

# Snapshot

December 2009



## Parent involvement in school

### *Engaging immigrant parents*

Among children ages 6 to 17 years old who live with a parent or parents, almost one-quarter (22%) have at least one foreign-born parent.

- Census Bureau, 2008 data.

Research has clearly linked parent involvement to positive educational outcomes and academic success, including more positive attitudes towards school, better grades, and higher test scores. So it is concerning that while immigrant parents highly value education, studies find they are also less likely to be involved in their child's education and school than parents born in the United States.

Studies find that compared to U.S.-born parents, foreign-born parents are less likely to visit their children's school, participate or attend school activities and events, help with homework, and talk to teachers and school staff.

This brief explores why immigrant parents are less involved in their children's education and provides strategies to increase their engagement.

### **The value of education**

There is a misperception among teachers, administrators, and other school staff that immigrant parents do not care about their

children's education because of their lack of "active" involvement in their children's school; i.e. direct involvement and contact with the school and teachers. However, research finds that immigrant parents highly value education and hold high educational expectations for their children. Some studies have found that foreign-born parents hold higher educational expectations for their children than U.S.-born parents. In addition, a 2004 study by Grace Kao of parental influences on the education of immigrant youth found that while immigrant parents were less likely to talk to their children about school than native-born parents, they were more likely to talk to their children about college.

Immigrant parents see education as the means to "making it" in the United States; i.e. having what it takes to succeed in America, such as English language proficiency, a good-paying job, and being able to navigate U.S. systems. Education is also highly valued among immigrant parents for their children because parents may not have had that same opportunity in their native country.

## Increasing parental involvement through education and training

The Connecting Parents to Educational Opportunities (CPEO) program within the Minneapolis Public School district aims to increase parental involvement and strengthen partnerships between parents and teachers/school staff. The 7-week program teaches parents about the school system and how they can help their child be successful, including communicating with teachers, understanding report cards, and preparing for college. The CPEO program is offered in English, Spanish, Hmong, and Somali.

Parents who complete the CPEO program receive certificates for free community education for themselves and post-secondary financial aid support for their children if they meet certain requirements and qualify for a Pell Grant.

For more information, please visit, <http://ofe.mpls.k12.mn.us/CPEO.html> or contact the Department of Family Engagement within the MPS district.

## Barriers to active parent involvement

Common barriers immigrant parents face to actively being involved in their children's education include lack of formal education, low English language proficiency, lack of knowledge of the mainstream U.S. culture and school systems, and time constraints due to work and family responsibilities.

Many immigrant parents have had limited opportunities for school and exposure or use of English in their native county, thus, they lack formal education and English language proficiency. This impacts their ability to help their children with school work.

Kristen Turney and Grace Kao's 2009 study "Barriers to School Involvement: Are Immigrant Parents Disadvantaged?" found that lower English language proficiency was linked to lower parental involvement among immigrant parents. For many immigrant parents, the lack of English language skills is a prominent barrier to being involved at their children's school and communicating with teachers and school staff. They may feel embarrassed with their English language skills, making and uncomfortable participating in school and talking to teachers.

In addition, immigrant parents may be unfamiliar with how the U.S. school system works and the concept of parental involvement. School systems differ around the world, and in many different countries parent involvement is not expected. Teachers assume a parental role in monitoring students' education and parent involvement would be considered

an interference and disrespectful. Thus, immigrant parents may not know they have the opportunity to be involved. They may also have limited knowledge of how to support their children's education and navigate the educational system.

Furthermore, immigrant parents may also struggle with fulfilling basic living needs and adjusting to the U.S., limiting their time for active involvement at their children's school.

## Effective engagement strategies

Teachers and school staff play important roles in engaging parents and creating a welcoming school environment for diverse families. However, in their efforts to be inclusive and promote parent involvement, they also need to be sensitive to the barriers that culturally diverse families face.

### Building relationships with immigrant parents

In fostering a welcoming school environment, it is important for teachers and school staff to develop positive relationships with parents. Immigrant parents feel welcomed when they know someone within the school. Greeting parents and making an effort to communicate with them goes a long way.

Showing an interest in the diverse experiences of students and their families is an easy way to start building relationships with parents. Parents are often interested in sharing their personal experiences. It gives teachers and school staff an opportunity to build their awareness and understand the diverse backgrounds of their student population. For example,

teachers may ask parents about their experience of immigrating to the U.S. or learn more about cultural holidays and traditions.

