

FALL 2004

Reaching Out to Families Whose English is Limited

We know meaningful parental involvement can enhance student achievement, but how do we ensure it is meaningful when we do not speak the same language? The demographics of many school communities have shifted radically in recent years. In Connecticut over 18% of students speak a language other than English at home. In some districts, that number is well over 50%. In New Britain 58.9% of students live in homes where English is not the primary language.

And significant growth in these numbers is not unique to urban districts. Today's immigrants are not settling only in industrial areas for factory jobs. Many are following other employment opportunities into smaller suburban and rural communities where resources to assist them are limited (see box page 2). The school often becomes a central support. It is not only where children are educated, but also the first place to seek help on issues such as housing or health. Schools have not traditionally claimed such issues, but they must be addressed if children are to enter school each day ready to learn.

Changes in the languages spoken by families demand new strategies for reaching out, making parents feel welcome in the school, and helping them support learning at home. The first step is to show that staff value their contributions--the richness that comes from new cultures, information they provide about students, and the support and learning all families provide at home. According to Ingrid M. Canady, Co-Coordinator of the *Initiative on Diversity in Education* at SERC, one of the keys to success is reaching out to families through existing community supports with which families are already comfortable (see box below). Schools and their students then benefit not only from improved partnerships with families, but also from partnerships that develop with the wider community.

For more information: Ingrid Canady, Consultant, SERC, (860) 632-1485 x330 or canady@ctserc.org.

Proven strategies include:

- Make contacts and visit families in the community where they worship, work or learn. Find liaisons families trust to help you welcome them to the school. You might give a presentation at a community college or at a community ESL course. There is often a bilingual employee at factories and restaurants who serves as a liaison between English and non-English speaking employees. Get to know the people who can help you connect with families, better understand a group's needs, and convey or explain information. In addition, multicultural centers at large universities may have students willing to serve as interpreters or tutors.
- Survey parents' concerns, perspectives, and ideas. (See page 3, *Getting to Know...*)
- Create a family space—a room or just a corner. Big or small, this is a place where families can feel they belong. A dedicated space where families can talk together; have a cup of coffee, or review parenting or other resources sends a strong message to the school and the community that families have a place in their children's education, and that the school values that place.



The CT School-Family-Community Partnerships Project helps educators, parents and community members develop partnerships by providing training and resources that promote effective local policies and practices, and increase public awareness of the positive impact of school-family-community partnerships on student learning. [Project Partners:](#) Connecticut State Department of Education, CREC, CT Parents Plus at The United Way of Connecticut, & SERC

farsi ganda yoruba
 bengali
 polish
 chinese

Communicating When English Proficiency is Limited

There is no one strategy for improving communication that is sure to work with all families whose English proficiency is limited. Schools must try many to find what works for particular families. It is best to rely on more than one.

Communicating Orally

Many schools find the personal touch is key to establishing trust. Home visits and phone calls show families how much you value their role. While language barriers make this challenging, following basic ground rules can help.

- Speak at a normal volume and speed, but pause slightly between phrases or sentences to give listeners time to translate ideas in their heads. Use shorter sentences.
- Ask if listeners have questions. Give them time to process and reflect before moving on. Be sure they understand by asking them to restate key ideas. Restate what you hear to be sure you understand. Ask open-ended questions such as "how would you..." rather than yes/no questions like "do you understand how..."
- Avoid jargon like *AYP*, *phonemic awareness*, and long words like *proficiency* that may be confusing. Use simpler terms: *tests* rather than *assessment*, for example. When you must use a term that may be unfamiliar, explain it.
- Plan what you are going to say. Concentrate on the most important message. Keep information in a logical order. Omit extraneous ideas that might be confusing. At the end, repeat the most important points.
- Limit the amount of information. Parents may become overwhelmed or frustrated if there is too much to respond to at once. One short successful conversation can lessen anxiety and increase confidence of both educator and parent, making future communication easier.
- Keep calm. Families may approach educators when worried about their children. Help them calm down so they can better listen and respond.
- Limit distractions. A noisy hall or office with constant interruptions will reduce chances for success.
- Use a variety of teaching methods. Like students, parents have different learning styles. Reinforce verbal information with written material or simple diagrams. Demonstrate key concepts. Suggest parents take notes in their native language, or make an audiotape they can review at home.

Using Translation & Interpretation

No matter how successful your efforts, at times you need help from someone proficient in other languages.

- Seek out school staff, parent educators, community members, older students in the district or at local universities who might be able to serve as translators and interpreters. Keep a contact list for each language.
- Screen prospective translators/interpreters. Conduct interviews in both languages and ask for sample translations.
- Use professionals for key printed material, and sensitive issues (see back page). Stress confidentiality.
- Translate/communicate all information received by the general school population.

Rising Linguistic Diversity

Connecticut districts large and small are experiencing increasing cultural and linguistic diversity. Here are some examples.

