strategies for promoting meaningful dialogue with diverse populations, including

1. know your community, get smart about communicating with parents and community members; provide extra help for school staff and parents;
2. bridge the gap between families, communities, and schools; and
3. evaluate your public engagement efforts regularly.

Each strategy explanation includes questions for consideration and suggested activities. Also available in Spanish.

The **Harvard Family Research Project** has developed various studies and other helpful documents to assist private organizations and communities as they promote child development, student achievement, healthy family functioning, and community development. Teachers like Mr. Han can use the studies as discussion starters with other staff, families, or community members. These materials are a series of teaching cases related to class, culture, and gender dilemmas in family-school involvement and are designed so that groups of individuals can talk about possible solutions for these life-like situations. The *Class, Culture, and Gender Teaching Cases* are located at <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/teaching-case/subjects/class.html>.

Related Research

There are many studies that provide insight into working with the families of students from diverse populations that would help Mr. Han in promoting family involvement. However, for this specific topic, no random control trials were found. Though the studies reported here are rich in description of issues and factors concerning diversity, culture, and economic status in family and community involvement, they do not provide empirical evidence as to what interventions can produce the best results or what interventions can foster effective practices with the families of culturally diverse populations. The studies described below utilize survey, case study, and comparison designs. Additionally, the studies described in this section not only present current research, they also help to define what is known about diversity issues related to family and community connections with schools.

Family Expectations for Their Children

Multiple studies have found that all families have high academic expectations for their children. The following studies, because of their diverse sources of data and focus, illustrate the wide support for this finding.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) collected survey data from approximately 24,000 parents for the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88). Numerous researchers have used these data for a variety of studies. In Fan's (2001) NELS:88 research report, he found that parent involvement was a complex concept dependent on multiple factors, rather than a single cause and effect processes. All parents, regardless of race, economic status, or culture, held high expectations for their children.

Fan, X. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A growth modeling analysis. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 70(1), 27–61. EJ642228.

Collignon, Men, and Tan (2001) conducted focus groups with 60 Southeast Asian community members, reviewed personal narratives from 4 educators, and conducted interviews with 85 Southeast Asian middle school students to explore the barriers that Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, and Vietnamese families encounter as they participate in their children's education in the United States. They found that while the Southeast Asian parents state that education is important for their children, they find that they do not fully understand the US system of education or what their role is in that system.

Collignon, F. F., Men, M., & Tan, S. (2001). Finding ways in: Community-based perspectives on Southeast Asian family involvement with schools in a New England state. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 6(1&2), 27–44.

Using a longitudinal random sample of 81 Latino children's family members, Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, and Garnier (2001) interviewed an adult family member for each student by phone or in person 10 times, used home visits to conduct three extended interviews with an adult family member for each student, and conducted 12 additional informal home interviews with an adult family member for each child. The researchers found that these Latino immigrant parents held high aspirations for their children continuing their education past high school.

Goldenberg, C., Gallimore, R., Reese, L., & Garnier, H. (2001). Cause or effect? A longitudinal study of immigrant Latino parents' aspirations and expectations, and their children's school performance. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(3), 547–582.

Related Research *Continued*

Impact of Reaching Out to Diverse Populations

Each study in this section provides further insight into an array of strategies that school staff can use to develop and implement quality family and community involvement efforts with diverse populations.

Based on their interviews with 20 randomly selected Mexican American families and 20 Anglo families about their involvement in their children's schools, Birch and Ferrin (2002) note that the culture and economic status typically associated with each of these groups plays a role in student success and parental involvement in schools. They suggest that the difference in world views or beliefs held by each group—Mexican American and Anglo—illustrate why initial or superficial efforts rarely increase the involvement of Mexican American families in school events. Because school staff often act quickly on a solution rather than developing a deeper understanding of the context, many times these school efforts lead to limited, if any, increase in involvement. If school staff want to promote and expand the involvement of Mexican American families, they need to actively listen with sensitivity to the concerns and issues of these families. Programs that deeply explore the issues of race and culture raised through active listening can result in meaningful family-school involvement.

Birch, T. C., & Ferrin, S. E. (2002). Mexican American parental participation in public education in an isolated Rocky Mountain rural community. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 35*(1), 70–78. EJ646575.