Building relationships with parents also strengthens trust between parents and teachers. Immigrant parents, especially those who lack English language proficiency, often feel that their voices will not be heard. Parents find it meaningful to have someone within the school that they can trust and talk to.

### **Providing needed information and guidance**

As immigrant parents are often unfamiliar with U.S. educational systems, they need information to help them understand the expectations of their children and of themselves as parents. Teachers and school staff can help guide immigrant parents in how to help their children in school, despite cultural and linguistic barriers. Immigrant parents value education and want to help their children be successful; however, many lack information on how to support their children's education and how they can be involved.

Teachers and school staff can help parents build a home environment that supports learning and literacy for their children, such as providing quiet space and a regular time for their children to complete homework and reading to their children if possible, whether it is in English or their native language.

### **Having bilingual interpreters or family liaisons within schools**

Most importantly, information and guidance needs to be provided in a way that immigrant parents understand.

While many schools translate letters and other school information into multiple languages, immigrant parents may not be literate in their native language for a variety of reasons, including lack of formal education or limited use of writing or reading in their native language.

Active outreach, such as phone calls or home visits, can be successful in engaging immigrant parents especially when done using culturally specific strategies and bilingual school staff who can eliminate language barriers.

Bilingual/bicultural teachers and school staff are instrumental in helping immigrant families within schools. Immigrant parents feel more comfortable talking to someone who knows their language and understands their background. Several studies have found that bilingual school staff who actively engage immigrant parents have been successful in inviting and engaging immigrant parents to attend school activities and events.

Many schools with a high concentration of one or more ethnic or language groups often employ a language specific family liaison whose role is to work with parents from the same background. Family liaisons help greet parents when they come into the school. They also resolve any concerns or issues that parents may have about their children's education, and can help guide parents in communicating with other school staff to resolve concerns and to understand the school system.

In addition, having interpreters or family liaisons available helps relieve students of having to translate for their parents. Family liaisons can also serve as "cultural brokers," helping to resolve conflict among immigrant adolescents and their parents caused by intergenerational and acculturation differences.

It is important to ensure that interpreters and family liaisons are supported and they have the resources they need to carry out their responsibilities. Many bilingual/bicultural staff may feel overwhelmed with their workload; especially if they are the only staff person who can speak a specific language.

### **Offering additional support**

Another effective strategy is to keep parents informed about available resources and opportunities that their families can benefit from within the school or community, such as tutoring or youth leadership programs, adult literacy programs, and parent advisory groups. Several studies find that immigrant parents are interested in learning about how the school system works, what roles administrators play, how decisions are made on the school and district level, and what roles they can play within the decision making process.



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Immigrant parents also need information about helping their children access post-secondary education. The college application process may be a new experience for many immigrant parents who did not attend college in the United States. College is highly valued, but immigrant parents may have difficulty understanding what their children need to do in high school to prepare for college and be well-positioned for college acceptance, such as taking advanced courses or completing a second language requirement. In addition, immigrant parents need information about helping their children complete college applications and finding ways to finance a college education. They may be unfamiliar with what is needed from them in the process of applying for financial aid, such as employment and tax return information.

## Conclusion

While immigrant parents face barriers to active parental involvement, they play an important role in their children's education. Research shows using the strategies outlined in this snapshot can reduce these barriers and help immigrant parents demonstrate and reinforce the value of education and the high expectations they have for their children.

## Resources

The following resources were used in development of this snapshot:

Turney, K. & Kao, G. (2009). Barriers to school involvement: Are immigrant parents disadvantaged? *The Journal of Educational Research*, 102: (4), 257-271.

Peterson, S.S., & Ladky, M. (2007). A survey of teachers' and principals' practices and challenges in fostering new immigrant parent involvement. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 30 (3), 881-910.

Schaller, A. & Rocha, L. (2007). Maternal attitudes and parent education: How immigrant mothers support their child's education despite their own low levels of education. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 35:5, 351-356.

Sobel, A., & Kugler, E.G. (2007). Building partnerships with immigrant parents. *Educational Leadership*, 64 (4), 62-66.

Kao, G. (2004). Parental influences on the educational outcomes of immigrant youth. *International Migration Review*, 38, 427-450

Brewster, C. & Railsback, J. (2003). *Building trust with schools and diverse families: A foundation for lasting partnerships*. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Portland, Oregon. Retrieved from: [http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm\\_send/453](http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm_send/453)

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