
Preface

As Latino parents we have to help our children in every way possible. Simply because we don't speak English very well doesn't mean that we can't support our children to succeed in school. We value education, and there is much that we do at home every day. And staying involved in the school to watch over them is an extension of our parental responsibility.

[Translated from Spanish]

Addressing other Latino parents at a community meeting, this parent illustrates how Latino parents are willing partners in their children's schooling from preschool to high school. That parent involvement in children's schooling is both necessary and beneficial is beyond dispute. Parent involvement in students' elementary and secondary schooling has been a focus of much research over the past decades. Educators, including teachers, teacher assistants, community liaisons, counselors, principals, and other personnel, sometimes believe that because parents have less formal education or reside in lower socioeconomic communities, they are uncaring about their children's education. But research tells us that Latino parents do care about their children's education. Educators successfully include Latino communities in building strong partnerships on behalf of children.

National policies have identified parent involvement as a critical component of public education in the United States. The America 2000 national mandate for education promoted parent involvement: "Every school will promote partnership that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional,

viii Involving Latino Families in Schools

and academic growth of children" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 1). As restated in the "No Child Left Behind Act," this decrees that parents should have a central role in their children's academic progress. They have the right to move their children out of persistently failing schools. To support parent involvement initiatives, Title I federal funds have been identified for schools that make parent involvement a priority, "with particular attention to parents who are economically disadvantaged, are disabled, have limited English proficiency, have limited literacy, or are of any racial or ethnic minority background" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

This book presents two key perspectives: (a) that parent involvement is an imperative component in the schooling of all Latino students and (b) that it is possible for educators and parents to collaborate in support of Latino students' academic success from the first day of their schooling career to the day they receive their high school diploma. That parent involvement is critical to school performance is beyond question. There is considerable evidence that parent involvement leads to improvement in student achievement, better school attendance, and reduced dropout rates (Becher, 1984; Epstein, 1987, 2001). Regardless of cultural and linguistic background, parents and schools can work together for the benefit of students.

The suggested activities, case examples, vignettes, ideas, and reflections found here are based on existing school and community efforts. The purpose of the book, however, is not to serve as a recipe book for educators to copy or to borrow ideas that have worked for others. Instead, this handbook offers discussions and suggestions for involving Latino parents who have been marginalized as a result of poverty, social and linguistic isolation, prejudice, or limited schooling. Educators can use these understandings as springboards for their own local reflection, planning, and designing of parent involvement activities and programs. Fundamentally, each school district and community must define its respective needs, resources, and goals to best serve Latinos in its particular setting. What is highly successful in one community may not fit the needs in another one because the trained personnel, fiscal resources, and student needs could differ enormously. However, as communities look within to identify their strengths, they can maximize schooling opportunities for Latinos. It is important to note that when schools complain about Latinos not being involved in their children's education, they are referring primarily to Latino parents whose experience with the schools has been deficient. These Latino parents may not have had any schooling in the United States, or they may have dropped out of school because

they had difficult or negative academic and social experiences. When such people become parents, they may end up in low-wage employment with long hours. They may be unskilled in academics and unable to assist their children, or they may not speak the language of the school.

Furthermore, they may have difficulty accessing school resources to assist their children because they have little knowledge of how the school system works. In such cases, getting Latino parents involved in the school becomes problematic for educators. Involving parents who are strangers to the schooling system is possible if schools shape the conditions that invite open communication between Latino families and the school. Equity and access are the goals of parent-educator relationships. These two words represent the outcomes of all parent involvement efforts at the elementary and secondary levels because the fundamental purpose of all parent involvement is student achievement and academic success. Equity happens when Latino parents are participating in the schools on a par with their white Euro-American counterparts. This means that schools need to reach out differently to Latino parents and do whatever it takes to make them partners in the pursuit of Latino student achievement. Equity happens when the gap closes between white and Latino parent involvement and between white and Latino student achievement. Access is the process whereby Latino parents are able to attain information, resources, and entry into the schools to participate actively. That active level of participation enables community empowerment, where parents take charge of their schools, and it supports student achievement and success in school.

