Second Edition

TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS for MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

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Emphasizing the Importance of Family Engagement

When Sokhem arrived to take the SAT, he was 15 minutes late. The public transportation that he normally took to school during the week ran on a different schedule on the weekend. When he arrived at 8:15, the monitor would not let him in. She told Sokhem that the testing had begun at 8:00 and the door was closed. He almost broke down in tears as she shut the door, refusing him entry. He returned to the bus stop and waited over an hour for the bus to return him to his house. When he finally arrived home and told his mother what happened, he cried, "Now, I will never go to college!"

Sokhem's mother was not sure what to do. She knew that his school was having an Open House for parents soon. Thinking that would be a good time to ask his teachers for help, she took time off from work to help her son—though she would miss a much-needed day of pay. On Open House night, she waited anxiously in a line that was marked for parents of 11th graders whose last name began with the letters A through G. When she reached the sign-in table, she tried to muster the courage to seek help for her son. But before she could, she was shuttled off to Sokhem's first-period math class. She politely waited while the math teacher described the math course to all the parents so she could speak with him about Sokhem. However, the teacher spoke so quickly that she could not keep up with him. Suddenly, at the end of 10 minutes, a bell rang, and the school principal announced over the loudspeaker that parents should go to their child's next class. Sokhem's mother reluctantly got up from her seat and tried to get the math teacher's attention. However, all he did was reach for the course schedule that she was holding and tell her where to go for Sokhem's second-period class. This same scenario continued throughout the Open House event. Sokhem's mother went from class to class hoping that she could get advice from one of his teachers. By the last class, she was exhausted. She had been rushed from one classroom to the next, one side of the building to the other, and had not been able to ask her important question. She was not empowered enough to stop the flow of the Open House night like a more empowered parent from the dominant culture might have been, nor did she have enough English language skill to do so.

When the bell rang for the last time, the school principal thanked everyone for coming, announced that the Open House was over, and bid everyone goodnight. So that she wouldn't be leaving without hearing anything to help her son, Sokhem's mother mustered the courage to speak to his last-period instructor, who happened to be his ESL teacher. The ESL teacher, though anxious to go home, took time to talk with her about Sokhem's problem. The teacher helped her understand that she and her son needn't worry, and that there would be other opportunities to take the SAT. The next day, the ESL teacher found Sokhem and helped him make plans to take the SAT the next time the test was offered in the area.

The following year, when Sokhem had scored well on the SAT, had graduated from high school, and was excitedly getting ready to attend a local college, he told his ESL teacher that he could not have done it without her and his mother's help. She began to reflect on the experience that she had had with Sokhem's mother. Could she and the school have been more proactive to help students and their parents with the college application process?

The Importance of Family Engagement

The importance of family–school engagement is well documented (Delpit, 1995; Epstein et al., 2019; Espinosa, 2015; Gonzalez et al., 2005; Henderson et al., 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1999, 2003; Robles de Mélendez & Beck, 2019). Additionally, federal regulations explicitly state that schools and state education agencies are obligated "to ensure that LEP [limited English proficient] parents and guardians have meaningful access to district and school-related information" (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 37). Further, federal regulations specify:

> This essential information includes but is not limited to information regarding: language assistance programs, special education and related services, IEP meetings, grievance procedures, notices of nondiscrimination, student discipline policies and procedures, registration and enrollment, report cards, requests for parent permission for student participation in district or school activities, parent-teacher conferences, parent handbooks, gifted and talented programs, magnet and charter schools, and any other school and program choice options. (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 38)

The research and regulations affirm that all parents and guardians (hereafter families), including two-parent, single parent, grandparent, stepparent, foster parent, custodial parent, extrafamilial member, and others in our ever-changing society, are important partners in their child's education and that we must take the steps needed to engage families. Every family constellation, regardless of configuration, is foundational to a child's development, understanding of the world around them, social interactions, and cultural identity.

Kristina Robertson is the English Language Program supervisor at St. Paul Public Schools, in Minnesota. She provides important information about our obligations:

> We should provide interpreter support so that families and educators can connect with each other. Partnerships require a two-way communication process. It's important to select the type of communication that will work best. For example, some families may not have had the opportunity to learn to read and, as a result, are unable to understand written translated messages. Alternatives, such as translated miniconferences, phone calls, and oral and video messaging, may help.

