Building Partnerships for Student Success Through Family Involvement

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FAMILY ENGAGEMENT TEACHING CASES
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2002

Defining “Fine”—Communicating Academic Progress to Parents

Holly Kreider, Margaret Caspe

Case Narrative

In a small rural state, an act is signed into law. The Act ensures overall educational quality in the state's schools through adoption of rigorous statewide and local academic standards, state and local assessments, individual school action plans based on assessment results, and mandatory reporting of educational results to communities. School action plans must be developed by committees with parent and/or community member representatives. These committee members will need to know how to interpret and act on school performance data, as well as how to communicate the information to the community at large.

The Principal

Dick Leonard, a Principal of 24 years, was returning to his office at Peterson Elementary School after a long day of meetings at the district office. He rolled down the window and started to recap the important points of the day's events. Although controversial, he didn't think the law was all that bad. He knew that state test results would be coming back, and with that data, staff, parents, and community would all need to come together to form action plans for approval by the school board. He knew that on the systemic level, this meant making decisions about what programs to keep and which to let go in order to increase student success. Parents would need to be involved in the decision-making process. They would need to understand the standards and what it looked like for a child to successfully meet those standards.

“When parents come to school we have to get them on the same page as us. This starts with the relationships between teachers and parents. Parents don't come to conferences to talk about social stuff. They want to know what their kids can and can't do. I am very clear with my teachers on how they should run their parent-teacher conferences. I don't say the specifics, but I remind them that we're dealing with the state standards and frameworks and that we need to articulate this to our parents. We need to educate them because it's different than when they came to school. We need to talk about new assessments. We need to talk about math, reading, and writing performance. They need to understand why we're choosing certain books for reading.”

Dick believed from experience and research that what parents and families want most from schools is a good experience for their kids. Parents want schools first and foremost that are safe and treat kids with care, understanding, and fairness. There was no question in his mind that different parents wanted different things, but he knew they all want to see their kids succeed.

“Parents need to understand what success is. They need to talk to their kids about the importance of school and listening to their teachers. On the flip side, teachers need to be able to articulate to parents what their kids should be able to do. You can't have high standards and low expectations for kids and families at the same time.

Dick had initiated a number of new school-wide policies based on these beliefs. He had eliminated the practice of giving letter grades. At the meeting that morning he was quite vocal in explaining his rationale to his colleagues.

“The kid might get an ‘A’ and the parents think they know what their kid learned. Well they don't know. They only know he got an ‘A.’ We need to show where a kid is in relation to the standards. We have to explain if a kid is meeting the standards, exceeding them, or below them. That's why standards were developed in the first place. You can tie your ‘A’ to standards. Standards are a tool that let teachers and parents monitor the rigor of the work children are expected to do. Unfortunately, standards might be public documents, but they're not accessible and understandable. I think that we in education need to take more responsibility in explaining to parents what standards mean. This will get directly at the issue of parents not having trust in the system.”

Dick had talked about building trust back into the system. Over the years he believed that deteriorating confidence was one of the main problems that existed between the public and public institutions. If teachers and schools could communicate progress and standards with families better, then that would be the first step in building more confidence in the system.

Dick thought of his own situation as a father. He had stopped going to parent-teacher conferences for his daughter when she was a sophomore in high school. During one back-to-school night, he asked his daughter's math teacher to talk about the standards in her classroom. Dick was shocked that the teacher could not clearly express what she expected from his daughter and the others. Nor could she show him some of his daughter's work when he requested it. He felt his time had been wasted. He drove into the parking lot, renewing in his vows to make things different at his school.

The Parents

Molly Burnham and her friend Margot, both parents at Peterson Elementary, stood in the parking lot waiting to pick up their children. Molly was upset because her son, Nathan, who was in first grade had been recommended for summer school. She knew that he was reading on grade level, so was surprised to hear the recommendation two weeks ago at parent-teacher conferences. She and her husband decided not to send their son to the summer classes. As a 30-year-old mother of two, Molly worked only part time so that she could spend more time at home with her children. Much of this time was spent on making Nathan a strong reader. She confided her concerns to her friend Margot.

“Reading is one of the areas where it took him a long time to pick it up, because he resists when he has trouble learning. But we're really working on helping him understand that just because things are a little difficult doesn't mean it can't be done. I keep telling him it's like playing Nintendo—not that I like him to sit there hour after hour, but there are things that are hard, and then he'll get help and he'll do it. So eventually this year he really did pick up his reading. He can read fluently and understand what he's reading. He's now on grade level exactly. And that was important to me.”

Molly had advocated for her son to be in the special enrichment school-day reading program, but other kids were ahead of him so he couldn't enroll. Because of this she worked on reading with him a lot at home.

“We read all the time. Even if it's the back of a cereal box. We read signs, we look at the board at the bus station, and if he recognizes that something looks colorful and interesting, he'll read that. We read a story every night. It's mostly the same books all the time, but he likes the repetition and knowing words immediately.

“His teacher told me he was doing well, that he was on grade level. But now she's recommending him for summer school. I really don't think it was fair. Why is she concerned about summer slippage when we spend so much time reading with Nathan at home? We have nearly twenty library books taken out! Besides, I kept trying to get him help during the year, but there were other special needs kids ahead of him. And he's not even special needs. And now they want him to miss his summer, and he's only in the first grade. Why would she suggest summer school out of nowhere?”

The other mother responded. “This school just has a lot of trouble letting us know how our kids are doing. My oldest son is in fourth grade, and his report cards have been getting stupider and stupider over the years. By fourth grade you really need to have some kind of letter grade. Let me know where he stands! I just can't figure it out. Last quarter I got this report that says ‘he's meeting the standard’ or ‘he's not meeting the standard’ or ‘he's exceeding the standard.’ These report cards don't even tell you if your kid is really doing okay. I mean they moved my son up a level, which is great. But we're also a little worried about that because I don't know if he's doing ‘A’ work, ‘B’ work, or ‘C’ work. You don't have any control over how they do the report cards anymore.”

Molly thought more about it. She didn't mind having standards or benchmarks to show progress. Because of her loose work schedule she was in the school a lot and felt she had a good handle on what was going on. She understood the different strategies the teachers used in reading and how she could help Nathan beyond asking him to “sound things out.” But she also felt the curriculum was a bit overwhelming and that the new standards made it hard to read letters and notes sent home by the school. She was worried sometimes that even though she was actively involved, she was not getting the total picture and not getting a lot out of the communications with the school.

Molly looked at Margot and said, “I think the school needs to send home information just to let you know in between how your kids are doing. I know that when the kids leave school, teachers are allowed to have their time. But if they could have progress reports or open houses or a potluck dinner—they don't do those things anymore.”

Margot agreed, “Teachers just present a portfolio and tell a parent that their child is doing fine. Teachers need to show what ‘fine’ means. Teachers need to be able to give a parent a four-point rubric and explain where their child is and where they want that child to go. It needs to be concrete. You know, we come into school and they go over the kids' progress, their report card, and their strengths and weaknesses. Yes, you meet the teacher. You get the report card. Then she has folders with some work in them, but what does it all mean? What do I have to compare it to?”

At this point Nathan came bounding out of school and gave his mom a big hug. “Let's go play in the park,” he yelled.

The Teacher

Tammy Gray, Nathan's teacher, began to clean up her room after dismissal. Teaching at Peterson Elementary for over 10 years, Tammy was a respected educator and friend to many in the building. As she straightened out the reading record folders, she smiled as she ran across Nathan's. He was the success of her year. He came into the year with a lot of difficulty reading and was very behind with his sounds and his retention of words. She worked one-on-one with him for most of the year.

“Without the one-on-one, I'm not sure what would have happened. He might have picked it up, but because he was so much lower than the others, it's hard to say. But now I expect him to continue reading at the average level next year. He's doing well with his research on zebras and he's just so excited about anything he reads and writes. His mom's in school a lot and if she's walking by he'll bring her something that he's written and show it to her.”

But Tammy was also concerned.

“I just don't want him to lose what he's learned—we've worked so hard this year and he's come along so well. I don't want him to hit the ‘summer slide’ so to say. Molly acted surprised by this. Hasn't she been tracking his progress through the year? I don't even think she realizes how low he was coming in.”

Tammy began to walk down the hall to the main office. She thought about all the times parents were surprised at the end of the year when their children's promotion to the next grade was questioned. But Tammy felt she did her best.

“I send home numerous report cards and progress reports throughout the year. I even have my own progress reports that I send out at least two times during the report periods so that the door is open if parents want to discuss any problems. We hold report cards until the parent-teacher conferences to make sure that they arrive home and so that we can talk to the parents about them. In my class I explain what the different standards are, the way the report cards are marked, and what it means. I tell them how their child's doing in the different areas and let them know the concerns I might have. And then I ask the parent if they have questions for me, and quite often they don't. I don't know if that's because I've explained it so clearly or they just have no idea what to ask!”

Tammy always felt her discussions with parents were positive experiences. She believed educators need to go into conferences with an attitude of “What can we do to make this situation better for your child?” or “These are all the wonderful things your child can do.” She walked into the office to check her mailbox. Inside, a flyer invited her and other teachers to take part in the school design team created as a result of the new law. She wondered under her breath, “What a waste of time! I recognize many of the parents in this school have a lot of strengths and a lot to contribute. But if parents don't even understand about their own kids' progress, how are they ever going to be able to participate in these school-wide teams?”

The people and events in this case are based on real life accounts, but have been disguised to protect confidentiality. We would like to thank ethnographer Kim Friedman for conducting the in-depth interviews from which this teaching case was developed and her early analytical insights. This work was supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of its Research Network on Successful Pathways Through Middle Childhood.

Discussion Questions

- What do administrators, teachers, and parents want from a student reporting system?
- How are administrators', teachers', and parents' interests and needs served by the new ideas and practices?

- Will school personnel and parents be able to work together?
- What are the organizational and administrative issues in this case?
- What are some school and home barriers to parental understanding of children's academic progress?
- What are the consequences of poorly communicated progress? What are the benefits of well understood progress?
- What are some effective ways to communicate children's academic progress to parents?

