



Engaging Hispanic Parents at Title 1 Schools*

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Let's begin with a critical question:

What impact does parent involvement actually have on children's performance at school?*

The answer is more complicated than it might seem. Instinctively, we all know that parental involvement in a child's education is critical to the student's success, but research has failed to show a correlation between engaging parents at school and their children's academic performance.

And at Parent's Alliance, we agree with that data: after all, parents stay in our program for only 32 hours, which is a mere instant in their children's education. The simple skills acquired in class do not in themselves allow parents to help their children achieve in school.

But we know that parental involvement is crucial. The question is, in what way?

For Dr. Wendy Grolnick, an expert in motivational development in children and adolescents, "parent involvement exerts its most important effects by increasing *children's motivation* rather than by building academic skills."

Steven Levitt & Stephen Dubner, authors of the bestseller *Freakonomics* go even further: "When we talk about education, we have to look at the importance parents have as a whole: how much kids have learned from their parents, how hard they work at home, and whether the parents have instilled an appetite for education. If these home-based inputs are lacking, there is only so much a school can do. Therefore, when we talk about why kids aren't doing so well, *we should be talking less about schools and more about parents.*"

Lori Bourne of *Montessori for Everyone* stresses this point: "You're [parents] not out to raise a child who can do well on the artificial, unauthentic environment that a standardized test creates; you're out to raise a child who is curious, open-minded, fun to be with, and a *lover of learning.*"

We have to create a *culture of education* in every home motivating parents to pass that love of learning and that respect for education on to their kids. However, for most Hispanic immigrant parents, this involves a radical paradigm shift because most of them are not accustomed to taking an active role at their children's schools, other than encouraging the kids to attend

school and study. They firmly believe that schools in this country are doing a great job, so why bother those fine teachers.

According to research from the Pew Hispanic Center “Hispanics demonstrate an overarching faith in their local schools and in educational personnel and institutions overall.” Of course they do since most schools back home have no computers and no whiteboards, teachers are paid minimum wages and parents are shunned from participating.

Many of these parents are daunted by the broader cultural expectation that they be actively involved at their children’s school, attending PTA/PTO meetings, volunteering, keeping up with teachers through email networks, or tracking their children’s grades and school notices through Internet blackboard or whiteboard systems. These requirements can be intimidating to anyone who lacks proficient computer skills, but to Hispanic parents who struggle with English, they are simply overwhelming. And so communication breaks down—between teachers and parents, between parents and children, and instead of being active advocates for their children, parents become sidelined from the education process. And we hear this again and again from the parents we work with—whenever their children drop out of school, this breakdown in communication is cited as the number one reason or corollary.

Many schools complain that it is very difficult to get the parents through the school doors. They send tons of flyers and notifications, but it seems that nothing works. Yes, it is indeed difficult if parents think they are going to listen to all kinds of regulations and boring data. The secret to lure parents is “motivation.” Be creative and explain to them, in their own language, why their presence is so important. *The Meet the Teacher Day* is an excellent opportunity to gather parents— give them one-hour motivational talk in Spanish and, if possible, raffle prizes. Offer a welcoming, non-threatening ambience, and these parents in turn, will spread the word through their communities.

Each school puts their own spin on the idea. Hermelinda Cazares, Parent Engagement Rep at Sam Houston High School in Houston, for example, has mastered the art of “parent entertaining;” she even invites a Mariachi band with student musicians for the Meet the Teacher Day. These are really joyful events. As you can imagine, we have been there for several years now.

Schools must invest in the development of parents as an integral part of their mission. It is important for them to provide a setting in which parents feel welcome, get involved in the education of their children, and experience personal success. They will see that parents who once avoided the school building, intimidated by an institution they did not understand, now interact daily with teachers, other parents, and even the school principal. This positive, proactive attitude toward education is contagious. Not only do parents attend school on a regular basis, but their children also see and admire their accomplishments and begin to look at education as an important part of their lives.

Hispanic parents are more likely to stay engaged at schools that have a parent advisor, coordinator or liaison who is bilingual, and who can provide an invaluable service by being welcoming, attentive, and ready to help resolve any issues that parents encounter. An example of this is Pasadena ISD in Texas where every school, except high schools, has a parent coordinator with whom we work as partners. Ruby Salinas, Coordinator of Special Projects plans to offer our PACT Program in all schools in the district as it is the stepping stone for a series of Career Pathways to certification they have developed in collaboration with San Jacinto College.

Since 2007 Parents Alliance has offered PACT Program – an interactive program that brings Hispanic parents to Title 1 schools. We have listened to many parents, schoolteachers and administrators in order to offer a program that all parties consider valuable for the information it teaches, for the way it is actually taught, and for the incredible motivation our facilitators – who are mostly mothers themselves– provide to other parents. But we also know that our program offers a hidden curriculum that is part of the education we provide. These are values and experiences that are conveyed during the learning process and class discussions: self-esteem, family values, social responsibility and education for success. They are an integral part of our learning experience and have a positive effect on the entire family.

We look at PACT Program as an *educational experience* that changes the whole family’s attitude on the importance of education. It increases parents’ self-confidence as they work to earn a diploma and then begin to reap the exciting benefits of continued education. Taking a class empowers them to change their lives. Our impact reaches way beyond grades to affect the way families view education itself. In addition to instilling a culture of education in the family, PACT Program strives to empower parents to take a more active role in their children’s education.

The financial literacy part of PACT Program motivates parents to open a bank account, buy insurance and, very importantly, prepare a family budget and a financial plan –albeit a very simple one– but the idea is to empower parents to be able to take control of their finances and start saving for college among other needs. This sets in motion real cultural changes in the perception of education as an important part of their lives, as children begin to learn from them.

As one parent stated after graduating from our program in California: “*We are more than a simple statistic, we are now able to reach higher and succeed.*”

* Available online at <http://400voices.com/engaging-hispanic-parents-at-title-1-schools/>