District (# of students)	% speaking other language at home	# of different languages, for example
WOODBIDGE (905)	6%	14 Burmese, Chinese, Greek, Russian
DERBY (1,599)	14%	19 Afrikaans, Bengali, Polish, Urdu
ROCKY HILL (2,472)	10%	37 Farsi, Igbo, Marathi, Serbo-Croatian
NORWICH (4,122)	16%	31 Bangla, Cebuano, Creole, Khmer
WEST HAVEN (7,204)	13%	48 Ganda, Slovak, Turkish, Twi/Fanti
DANBURY (9,822)	36%	49 Gujarati, Kannada, Lao, Yoruba
WEST HARTFORD (9,911)	17%	62 Amharic, Bikol, Ilongot, Ponapean
BRIDGEPORT (22,630)	37%	75 Algonquian, Kurdish, Lingala, Nyanja
HARTFORD (22,783)	53%	43 Akan, Dari, Ewe, Frisian

SDE data as of January 2004

urdu creole turkish

Getting to Know Connecticut's Newest Families

Immigration looks very different today than in the past, both because of the large number of different regions of origin, and because of where immigrants are settling. The diversity of languages and cultures has soared not only in urban areas, but also in much smaller suburban and rural towns.

To determine how best to reach out and support families in your community that are less proficient in English, you must find ways to get to know them. One of the simplest ways to begin is a survey. The first question is where are families from. What language do they speak at home? What education and work experience do they have in other countries, and in the US? Such questions will help you choose the best strategies for reaching out. If families are not literate in their native language, translation will not help. Include simple questions about childcare and transportation needs, working hours and skills, as well as open-ended questions such as "What concerns do you have about your child's progress"; "What else would you like to know"; and "What else would you like the school to know?"

To maximize your response, you might translate the survey. Or some schools have asked bilingual parents to approach new parents in their neighborhoods to collect information. Another successful method is to distribute surveys before parent teacher conferences or a student performance, and collect responses the same evening. This way bilingual staff or liaisons from the community can make themselves available to help families complete the surveys. If you are not sure what methods will work best in your school, try several. The point is to let families know how much you value the information.

District Outreach Practices Show Promise

With so many new immigrant families, **New Britain Consolidated School District** must reach out in multiple ways, especially to parents with little or no schooling in their country of origin, to help them become more comfortable with schools and their role in children's education. Two strategies are particularly effective, according to Adnelly Marichal, Coordinator of Bilingual Education, ESOL & World Languages.

Each fall the district hosts a *Latino Parent Conference* with a new theme. Last year the focus was on supporting learning at home. This year focused on the importance of health to learning. Dr. Luis Diez of St. Francis Hospital gave the keynote address. There were two sessions of workshops on topics such as nutrition, asthma, diabetes and obesity, which parents could choose to attend in Spanish or in English. Over 25 community organizations exhibited resources. But the conference is also a celebration. It included performances by students in the migratory and bilingual programs, and ended with participants coming together for lively discussion and lunch in the high school cafeteria.

To reach out to individual parents, especially those new to the schools, the district is trying something new. *Parents Supporting Parents* capitalizes on that core group of parents that attend every workshop. For volunteers willing to connect with other families, the district provided special training on topics such as creating home environments conducive to learning, coaching children with homework, and assessment and evaluation. Each parent is then assigned 5 or 6 families in their neighborhood, to welcome them, answer questions, and help them better support their children's academic success. "Feedback so far from new parents is wonderful," says coordinator Adnelly Marichal. "If this is successful, we hope to open it to more groups next year."

For more information, contact Adnelly Marichal, marichal@new-britain.k12.ct.us, (860) 827-2261.

Resource Materials on S-F-C Partnerships

Children's Home Society of California publishes a colorful series of 16 family education brochures in English, Spanish, Khmer, & Vietnamese. The brochures are available free of charge, and include such titles as *Choosing Childcare*, *Toilet Teaching without Tears*, *Separation*, and *Managing Anger*. For more information: www.chs-ca.org/services_edu_education.shtml or (213) 240-5925.

The ED Pubs Online Ordering System is an easy way to identify and order free U.S. Department of Education publications and products. Many are available in English and Spanish, with a few also available in other languages. Use keywords to search for titles such as the **Help your Child** series, including Spanish versions of *Helping Your Child Learn Science* and *Helping your Child Do Homework*. For more information: www.edpubs.org or (877) 4 ED PUBS.

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA) offers information about language instruction and educational programs for English language learners. It is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement & Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students (OELA). www.ncela.gwu.edu.

Talking about substance abuse is challenging. Finding information in Spanish adds to the challenge. **Hablemos en Confianza** is a bilingual website that provides information, offers advice on improving communication, and presents free bilingual publications. Go to: www.soyunica.gov/adults/.

National Association of Elementary School Principals offers over 70 **Reports to Parents** in English and Spanish for schools to copy and distribute. Topics of these one-pagers include safety, homework, discipline, stress and report cards. The series can be purchased for \$50-\$70. www.naesp.org.

Multilingual Assistance

The non-profit **International Institute of Connecticut** has been helping immigrants since 1918. Along with services such as classes and immigration counseling, the International Institute provides language and cross-cultural assistance in almost any language. Connecticut schools and organizations can arrange interpretive services (~\$45/hour) or request translations of flyers and other material (usually \$25 per page). For more information: <http://members.aol.com/liiconn/index.htm> or (203) 336-0141.

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