

DEFYING THE ODDS, PARENTS of DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS ACHIEVE THE IMPOSSIBLE



Research indisputably acknowledges, “Parents as a student’s first and most important teacher”. Federal education legislation supports this notion by mandating ‘parent engagement’ in every iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). However, little is really understood by professionals or policy-makers about parent engagement within language minority communities. Recently, Quality Counts 2020, states “Linguistic integration or the percent of DLL students’ whose parents are fluent speakers of English is an indicator that influences a students’ Chance-for-Success. However, my first-hand experience in living, learning and raising five dual language learners in two countries, communities and cultures over 25 years, offers a much different familial and cultural perspective of the importance DLL parents place on education that is not reflected in most U.S. schools.

My first encounter with DLL parent concerns and expectations occurred as PTA president and school board trustee of an inner-city Dallas community. The first community/PTA meeting was profoundly eye-opening as the poorest and **98%** non-English speaking school community packed the ‘cafetorium’ with ‘standing room only’ participants eager to learn about the upcoming school year plans. What was not understood initially but thoroughly embraced by parents over time was the importance their collective input would have on determining the direction the school community would take for several years.

1000 non-English speaking students attended a tiny **PK-3rd** grade three story building situated on one city block nestled in a forgotten refugee resettlement area of Dallas. The building, enclosed by barbed-wire fencing, had no playground, no auditorium and no gym. The school community, primarily first-generation immigrant, non-literate in their first or heritage language, was extremely poor as **99%** of the student population qualified for the free or reduced lunch program. Few families had sufficient resources to provide needed food, clothing, school supplies or books for the children. **7** different cultures and languages Spanish, Korean, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese and English graced this complex community. Achievement scores were abysmal and the school was labeled low-performing. However, what happened next completely upended the notion of ‘disinterested parents’!

PREPARATION

Under the direction of new school leadership and highly effective teachers a strategic plan was developed based on input from parent leaders representing each community. Parent groups chose an interpreter who was a trusted and respected leader within their community to conduct meetings in the appropriate language. Example: A Buddhist monk from the Laotian community took charge of interpreting materials, communicating with families and providing feedback to the school and PTA. Extra time was allotted during each meeting for translators to communicate information in the language parents understood best.

A series of Multilingual surveys were distributed with questions regarding the family's priorities, expectations, challenges and strengths. The community leaders facilitated parent survey responses orally or in writing. Community parents became PTA board members ensuring full representation from each community. Leadership training was provided in every language. Parent leaders organized the meeting agendas based on survey results. Transparently tabulated multilingual surveys revealed the following:

Priorities

- Build new schools in the inner city to stop bussing their children to suburbs after 3rd grade.
- Move the health clinic into the community for easy access.
- Build affordable homes within the community.
- Conduct Basic English classes for first generation parents to help their students with homework, attend parent/teacher conferences and participate in their learners ongoing academic career.

Results

Homes were built. The health clinic was moved to within walking distance of the seven diverse communities. Free Basic English classes were established for parents which included an early childhood education component, snacks, transportation, books and materials, certified teachers trained to use evidence-based instructional strategies and a new curriculum focused on integrating dual language acquisition with academic courses. Over 1000 families attended classes annually. The only Basic English participant requirement was to volunteer one hour per week at the school. More than 17,000 parent volunteer hours were recorded by the school's official sign-in log within one year. Additionally, the school administration implemented a variety of PK-3 language programs which included dual language, transitional bilingual and ESL taught by highly trained multilingual teachers. Within two years, the school attained the highest academic achievement recognition awarded by the State Board of Education.

The greatest accomplishment enjoyed by this poor, minority, non-English speaking community was building two new schools in the inner city with \$22 million school bond funds which ended the 17-year desegregation bussing mandate. The community, also, eagerly participated in both the architectural design, school naming and ribbon cutting process. Most importantly, the community stayed involved with their student's academic life through high school and beyond. The entire five-year journey changed the district's and city's perception of what 'disadvantaged' parents can achieve when engaged from beginning to end.

What We Learned

Every community is different and unique but the common bond among all of them is their child's well-being. Quality education was **THE** priority that overshadowed all other concerns. In order to reach the clearly stated goals articulated by the diverse, multilingual groups extraordinary collaborative measures that supported a sustained, inclusionary decision-making process were instituted. Each group learned to

LISTEN intently

ASK questions

HONOR differing viewpoints

ALLOCATE sufficient time to each group and project

REMAIN FLEXIBLE

SEEK EXPERTISE when necessary

SHOW UP and stay committed

ADMIT FAILURES and learn from them

NOT SETTLE for substandard results

PARTICIPATE fully

DEMAND answers

NEVER GIVE UP

The schools, homes and clinic stand as a testimony to what parents can accomplish when stereotypes, barriers and low-expectations are eliminated. Yes, there is no doubt that parents who communicate effectively in the school or society's primary language benefit. However, learning a new language, parent conferences, international festivals, culturally relevant books, pictures, programs are not enough. Parents engage where and how they live, work and educate their children. Our role, as passionate educators, is to harness the interest, curiosity, knowledge, eagerness, commitment and sometimes uncertainty that exists within diverse multilingual communities which with time and patience can lead to unimaginable results. This poor, non-literate community defied all odds and achieved the impossible!

You and your community can too!

For more information on how to organize parent engagement with results contact

The Education Neuroscience Foundation

202-731-0391 or visit the ENF website at www.eduneuroscience.com

Quality Counts 2020: Chance for Success; Education Week 2/ 11/2010