Instructor Notes

To request instructor notes for this teaching case, send an email to FINE at fine@gse.harvard.edu.

Defining “Fine”—Communicating Academic Progress to Parents Commentary by Deborah Stipek

Deborah Stipek is the I. James Quillen Endowed Dean of the Stanford University School of Education. Read an article about her work in the Stanford Report. She is co-author of the book, "Motivated Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning".

The new standards and emphasis on accountability for schools creates considerable challenges in home-school communication. As the principal notes after his visit to his daughter's school, even the teacher didn't seem to understand the math standards. If teachers can't articulate them, it is no wonder that parents are confused. The political climate and the frequent changes in the standards seen in some states and communities makes communication all the more difficult.

Despite the principal's apparent commitment to communicating with parents, there are many examples of misunderstandings in this case study. The principal eliminated grades, but the parents interviewed obviously did not understand what the new information on students' report cards meant. Nathan's mother worked with him on reading, disappointed that he had not been accepted into a special program, but apparently not aware that the teacher was also working with him one-on-one. The teacher felt she was informing parents by sending “numerous report cards and progress reports throughout the year,” but according to Nathan's mother, these written communications didn't make sense. The communication glitches seen in this case are common.

I will take a few examples from this case to illustrate strategies that can be used to improve communication of standards and individual student progress. Grades, as the principal concluded, do not provide useful information. They do not tell parents what their child knows, what her strengths are, or where she is falling behind.

Grades are particularly problematic as a strategy to provide information about individual student performance because the standards and criteria vary substantially from school to school and even from classroom to classroom. For example, one national study found that seventh-graders in low-poverty schools who received an ‘A’ in math achieved at the 87th percentile on average on the math achievement test; students who received an ‘A’ in math in high-poverty schools achieved on average at the 36th percentile. Parents in high-poverty schools therefore can be easily misled into thinking that their child is doing fine, even though he is doing very poorly relative to national norms.

If alternative strategies to provide information are used, however, they must be clear and meaningful to parents. At the elementary level, they can be very concrete (e.g., understands single-digit addition and subtraction), and they should indicate whether a child has or has not achieved the expectations for his grade level. Really good report cards include suggestions for activities children can do at home to develop skills in areas in which they are having difficulty. It is useful to involve parents in efforts to revise reports that are sent home, and to pilot a new report on a subset of parents to make sure that it is clear and interpreted accurately.

Communicating standards to parents requires that they first be well understood by teachers. This usually requires a fair amount of professional development time, including time spent looking at student work and assessments to make sure that they have evidence for every student on where their skills are relative to the standards. If teachers have done this kind of careful analysis in a group, they should be prepared to explain standards to parents, as well as to show parents through their own children's work samples how their children are doing.

In my experience, it is very difficult to communicate standards effectively in writing, and it is inefficient for teachers to explain standards to parents individually at teacher-parent conferences. This time should be devoted as much as possible to the child's own progress. School programs organized by subject-area and grade level work most effectively. One strategy to improve parent attendance is to involve their children in demonstrating the work they are doing to achieve the standards. Having parents actually engage in activities is also helpful. The programs take time to organize, but they also save a great deal of time correcting misunderstandings and dealing with angry parents!

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Defining “Fine”—Communicating Academic Progress to Parents Commentary by Jerold P. Bauch

Jerold P. Bauch is Professor Emeritus at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. His research is on parent involvement and school change. The syllabus for his course, Parents and Their Developing Children, is available in the Resources section of the FINE website.

Change in Schools: What Works and What Does Not

The pressures and forces for change in schools have often originated outside of the school. Members of the local school community are expected to do the implementation, and (often as an afterthought) have to communicate the change to parents. As nothing schools do is as personal as communicating academic progress to parents, this becomes a topic of vital interest for all constituents.

At Peterson Elementary School, the mandate for change was first transmitted to the principal, who must establish a process for accomplishing the change. How Principal Leonard starts the process, and how he provides leadership, will have a strong influence on the outcome (Theobald and Rochon, 1999). If he follows a model with high stakeholder participation, his leadership efforts will have to be focused on managing the process and supporting the teams and committees. If he uses a traditional model of decision making involving his staff and perhaps, outside consultants, he will have to be central to the action and will retain much of the responsibility for success or failure himself.

Another issue that will probably emerge as students discuss this case is the scope of the change. Some might see the challenge simply as revising the report cards. Others may see it as a whole school change that will affect the entire instructional program. Schools as complex social institutions seldom make isolated changes without collateral influence on people and other aspects of school operation. For example, if you change the procedure for reporting student progress to parents, you will have to consider what you are reporting, how students will reflect progress, and the relationship between learning objectives and assessment.

The use of standards to drive whole school reform has also been questioned. As Noddings opined, “It seems ludicrous to suppose that merely stating that ‘all children will perform task T at level P’ will accomplish much” (Noddings, 1999). The author raises concerns of the benefits to some students and the potential harm to many others, since standards rich enough for one might be less appropriate for others. The needs of individual students may be disregarded in favor of universal standards for all. Other possible problems may arise if a narrow set of standards is adopted and the school only reports to parents on acquisition of knowledge related to the standards. This may increase student failure and retention, which seldom produces positive results. And holding a school accountable to standards without a concomitant increase in instructional resources is destined for failure (Darling-Hammond and Falk, 1997).

Parents like Molly and Margot reflect some of the trends in the literature about standards-based education. Molly's concerns about her son's possible assignment to summer school is consistent with findings from the Public Agenda's survey (Johnson, et al., 2001) that less social promotion and more use of summer school to remediate performance are likely results. The survey also found that many parents are quite satisfied with their local schools just the way they are, and are therefore not very motivated to engage in complex school reform. Another survey found that found that 53% of public-school parents believed that students' broad education suffers from an overemphasis on standards-based testing (Teachers' Insurance, 2001). Parents in the survey thought that using standardized tests focused too much on the content in the test.

The Potential for a School/Home Partnership

A large body of evidence and professional opinion exists about the value of engaging parents in the process of school change (DuFour, 2000). In fact, many believe that meaningful reform is not actually possible without functional partnerships between parents and the school staff (Holland, 1999). Yet the parent involvement literature does not address whether or not a new progress reporting system based on standards is “better” for students than a more traditional reporting system. Instead, school leaders must try to anticipate the positive and negative effects of standards-based reform. For example, diverse student populations with a wide range of educational abilities and interests are likely to show differential results. Some students who might not “test well” could be further disenfranchised while those who can memorize very specific content may be reported as performing higher than appropriate.

The individual needs and the self-interest of each participant factor into how parents might view a new reporting strategy and how it affects their child, or the reaction of certain teachers to sharing “power” with the parents. These personal concerns will have to be acknowledged at every step in the case analysis.

If the school can successfully engage a representative group of parents as equity partners in the process of implementing the state mandate, there are concomitant benefits. As teachers and parents learn how to work cooperatively, the process can be transferred to other school issues and can put the school on a more positive trajectory. The combined energy of parents and the professional staff can be a powerful force for change, and the active involvement of the ultimate consumers of progress reporting (the parents) is much more likely to be accepted and embraced.

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2002

Culture Clash at Intermediate School #91

Mary Katherine Moss

Case Narrative

The Fight
On Thursday afternoon, Sara Martin, a first-year teacher at Intermediate School 91, heard yelling in the corridor outside her room. There had already been two fights earlier that day among the seventh and eighth graders on the fourth floor and Sara felt tension in the air. Sara knew that 702, one of her most difficult classes, was in their reading class down the hall with her friend Kristen, another first-year teacher. Sara left her science class to investigate the commotion. Most of her students followed her out. At the end of the hall, two young female students from 702 were yelling; a fight was escalating.

Peering over the crowd, Sara could see Keisha, a short African American girl, dressed like a tomboy, and Jackie, also African American, sporting a trendy pantsuit, platform heels, and long braids. Kristen was attempting to get between the girls as they grabbed at each other's hair and faces. Sara made her way through the crowd and tried to hold Keisha back as Jackie fell to the floor. Kristen leaned over Jackie to protect her as Keisha continued to kick Jackie's head. A security guard arrived, sending the large crowd of spectators back to their classrooms. He escorted Keisha and Jackie to the office to file reports and send the girls home.

After school that afternoon, Sara walked down to Kristen's room. “What a day,” she lamented to Kristen, “Are you okay?”

“Honestly,” replied Kristen, “I don't know if I can take it anymore. I don't understand this constant fighting. I can't believe how brutal that fight got. Keisha is out of control. I mean, why kick someone when they're down? I am going to have to call her grandmother again—which I am not looking forward to. She refuses to take any action to help straighten Keisha out—but I am not going to let Keisha get away with fighting like that.”

Intermediate School 91
Located in a predominantly Puerto Rican area of the Bronx, I.S. 91 serves approximately 900 sixth through eighth grade African-American and Puerto Rican students, most of whom are eligible for free lunch. The school building is large, with four floors and a basement. Extending from the main hallways on each floor are smaller corridors, separated by locked doors, which make the management of students more difficult. The classrooms are dirty and dilapidated. Looking from the windows, many with visible bullet holes, one can see empty lots, junkyards, graffiti, and streets strewn with trash. Adjacent to the school is a blacktop playground, which the school uses during recess, and where groups of men trade drugs and settle their disputes physically. Although some of the parents who live on nearby streets are concerned about their children's school, there is very little community involvement.

I.S. 91 has been a “school under review” by the State Board of Education for 10 years. Despite six restructuring attempts during this ten-year period, the school continues to be one of the worst performing schools in New York City in terms of state reading and mathematics test scores. In a recent political maneuver, the new Chancellor chose several low-performing schools to restructure and to provide with additional support and resources. I.S. 91 and the other selected schools were placed under the Chancellor's District, controlled by the Board of Education. These schools had been on their way to closure and were expected to raise reading and mathematics test scores by the end of the year if they hoped to remain open.

