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Schools Enlist Parents to Bridge Cultural Barriers

By **Caralee J. Adams**

Maxine Nguyen used to think getting her four children to school and making sure they finished their homework was enough.

"From my culture, we usually leave it to the teachers to deal with education," said Nguyen, of Kent, Wash., who came from South Vietnam at age 4 as a refugee and had painful memories of being treated differently by teachers because of her ethnicity.

But her attitude changed once she got to know teachers, administrators, and other parents though a process in which her local school district was redesigning strategies to engage parents. Nguyen said she began to see teachers as fellow human beings who were approachable. The experience made her feel more confident asking questions, allowed her to better understand what was happening in her children's classrooms, and prompted her to volunteer at the school.

Increasingly, schools are working to bridge the cultural differences to get families engaged more deeply in their children's education. This means welcoming families, visiting their homes, listening to their experiences, and explaining the educational system so that families can recognize when biases are hurting their children's learning and work to overcome them.

"Teachers go into the classroom and they are confronted with kids who are a rainbow of colors and backgrounds, and [teachers] are just woefully underprepared," said Anne T. Henderson, a senior consultant for the **Community Organizing and Engagement program at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform**. "I'm convinced the inequitable practice of engaging families is very much behind the disparate outcomes

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that we see for our more-vulnerable children."

Not Out to 'Fix Parents'

Henderson said that instead of traditional, one-way activities that aim to "fix parents," such as lecturing parents at Back-to-School Nights, schools need to reach out to families and help them navigate schools. "Parents know when a school looks down on them," she said.

The key is to change the relationship from one of distrust to one of respect and collaboration. "We are moving from thinking of parents as the problem to parents as partners," said Henderson, a co-author of the 2007 book ***Beyond the Bake Sale***.

Take Mt. Rainier Elementary School in Maryland, composed mostly of Hispanic and African-American students, about half of whom are English-language learners. Principal Shawn Hintz wanted to do more than hold a social event, such as the annual barbecue, to engage families in the education of their children and the decisions of the school.

In partnership with Teaching for Change, a nonprofit that helps schools and parents build positive connections, Mt. Rainier last year invited parents into the classroom, with translators who could help educators explain how lessons were taught so they could replicate the methods at home. Hintz also hosts regular parent-principal "chit-chats" where parents are encouraged to raise issues.

"Before, the parents would do a lot of talking amongst themselves," Hintz said. "Now they feel more empowered to come talk to me about their concerns."

Creating a Story Quilt

This year Mt. Rainier will begin a six-week story-quilt activity where parents are given different prompts (such as to talk about their first paycheck or a time when they got in trouble) and then share their experiences as they make a quilt together. They also discuss challenges in the school and begin to do some community organizing, finding power working in a collective.

"It's based on the idea that we build meaningful relationships by sharing our stories," said Allyson Criner Brown, an associate director of Teaching for Change, in Washington. Teachers and principals are also encouraged to take part. "We are trying to address the power dynamics in the room and looking for where there may be differences, and biases and structures that may be putting up barriers."

In the Central Falls, R.I., district, drop-in "family rooms" have been set up in schools to

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provide a warm, welcoming space, along with computers and a staff member who is bilingual to connect with parents before, during, and after school.

"With so many minority families, especially if they don't speak the language, there is this big wall in front of the school," said Joshua Wizer-Vecchi, the coordinator of a federal Investing in Innovation, or i3, grant through Children's Friend, a Providence nonprofit that works with the district on family engagement. "Maybe you had a terrible experience or feel that you don't have a place here. We have tried to break that down and say, 'No, no, come in.' "

Sometimes school staff members mistakenly believe parents are not interested in their children's educations because they don't show up at school events. But it can be a matter of tuning into what works for the school's diverse community.

"We are guilty of scheduling for a time that works for us," said Wizer-Vecchi, who has switched events to evenings to accommodate working families. The district also has also begun to replace pizza and pasta with rice, beans, and empanadas to appeal to Latino families.

Expanding Teacher Awareness

In Kent, Nguyen was among the parents who designed and developed a family-engagement curriculum in collaboration with teachers, administrators, and researchers from the University of Washington. The process gave parents a chance to share their experiences, create bonds, and develop priorities for improving the school together with educators, said Ann Ishimaru, an assistant professor of education at the University of Washington in Seattle, who facilitated the work.

In turn, the process raised a level of awareness for these educators about how social, cultural, and racial dynamics influence their ongoing interactions with children and families, in and out of the classroom, Ishimaru said.

Being part of the collaborative design team was "enlightening," said Teresa Wocken-Linders, a 5th grade teacher who is white and works at Panther Lake Elementary School in Kent, which has become increasingly diverse through influxes of refugees.

"It was interesting to hear what was most important to parents—it's not always the same thing as what seems important to staff," said Wocken-Linders.

For instance, parents were concerned about safety and wanted training on how to prevent bullying. They also thought it was important that their children develop a positive racial identity within the school system, she said.

Wocken-Linders began to ask parents about their priorities going into conferences so they had more of a shared agenda.

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"As a teacher, I feel I have an increased awareness and respect for what parents know about their child and the needs of their child," she said. Now she translates more of her correspondence with parents—into Spanish or Vietnamese, as needed—using Google Translate. "I'm trying to be more sensitive."

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