Rodríguez-Brown, Li, and Albom (1999) conducted interviews and collected surveys to determine the impact of the participation of 60 new immigrant Hispanic mothers who participated in the Parents as Teachers and Parents as Learners Program (FLAME) for 2 school years. These mothers engaged in four literacy enrichment areas had an impact on families' participation (not just the mothers' participation) in activities. The researchers found the increased

understanding of the family's role in supporting student learning and strategies for helping their children in building literacy skills that came from interactions around these enrichment areas had an impact on families', not just mothers', participation in activities that promote student learning.

Rodríguez-Brown, F. V., Li, R. F., & Albom, J. B. (1999). Hispanic parents' awareness and use of literacy-rich environments at home and in the community. *Education and Urban Society, 32*(1), 41–57.

In a study of 5 low-performing students and their Puerto Rican parents, Lopez and Cole (1999) investigated whether the parents had the ability to implement an at-home strategy to address their children's academic readiness needs. The researchers found that each parent was willing to participate in the intervention strategy. After receiving appropriate training on what strategies to use during home visits, they were able to support student learning in the home environment effectively regardless of their personal educational experience or skills. All of the children in this project increased their academic performance following the intervention; however, the researchers were hesitant to state that the home-based intervention was the sole reason for their improvement. Instead, they felt it was likely that the home intervention complemented several other classroom-based strategies that were used with the children.

Lopez, A., & Cole, C. (1999). Effects of parent-implemented intervention on the academic readiness skills of five Puerto Rican kindergarten students in an urban school. *School Psychology Review, 28*(3), 439–447.

Exploring the relationship between achievement-fostering beliefs and the actions of the parents of African-American, economically disadvantaged children, Halle, Kurtz-Costes, and Mahoney (1997) studied 41 African American third- and fourth- grade children and their caregivers. In their study, they found a significant correlation between the number of books read in the home and the reading achievement levels of students. When caregivers actively promoted reading these books, there was a higher correlation to reading ability. Therefore, the authors suggested that if schools found ways to make books accessible to students at home and provide help to parents in learning to practice reading strategies, there could be an accompanying rise in reading achievement for all tested subgroups.

Halle, T.G., Kurtz-Costes, B., & Mahoney, J.L. (1997). Family influences on school achievement in low-income, African American children. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 89*(3), 527–537.

In her survey study of 451 randomly selected Navajo students from 11 schools in the Navajo Nation, Willetto (2001) explored the relationship between traditional culture and public education goals. Willetto stated that of all the tested students across the Navajo Nation, the Navajo students were the lowest-performing subgroup in the United States. Their lack of achievement is a grave concern for educators in the Southwest. At one time, educators and politicians assumed that the only way these Indian students could be educated was to remove them, sometimes forcefully, from a traditional culture that did not support the nation's educational

goals. This action resulted in a pervasive feeling that public education was attempting to systematically destroy the Navajo traditional culture. The tension brought about by this conflict of beliefs led to discord between the tribes and educational and governmental institutions. It has become an historical as well as a current question: Do Navajo students need to shed their traditional culture in order to be successful in U.S. society? In her analysis, using a multivariate procedure, the researcher found that school success for Navajo students does not require that students “assimilate into the dominant society” (p. 19). Therefore, families of Navajo students did not need to discourage the development of a child's traditional culture in order for that child to be successful in the dominant culture or educational system. Many educators also thought that the Navajo matriarchal society led to a lack of substantial support for student achievement in the home. The researcher found no basis for this belief. In fact, she found that adolescents who performed well academically identified with and were greatly supported by their mothers. She concluded that a “more tolerant climate” that engages Navajo families in school activities could result in salient connections between Navajo family life and increased academic success (p. 20).

Willetto, A. A. A. (1999). Navajo culture and family influences on academic success: Traditionalism is not a significant predictor of achievement among young Navajos. *Journal of American Indian Education, 38*(2), 1–24. EJ605532.

Chris Ferguson is a program associate for SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools.

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Find Research Related to This Strategy

You can find more information and research on this topic by searching the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools' research database, *The Connection Collection: School–Family–Community Publications Database*, at <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/bibsearch.html>. If you are looking for information about reaching out to diverse populations, useful keywords to help narrow your search are **diversity**, **policy**, and **relationships**.



**National Center for Family & Community
Connections with Schools**

211 E. 7th St., Suite 400
Austin, Texas 78701-3253

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