I.S. 91 opened its doors in September, excited for a year of change. Administrators divided into houses in an attempt to create smaller communities that would work with fewer students. They hoped that this structure would enable the school to address student needs, promote student learning, and improve test scores. The hope quickly dwindled, however, as the realities of the disorganization, lack of discipline, and ineffective teaching and leadership became apparent. District leaders heard rumors that the school administration was struggling, so they sent several representatives into the school to help the principal perform his duties.

Within a month after school opened, morale had dropped. Teacher absence ran high, requiring other teachers to cover additional classes during their preparation periods. These absences heightened teacher stress and exacerbated student discipline problems. Security guards resisted intervening in frequent fights, complaining, “Those teachers can't control their kids!”

Sara Martin and Kristen Jones, Teachers

Both Sara and Kristen were first-year teachers and were on the same team, meaning that they worked with the same students. Sara was part of the Teach for America program and Kristen had just completed a Masters degree in education. Although both women came to the school with sincere intentions of providing meaningful learning experiences for their students, their idealism quickly faded.

Both Sara and Kristen were middle-class white women who had grown up in the suburbs north of New York City. Although both had student taught in areas similar to the Bronx—in Harlem and Washington Heights—they had previously worked in alternative schools and were not well prepared for the difficulties of the more traditional New York City public schools. They espoused philosophies that fostered student choice and empowerment; however, many students saw their approaches as opportunities for free time. Both women were in their mid-20's and experienced significant difficulties managing student behavior and maintaining control of their classrooms. The general school environment contributed to their difficulties; neither was assigned a mentor teacher and they received little support from their administrator.

Making matters worse was the placement of their classrooms, along with another young white woman who taught art, in the same corridor. This corridor quickly became known to students as a place to hang out, eat, and cause trouble with no fear of consequences from the three young teachers.

Since Sara and Kristen knew that they could not be authoritarian (nor did their own beliefs support this strategy), they spent time getting to know their students and calling their students' homes frequently. They called home to make both good and bad reports, but received mixed responses. Some parents were enthusiastic and eager to help—they were happy that some teachers at that school finally seemed to care—while others seemed bothered by the frequent intrusions. Both Sara and Kristen were regularly in contact with the families of both Jackie and Keisha.

Jackie and Keisha, Students

Jackie was a bright girl and a good student. She always came to school well dressed, with her hair perfectly styled. She often wore high heels and had long, painted fingernails. Jackie completed all of her assignments and received high grades. She was also a noted singer and artist at the school. She often stayed after school for special enrichment programs or to spend time with, or get extra help from, Sara and Kristen. She lived with both parents, who supported her and kept close contact with her teachers.

An intimidating group of girls, of which Keisha was a part, picked on Jackie frequently. Although Jackie kept to herself most of the time, the girls often got the best of her and provoked her to fight them. Because Jackie was fairly easily provoked, she frequently got into trouble as a result of defending herself.

Keisha was also a bright girl, but struggled in most of her classes. She constantly talked or fooled around and had difficulty working and completing tasks. She spent most of her time with a group of girls who had similar difficulties, and caused trouble throughout the school. Although most of the girls were very bright, many of them had difficulties in school. Because this group of girls was so tough, Sara and Kristen spent much time getting to know them. They spent many after school hours with the girls, and even invited them to Sara's house for a big dinner. Despite the teachers' attempts, the girls' behavior improved little. Sara and Kristen frequently called the girls' families.

When Sara and Kristen first called Keisha's home and talked to her grandmother, her behavior improved drastically. Keisha was so fearful that the teachers would call home again, that Sara and Kristen worried that they may have ignited some abuse. However, Keisha's misbehavior soon returned, so Sara and Kristen continued to call her grandmother.

Mrs. Jameson, Keisha's Grandmother

Keisha's grandmother, Mrs. Jameson, had raised Keisha since she was born. Although Keisha's mother was in and out of the house, she was unreliable, and Mrs. Jameson suspected that she was using drugs. Mrs. Jameson had done her best to raise Keisha, but she worked until 6:30pm each night and could not monitor Keisha 24 hours a day. She worried about the neighborhood—it wasn't a safe place and she knew the temptations it offered to young girls.

She knew that Keisha was having difficulties in school, and could enforce consequences at home, but she felt that it was the school's duty to maintain discipline and it needed to improve and do its job.

When she received a call from two of Keisha's teachers early in the fall, she was hopeful that—after so long—the school was improving. She was disheartened to hear about Keisha's misbehavior, so she promised the teachers that she would “keep on Keisha.” But soon the teachers were calling for every little thing and Mrs. Jameson felt that they were not fulfilling their responsibilities to control the students.

A Conversation After the Fight

“You know, I am at work and I really can't be bothered all the time for every little thing Keisha does wrong,” snapped Mrs. Jameson when the call came through.

“I know. I am sorry to bother you again, but this is serious,” replied Kristen.

“What did she do now?” asked Mrs. Jameson.

“Keisha was involved in a very brutal fight today. She and the other girl are fine, but we are very concerned about her behavior and the level of violence. She was trying to kick another girl in the head.”

“Did she win?” asked Mrs. Jameson.

“Excuse me?” asked Kristen, confused.

“Did she win?” repeated Mrs. Jameson, “I mean, because if she didn't, she knows she better not come home.”

Stunned, Kristen did not know what to say. “Well, Keisha will probably be suspended, I just wanted to let you know,” she finally said, still confused by Mrs. Jameson's response.

“Well, thank you,” snapped Mrs. Jameson before she hung up the phone.

Kristen's View

“I just don't understand Mrs. Jameson's response,” she lamented to Sara after her conversation. “I know that it is important not to be considered weak in this neighborhood, but to allow—to even encourage—this behavior is absurd. There are no consequences in this school, none at home—what kind of lesson are we teaching these kids? You would think that at some point, someone would say 'enough is enough' and start to teach the kids to walk away from these fights. I don't get it. I know how hard growing up is—especially as a girl—I don't understand why they have to attack and hurt each other. Things are hard enough for these girls.”

“It is even more frustrating,” added Sara, “to know that we don't even have the support of the parents on this—that they are actually working against us. It's unbelievable that they think it is okay for their kids to fight like that and to actually create consequences if their kid loses a fight! What values are they teaching around here? And what can we do about it? You're right—we have no consequences from the school or parents, and the kids certainly don't listen to us—how are we going to control them now? If Keisha's grandmother accepts that kind of behavior from her, then our authority is completely undermined.”

Mrs. Jameson Approaches Kristen

“This is the last time I want to talk about this,” Mrs. Jameson said as she walked through the door of the classroom clutching her purse and stopped a few feet from Kristen's desk. “I had to take off work to come in here and talk to you, but I want to get this thing cleared up.”

Kristen had expected Mrs. Jameson's visit after Friday's classes, and was familiar with her demeanor from speaking to her over the phone, but even so she was a little taken aback by her directness. “Well, why don't you sit down and we can talk about it?” she offered. Mrs. Jameson replied without delay, “I don't have much time so I can tell you what I want to say from right here.”

“Well…okay, Mrs. Jameson…” Kristen started.

“This last thing with Keisha and that other girl just goes to show that you teachers can't control those kids,” replied Mrs. Jameson. “They need to close this school once and for all, and I'm not the only one who thinks so.”

“But Mrs. Jameson, what do you want me to do?” Kristen asked, exasperated, looking up at Mrs. Jameson with her hands flat out on her desk in front of her.

“Do your job,” said Mrs. Jameson, “If you can't keep the peace and keep those kids from fighting, Keisha has got to take care of herself and that's what I told her.”

“Keisha has got to get control of herself and stop fighting,” Kristen countered, getting up from her desk, “and we need your help to get her to do that. We're sending her mixed messages. It doesn't help her behavior to have you encouraging Keisha to fight.”

Obviously frustrated, Mrs. Jameson paused for a minute, her face growing tighter. “To tell you the truth I don't think that white teachers should be teaching here. What do you know about living in the Bronx? You drive in and drive out and they want to talk to the kids about peace and all that other nonsense. That is not what our kids need—they need to survive and they need skills—that's the only thing that's going to get them out of this neighborhood. You teachers don't know what it's like to live here and to make it here—like my granddaughter would be able to walk down the street if she let some skinny girl beat her down. You'd be better off going back and teaching those white kids up in Westchester, or wherever it is you're from.”

Kristen had to stop for a moment to keep tears of frustration from welling up. “What can I say to this?” she thought, “What should I do?”

The people and events in this case are based on real life accounts, but have been disguised to protect confidentiality.

Discussion Questions

- What are the assumptions being made by Sara and Kristen? By Mrs. Jameson? Are they being communicated?
- How do Sara and Kristen's expectations about student behavior differ from those of Jackie, Keisha, Mrs. Jameson, and the neighborhood?
- Do Sara and Kristen have realistic expectations for involving students' families in managing student behavior?
- How does the difference in beliefs between Mrs. Jameson and the teachers about the role of the school and family in maintaining student discipline affect their communication?
- How does the perception of some school staff as “outsiders” as a result of racial, ethnic, or class differences impact their effectiveness as educators?
- Whose responsibility is it to change the problematic behavior of the students in Intermediate School 91?
- If you were a teacher in a similar setting, how would you resolve the situation? Would you involve the principal or any other school personnel? If you were a caregiver in a similar situation, how would you respond?
- What affect could school or district wide policies and strategies, such as recruitment of teachers, have on student discipline issues?

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT TEACHING CASES
HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT :: HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

1999

Suspension at Aurora Middle School

Sylvia Sensiper

Case Narrative

Anxiously pushing aside the lace curtain, Mai Nguyen looked down from her third floor window, hoping to see June's familiar face. She had lived here in Seattle, Washington with her family since arriving a little over eight months ago and she usually took great delight in watching the busy street. She liked to see what the women wore on their way to work, and how the kids chased together to the end of the block. The noise and liveliness helped to ease her mind of the terrible memories that often crowded in and the misery she had endured for years before she emigrated from a Vietnamese refugee camp in Malaysia with her kids.