> Establishing relationships with families should be an important objective and priority for educators at all grade levels. While much has been written about family partnerships at the early childhood level (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Espinosa, 2015; Robles de Mélendez & Beck, 2019; Tabors, 1998), maintaining strong partnerships with the families of multilingual learners (MLs) should continue through high school. Moreover, we should understand the important role that many multilingual children of all ages play on their families' behalf and consider how we might support such families.

Kristina also provides us with a rich example of the important role that a student played on behalf of her family:

> A Karen refugee high school student (whom I refer to with the pseudonym Paw Ku) was responsible for her schoolwork, navigating school systems, understanding college preparation, as well as acting as the main interpreter in her home for adult tasks such as telehealth visits with her grandmother, talking with the landlord, and calling the bank to help her mother ask about the account. As a 16-year-old high school student, she acted as her own parent and household manager like an adult because her parents didn't have meaningful access to information. Paw Ku took on these responsibilities without expecting additional support or more bilingual connections for her family, and she was stressed out all the time with so much to do.

> She saw it as her duty and wouldn't complain: "I know English, so I have to help my family." When told her parents should have access to information in their native language, she replied, "That would be good, but they still don't understand. They don't understand school." (K. Robertson, personal communication, May 25, 2022)

While we are familiar with the importance of family involvement, we sometimes overlook its special relevance for families from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Indeed, many educators are not familiar with the various cultural norms of MLs and their families. Conversely, many families of MLs are not familiar with the culture of the U.S. public school system, in terms of its implied ways of thinking, being, and acting by the dominant culture's notion of "school culture." Misconceptions and misunderstandings abound on both sides, and these differences can easily become impenetrable barriers that divide and separate one group from another.

Linking Parent Involvement to Learning

More often than not, we worry that families who are not fluent in English cannot connect with or support their child's education and we find ourselves worrying more about families who we believe cannot understand academic text and help their child understand it. We may think this because we believe that learning is entirely academic. An alternate view is important here. Learning involves building connections between what students already know and what is being learned. However, not all connections occur through academic experiences. They occur also via students' personal, social, cultural, linguistic, and life experiences (Haynes & Zacarian, 2010; Zacarian et al., 2021). Rousing students' interest to learn must include making connections with their prior experiences. Indeed, these connectors may be far more successful than drawing strictly from academic knowledge. Families have a good deal to contribute to their child's intellectual development. When parents are empowered, their knowledge can be used in powerful ways (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Moll, 1992; Zacarian et al., 2021). For example, when a school principal noted that many of the fathers of the school's MLs were fishermen, she encouraged their teachers to develop a unit of study on the fishing industry. With help from the fathers and other members of the fishing community, various teachers designed and delivered successful interdisciplinary science, social studies, and language arts lessons on this topic. The same is true for a high school chemistry teacher who engaged students in the study of thermal reaction. Knowing some parents of MLs were welders, he solicited their help in demonstrating an authentic model of the concept. Viewing parents as resources allows us to be much more open to the possibilities of building connections that can be readily integrated in school and at home.

While this is a helpful means for connecting to families, much of academic text is built on implied understandings about U.S. society. Think of the social studies teacher who asks the important question, "What is the relevance of Barack Obama being the first African American president?" This question requires depth of knowledge about race in the United States that many MLs do not possess. Helping to build connections to learning through students' and their families' prior experiences can be more easily accomplished if we consider the relevance of the other connection makers and include families in the process. Drawing from Gonzalez et al. (2005) and Moll (1992), we must encourage educators to consider how parents' knowledge will be encouraged and empowered. In this sense, learning occurs when it is connected to what is happening at home and in the community. It is personal and cultural and built on students' and their families' views of the world. For example, asking students to interview their parents about a time in which they were not treated well and/or were discriminated against can activate students' interest to study the relevance of the first African American president.

This asset-based model of connecting curriculum to MLs' personal, social, cultural, language, and world experiences provides opportunities for families to help in their child's schooling by using the rich resources that they possess. When schools build systematic connections to students' and their families' lives, there is a much greater chance that academic learning will occur.

Working Together for the Common Good of Students

Schools do not exist in a vacuum. They reside in communities in which students travel from one side of a city or town to their school, walk to school, or both. Creating a welcoming environment for an ML community and its culture(s) requires a high level of commitment in the student and family community as well as the community at large, and it requires more than celebrating cultural holidays and events. In an example described earlier, the school involved community members in the production of a play. Local restaurant workers, seamstresses, and other community members became involved with the performance for the common good of the children, and their collective contributions are what made the performance successful. This type of effort requires a much broader lens. It involves a willingness on the part of the school, as well as the community, to look closely at itself.

