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Immigrant Parents and the School

A Handout for Teachers

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Background

During the past decade, more parents and children have immigrated to the United States than any other time since the turn of the century. Representing countries such as Mexico, Vietnam, China, India and the Ukraine, this fast growing and diverse group present unique challenges and opportunities for teachers. In addition to the cultural diversity and unique life experiences common to individuals entering from other countries, the vast majority of immigrant parents and children are from home countries which have a primary language other than English. This combination of cultural, experiential and linguistic diversity poses potential barriers to the integration of parents into the school environment. The following strategies are designed to provide proactive solutions to problems which may arise in the areas of home-school communication and parent involvement in school activities.

Home-School Communication Strategies

1. Provide a one-page notice to parents in their native language which emphasizes that all children have the legal right to a free public education regardless of their immigration status.
2. Post a notice at the school entrance informing parents that children do not need a green card, visa, passport or other proof of citizenship or immigration status to register for school.
3. During registration, introduce parents to school policies, procedures, grading structure, and programs in their native language. Parents who were educated in another country may not be familiar with the structure and format of the United States educational system. This introduction is best accomplished through face-to-face communication. However, if this format is not possible, a video-taped summary in the parent's native language may be created for on-site viewing or home check-out.
4. Teacher-to-parent contacts should be in the native language of the parent and should encompass all forms of home-school communication (e.g., informational letters for parents, school newsletters, picture day flyers).
5. Parent-to-teacher contacts may be facilitated by distributing "bilingual" teacher business cards (English on one side and native language of parent on other). These cards should include the teacher's name as well as the school address and phone number. Additional strategies include sending home several preprinted memo sheets with the teacher's name on top which could be dropped off at the school and placed in the teacher's box. Self-addressed, postage paid, bulk mail sheets might also be distributed to parents to be used for more lengthy communications or to notify the teacher of a change in address, etc.
6. Parent-teacher conference preparation should include consultation with individuals familiar with the parent's culture and behavioral "do's, don't's, and maybe's." Parents should be given the option to bring their own interpreter or to have one provided by the school. They should also be encouraged to bring an extended family member or friend for support. Research also indicates the benefit of addressing the transportation and child care needs of immigrant parents as well as the need for extended time

7. At least one social/conversational meeting should be planned in order to develop an understanding of the parent's background and culture and their expectations of the school system. To minimize parent inconvenience, this informal meeting might be planned jointly with other teachers and school personnel working with the family. To reinforce the social atmosphere of the meeting, both the teacher and parent might plan to bring food/snacks to share.

Parents as Supporters of School and Children's Learning

1. Develop handouts in parent's native language emphasizing importance of parent involvement.
2. Expand concept of "volunteerism" and actively recruit immigrant parents as classroom volunteers during registration process. For example, volunteer parent may serve as a mentor for newly arriving parents and students. Encourage indirect participation by parents through activities that can be completed at home for use in the classroom. For example, the parent may be asked to create folders for each student for a reading activity. Participation should be on a voluntary basis with all materials supplied by the school.
3. Inform parents well in advance of their child's participation in school activities such as assemblies and programs.
4. Seek out local businesses which are willing to sponsor a "Parent of the Month" through gift certificates or products.

Resources

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