But today Mai's worry for Khoi, her 13-year-old son, loomed too large for her to take any pleasure in the antics below. Looking back over her shoulder, Mai could see Khoi sitting on his bed, his knees pulled to his chin rocking slightly to the music that escaped from the headphones gripping his ears.

For the most part, Khoi had adapted to his new life relatively easily and was popular with his peers because of his athletic ability. He was always the first to be picked for a soccer game and had proudly placed his school trophy in a prominent place in the apartment's tiny living room. Mai found great joy in Khoi's successes and hoped that his younger siblings would follow his lead.

But last week, Khoi had arrived home late, unhappy and dejected. “I've been suspended,” he told Mai despondently, and handed her a note that she could not read. Mai cajoled and pushed and finally got through his uncharacteristically defiant stance to find out what happened. “I didn't know,” he told her, his voice taut with hurt and frustration. “I didn't know you have to stand away from a fight. It was my friend Tran Le and another boy who were fighting and I wanted to see what was going on. Then they took me away and gave me this letter. It says I have to stay home 5 days and then I can go back. But I'm never going back, never!”

Khoi had stamped off away from Mai to another room, but the apartment was so small that she couldn't help but hear his angry sobs.

Mai was stunned at her son's outburst, and had remained rooted in place for a great while as her mood slowly spiraled downward. Her lack of proficiency in English was one reason she did not immediately call the school administrators to find out why her son was so upset. But Mai also had an ingrained fear of authority figures, a cultural aversion she shared with many Vietnamese due to their experiences during the war.

For the next few days she felt hopeless and confused. Then finally, after watching her son mope about the house with no break in his gloomy demeanor, she had called her friend June to come over and talk.

June Truong and Sor Piseth, Community Advocates

June Truong worked as a housing consultant for TPACS (the Pan Asian Community Services), a small community based organization that served the diverse Asian populations in central Seattle, and she was always glad to help.

When she got the call from Mai Nguyen she had immediately contacted a social worker down the hall, Sor Piseth, and they had scheduled a time when they could both visit Mai. As a friend, June wanted to comfort Mai and hopefully try and talk to Khoi about what had really happened, but she wanted Sor along for another reason.

TPACS had recently decided to play a role in the local schools and Sor had taken the lead in meeting with a number of principals to see how the organization could act as a mediating influence when students and their families needed help. Khoi Nguyen's suspension was the kind of situation where June felt she and Sor had some deep insight and she hoped TPACS could be brought in to benefit both the school and the family.

She was sure the issues were more complicated than what Mai had told her over the phone. Some elements of the story seemed to be missing and it was difficult to determine why Khoi did not want to go back. As they drove towards Mai's small apartment, June told Sor she had met Mai at a temple picnic and had been taken with her graceful composure in spite of her difficult life.

Mai had left her home country with her husband and Khoi following the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from South Vietnam in 1973, but they had gotten stuck in a refugee camp in Malaysia, waiting for their chance to immigrate to France or the U.S. Mai gave birth to two children in the camp before her husband died, and had come to the U.S. only because of the influence of a distant relative. However, that relationship had grown strained because of Mai's abject poverty. Her health was not good and she had only been able to work sporadically as she had to care for her children. She had secured the family's apartment with the help of TPACS, and relied greatly on the charity of the local temple and its affiliated organizations.

In spite of their different circumstances, June felt a bond with Mai and often sat with her at temple events. She knew that Khoi was Mai's shining star, and she was worried how his troubles were affecting her ability to take care of her other children. June told Sor she had last seen Mai a couple of weeks ago, but hadn't had a chance to talk with her since. As they drove along, the two chatted on about their hopes for TPACS influence on school policies, then both fell silent as they reflected on their own experiences.

June's family had been fairly lucky as they were some of the first Vietnamese to leave the country as political refugees. Still, things were difficult, and both parents had to work at jobs that were far below their capabilities because of their inability to speak English. June and her two brothers were the only Vietnamese children in their elementary school and sometimes the only Asians. They were teased for their funny lunches, their looks, and the language of seemingly strange sounds that they still spoke among themselves. Perhaps because of her experiences, June had always wanted to help people, and she had begun working with a local housing agency as an intern in college. When she graduated, she had taken the job with TPACS.

Sor had arrived as a teenager in the U.S. in the mid-eighties, after a frightening escape from first Cambodia and then Vietnam. Many in his large family had been killed during the Khmer Rouge regime and only his immediate family had survived. In his first couple of months at the new high school, Sor was often in trouble - it almost seemed as if he looked for any opportunity to get in a fight and prove his strength and courage.

But a gift for math and a talented teacher helped him set his sights on academic goals. He learned English with grim determination, and then went on to college, choosing a major that would allow him to help his community.

Using their own experiences in the schools as a guide, June and Sor had begun the discussion at TPACS about forming partnerships with local schools. TPACs had expertise with housing, medical issues, and social problems, but the organization had never dealt with the many issues that were involved with educating the growing number of youth in the Asian communities. Sor's initial discussions with principals had been encouraging and he and June had begun to formulate a list of areas in which they thought TPACS could be of help.

Both June and Sor were not only bilingual, they were bicultural. They felt they had a better understanding than many educators of how young people of Asian background might respond to some of the expectations they were presented with in this often strange U.S. environment. Hoping to help with Khoi Nguyen, Sor had already called to make an appointment with the principal at the school.

Mike Horsmith, Principal

Mike Horsmith had been the principal at Aurora Middle School for four years and during that time had seen a great number of changes in the student population. The community surrounding the school was now predominantly Hispanic—the many families of third generation Mexican-Americans had been joined by recent immigrants from Central America. Yet the neighborhood was also home to a number of Vietnamese and Cambodian families, and a fresh wave of immigration had brought newcomers from Laos, Thailand, and the Philippines. Many of the parents had low-paying jobs in nearby industries or as craftspeople and day laborers. The education level and economic stability of the older residents were often higher, but length of residency in the U.S. did not always mean better opportunities and more resources.

Mike did the best he could to cope with the challenges that diversity created, and he had a good track record of making needed changes. He liked to run a “tight ship” and had inspired his teachers to do the same by asking them to implement strong disciplinary rules in their classrooms that dealt quickly with any problems that cropped up.

At the same time, he was very interested in helping the local communities and made many gestures to celebrate diversity. In the fall, Mike had organized in-class discussion for Asian History Week, and the school's Spring Festival of Foods had featured representative dishes from many countries.

Last week Mike had got a call from Sor Piseth, and he had been intrigued with meeting him and finding out more about his idea of a partnership between TPACS and the school. But when Sor called him back this morning and asked for a meeting in regards to the Nguyen suspension, Mike was less than enthusiastic. He wanted to approach the partnership issue thoughtfully and thoroughly, and put in place workable mechanisms and a viable infrastructure. He did not want to involve TPACS in volatile issues on an ad hoc basis.

Mike thought that the school had performed acceptably with regards to Khoi Nguyen. The school had circulated a handbook of rules early in the school year and had even printed the book in Spanish and a number of Southeast Asian languages.

The handbook included among the rules a protocol for student behavior during a fight, and all students had been instructed to stand 20 feet away. As far as Mike knew, Khoi Nyugen had been informed of the rule and had violated it. The result, as the book informed the students, was suspension. There had, in fact, been three students who had been sent home with letters that day, and the other two had already returned to school. Khoi Nguyen had been expected to come back to Aurora Middle School yesterday, and if there was an additional problem, Mike felt that should be dealt with in the family and community.

His strong policies had minimized discipline problems at Aurora Middle School, and he wasn't about to change now. He would be happy to meet with Mai Nguyen, but he didn't want TPACS to get involved with this issue.

A Meeting at Mai's Home
Mai ushered her guests into her home, apologizing for its bleakness and offering tea. She was surprised that Khoi came forward so willingly to greet June and Sor, and it lifted her spirits to see how polite he was with the visitors. However, his face clouded over when June told him they would like to know what happened. He looked embarrassed and tried to slip out of the room, hanging his head. Finally, after hearing June and Sor tell a few of their own bad experiences, Khoi decided to open up. “OK,” he said, “This is what happened.”

“Last Thursday, one of my best friends got in a fight with a kid named Antonio and it looked like Antonio's friends were going to jump in to help him. I was just standing by to make sure that Tran was OK. Then the next thing I know, some teacher is pulling me by the arm, really twisting it hard, and I have to go to the assistant principal's office.” Khoi's voice dropped and his eyes darkened with shame and anger. “They treated me like I'd done something wrong, something horrible, when it turns out, it was just that I didn't understand. You're not supposed to stand close to a fight. They passed around a sheet that said you have to be 20 feet away. But I didn't know. So then I got in trouble.”

“Not only that,” Khoi continued, “but the teachers told me if it happened again, I would be suspended for 10 days next time. But it wasn't like I even did anything wrong. I just didn't understand. I didn't know because I couldn't read the paper.”

This case is based on an actual event, however, all the people represented are fictitious and the sequence of events is the invention of the author, Sylvia Sensiper.

Discussion Questions

- How can June and Sor best help Mai?
- How can Mai best help Khoi?
- Should June and Sor approach Mike Horsmith again to try to get a meeting?

- Should Mike Horsmith be responsible for having school regulations printed in the native language of every student in the school? What are some other activities, structures, education he should provide to students for whom English is not a native language? What other kinds of structures could he put in place to help students and their families develop ease in dealing with American cultural institutions?
- What is the responsibility of students for knowing the rules and regulations at school?
- If you were Mike Horsmith, what kind of program would you be interested in developing with TPACS?
- Imagine you were June and/or Sor. What kind of relationship do you want to develop with the principals and schools. What kind of program do you think TPACS could develop with the schools?
- Role-playing. Mike Horsmith has agreed to have a meeting with Mai and TPACS. Have four students volunteer to be Mai Nguyen, June Truong, Sor Piseth, and Mike Horsmith and allow them to develop a conversation/discussion.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT TEACHING CASES

HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT :: HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

2003

Making a Decision About College: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Lad Dell

Case Narrative

Marisela Castillo

Marisela is well liked by those who know her at school and she's earned a reputation for being a hard worker. She excels in the sciences and her teachers have taken note. Her biology teacher was able to match her interests with medicine and children, and set her up with a volunteer position at the local hospital that her mother works at. Marisela loves going to the hospital and spending time with the children there. It has solidified her resolve to become a pediatrician.

