

Building Partnerships with Immigrant Parents

By Andrea Sobel and Eileen Gale Kugler

Ms. Pham, a mother from Vietnam with three children at Annandale High School, said she used to be “afraid to come to the school” but now feels “like this is my home.” Mr. Fesseha from Ethiopia was concerned about the decisions his 11th grader was making about his future, but he is “now in a position to help him.” Ms. Ibarra from Bolivia said “I am not scared anymore to pick up the phone and call anyone at this school. My kids say ‘Why are you doing that?’ I tell other parents that they have to be in the school, too.”

All of these parents were part of a program to increase participation by immigrant parents at Annandale High School in Fairfax County, Virginia. Increasing parent engagement at the secondary level is always challenging, but Annandale High adds the challenge of language and cultural barriers faced by parents born outside the U.S – the student body hails from more than 90 native countries and more than half of the parents speak a language other than English at homes. While there are many active parents, including several PTA officers who are bi-lingual immigrants, the vast majority of immigrant parents are disconnected from the school and their children’s education. The administration, faculty, and current parent leaders are committed to changing that.

Their efforts were significantly enhanced the past two years with a grant from the Washington Area Partnership for Immigrants. With its non-profit partner, the Mid-Atlantic Equity Center, Annandale High developed a comprehensive program including classes for immigrant parents, faculty action research, and the opening of a Parent Resource Center.

Developing Immigrant Parent Leaders

Recognizing that creating a comfortable non-threatening environment for immigrant parents is a critical first step, Annandale High offered classes geared specifically to immigrants. The first year of the grant, a variety of classes in several languages were offered, however, these proved both labor-intensive and overlapping. The second year, the school focused on the classes that offered the most potential for building two-way partnerships with immigrant parents. The school offered six-week Immigrant Parent Leadership Classes in Spanish (the largest language sub-group) and English (for parents from English-speaking countries and bi-lingual parents comfortable in English). The school’s bi-lingual parent liaisons were involved in the planning and the class in Spanish was taught by the Hispanic Parent Liaison.

The classes sought to empower the parents to become leaders in their own families, the school, and the broader community. Discussions covered topics such as motivating your child; planning for the future, including course selection and college choice. Guest speakers and visits to school facilities such as the library and the Career Center broadened the parents’ resources. In addition to advance planning, the two instructors

conducted a needs assessment at the beginning of the first class, with the Spanish and English classes covering different topics where a need was shown.

A key element of these classes was that the school sought to build a partnership with the parents, not simply instruct them or inform them. With this open mind, the school gained a great deal of knowledge. Among the lessons learned:

The immigrant community itself is diverse, including wide-ranging economic and language backgrounds. Programming aimed at immigrants tends to be at a very basic level, yet many are ready for more sophisticated programming. Some parents are eager to become involved in the school and take on leadership roles.

While English-speaking immigrant parents may not face language barriers, many still face cultural barriers stemming from different practices and school expectations in their native countries.

Building relationships is at the core of connecting immigrant parents to the school. Small classes offered a comfortable environment for parents to express themselves, and fostered the strong bond that developed among the parents. A key strength of the Parent Leadership classes was that they were school-based, providing parents with specific information and contacts that were of immediate relevance. Most guest speakers were from the school faculty. The parents appreciated the fact that the principal came to the class graduation and gave his business card to each parent, encouraging them to contact him.

Each class finished the year by planning an event for other parents. The Spanish leadership class shared the knowledge they had gained by making presentations in Spanish (with translations to other languages available) on “10 Tips for Your Student to be Successful in School” and offering tours of the school. Parents from the English class organized a “Bravo Dinner” with a panel of successful immigrants sharing their experiences with parents and students at a pot-luck dinner. Parents from the Immigrant Parent Leadership Classes from both years helped to organize these two events.

Faculty Participation

Immigrant parent leadership within a school community requires partnership and commitment from school faculty, staff and administration. In response to a project goal of increasing school personnel’s competence and confidence in working with immigrant parents, 22 faculty members conducted Action Research projects. The projects were designed to increase knowledge of immigrant communities and develop strategies to create partnerships with immigrant parents to improve student academic achievement.

Researchers reported an increase in their understanding of parent expectations for their children, noting that most parents had very high expectations for post-secondary education, but limited knowledge on how to achieve these goals. Findings also added to an understanding of issues related to language and communication with immigrant parents, such as:

- Parents may have a basic understanding of English, but they may not have the vocabulary related to academic language used in the schools or with nuances.
- Students are often unreliable translators for their parents as they may screen the information.
- Parents value and respond to efforts on the part of school personnel to communicate with them regarding their children. They are interested in understanding how they can contribute to their child's school success.