Life in Latino families is an important factor in the parents' level of participation in the school. The Latino family's home environment is affected by the family's socioeconomic standing, which could be serious economic poverty. By this, I do not mean that children from families who have low incomes cannot learn or that they necessarily have to underachieve in school. But we cannot ignore the fact that when children live in impoverished conditions, their resources differ from those available to families with higher incomes. Resources play a role in the education of the children. Although parents from poor communities value education for their children, they often lack knowledge about the educational system and the proper resources to effectively support their children's schooling. For example, poverty creates stress in the family due to financial insecurity. The lack of resources also results in health problems caused by poor nutrition and inferior or nonexistent health care, which in turn can negatively

x Involving Latino Families in Schools

impact children's school attendance. In extreme cases, inadequate housing and homelessness interfere with children's schooling and learning because of frequent moving from place to place or not having the space to make schoolwork a priority at home (Lopez, 2002). These are not convenient excuses to link poor children with poor achievement, but social conditions can defeat children's motivation and opportunity to learn.

The issue of parent involvement raises issues beyond the practical strategies for involving parents in the school. From my own and others' more recent research, it is known that high-achieving Latino students report a high level of parent involvement at home and in the school (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). These studies provide an understanding of the sociocultural complexity of the subject.

Educators need to establish a working partnership with Latino parents who live in poverty. The most important thing that educators can understand about Latino children from low-income homes is that they, too, have dreams. Families and children often overcome poverty and achieve success against the odds. Educators' attitudes about Latino children who are poor need to take into account that parents expect their children to receive a good education. Poor Latino children deserve to have educators believe in their intelligence and ability to learn. High expectations are critical for these children. Often, parents receive only negative reports about children from impoverished homes. Educators need to communicate with the parents about their children's strengths and efforts in school.

Studies of schools and Latino home culture have not always interpreted parental involvement in their children's schooling correctly. Although the use of English may be limited in many Latino homes, and parents may have low educational attainment, parents value education highly. They support their children's schooling by providing a strong emotional environment in the home. Telling children stories about family and personal history motivates them in their schoolwork and encourages them to take advantage of economic opportunities as adults. Many Spanish-speaking parents have immigrated to the United States, leaving behind family and facing tremendous peril to create opportunities for their children. This alone is a strong testament to Latino parents' desire to improve their children's future through education. A rift occurs when the school requires parents to play a role that is unfamiliar to them.

In educational institutions, parent involvement is based on knowing the needs of the children and the support system that is necessary for them to succeed. When students are not high achievers, educators

often point the finger at the parents, if the parents are not visibly involved in the school. However, the relationship between families, communities, and schools is not a straight line linking parent involvement and grades on a student's report card. More important is the fact that learning is a lifelong process, and grades have to be understood in that specific context, underscored by the larger story of the complex Latino parental role in children's education. Simplistic parent involvement blueprints also minimize the students' learning process, as well as the teacher's role. This intricate relationship, negotiated day-by-day, impacts continuities and discontinuities back and forth from home to school to community.

Good home-school communication makes the job easier for the teacher and benefits students. If parents work closely with teachers, they will know the teacher's expectations, and the students will know that the parents and teachers are working together with consistency. Teachers note that communication between parents and teachers is the essence of Latino parent involvement. Weekly letters, frequent phone calls, positive notes to the parents, working with parent volunteers in the classroom, and educating parents in workshops are just a few ways that teachers ensure ongoing contact with parents. Some teachers believe that parent involvement is so important that they give parents their home telephone number. They receive calls until a fixed hour, such as 8:30 P.M.

Although teachers are aware of their responsibility to encourage parent involvement, they feel that the administration must support their efforts through district policies and activities that endorse student achievement. School districts assist teachers through release time, community liaisons, and training to help them to assist parents participate fully in their children's education.

Although there are many ways to accomplish parent involvement goals in Latino communities, three major conditions and objectives stand out. They are *connecting*, *sharing information*, and *staying involved*.

Connecting with Latino parents sends a strong message. When educators, whether teachers, teacher assistants, community liaisons, counselors, principals, or other personnel, reach out to parents in a language they understand, parents feel included in their children's education. When parents are intimidated by the school setting because of their inexperience, it matters even more that educators initiate contact to enlist parental participation in school programs.

Sharing information is a two-way process. Just as educators need to share with parents what is happening in the school, they also need to learn about the child's experience in the family.

*Elementary and Secondary***POINT****Imperative Conditions
for Latino Parent Involvement**

- Connecting is ...
Reaching out to Latino families and community without judgment, in the language and culture that they understand, to keep information flowing
- Sharing information is ...
Improving learning opportunities for students through critical knowledge and sharing information between parents and educators about students
- Staying involved is ...
Involving Latino parents in an ongoing process by continuously assessing and revising the parent involvement program

Since parent involvement is an ongoing process, *staying involved* is the long-term goal. This means more than one event or one day. As educators and parents work together to keep an open-door policy with each other, children benefit from the strong, supportive foundation that the school and family build.

These components of parent involvement keep the process with Latino parents proceeding at a steady and active pace.

Confidence and communication are essential elements in the partnership between parents and schools. The best results happen when parents are involved in knowing what to do, and when teachers and parents respect and

understand each other's roles. This is the essence of parental involvement for Latino parents.

The eight chapters in this book suggest many possible ways that educators can engage Latino parents in the education of their children.

Chapter 1: Life in Latino Families. In this chapter, I describe the heterogeneity among Latino families as well as the shared history, language, and social values, including education. According to the research, Latino families support, encourage, and assist their children through school in many ways.

Chapter 2: Latino Parent Involvement for Student Success. The parent role in the school has many faces, including those of spectators, fundraisers, and audience at meetings. But the participatory role engages

parents as volunteers in the classrooms, as decision makers on curriculum matters, as personal communicators with teachers and principals, and as learners in literacy and parenting workshops that most favorably influence student academic outcomes.

Chapter 3: Sharing Information With Latino Parents. Communication is central to all parent involvement activities. Formal and informal verbal and written communication between schools and Spanish-speaking parents needs to be frequent, clear, and in the language parents best comprehend. How this is accomplished is the focus of this chapter. School conventions and procedures often require change in the school structure to facilitate systematic interchange.

Chapter 4: Parents Teaching in the Home. What parents do in the home makes a difference to students' school performance. Latino parents give their children a great deal of emotional, physical, and academic support by maintaining strong relationships with the children as well as with the school.

Chapter 5: Parents Participating in the Schools. Parent involvement programs need to be tailored to the specific community and school district. There are numerous roles parents play in the school, including that of spectators, volunteers, decision makers, and resources. Although some roles ask less of parents than decision maker, all roles are important because every one of them gets parents to the school. All contacts present opportunities for teachers to connect with Latino parents and to reach out to them and build on those interactions by inviting them to participate in particular ways.

Chapter 6: Getting Latinos to College Through Home-School Partnerships. Preparing for college begins in early elementary school by making explicit what can be a mystery and a maze for many Latino students. Latino parent involvement is immensely critical in socializing young Latino students to learn what is expected in academic achievement that leads to graduating from high school and entering college. Parent education for Latinos is an important aspect of this issue because they need to be knowledgeable about the schooling system that leads to college so that they can help students set expectations for reaching goals beyond high school.

Chapter 7: Designing Parent Involvement Programs in Schools. Whether Latino students comprise a large or small population or whether the school is largely multicultural with many different cultural groups,

xiv Involving Latino Families in Schools

involving parents in the school requires a strong, well-defined program. To ensure that parent involvement is a viable part of a classroom and a school's program, educators need to construct a conscious, deliberate, and systematic process. That includes designing, implementing, and continuously assessing how Latino parents participate in their children's education and providing them with the necessary training to make them co-teachers in educating Latino students.

Chapter 8: Working With Community-Driven Organizations. Latino parents can support each other by learning from one another. Organizing themselves to support each other around educational issues has proven to be a powerful way of establishing a Latino voice in the schools. Educators can play a supportive and advocate role within the schools for community organizations that propose changes to strengthen Latino student performance.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is organized thematically in the chapters. Within each chapter, I address the elementary and secondary needs relative to involving Latino parents in the different school levels. Much of the book is narrative, explaining the concepts in some detail under three categories: *connection*, *sharing information*, and *staying involved*. Throughout, I highlight *points*, *suggestions*, *personal vignettes*, and *case examples* that represent critical stop-and-reflect signposts. The boxes labeled *Point* are critical messages that are reminders to keep at a conscious level. In the boxes titled *Suggestion*, I pose ideas and activities that I have observed as successful. The suggestion boxes are labeled elementary, secondary, or both depending on where the ideas are appropriate. Some ideas apply only to elementary or to secondary schools, while other ideas apply to both school levels. These suggestions can be adapted according to the particular needs of a school or school district setting. In the *Case Example* illustrations, educators and parents reveal actual instances and practices in their parent involvement endeavors. The *Personal Vignettes* are accounts of experiences that individuals share. Whether it is a story shared by a school administrator, a parent, a teacher, community leader, or Latino student, the personal vignette is an excellent teaching tool. Personal stories have the power to convey people's emotional connection, telling how change affects their lives and how they deal with it. Where necessary, I designate the material elementary or secondary.

A special note here: The personal names that appear throughout the book are pseudonyms to protect the individuals' privacy.

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