“It's hard to describe the feeling I have when I go to the hospital. I get all excited. And the kids, their faces just light up when I see them. My mom tells me that it's not always happy at the hospital and that there is a lot of pain too, but I know that I could see myself working there, not as an orderly or a nurse, but as a doctor!”

Marisela also loves working with children in part because she has helped her mother raise her three younger siblings: Ana is 12 years old, Miguel is 10 years old, and Rosa is 7 years old. Because Claudia works two jobs, Marisela usually prepares nightly meals and makes sure that her brother and sisters complete their schoolwork. After washing the dishes and cleaning up after them, Marisela finally has time to devote to her own studies. It's not uncommon for her bedroom light to be on past midnight.

“I know that I stay up late to finish my homework, but that's what I have to do to help my mom and my brother and sisters out. Sometimes I wish I had it like some of the other kids at school who don't have to work or take care of their brothers and sisters. They get to hang out, play sports, and do more after school things. It's not easy, but I'm doing the best that I can.”

Because Marisela wants to be a doctor, she applied to colleges with strong reputations in premedical studies. With the help of a fee waiver, she applied to six schools across the country. Marisela was eager for April 1st to come, the day that admission decision letters from colleges usually arrive. As the postal carrier rounded the corner, she burst out the door to intercept the mail before it was even deposited in the mailbox: one small envelope and two big ones. She opened up the small one first and found out that she was denied admission to UCLA. The next two were from UC Riverside and Washington University and they were both acceptance letters. Over the course of the week, Marisela received acceptance letters from Johns Hopkins University and Brown University and a deny letter from Stanford University.

“Wow! I got accepted to four of my colleges! I'm kinda bummed that UCLA and Stanford didn't accept me, but that's okay. Johns Hopkins was my dream school and Brown has an accelerated medical program, and they're all giving me a lot of financial aid. I wonder what Mom is going to say. I mean, I'll have to go away from home. Who's going to look after Ana, Miguel, and Rosa? I really wanna be a doctor, but I'm worried about going so far away from my family.”

Later that night, Marisela called her Aunt Clara in Sacramento. As usual, Clara comforted Marisela from a distance. “Marisela, you don't worry about *mi hermana* Claudia. You just worry about becoming a doctor.”

Claudia Castillo

Claudia came to California from El Salvador to flee the war and to give her children a better life. Her sister Clara, who had immigrated a few years earlier encouraged her. The father of Claudia's children, on the other hand, refused to leave El Salvador and fought her to keep the kids in their home country. Claudia had to escape in the middle of the night in order to get away. She fears that he might track them down one of these days.

“It's not easy balancing two jobs and raising four children. Before Clara moved to Sacramento I could at least get some help from her. Now, by the time I get home, I just want to lie down. I barely have the energy to eat the meal that my dear Marisela so diligently prepares every night. I wonder if things are ever going to get any easier?”

Claudia works the night shift at the hospital as a midwife and during the day at a local restaurant. She wishes she had more time to spend with her children, but she has to work to be able to pay the rent and provide them with food and clothes. Claudia raised her children with the belief that they could be anything that they wanted to be as long as they worked hard. She has always encouraged them to do well at school. Now that it was time for Marisela to go off to college to pursue her dreams, Claudia was torn between her hopes for her daughter, but also her dependence on her.

“I'm so proud of Marisela. She's a good student, a great sister to her siblings, and a wonderful daughter. I don't know what I would do without her. I want her to be successful in life and have it easier than I did, but I don't know if going away to school will be good for her. She's so young and I worry about her safety and how she'll be treated. My sister Clara tells me that this is why we came to California, for a better life for our children, but Marisela will be so far away from home and her family. Maybe it's better that she go to the nearby community college.”

Linda Ruiz, Biology Teacher

“Marisela is special. Not too many girls are interested in the sciences and the fact that Marisela excels in them is wonderful. I can see her going really far in life. The sky's the limit. I also have a lot of respect for the additional responsibility that she takes on at her age. It's not easy having to juggle challenging schoolwork with a part-time job and taking care of younger siblings. Frankly, I don't know how she does it or where she finds the energy.”

Linda has been teaching for three years and also is a first-generation college graduate. She sees a lot of herself in Marisela and hopes that Marisela won't be held back by her family responsibilities. Linda, too, had an aptitude for the sciences when she was young and aspired to be a doctor. She had a hard time convincing her parents that she should go away for college. She ended up having to strike a deal with them by attending a community college for the first two years before she could go “away” to college. Though she eventually earned her bachelor of science, she feels that she would have gone farther in her career had she gone away to college right after high school.

“It's just not the same living at home and going to college, especially in the beginning. Freshman year is when you build social networks and become part of the college community. I'm not saying that I wasn't able to find my niche once I transferred from the community college, but I do know that it was a little bit harder. There are experiences living at college that you can't replicate being at home. What I have come to realize is that college is important for the learning that occurs in the classroom, but equally important is the learning that happens outside of the classroom. You can't buy experience. I hope that Marisela will have that opportunity.”

Jonathan Stewart, Guidance Counselor

Jonathan has lived in Palmdale all of his life. He's been a guidance counselor at Palmdale High School for over 15 years and has taught there for 10 years also. He has a caseload of 550 students. The bulk of his time is spent coordinating students' class schedules and handling any disciplinary issues that come up. Not much of his time is devoted to career or college counseling, as evidenced by the cookie-cutter type letters of recommendation that he puts out for his counselees who are applying to college.

“To be honest, I don't know Marisela all that well. She hasn't gotten into any trouble so I don't see her all that much. I met with her once to explain the fee waiver for her college applications. From what I know, she's a pretty good student and well liked by her peers and teachers. She has one of the toughest schedules a student could have with four AP courses this year, two of them in the sciences. I think she has to take care of her younger siblings because her mother works a lot. That being the case, maybe it's better that she stay local. I'm sure her mother would be happy.”

Ricardo Vargas, University Admissions Counselor

Ricardo has been an admissions counselor for Johns Hopkins University for the past year. He is originally from the Los Angeles area and spent his formative years there. After graduating from high school, he went to college on the East Coast to, in his words, “get away from his family.”

“I knew that I didn't want to go to school near home. I wanted to have a new experience and didn't think staying in Southern California would give me what I wanted. My mom went to college in the Midwest and my father went to college in the Northeast. They both studied abroad too. They showed me the importance of trying new things and seeing new places, so I try to convey that to the prospective students that I meet. I think Marisela would have a great experience at Hopkins and it would definitely put her on the right path for medical school.”

Marisela's Decision

May 1st, the deadline to reply to the colleges, is two weeks away ...

Marisela only has two weeks to decide where she will be next year after she graduates from Palmdale High School. So far she has visited UC Riverside, which is about 90 miles away from Palmdale, with her mom. She wasn't convinced that UCR was the right place for her, but she didn't dislike it either. Johns Hopkins University extended the offer to fly her out to their campus for their open house and she happily accepted.

Deep down, Claudia wanted what was best for her daughter, but as Marisela boarded the plane bound for Baltimore, she couldn't resist reiterating to Marisela how much she and the family would miss her if she went so far away. Comfortably cruising at an altitude of 35,000 feet in a deep, puffy bed of clouds, Marisela was torn; how could she pursue her dreams and at the same time make her mom and family happy?

This case is primarily fictional, but loosely built on the cumulative experiences of the author.

Discussion Questions

- What are Claudia's views and values about where Marisela goes to college? How do Claudia's ambitions for Marisela and dependence on Marisela affect her feelings about college?
- How does Claudia understand her influence over Marisela's decision?
- How has or can the school emphasize the value of higher education and “going away to college” to Claudia (i.e., visits to college, speaking with admissions counselors)?
- What role does the community have in supporting Latino students' aspirations for higher education?
- Who has Marisela expressed her feelings to? How could school personnel create an atmosphere for discussing these feelings?
- How can Linda Ruiz, the biology teacher, relate better to Claudia about Marisela's dilemma? What has her communication with Claudia been like so far?
- How does Ricardo Vargas, the admissions counselor from Johns Hopkins, understand Marisela's home situation? How is he sensitive or insensitive to her home situation? What could he do to help Marisela?
- How can Jon Stewart, the guidance counselor, be more helpful?

Resources for Family Involvement and Preparation for College

Bridging Worlds Website at www.bridgingworlds.org/selectedpublications.html
This website features several articles by Catherine Cooper and her colleagues at the University of California, Santa Cruz, which focus on ethnic minority youth.

Fry, R. (2002, September). *Latinos in higher education: Many enroll, too few graduate*. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center. Available at pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=11.
This report considers the discrepancy between enrollment in higher education and degree completion for Latino students and suggests policy initiatives to address this problem.

Lowell, B. L., & Suro, R. (2002, December). *The improving educational profile of Latino immigrants*. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center. Available at pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=14.
Despite the persistence of an achievement gap between immigrants and native-born U.S. populations, this report finds that the educational profile of the adult population of Latino immigrants has improved in the past 30 years. This page also has a link to education data for California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas.

National Public Radio. (2002). Educating Latinos: An NPR special report. Washington, DC: Author. Available at www.npr.org/programs/atc/features/2002/nov/educating_latinos/index.html.
NPR explores several topics about Latino education, including the bilingual education debate, educating Latinas, and the continuing achievement gap between generations of Latino immigrants.