These year-long investigations led to specific recommendations to increase family engagement in the school, which were shared with teachers within the school and the district. The recommendations included:

- Call parents with good news: Parents often prefer a personal call over a written communication. Most parents can understand basic information on the phone.
- Communicate important academic information in home languages whenever possible; plan ahead and utilize language resources within the school and district.
- At the beginning of the year, have your students work with their parents or guardian to develop a study plan for the year.
- Call or e-mail parents about major assignments. Many immigrant parents do have email through their jobs.
- Develop a parent phone tree to let parents know about assignments or activities for your classes or extracurricular activity. Enlist assistance of bilingual parents.
- Extend personal invitations to school events by phone or email, not just flyers.
- Provide incentives for students to get their families involved in school.
- Give immigrant students opportunities to share aspects of their culture when it corresponds with the curriculum.

The researchers recommended specific strategies for school-wide initiatives, including;

- Establish a Family Resource Specialist position to coordinate family engagement efforts,
- Investigate ways to make the school feel more welcoming to parents; and
- Provide parents with additional notice about course selections and their role in helping their child prepare for the future.

Above all, the researchers recommended patience and continued efforts to reach out to parents.

Establishing a Parent Resource Center

Both the faculty members and the new parent leaders expressed an interest in establishing a parent resource center at Annandale High. Parent resource centers in the district have been housed exclusively in elementary schools, including two exemplary centers in elementary schools feeding into Annandale High. Parent Resource Centers provide parents with a safe, comfortable place to learn about the school, the school system, ways

to support their children's social and academic growth and a place to volunteer. These benefits are important to secondary school parents as well, particularly for immigrant parents who may lack basic information about American schools and options about college and careers.

In October of 2005, Annandale High opened a comprehensive Parent Resource Center, the first of its kind in a high school in Fairfax County. The center offers school system, parenting, parent advocacy and community resources for parents, available in multiple languages. Permanent signs in four languages direct parents to the center located in a trailer directly behind the school. Parents have access to additional resources on the Internet through computers in the center. Parent meetings, workshops and a monthly immigrant parent support group, led by a guidance counselor, met in the center.

The school administration was committed to providing a respectful, comfortable and accessible space for parents. Parent liaisons moved their offices to the Center and found it helpful to share information with parents in their own languages and respond to individual or group questions regarding their children and their academic experiences in high school.

Lessons learned: Planning for the future

One of the greatest challenges identified is that of communication. Recruitment for the parent leadership classes and other workshops is time intensive. We learned that different methodologies worked better for members of different communities, with a personal invitation via telephone or in person the optimum way to reach most parents. Multiple strategies were also needed. For example, distributing flyers in different languages was a first step at providing information, followed by email and/or telephone contact, notices in foreign language newspapers, and parent-to-parent communications. Many hours were spent on the phone to recruit a small number of parents for each class.

Even after parents made the decision to participate in a program, reminders were necessary as their lives are often extremely complicated and busy. Most programs were offered during the evening, yet many immigrants work in the evening or have family responsibilities. We found that different times for programs are needed to meet varying parent schedules.

We learned from parents that in most cases, parents need a very specific reason to visit the school or the Center; a meeting with a teacher, guidance counselor or parent liaison; a workshop on a topic of interest to them, support groups, etc. They were unlikely to "drop in" to the center. While the elementary school had volunteer projects waiting for "drop-in" parents, the high school program is not structured to provide this opportunity with ease. Many of the immigrant parents in this community were working – often more than one job.

What is in the future for Annandale High School Immigrant Parents? Hopefully sustained efforts for parents to connect with teachers and school personnel, participate in

their child's academic life, assume leadership roles in their community and in school, as well as continued advocacy on behalf of their children. School personnel continue to increase their awareness of the importance of communicating with immigrant parents and are learning successful strategies from one another. Their work from the past two years is becoming embedded in the school culture, which is critical for continued success.

A very positive outgrowth of the grant activity is a potential partnership between Fairfax County Public Schools and the Fairfax County government. A plan is being considered to establish a Neighborhood Center at Annandale High School which would combine the school focus of the Parent Resource Center with additional health and community resources. This potential partnership grew out of the identified community need for a full-service center and on the successes that have been noted at Annandale High School. The work begun in the Annandale Parent Resource Center will continue as part of this project with additional resources to address challenges related to accessing parents, getting the word out and providing space for meetings and confidential conversations with liaisons.

These important systemic changes take time, continued attention, collaboration, advocacy and administrative leadership. Annandale High School is ready to lead the way in this endeavor with many of the components already in place.

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