

GET TO KNOW YOUR FAMILIES

What do parents (and grandparents and other guardians) want for their children? Instead of assuming, ask questions and engage in conversations. Some ways to start:

Host a welcome event, like a picnic or an evening gathering, in families' primary language.

Instead of a single presentation with school leaders and teachers at the front of the room, consider small groups. Consider partnering with a known nonprofit agency with an existing relationship with the community, such as a local refugee resettlement organization or a social service group that's actively serving families. Make sure there is at least one trained interpreter at each table to facilitate the conversation and take notes.

Visit students and families in their own settings. Home visits are a critically important component of authentic community engagement. Schools should provide teachers and staff with opportunities to go to students' homes and connect with parents and families in a more personal context. These visits can be paired with community walks for all school staff that give them a chance to get to know the neighborhood and institutions (like houses of worship, community centers, libraries or even corner stores) that your families call home.

Create an ambassador program at your school. Connect new families with someone who speaks their language—a fellow parent, dedicated staff member, or volunteer—who can help them get to know the school and vice versa.

VALUE HOME LANGUAGES & CULTURES

Fishman Prize winner Erin Dukeshire, who taught science to English Language Learners in her Boston classroom for more than a decade, says [it's vital that students' home languages and cultural identities are viewed as assets](#)—not deficits. That was so important to her, in fact, that Dukeshire [traveled to Cape Verde](#) to learn more about her students.

“I think it’s just really important to have your cultural identity and your language be part of who you are in [the classroom],” she explains

Few teachers or principals will be able to fly across an ocean to visit the birthplaces of students or their parents. But there are many other ways to ensure that families’ cultures are honored:

Take translation seriously. All school-home communications should be translated, of course, but this goes further than that. Schools should rely on trained interpreters to share information with families—not staff who happen to be bilingual, and definitely not students. Schools will need to identify common situations where translators will be needed and make appropriate arrangements, so families and teachers can easily identify available translation resources. [These will include](#) but aren’t limited to: student enrollment, welcome nights, parent-teacher conferences, comments on report cards, calls from the nurse’s office, and calls to the main office by non-English speakers. We also recommend checking in with families regularly to ensure the translation methods you’ve selected are meeting their needs, and making sure teachers and school leaders understand best practices for communicating through translators, too—such as looking at the parent, not the translator, while in conversation.

Give teachers and staff the opportunity to learn a new language. Even if they are just learning a few phrases, it signals to families that their language is welcome at school. Teach staff gestures that are meaningful, too (both those that are welcome and those that could be potentially offensive) Put up signage in multiple languages. At Orchard Gardens K-8 in Boston, where Erin Dukeshire taught, school signs were posted in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin and more, reflecting the many languages spoken at the diverse school.

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Show parents their native language is valued in school. Discuss with parents the value of their students hearing both languages and include books in their home language in your classrooms and libraries. Support the celebration of cultural traditions: avoid scheduling tests or school events on religious or cultural holidays, and give teachers resources to understand the significance of these holidays.

MAKE SCHOOL MORE ACCESSIBLE

It isn't enough to just translate documentation, or even to ensure that all families feel welcome in school. School also needs to be more fully accessible for parents.

Be aware of potential power dynamics between families and school staff. [Teaching Tolerance](#) points out that differing cultural norms, immigration status, negative past experiences, and lack of English language fluency can cause discomfort and lead families to disengage from the school. It's important for school staff to be mindful of how these dynamics might affect their interactions with parents.

Communicate creatively. Some parents might prefer text messages over phone calls or letters sent home. Email might work well for others. Ask parents what they prefer, and try to honor those different processes as much as possible—or offer a couple of different options at the start of the school year so parents can opt into their preferred method. In all cases, use translation apps or school interpreters to ensure that all contact is accessible for non-English-speaking parents.

Make in-person time flexible. In-person parent-teacher conferences are optimal, of course, but if parents can't make it at the appointed time, don't assume they're disinterested. To help parents get in the building, try offering parent-teacher conferences at different times—some in the morning, some in the evening. If possible, offer childcare for younger siblings, or make sure parents know they are welcome to bring younger children along. And if parents can't make it into school, consider trying video conferences.

Let parents in. Make sure parents know how to access the school building and how to contact teachers and principals. Let families know that they are welcome to visit their children's school outside of normal parent-teacher conference times. School leaders should set up systems to ensure that families with questions or concerns receive a response within 24 hours.

FOSTER LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES AMONG PARENTS

A [recent survey by Learning Heroes](#) found that parents who identified as Spanish-dominant placed a higher level of importance on their children's academic success than any other group—and they also show a high level of eagerness to support that success. Of course, Spanish speakers are just one subgroup of English Language Learners, and no group of parents is a monolith. But schools should never assume that a lack of English language fluency—or lack of visibility at parent-teacher events, for example—indicates low engagement. Schools should take steps to both honor families' focus on academic success and take advantage of it.

Give parents tools to help with homework. Make sure parents understand the expectations for their children, and be clear about how much time children are expected to spend working on schoolwork or reading at home.

Offer workshops to support parents' learning. Many parents are eager to help their children with academic work, but sometimes feel their children's learning has already gone ahead of their own knowledge. Offer content-specific resources in families' native language, or offer free workshops so parents can beef up their skills in, for example, math or reading. Explain to parents how new math strategies might look different from the way they learned, too. Parent book clubs (in multiple languages) can also be great ways to engage parents.

Remove language as a barrier to shared decision-making. Create language-specific branches of parent organizations or school-based decision-making committees so parents of English Language Learners aren't left out of opportunities to weigh in on school policies.

MORE RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS & PARENTS

More Resources for Educators:

Teaching Tolerance: Best Practices for Serving English Language Learners and Their Families.

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/best-practices-for-serving-english-language-learners-and-their-families>

Colorín Colorado: How to Reach Out to Parents of ELLs.

<http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/how-reach-out-parents-ells>

Colorín Colorado: A Guide for Engaging ELL Families: Twenty Strategies for School Leaders.

http://www.colorincolorado.org/sites/default/files/Engaging_ELL_Families_FINAL.pdf

More Resources for Parents:

Colorín Colorado: Your Rights as the Parent of a Public School Student.

<http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/your-rights-parent-public-school-student>