Ruiz-de-Velasco, J., Fix, M., & Chu Clewell, B. (2000, December 1). *Overlooked and underserved: Immigrant students in U.S. secondary schools*. Washington DC, Urban Institute. Available at www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=310022.
This report describes the Program in Immigrant Education, its challenges, and schools' responses.

Tornatzky, L. G., Cutler, R., & Lee, J. (2002, April). *College knowledge: What Latino parents need to know and why they don't know it*. Claremont, CA: Tomás Rivera Policy Institute.
This study highlights the levels of Latino parents' knowledge about preparing their children for college and includes recommendations to increase Latino college enrollment.

Making a Decision About College: Should I Stay or Should I Go? Commentary by Sylvia Acevedo

Sylvia Acevedo is an award-winning CEO who has earned worldwide recognition for her work in addressing one of society's most vexing challenges—universal access to education. In 2011, Acevedo was named to the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, where she serves as chair of the Early Learning Subcommittee. Acevedo started her career as a rocket scientist at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. She has since served as an executive with Fortune 100 companies, including Apple, IBM, Autodesk, and Dell. Acevedo holds a master's degree in industrial engineering from Stanford University and a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering from New Mexico State University.

Getting on the plane that would take me away from our family home in Las Cruces, New Mexico, to Stanford University was one of the most difficult moments in my life. As my family and I waited to board the plane, tears were streaming down our faces and my heart felt as if it was being pulled out of my chest. Even as they were wiping away their tears, my family was united in their message to me, "Do your best and make us proud." Their support had not always been so unified or unconditional. When I had first broached the idea of leaving southern New Mexico to go to school in California, the response was that it was too far away, too expensive, and not necessary.

As one of the first Latinas to earn a graduate engineering degree from Stanford, I have lived through the challenges that confront many first-generation students like Marisela: financial, familial, gender, academic, and social. Before I could embark on my dream of attending Stanford, I had to prepare myself, and my family, for the impact my departure would have on the balance to our family system as well as on me as an individual.

Family responsibilities are a powerful tug, as is the sense of obligation for the care, support, and guidance of younger siblings and possibly elderly grandparents. Like many first-generation students, I had the responsibility of serving as a "relationship broker," providing my hard-earned skills in negotiating the U.S. educational, legal, and health care systems on behalf of family members, including my developmentally disabled sister.

Unlike Marisela and many of today's first-generation students who have some academic and financial support along the educational path, I didn't have those resources. However, I currently mentor many students, especially Latinas, who want to pursue degrees in the nontraditional fields of STEM and medicine. I understand that the guidance offered from well-meaning teachers and admissions counselors must be augmented with support that acknowledges the first-generation student's role in the family.

To successfully embrace this wonderful opportunity of pursuing the dream school and dream profession, the students must ensure that their family is taken care of in their absence and that they also have the support that they need for school. Otherwise, trying to provide translation services or emotional and financial support from a distance frequently negatively impacts the time and attention students need for their academic life, and it also causes the family to suspend important decisions until the student is available. Family pressures build, and all too often students either underperform in school by changing majors to a less rigorous course load, transfer to a local university or community college, or even drop out of school, resulting in a lower-than-average graduation rate nationally for Latinos.[1]

What is more successful is an approach that considers the entire family in the decision. With first-generation students, especially in nontraditional fields such as STEM or medicine, having family support is vital, because the social structures to support the student may not be in existence in their chosen field. There may be no one who looks like the student or who comes from a similar socioeconomic background or who understands what it is like to be a pioneer, navigating a complex academic system on their own. Especially for families with a collective cultural mindset, like Marisela's, if they can understand that supporting the student in pursuing their dreams will eventually benefit the entire family, they more readily redistribute and accommodate family responsibilities. After all, many of the parents made major sacrifices themselves in coming to the U.S.

Educators and counselors can be more successful if they take the time to discuss the benefits to the family and the student, and not just the sacrifices. This additional step is vital for families to understand and support the student's dreams and desires, transforming the student's journey from a solo venture to an entire family journey, each with their own roles.

Students in the U.S., especially high-achieving students, are expected and encouraged to have and make the determining decision on where they go to college, independent of any family responsibilities (other than financial.) An imperative step for first-generation students to be able to attend the college of their dreams is helping families to understand the difference in postsecondary educational institutions and degrees. First-generation families don't have experience with U.S. higher-education institutions, frequently equating all college experiences— from community colleges to elite institutions—as providing an equivalent educational experience. Without understanding the higher-education institutions and the degrees conferred, it is far too easy for families to only see cost, convenience, and location as the most important determining factors in the college enrollment decision.

In Marisela's case, there is another way to approach this situation rather than simply obliging Marisela to be the one to choose between her dream of attending a four-year school that prepares her for medical school and "abandoning her family," or attending a community college that does not provide the entire college experience and that imperils her opportunity to attend medical school. With her teacher and counselors, they can all embrace the opportunity to help her mother and siblings to understand their collective future, both immediate and longer term, as Marisela pursues her dreams. They can better understand the experience for Marisela, both in personal sacrifice and hardship. In turn, they can redistribute the family obligations, allowing her to focus on her studies.

One of my happiest memories as a student was my graduation from Stanford University. My family made the long drive to Palo Alto to share in the wonderful achievement honored that day at commencement. My father's smile could not have been brighter. There were tears, but this time they were of joy, as we joined together as a family, celebrating the family milestone that was my graduation as one of the first Latinas to earn a graduate engineering degree from Stanford.

Making a Decision About College: Should I Stay or Should I Go? Commentary by Concha Delgado-Gaitan

Concha Delgado-Gaitan is the author of numerous books and articles on families and communities, including the book, The Power of Community *(2001). She is the recipient of the George and Louise Spindler Award (2000) honoring her lifetime of work in anthropology and education.*

As an elementary school teacher, an elementary school principal, and an ethnographer in immigrant families and communities, many of them Latino, I have worked with countless students like Marisela. I also have first-hand experience with going away to college and leaving parents who preferred that I went to a local college. Like Marisela, I had very traditional Mexican immigrant parents who worked very hard for meager wages. They didn't have much formal schooling. And while getting a good education was their plan for us, they couldn't afford but room and board at home for us. My mother held very high expectations for my sisters and me to excel in school, go to college, and get a career. In spite of that I didn't have plans to attend a college away from home because my family couldn't afford to send me. And although I worked long hours in a part-time job during high school, it wouldn't have paid the huge expenses. The idea of applying for loans or scholarships didn't enter my mind because it was just assumed that I would attend a local college like my older sister did.

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[1] Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2010). *Low Hispanic College Graduation Rates Threaten U.S. Attainment Goals.* Retrieved from http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Media-Center/Press-Releases/2010/03/Low-Hispanic-College-Graduation-Rates-Threaten-US-Attainment-Goals

Then in my senior year a school counselor called me into her office and encouraged me to apply to the University of the Pacific because they were offering scholarships to Spanish-speaking students interested in majoring in Inter-American Studies. Mrs. Nichols knew that I was a very good student in Spanish. Academically I was in the top 10 of my graduating class. So I applied and was accepted into their four-year program. Although I had great guilt about leaving home because I thought my parents needed me, I was willing to do it. Somehow, the idea of leaving home for a new experience excited me. And the notion of a different life away from home felt more intriguing than the guilt I harbored for hurting my parents.

My parents on the other hand couldn't understand why it was necessary for me to leave home. After all, my sister attended a local college. You probably want to know how my parents were able to let go. Well, I sat them down and told them why I wanted to leave and go 400 miles away from Los Angeles. I convinced them that I would return home to visit on every holiday break. My mother accepted it, but my father didn't speak to me for months. I endured a lot of guilt about, as they put it, “breaking the family,” “living in danger away from home,” and “having to return home broke” because I would never be able to afford living away from home in spite of the scholarship money. But when I began to keep my promise of returning home every holiday, they eventually got used to my being away. However, it was many years after I graduated from college before they stopped saying, “when you come back home....” I never did return to Los Angeles.

Research on Latino students' pursuit of education speaks to two major issues embedded in Marisela's story. The first one has to do with how the school orients students to college and careers. And the second one has to do with the way that cultural change in the communities takes place through strong community groups that support immigrant families to participate fully in the community, including involving themselves in their children's education.

Factors Affecting Latino Higher Education

Getting into college is a major undertaking that begins with early expectations and knowledge of the process. Many Latinos fail to attend college because they are not instructed or counseled on how the process works. In a Pew Hispanic Center Report, Fry (2002) finds that Latino students and their families value a college education. And they do attend college, but the numbers of students who reach graduation are reduced by part-time enrollment, a concentration in two-year institutions, and the fact that they take longer to complete their BA degree than their white and Asian counterparts. The reasons for lower numbers of Latino college graduates are attributed to affordability, family and community factors, and inadequate high school preparation.

Orientation to college needs to be well in place by the fourth grade. For Latino students, the pattern of school failure and alienation begins as early as the elementary grades. In some Latino impacted communities in the US it is estimated that the dropout rate may be as high as 60%. And for Latina females, the dropout rate is two to three percent higher than it is for Latino males. Latinas also attend college at a lower rate than Latino males (Asher, 1984; McKay, 1988; Hodgkinson, 1988; Landon & Novak, 1998). The girls perceive the school as an alien environment not capable of understanding them (McBride, 1999; Zacarias, 1990).

Andrade (1982) identifies five conditions as contributing to Latina females' negative assessment of the school environment: (1) lack of Latina role models (teachers, counselors, administrators), (2) a disproportionate level of referrals to special education classes, (3) low expectations for Latinas by school personnel, (4) lack of adequate vocational and career counseling for Latina women, and (5) stereotypic portrayal of Latina women in the curriculum. We know this about the schools' failure relative to Latina girls' academic performance. But given this, what is the role of the parents, especially mothers, in the schooling of Latina girls? Stories like Marisela's give us fodder for examining what the role of schools and communities is in socializing young Latino/a students to college.

