

Bringing Parents of Underserved Students Into Schools: Ways to Go About It

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School leaders often say they want to engage families, but it can be a struggle to know just how to do it.

While most teachers in the nation's schools are middle class and white, experts say diversity and poverty among students are creating growing mismatch between educators and students and families. **To build partnerships with parents from different cultures takes intentionality and creative outreach.**

One way to deepen connections with parents is to provide them with training on how the school system works and help them become advocates for their children, thus promoting greater equity in education.

The **Intercultural Development Research Association** developed a family-leadership-in-education model that brings parents together and focus on how to improve the school. Instead of promoting a deficit view of families, this approach is participatory and honors the culture and language of the parent, said Aurelio M. Montemayor, a senior education associate with IDRA in San Antonio, Texas.

Through workshops, parents are provided with data (and interpreters as needed), to learn about student performance and curriculum to make sure the school is doing what it should to serve all students, said Montemayor. Instead of teachers looking at students through stereotypical filters, the training aims to have teachers view every child with the potential to be a high achiever, he said. "We want systems that are asset based, that view families as valuable," he said.

The **California Association for Bilingual Education** offers a series of workshops for parents to better understand technology, stand on other issues that impact their children's education. The goal is to help schools see parents in a new light, as partners with expertise that can use to be agents for change in their children, according to Maria Quezada of CABA.

Marisol Lagunas, a mother of two at Lowell Elementary School in Santa Ana, Calif., attended the association's 12 workshops and learned to ask more specifically about how her kids were doing in school and advocate for them. Lagunas said her mother, an immigrant from Mexico, wasn't as involved in education as she is now with her 3rd and 5th grade children. When she hears parents talk about concerns in the classroom, Lagunas informs them of their rights and helps push for them to get best results for their kids.

After parents from Martin Elementary School in Santa Ana finish the CABA training, they explained what they learned in a presentation at a school staff meeting. "It helped them find their voice and feel comfortable in talking with teachers," said kindergarten teacher Karah C. George. The experience for the parents at her school, most of whom do not have a college education. Even though teachers and parents came from different cultural backgrounds, George said it was powerful to discover their mutual care and desire to help the kids.

Parenting can be isolating and participating in organizational activities can help families find strength in numbers, said Allyson Criner, an associate director of Teaching for Change, a nonprofit that helps schools and parents build positive connections in Washington. She said, "Parents are willing to be part of the solution. It's creating opportunities for them to bring it up."

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