It means taking time to learn about how the school's MLs are or are not participating in events and activities that are common among the dominant group.

An example of supporting family involvement comes from Becky Corr, team lead of the Language, Culture and Equity Department of Douglas County Public Schools. She shares what the district has done to support families, including a group of immigrants who recently moved to the district.

> The annual Language, Culture and Equity celebration in Douglas County, Colorado, brings together families and educators from across the district to celebrate the accomplishments of our students and the diversity of our community. Each year, there is a focus on a theme. Students create projects including artwork, written pieces, and presentations centered around the theme. Families enjoy viewing the artwork, a slideshow of the year's highlights, and performances by student groups, and teachers are honored as ambassadors for multilingual families. Parents are invited to be guest speakers and are partners in the planning process. Caretakers/parents are also invited to host craft tables where they teach a craft to students. At the end of the evening, families enjoy a meal together.
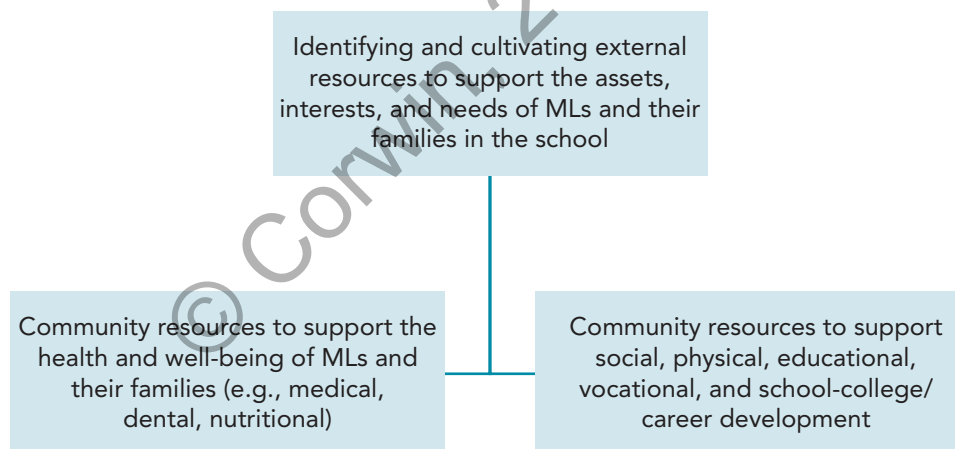>
> Recently, one geographic area of our district experienced tremendous growth of families from India. Our leaders and teachers expressed interest in understanding more about their culture and how to come together to support our students. We had an existing partnership with a local nonprofit of Indian American families and wanted to partner with them to build a deeper understanding of our MLs and their families. So, we organized a focus group to build partnerships and relationships with the new community and our school. Then, families presented what's going well for them and some ideas to explore to refine our practices. As a result, we are now partnering with the nonprofit to organize presentations that will inform about partnership led by families. This is the beginning of the partnership, but it is exciting to continue to build upon these successes. (B. Corr, personal communication, May 20, 2022)

Expanding Beyond the School

Town or city sports and driver's education programs, Girl and Boy Scouts, dance classes, and Boys and Girls Clubs, though generally not part of a school program, are often activities and groups that students engage in and that are part of their development. Because these are so common, teachers may draw from them to build connections to the curriculum. Think of a classroom teacher who uses a soccer example to illustrate a math problem. MLs and others may not be exposed to activities like playing on a soccer team for many reasons, including lack of awareness about the after- or out-of-school activities that the dominant culture of children participate in and lack of financial means to support their participation.

Building partnerships with families requires opening the circle of opportunity and involving all educators in making this an important and sustained priority. Figure 6.1 shows the steps that can be taken to better ensure that we take time to identify, recruit, and continuously cultivate the resources needed to support the assets, interests, and needs of MLs and their families in our schools.

Figure 6.1   Identifying and Cultivating External Supports and Resources

Identifying and cultivating external resources to support the assets, interests, and needs of MLs and their families in the school

Community resources to support the health and well-being of MLs and their families (e.g., medical, dental, nutritional)

Community resources to support social, physical, educational, vocational, and school-college/career development

Source: Zacarian et al. (2021).

One way to identify and cultivate external resources to support the assets, interests, and needs of MLs is to survey staff and families. Resources 6.1 and 6.2 from Zacarian et al. (2021) are intended for this purpose.

online resources

RESOURCE 6.1

Staff Survey

The purpose of this survey is to help us understand the health and well-being and social interests and desires of our students and build strong community partnerships on behalf of our students. Our collective responses will greatly help us in these efforts.

Please select your classification below:

☐ School administrator

☐ Schoolteacher

☐ School support staff (counselor, social worker, custodian, lunch staff, etc.)

☐ Other:

Please check the resources that you believe are most needed by the students in your classes:

☐ Medical

☐ Dental

☐ Eye care

☐ Housing

☐ Nutritional

☐ Counseling

☐ Other (please list):

Please briefly describe why you believe these resources are needed.

Please check the three family–school partnership activities that you think would be most helpful to our students:

☐ Family gatherings for social purposes

☐ Family gatherings for students to showcase their learning

☐ Ways for families to share resources

☐ Creating a shared home–school culture of learning

☐ Other (please describe):

(Continued)

(Continued*)*

Please briefly describe why you believe these activities are needed.

Please check three activities that you believe would be most beneficial to students:

☐ After-school clubs and recreational activities

☐ Before/after-school programs

☐ Field trips

☐ Buddy programs

☐ Other (please describe):

Please briefly describe why you believe these activities are needed.

Zacarian, D., Calderón, M. E., & Gottlieb, M. (2021). *Beyond crises: Overcoming linguistic and cultural inequities in communities, schools, and classrooms* (pp. 61–62). Corwin.

online resources   Available for download at **resources.corwin.com/transformingschoolsformultilinguallearners**

RESOURCE 6.2

Family Survey

The purpose of this survey is to help us understand the health and well-being and social interests and desires of your child and to build strong family–school partnerships. Your responses will greatly help us in these efforts. Thank you!

Please check the resources that you believe are most needed:

☐ Medical

☐ Dental

☐ Eye care

☐ Housing

☐ Nutritional

☐ Counseling

☐ Other (please list):

Please check the three family–school partnership activities that you think would be most helpful to your child:

☐ Family gatherings for social purposes

☐ Family gatherings for students to showcase their learning

☐ Ways for families to share resources

☐ Creating a shared home–school culture of learning

☐ Other (please describe):

Please briefly describe why you believe these activities are needed.

What is the best means to contact you to support our efforts?

Please check three activities that you believe would be most beneficial to your child:

☐ After-school clubs and recreational activities

☐ Before/after-school programs

☐ Field trips

☐ Buddy programs

☐ Other (please describe):

Please briefly describe why you believe these activities are needed.

An equally important goal is empowering MLs intellectually, socially, and emotionally in making meaningful contributions to the community. Commonly referred to as *service learning*, its purpose is twofold: (1) providing students with an authentic experience to apply learning and (2) encouraging students to be responsible for and committed to the community. In 2008, the Education Commission of the States synthesized 20 years of research about service learning and found that it greatly supports "young people develop[ing] civic skills, attitudes and behaviors" (Pickeral et al., 2008, p. 1). This approach to learning was enacted broadly with passage of the National Community Service Act in 1990 by President George H. W. Bush and the National Community and Service Trust Act in 1993 by President Bill Clinton (Ryan, 2012). While economic downturns led to the decline of service learning in low-income communities across the nation despite its efficacy, renewed interest is sparking its return (Zacarian & Silverstone, 2020; Zacarian & Soto, 2020). An example is Brockton Public Schools, in Massachusetts. As the city of Brockton became more diverse, the need for medical interpreters grew. In response, Brockton High School, with the support of families and community members, implemented a medical interpretation-translation certification program for its multilingual Spanish, Haitian, and Cape Verdean students and others. Students participate in a 2-year program of study in anatomy, physiology, human systems, and the art of communicating and intern at a neighborhood health center where several graduates have been employed full-time (Zacarian & Soto, 2020). The district is now considering adding a program in legal studies in response to a community need. This district shows us what's possible when we draw on students' strengths and assets and work with families to support MLs' success.

Families of MLs can be more engaged in their child's education and school community when each of four frames is employed intentionally by school leaders—bridging the cultural divide, infusing family advocacy as part of the core, linking family involvement to learning, and working together for the common good of students. In the next chapter, we will explore ways to identify and work with MLs with learning differences and learning disabilities.

Suggested Reading

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