Gender dynamics are important in describing issues involving Latino/a families and community with respect to educational issues, according to Maxine Baca-Zinn (1975-1994), Yvette Flores-Ortiz (1999), Denise Segura (1993), and Patricia Zavella (1991). Research conducted by Delgado-Gaitan (1994) and González (1998) further shows that the mothers' cultural narratives are nurturing and edifying through conversation between parent and children, resulting in transference of important cultural values, language, and world views from mothers to daughters.

Extrapolating from these findings, I maintain that through their cultural knowledge, Latina mothers help to shape their daughters' attitudes and values about education. Low-income Latina mothers may have the aspirations and expectations for their daughters' success, but often lack the formal education and the “know how” to help their daughters' educational and professional careers. This places part of the responsibility on the school to create avenues through which Latino parents can participate and maximize support for their daughters. Although effective ways to involve parents in schools have been documented (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Kirschenbaum, 1999; Macfarlane, 1996; De La Cruz, 1999), we need a clearer picture of how Latina mothers can participate more fully throughout their daughters' schooling.

In earlier research studies, I have addressed the numerous issues of parents' role in the schools and parental support of students in the home (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). But by focusing on the strength of Latina women as educational advocates for their daughters we can design effective programs to ensure that Latinas successfully get to college and into professions. Conceptually we need research that helps us learn how to organize effective family and school relationships in three major structural areas, including home-school communication, appropriate activities to involve the parents' voice in the school, and parent education about the educational system. Part of the missing link in the literature is what we need to understand how Latina women support their adolescent daughters' success in their academic objectives in this particular community.

Structures of Support for Higher Education Among Latinos

The family is the emotional center for all its members, and especially for children when they're young. Immigrant Latinos from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are unfamiliar with the idea of letting their children leave home to attend college and the process can be filled with tensions. A structure needs to be in place to help them make the changes related to this important transition.

One type of structure is school-dominated. Commonly, the school defines the interactions of the actors through pre-arranged events, such as the times and places where families and schools meet. In these instances, educators also tend to design the agenda and thereby assume a position of knowledge over the parents or community members. These transactions result in parents having to adhere to the school culture to support their children in school-related tasks. Cultural boundaries created by these structured conditions are rigid, and enforced by school policies and practices. In this mode, the pedagogy of change is learned through the school-defined structure.

In contrast, organizations like COPLA (Comité de Padres Latinos), which Latino parents organized independent of the school district, present a family and community oriented structure of interaction. This organization created a forum for ongoing conversations where new ideas and relationships are nurtured (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). In the parent meetings, COPLA parents interacted with each other in respectful ways around issues of children, literacy, learning, and culture. Parents exhibited the same values of respect and trust that I had noticed in the many family interviews I had conducted. These qualities demonstrated strength born of what could only be love.

The COPLA parents' commitment to growth was tenacious. They tapped into their own power and together they began shifting their collective power as Spanish-speaking Latinos in their families and their community. Through COPLA, parents addressed issues such as values that their children were learning in school that differed from theirs, including allowing the girls to attend science fieldtrips away from home for a week. Other issues that Latino parents addressed in COPLA dealt with establishing ongoing communication with educators.

Through COPLA's activities transformation in family, school, and community and in individuals became evident in numerous ways. In the family, parent-child interaction was enhanced. Family members could dialogue about common issues. Parent-child communication increased in ways that improved family members' attitudes toward the school and their relationships outside the home. The family unit was also supported through the family literacy activities in one school.

Schools in Carpinteria became transformed by establishing effective school-family communication with active families. They began to implement an effective classroom curriculum addressing cross-cultural diversity. But the parent voice transformed the schools most strongly by establishing a gifted and talented program for Spanish-speaking students. This was a statement that Spanish-speaking children were just as intelligent as their English-speaking counterparts. This feat moved the issue of language beyond just the language; power was at the center of the dialogue between Latino families and the school.

In the community, power became the voice of transformation when community members recognized the increased participation of Latinos in the community. Business people believed that this could only be good news for the development of the community because participation of all meant less isolation for Latinos and less stereotypical beliefs on the part of Euro-Americans.

Power was also at the center of a community political struggle between Latinos and Euro-American council members who wanted to impose a law limiting the number of Latinos living in single-family dwellings in Carpinteria. COPLA and Latinos for Better Government collaborated to successfully defeat the proposed law. Ultimately, the community as a whole won because the Euro-American group realized the strength and conviction of the Latinos, and of course, Latinos won their freedom to live as they pleased in their own homes.

At the individual level, many Latinos have talked about their personal empowerment and the ways in which their lives have changed through activism. While much pain has been endured during the psychosocial changes that occur in the lives of immigrants, Latinos in Carpinteria stretched their vision even further. Many Latino activists in COPLA saw themselves changing their sense of selves, from feeling isolated and victimized, to feeling empowered as individuals. An empowered identity enabled many Spanish-speaking Latinos in Carpinteria to reach out and change the conditions in their lives, and to assist others in their social networks. Some have talked about their improved communication skills within their family as well as in public. In this way, they've been able to grow in knowledge, skill, and personal fulfillment. In immigrant communities, continuity is critical for the students whose language and culture differ from that of the school. Students are the beneficiaries of a strong dialogue between parents and teachers. COPLA continues to be a viable force in Carpinteria 15 years later, and one model through which to support families like Marisela's.

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Making a Decision About College: Should I Stay or Should I Go? Commentary by Irina Todorova

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For many immigrant families in the US, including families from Central America, the sense of family loyalty, obligation, and responsibility holds a central place in their value system. To a large extent, this sense of obligation, and familialism more broadly, is preserved with time, including for the next generations (Fuligni, Tseng & Lam, 1999; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). From these studies it is evident that, for Central American and Mexican families, none of the values associated with family obligations decreased for the second generation. The importance of the family is so crucial for Latinos, that one's identity is constructed around it, and thus situations which individuals interpret as threatening to familialism can be perceived as threatening their sense of who they are. Additionally, forgoing one's responsibilities to one's family can be perceived as one of the greatest possible transgressions by the community, and thus threatens future acceptance by one's group.

Immigrant children from cultures which place a strong emphasis on family obligations, in arriving to the United States, find themselves immersed within a discourse of individuation and independence, especially evident during the adolescent years. This discourse of independence is also relevant to the concept of achievement. Achievement motivation has predominantly been defined in terms of individualism, independence from family and interpersonal relations, or a need for “competition with a standard of excellence” (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark & Lowell, 1953). Thus, at the intersection of multiple conflicting messages, adolescents from immigrant families face difficult dilemmas.

If this individualized conceptualization of achievement motivation is transposed to other cultures, a preservation of a familial and/or communal sense of identity can been interpreted as an impediment for its development. There are examples in the literature in which theorizing about achievement motivation is undertaken in relational and social terms (Asakawa & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; DeVos, 1973; Novi & Meinster, 2000; Suárez-Orozco, 1989). An alternative model of achievement stresses that relational ties can be an impetus and an essential ingredient of “affiliative achievement” (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Suárez-Orozco, 1989). Such reconceptualizations can lead to an increased sensitivity to the diversity of definitions of culturally meaningful goals and achievement motivation.

Rather than being an impediment, family obligations have been shown to be associated with academic success (Fulingi et al., 1999).[2] Succeeding in school itself can be seen as an obligation and duty to the family. From the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (LISA) it is also evident that immigrant children see education as a tool to help the family. Acquiring an education in order to come back and support the family in the future was the main form of affiliative achievement identified in the narratives of immigrant children.

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[2] While this relationship is true for moderate levels of sense of responsibility to family, it exhibited a curvilinear characteristic—children reporting very high levels of family obligations had lower academic outcomes.

In our work with immigrant children the dilemmas between helping the family and leaving in order to study emerge through several of the research methods we are employing, including indepth case studies. They are particularly evident in the narratives that immigrant children relate to Thematic Apperception Cards, particularly Card 2 (Todorova & Suárez-Orozco, 2002).[3] They are most evident in the context of poverty and economic struggles, and have gendered nuances. Many stories describe the child leaving to receive an education in a foreign country and the sadness connected to leaving family and friends. Afterwards, the protagonist comes back to teach others, or to bring the message of importance of education to others, also acquiring skills in order to be able to help her "whole family get ahead." Education is a tool in this endeavor, rather than a road to independence and separating from the family.

In Marisela's case there is a conflation of many of the themes that intensify the difficulty of what has emerged as a dilemma between helping her family and pursuing an education. Marisela has been able to find the necessary information and be extremely successful in her college application, and this seemingly without any program or concrete counseling that has supported her in the process. It is a tribute to her determination how well she has been doing in school, her knowledge of the college application process, and her success in being admitted to good colleges—especially when faced with so many challenges, economic hardships, and parental fatigue. Certainly this potential should be nurtured.

Conversations with school counselors sensitive to the cultural importance of family obligations and definitions of achievement for Central American youth, that can walk Marisela and her mother through the decision process, would be of great value. They can assist them in assessing the burden that the responsibility to keep on caring for them might impose on her and come to a decision which will leave her psychological space to pursue her studies. Considering the centrality of family values for Marisela, one might expect that her decisions will be accompanied with some extent of guilt. It would be important not to allow the guilt to lead to exhaustion, working extra hours to be able to help her family financially, which might have a negative impact on her studies. Such conversations might shift the family's current construction of the pursuit of education as an impediment to family obligations, to education as ultimately a tool for helping her family and improving their lives in the future. This image of investing time and being away from the family for a while in order to give back to them in the future is one that makes sense to immigrant children.

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[3] Card 2 shows a farm scene, with one girl who is holding books in her hand at the foreground, and a man and a woman in the background.

Key Points from Family Involvement Research

Questions to consider:

Deep School Culture

- What school values, structures, and practices limit expansive social networks/relationships for students and restrict college enrollment?

