



# INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER

Texas Elementary  
Principals and Supervisors  
Association

## Involving Parents of English Learners in Their Children's Schooling

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The large and growing population of children from non-English speaking homes, combined with unprecedented levels of accountability for student achievement, poses ever-increasing challenges to our schools. Texas educators are, of course, no strangers to students who speak little or no English. Because Texas was once a part of Mexico, the state historically has been home to large numbers of Spanish-speaking children and families. The recent wave of migration that began over 30 years ago has further increased the number of non-English speaking students—and further accentuated the challenge.

The English-learner population in the U.S. (and Texas) is quite diverse, with children from many language backgrounds and countries of origin. However, Spanish speakers make up the single largest language-minority group. Approximately three-fourths of the 5 million English learners in U.S. schools are from Spanish-speaking homes. But even among the Spanish-speaking population, there is considerable diversity in education, occupation, literacy levels, economic status, country of family origin, and type of community in which they live. Generalizations about “English-language learners” or “language-minority students” should be made very cautiously—if at all!

Yet, as educators we often ask questions that presume some degree of generalization. For example, “How can we get language-minority parents more involved in their children's education?” We know that families have a huge impact on children's school success. How can we make that impact as positive as possible for language-minority children?

### Language-Minority Parents are Deeply Interested in Their Children's Education

The single most important thing to bear in mind about parents of English-language learners is that they very much want their children to be successful in school and to obtain as much education as possible, preferably all the way through college. The reason is very straightforward: they see formal schooling as the primary means of social and economic mobility and security for their children. Virtually all parents, no matter what language, ethnicity, or national origin, want their children to thrive, prosper, and have a good future. This fact is fundamental to understanding language-minority parents.

It's not that language-minority parents are not interested in other outcomes. They are. They want their children to be well-behaved, respectful, and good contributors to their families. In Spanish, there is an expression for this: *ser bien educado*. Being *bien educado*—respectful, well-behaved, considerate of others—has a far different meaning from the English phrase “well-educated,” which typically means having a high level of formal education from good schools.

Parents of Spanish-speaking students highly value the aspect of their children's upbringing that stresses being *bien educado*. This is probably why parents most often ask the teacher whether their children are behaving, “¿Se porta bien?”. Educators often mistake parents' interest in their children's comportment with a *lack* of interest in academic achievement. This is completely wrong. Parents of English learners want their children to be academically successful; it's just that they see appropriate behavior, manners, and consideration of others as vital

elements in their children's development and ultimate success in life.

But make no mistake: parents want their children to be academically successful. When you think of it, this is not all that different from what most parents want, regardless of the language they speak. Language-minority parents are firm believers in the all-American idea that in order to get ahead you have to have a good education and that without a good education, the road before you will be rocky. I've had numerous parents say to me things such as, “You have to go to school to be somebody in this country,” or “We don't want our son to end up like us, without a good education or a good job.”

It's hard to convey the emotion in the voices and faces of parents as they speak about their hopes and aspirations for their children—hopes and aspirations that invariably include education, professional status, social and economic security and success. There are other ways of being successful in life, to be sure, and language-minority parents readily acknowledge this. A mechanic, a contractor, and a plumber can all build successful lives for themselves and their families. But most of the parents I have worked or studied with aspire to or dream about high levels of schooling and professional status for their children. These are things that are missing from parents' own lives but that they want for their children.

This set of parental beliefs is a very strong motivator and I have consistently found that language-minority parents are highly motivated to help their children succeed in school. This is true among language-minority populations in this country, and it is also true among many language-



minority populations around the world. The United States is not the only country with substantial numbers of individuals from different language backgrounds, many from poorer countries than the countries to which they migrate. What most of these individuals have in common is their hopes and dreams of a better life for their children. More often than not, this better life involves school success.

### So Why Don't Their Behaviors Reflect Their Interest?

When I say to educators that language-minority parents are highly motivated to help their children succeed in school, I might get objections such as, "But they don't come to back-to-school night," or "They don't show up at parent conferences," or "They don't come to the school and pick up homework if the kids are absent." These issues understandably puzzle even the most well-intentioned educator. The behavior of many of these parents seems to contradict my claim that they are deeply interested in supporting their children's education. What is going on?

I don't wish to make excuses or make light of these concerns, but there are a number of factors educators need to keep in mind. Not all of these issues apply to all parents, nor might any of them explain why some parents do not apparently demonstrate the sort of interest and motivation I say they possess. Some parents simply do not follow through or take responsibility for their obligations; this is true among any group of individuals. But the following are worth considering before rushing to judgment about language-minority parents' interest—or lack of interest—in their children's education.

An obvious issue is language. Language-minority parents are by and large limited in their English proficiency. Understandably they can be self-conscious or embarrassed speaking to highly-educated professionals such as teachers, administrators, counselors, and other school personnel. Even if your school provides translators, parents might not be aware of this service, or they might feel awkward making use of it.

Less obvious is that for many language-minority families—particularly if parents are immigrants—U.S. schools are foreign institutions. Most of these parents have not been to school in this country

so they have little idea as to norms and expectations. In most of the countries from which immigrants to the U.S. come (and especially Latin America), home and school keep their distance. Over the past 30 years, home-school connections and parent involvement have become increasingly important aspects of the educational landscape in this country. Not so in parts of the world where many of our students and their parents originate. Back-to-school nights and parent conferences might not be familiar kinds of events or ones with which parents are comfortable.

Closely related is the considerable status difference between language-minority parents and educators. This is particularly true when you consider that typical immigrants from Mexico and Central America come to the U.S. with approximately an 8th-grade education—the lowest of virtually any immigrant group in the U.S. Most people under these circumstances feel inhibited. How likely are they to approach high-status individuals such as the teacher? How presumptuous to ask teachers to take time from their busy schedules to provide homework for a sick child! Obviously, there are parents for whom the status difference is not a barrier, but it is not hard to understand how for many parents it very well might be.

Parents generally do not know what goes on in school nor what teaching methods are used; some are reluctant to get too involved for fear of confusing their children. One parent I interviewed had helped her daughter learn the alphabet but then was told by the teacher that this was incorrect; the children needed to learn the letter *sounds* not the names. The parent told me she stopped helping her child because she thought she might just be confusing her.

Because many parents have limited educations they feel incapable of helping their children succeed in school. I have spoken with parents who completely discount the possibility that they know something that might be useful in helping their child in school. Yet, virtually all the parents I have ever known can read, at least at a rudimentary level—and usually beyond this—in their native language. And if their reading skills are limited, they have a friend, neighbor, or relative who *can* read and can help their children. And even if they can not read, parents can make sure homework

gets done; they can listen to their children read; they can ask about what their child learned in math or social studies. In other words, parents have skills and knowledge that they themselves do not recognize but that could be used to promote school success for their children.

Finally, there is the issue of economic circumstances. Many language-minority families are economically stressed. Parents might work low-paying and low-status jobs, sometimes with family-unfriendly hours. Material resources and discretionary hours are limited. The irony is that all of the families I've ever spoken with (mostly immigrant parents from Mexico or Central America) about this issue say that economic circumstances do not determine school success nor any other outcome for that matter; anyone who has the motivation (*ganas*), they say, can succeed. Technically, this is true. Economics is not destiny. But economics creates constraints. Limited resources, limited discretionary time, limited control over work schedule and transportation all take their toll—and tend to limit what parents can do in support of their children's school success.

### What Can Schools Do?

There is no sure-fire list of to-do's that will guarantee high levels of involvement among language-minority parents. Moreover, research is equivocal on whether promoting parent involvement actually produces improvements in student achievement. Some educators and some studies have concluded that high quality and focused curriculum and instruction will produce greater achievement effects than parent involvement.

Nevertheless, since parents are such a huge influence on children's lives, my assumption is that children, schools, and families will all be better off if we can find ways to involve parents productively in their child's education. Here are some suggestions:

- Recognize and build upon the fact that parents care deeply about their children's school success. Parents want children to do well. They want them to go as far as possible in their formal schooling. Parents want to support the school's efforts to promote student achievement. This recognition is the foundation for effective parent involvement strategies.



- Parents should be made to feel welcome at the school and that they are an asset for their children. Simple things like welcome signs on bulletin boards in or outside the school office—in a language parents understand—can contribute to a welcoming environment. Office staff should treat parents with courtesy and respect rather than as intrusions. Regular principal newsletters, even if brief, written in a way that is accessible to parents can also help create the impression that parents are valued. Parents are especially interested in learning about programs or resources (e.g., a computer lab, a new ESL program, new books in the library) that will help their children achieve in school.

- Teachers are especially critical. They should make parents feel welcome and a part of their child's education by sending home notes about what children are learning and how parents can support this learning. The more specific the note, the better. Generalities, such as "read with your child," typically are not that effective. When I taught first grade, children took home regular homework sheets with the assignment written down (they would copy it from the board) and a line for parents' signature. Homework was not complete if there was no parent signature. If I wanted to encourage parents and children reading together, that was the assigned homework. Parents take homework very seriously. In Spanish it's called *tarea*. The vast majority of parents will support you all the way if they find out their child is not turning in her or his *tarea*.

- If a student is having difficulty—behaviorally, academically, turning in assignments, in short, anything—contact the parents and enlist their help. My experience has been that parents *want* to help, but if they don't know something is going on, they cannot. In one school where I worked we had a homework liaison, an experienced aide who would contact parents if children were not bringing in homework. In 90 percent of cases, once parents found out homework was not being done, children started completing and bringing it in regularly. In my first-grade classroom, if a child was having trouble learning to decode words, I would call the parent for a conference and suggest specific activities to go over and practice with the child (I taught in a bilingual classroom, so

language per se was not an issue). Even when I taught junior high, if students were behaving inappropriately, a call home almost always resolved the issue immediately. In virtually all cases, parents were grateful for being informed and given a chance to fix whatever needed fixing.

- Have translators available for conferences and back-to-school nights, and make absolutely, positively sure parents know translations will be available. Let them know you value their attendance and want their participation in the education of their children.

- Let parents know that young children are welcome at school functions or that some sort of care or babysitting will be available during conferences or meetings. This of course is not always possible, especially for large school functions such as back-to-school or Open House nights. But to the extent it is possible, it will help make parents feel more welcome and will boost attendance.

There are many other strategies and approaches schools can take to promote collaboration and connections with language-minority parents. But the fundamental issue is to recognize that parents are willing and in most cases capable partners in the educational enterprise. Educators typically underestimate the degree to which parents can help support their school academic program. As a result, they do not take advantage of an extremely valuable resource that can help children, families, and educators themselves.

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