Communication and Building Rapport

- Review the school and PTA websites, publications, communications, and events. Who is included? Who is missing? What messages does it convey? What school or educational jargon is routinely used that may need clearer explanation for people unfamiliar with the field?
- How are faculty and staff involved in the school's surrounding community, particularly with communities of color?
- How can communication from the school-to-families and teacher-to-families be more inclusive and relevant to diverse families?
- How and how often are student successes communicated with families?
- How can faculty and staff build more trusting relationships with African American, Latino/a, and other disenfranchised families?
- When there are behavioral concerns, how do individual teachers and school leadership manage these *opportunities* to build partnerships with families?

Professional Learning Opportunities

- What professional learning is needed for faculty and staff to reflect and examine how personal and institutional racism and classism influences relationships with disenfranchised families?
- How can schools use counterstorytelling and other oral traditions to solicit feedback from students and families of color about their educational experiences in order to combat school barriers?
- Thinking about family involvement beyond volunteering, what opportunities exist to foster greater family-school-student contact about academics and discussions about education-related issues?

Family Involvement Ideas That Really Work

1. Know THE SECRET to getting families to attend meetings at school – make sure they know they're genuinely invited.
2. Establish a friendly contact with families early in the year, "In Time of Peace."
3. Insist that teachers not wait until it's too late to tell families about potentially serious problems. Early contact helps.
4. Ask teachers to make at least two positive phone calls to families each week. Add a phone line or two if needed.
5. Family communication is a cost-effective investment. Start early. Use an agenda or communication folder for ongoing communication.
6. Remember the 3 "Fs" for success – Food, Families, Fun.
7. Focus on the strengths of families – they know their children better than anyone else. Find ways to get that information to teachers, other school staff.
8. Learn how to deal with angry families – separate the family member from the argument he is making. Use active listening. Don't get angry. Look for areas of agreement. "We both want your child to do well. " Find a win-win solution. If you're not sure about a family member's suggestion say, "I'll certainly keep that in mind." If necessary, devise a temporary solution.
9. Provide a brief newsletter for families. One sheet of paper is best.
10. Remember "30-3-30" in writing school newsletters. Eighty percent of people will. spend just 30 seconds reading it. Nineteen percent will spend three minutes. One percent will spend 30 minutes (your mother).
11. Remember the dollar bill rule for newsletters. A dollar bill placed anywhere, at any angle, on any page should touch some element of graphic interest-headline, box, screen, bullets, **bold type,** picture – or it's too dull for most people to read.
12. Develop written policies encouraging family involvement. If it's not in policy, the message is we don't care much about it.
13. Write for family and the community at 4th to 6th grade level. Use a computer to check the reading level.
14. Know why families say they are not involved: 1) Don't have time; 2) Don't know what to do; 3) Don't know it is important; 4) Don't speak English. Honor their reasons to get them to feel comfortable being in and at the school.
15. Take heart from the "one-third rule." Research says if you can get *one-third* of a school's families involved, you can begin to make significant improvement in student achievement.
16. Be aware that teachers are more reluctant to contact families than *vice versa.* Solution: get families and teachers together – just as people – in comfortable social situations.
17. Stress two-way communication between schools and families. "One-way" isn't communication.
18. Conduct school surveys to reveal family attitudes about your school.

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19. Use “key communicators” to control the rumor mill. Keep those to whom others turn for school information well informed, especially the three “Bs” – barbers, bartenders & beauty shop operators.
20. Use simple evaluation forms to get family feedback on every meeting or event. If we ask, they will tell us what they want.
21. Try “quick notes” home – notes the day something happens. A family member helps the child with a spelling test and the child does better. Shoot an immediate note home to say, “It’s working!”
22. Take family pictures with the students when they are at school. Tell them in advance that pictures will be taken with their child, and prepare for a crowd.
23. Encourage teachers to assign homework that requires talking with someone at home.
24. Ask teachers what they would like to tell families if they had the chance – and ask families what they would like to tell teachers. Then exchange the information! Great program.
25. Put up “Welcome” signs in every language spoken by students and families at your school – get families to help get the works right.
26. Have handy a ready reference list of helpful materials families might use to help them cope with student problems. Better yet, have a lending library.
27. Set up a Family Center in your school stocked with resources to help (and lend to) families.
28. Offer family classes – with videos and lots of handouts.
29. Know the facts about the changing structure of the family – and consider how schools can cope to best help children.
30. Consider an in-service program for staff on facts about single- parent and non-traditional families – it can be a real eye-opener.
31. Breakfast sessions at school draw busy families like crazy.
32. Be very careful to monitor how your school telephone is answered. Phone impressions are lasting ones!
33. Provide “Go to the Office” slips for teachers to give students who do something good. Student takes slip to principal who compliments child, writes note to families on the slip (or calls families), sends it home.
34. Be aware that families are looking for a school where their children are likely to succeed – more than a school with the highest test scores. Show families you care.
35. Send a school bus filled with staff around the school neighborhood to meet and welcome students and families just before school starts.
36. Solicit family volunteers at the Kindergarten Registration Day program. Make it easy to sign up when families are most enthusiastic.
37. Don’t make judgments about families’ lack of interest in their children’s education. You’ll probably be wrong. “Walk a mile in their shoes” and understand that what looks like apathy may be exhaustion.

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38. Try day-long family member academies with short repeated workshops on topics such as building self-esteem, language development, motivating children, encouraging reading, discipline, talking with kids about sex, dealing with divorce, etc. Test weekdays vs. weekends.
39. Provide training and lots of school information for family volunteers. They're powerful goodwill ambassadors.
40. Invite families to fill out interview forms detailing child's special qualities – interests, abilities and accomplishments. Teachers can use information to write a story about child to read at school's program, post on bulletin board.
41. Investigate "voice mail" systems to keep families up-to-date on homework, school activities.
42. Find ways to provide positive reinforcement to families. Everyone responds well to recognition.
43. Involve families in goal-setting for their children. It promotes working as a team.
44. Use research findings that one of the bet ways to get families involved is to simply ask them, and also tell them what you'd like them to do.
45. Give families specific suggestions about how they can help their children. Many just need to know things like: "Read aloud every day." "Turn the TV off during homework time."
46. Try a short student-written newsletter for families about what students have been learning. (You still need your own Families newsletter. You cannot fulfill your obligation to communicate by delegating the job to students.)
47. Help families understand *why* excessive TV hurts children – TV robs them of needed play, exercise, reading practice, study time, dulls critical thinking, and encourages obesity through snacking.
48. Understand the diversity of single parent families. Living with one-parent families can be wonderful for some children but destructive for others.
49. Offer school sponsored sessions on single parenting.
50. Help families understand that student *effort* is the most important key to school success, not just *ability.*
51. Encouraging (and assisting) families to network among themselves to solve common problems builds family support.
52. Encouraging (and assisting) families in networking among themselves to solve common problems builds families' support.
53. Provide some family education classes at their workplace. Convenience works for 7-11 stores and it also works for schools.
54. Try providing "Good News Postcards" for teachers to write short positive notes about students and mail them home. One thousand postcards cost less than $200 to mail.
55. Ask families' help in developing questions for a school "audit" to see if your school is family friendly.
56. Invite families to a program bout helping children do well on homework and eliminating things that distract them. Most have never had such information.

57. Ask families to fill out a “Contact Sheet” listing home and work addresses and phone numbers – and the best times to be contacted in either place.
58. Have children write personal notes to their families on schools papers, surveys, invitations to school programs, etc. Watch families' response rates soar!
59. Help all school staff understand the central role they play in building families' attitudes, support and involvement – secretary, custodian, food service staff, bus driver, librarian, aides, everyone.
60. Try sending home “Resource Bags” filled with games, videos, reading materials and instructions on specific activities families can do with children at home. They’re very popular.
61. Having problems getting families involved with a child who’s having discipline or other problems? Try videotaping class sessions. Showing the “candid camera” tape to families and children works wonders.
62. Make sure all staff know the top things families report they want to know about school: 1) How they can be involved with their child’s education. 2) How they can spend more time at school, 3) How to talk to teachers, other school staff, 4) How to help their child at home.
63. Try holding “non-academic” social events to draw families to school to see students’ work.
64. Try an evening Curriculum Fair to give families a better understanding of what’s being taught.
65. Try a “Family Math Night” to inform families about the math curriculum through math games.
66. Try “refrigerator notes.” Ask students to “Take this note home and put it in the refrigerator.” That gets attention!
67. Know that families are also looking to schools for help in dealing with non-academic problems (child care, raising adolescents, advice on drugs, sexual activity). Providing help can build families' support.
68. Understand one key reason for families' non-involvement: Lack of information. One memo won’t do. Try letters & notes & signs & calls & newspaper & radio & TV. Repetition works & works & works.
69. Transition Nights (or days, or afternoons) for families and students getting ready to go to a new school help answer questions, relieve anxieties, build involvement and support
70. Want to get families out for school meetings? Make children welcome by offering child care.

This information comes from a presentation by John H. Wherry, ED.D, President, the Families Institute, P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474. For information about publications and services (U.S. and Canada) call toll-free: 800/756-5525.

Individual Action Plan

In support of AVID implementation

AVID's mission is to close the achievement gap by preparing
all students for college readiness and success in a global society.

Name: ______________________

School/District: ______________________

School Year: ______________________

Goal/Outcome: ______________________

Action/Task/Step	Timeline	Reflection
What steps will be taken to accomplish this goal? How will I make it happen? Does anyone else need to be involved? Is there a cost involved?	When will I accomplish this goal? Do the actions need to be chunked and benchmarked?	What evidence will I have to demonstrate my success? How will accomplishing this goal help support AVID's mission? What challenges might I encounter? How will I overcome these challenges? How is my personal plan aligned to the AVID Site Team Plan? Who might support me and help hold me accountable?

FOCUSED NOTES

Proven Achievement.
Lifelong Advantage.

TOPIC/OBJECTIVE:	NAME:
	CLASS/PERIOD:
	DATE:

ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

SUMMARY/REFLECTION:

FOCUSED NOTES

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Lifelong Advantage.

TOPIC/OBJECTIVE:

NAME:

CLASS/PERIOD:

DATE:

ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

SUMMARY/REFLECTION: