

Building Partnerships with Immigrant Parents

Andrea Sobel and Eileen Gale Kugler

Because half of its parent population was born outside the United States, Annandale High School created a parent outreach program that transcends traditional approaches.

Sylvia, a parent in Annandale High School's Immigrant Parent Leadership class, presented to the class a problem she had encountered: "One of my stepdaughter's teachers thought someone else did her homework. But the reason she is doing so well is that I am working with her at home." Sylvia emigrated from Guatemala as a child and attended U.S. schools from 4th grade on. She speaks English well and is committed to helping her stepdaughter, who recently arrived from Guatemala.

"Call the teacher," the leader of the class advised. "This is clearly a misunderstanding, and the teacher would want to know what is actually happening." Sylvia was amazed: "You mean I can talk to the teacher? I felt I would be insulting her if I did."

This snapshot illuminates one of the lessons that administrators, faculty, and parent leaders at Annandale High School in Virginia have learned through our Immigrant Parent Leadership Initiative, a focused effort to engage immigrant parents and nurture two-way partnerships with them. Even when immigrant parents are fluent in English or have attended U.S. schools, cultural barriers to involvement often remain.

Annandale High is a diverse school of 2,400 students in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. The school opened in 1954 when Fairfax County schools were still segregated, and its population remained largely middle-class and white until the 1980s, when immigrants flocked to the region. Today, students come from 84 countries and speak 50 native languages; more than 40 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Nearly half of the students' parents were born outside of the United States.

Tensions in the school among different ethnic groups ran high in the early 1990s. The principal and faculty, with support from the district superintendent and school board, committed to making Annandale High a model diverse school. One of the fundamental goals of this effort has been to actively promote the involvement of parents from all cultures.

Education leaders in locales with expanding immigrant populations face a common challenge in engaging parents. When immigrant parents don't respond to traditional parent engagement strategies, administrators and teachers often assume

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that these parents don't care. In reality, most immigrant parents care intensely, but many misunderstand what is expected of parents in U.S. schools or do not know how to become more involved. In most countries outside the United States, the unspoken norm is that it's the teacher's job to educate a student and that participation from the parents shows disrespect for the teacher's expertise.

Launching an Initiative

In an immigrant-rich environment, parent engagement strategies clearly must move beyond business as usual. From the inception of the Parent Leadership Initiative in 2004, school leaders at Annandale High, including established parent leaders, looked for new ways to connect with immigrant parents. The effort began with the recognition that new strategies to target the needs of the diverse immigrant community were called for. Simply translating flyers for current programs into Spanish and other languages would not be sufficient, nor could we use jargon like “Back to School Night” without explanation.

The school's effort was significantly enhanced in 2004 with a \$25,000 grant for an Immigrant Parent Leadership Initiative from the Washington Area Partnership for Immigrants (which was later extended for another two years on the basis of the successful permanent leadership structures Annandale developed). With support from its nonprofit partner, the Mid-Atlantic Equity Center, Annandale High began a comprehensive program to foster immigrant parent leadership, including

- Holding parent leadership classes—in English and Spanish—to empower parents to become leaders in their own families, schools, and communities.
- Offering programs for parents from specific ethnic groups, held in Spanish, Korean, and Vietnamese.
- Guiding teachers in action research to increase their understanding of parents from other cultures and their skill at developing partnerships with parents.
- Opening a parent resource center. Annandale's approach has been to develop meaningful partnerships with immigrant parents rather than to merely provide information or assistance. Teacher researchers conducted surveys and personal interviews with parents concurrently with the school's launching of parent leadership seminars and outreach programs. Through these efforts, the school is learning as much from parents as parents are learning from participating more closely in school leadership.

Mutual Lessons Learned

Parents Need Support and Information

Many immigrant parents expect their children to graduate and pursue postsecondary education, but they have limited knowledge of how to help their children reach those

goals. Parents appreciate information from the school on student achievement, but they pay particular attention if the information relates directly to their child.

“I get so much mail that sometimes I don't pay attention to an envelope, even with a label from the school,” said one parent. “But if it is personally sent to me by my child's teacher, I always read it.”

The Complexities of English Remain a Barrier

Many parents with knowledge of English still lack understanding of its nuances or the academic language used in schools. Students are often unreliable translators for parents and may screen information. Annandale's immigrant parent leadership classes were taught in two languages: The school's Hispanic parent liaison taught a class in Spanish and a longtime parent leader taught a class in English. Although a number of parents in our Spanish-speaking parent leadership class communicated well in English, they chose to attend the class taught in Spanish so that they could more fully understand the issues discussed.

As a result, Annandale came to realize the importance of the school's five part-time parent liaisons, who collectively speak Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, French, Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi. The school began providing professional simultaneous interpretation at parent meetings and increased its emphasis on parent peer networks.

Cultural Differences Can Deter Involvement

At the first session of the parent leadership class in English, the parents—born in eight different countries from all parts of the world—described the school systems of their native countries. Not one of these systems encouraged parents to become actively engaged in the school.

Even programs designed for parents can be uncomfortable for immigrants who don't know the unspoken codes—from agendas run by Robert's Rules to other parents' shorthand speech that assumes knowledge of past events. But in leadership seminars crafted specifically for immigrants, parents expressed a new ownership of their school. “I have four children at Annandale High, but I was afraid to come into the school,” said a Vietnamese mother. “Now it is like a second home.”

Some Parents Are Eager to Take Leadership

In many communities, Annandale among them, the immigrant community itself has great diversity in language, culture, and socioeconomic status. Some immigrant parents are overwhelmed by adapting to the new culture and don't have the means or extra time to participate in school partnerships; others are able and eager to become leaders in their children's school, once they have a sense of how they could best contribute.

Parents in the leadership class in English pointed out that typical school programs for immigrant parents offer basic information and are geared toward lower-

level knowledge and skills. Many parents who might act as leaders avoid such programs. In contrast, parents in our classes were honored to be part of a leadership development program, and many took the responsibility seriously. Some now regularly attend our parent-teacher-student association board meetings. Others work with Annandale's parent liaisons to plan parent programs or in the Parent Resource Center. A father from El Salvador now collaborates with the teacher-sponsor of Annandale's Hispanic Youth Leadership Club.

Graduates of the leadership program expressed an interest in more advanced training. This led us to offer an additional level of training in the third year of the grant. Through this training, parents are taking on leadership projects of their own design, such as establishing immigrant parent groups within the school and community and improving recruitment for the school's mentor program.

Because the leadership classes were school based, they provided parents with information and contacts that were immediately relevant to supporting their child in school. Presentations focused on such topics as motivating your child, planning for the future, selecting courses, and choosing a college. Parents talked with teachers, counselors, and parent leaders, and visited the library and career center.

A parent from Bolivia was proud that what she'd learned in the leadership class had enabled her to help her child. "My son told me he was given time to visit the Career Center, but he didn't go," she explained. "I told him he had to go the next day so he could find out about college and jobs." Before attending the parent leadership classes, this parent did not know the Career Center existed.

Outreach Must Be Culture Specific

In addition to the leadership classes, the school targeted programming to the varying needs of its immigrant community. For example, the Korean parent liaison led a discussion on college admissions, which Korean families had expressed interest in. Programs in Spanish shared details on school resources, including materials available to both students and parents in the library and scholarship information in the Career Center.

As with all aspects of this initiative, traditional methods of publicizing these programs were not sufficient. The school found that fliers must be coupled with telephone contact and e-mail, if available. Immigrant parents appreciate the school's automated telephone service, which sends out messages about school events in each of seven home languages. Participants in the parent leadership class helped us realize the effectiveness of posting notices in local foreign-language newspapers and distributing fliers at ethnic restaurants, markets, or other community venues.

During the first year of the leadership program, Annandale advertised parent leadership classes through one flier translated into several languages; this strategy produced little response. The school's Korean parent liaison completely revised the flier in Korean, included some information of interest to her community, secured Korean refreshments, publicized the event through fliers and the local Korean newspaper, and followed up with phone calls. More than 30 Korean parents attended the session.

Personal Relationships Are Key

The parent leadership classes were originally designed for approximately 25 parents, yet the actual class size of 10–15 turned out to be an advantage. Parents felt more comfortable in a smaller class and formed close bonds with peers from other countries. A Bolivian parent said she had felt isolated from the school, “like I was looking at things from a distance. Now I see that as parents we all share the same concerns and objectives.” When a mother from El Salvador discussed the insulting way a police officer had talked to a family member, a father in the class—a county police officer who emigrated from the Philippines—gave her his card. “If you ever experience anything like that again, call me right away,” he urged. “That’s the reason I became a police officer.”

For a diversity-rich school to effectively build long-term partnerships with parent leaders, those parents must experience personal contact beyond one or two interactions with a faculty member. These contacts need not be limited to school personnel; phone calls from other parents, particularly from the same culture, are probably even more effective. Members of the first class of immigrant parent leaders recognized this need for connection and helped organize phone trees within their communities.

Creating a Parent Resource Center Requires Outreach

Both Annandale faculty members and the new parent leaders expressed an interest in establishing a center for parents within the school that would provide information and welcome new parents. In October 2005, Annandale High opened a comprehensive Parent Resource Center that provides materials about the school, community services in several languages, and access to the Internet.

Because parents tend to casually stop by a parent center less often in high schools than they do in elementary schools, the school worked to increase the parent center’s visibility. Parent liaison offices were relocated to the center, and staff members hosted parent meetings there. This school year, Vida Sanchez, who had been the lead parent liaison, took on the new position of school-community liaison, coordinating programs for the school’s immigrant families and collaborating with community leaders.

As the first comprehensive parent center in Fairfax County’s 28 high schools, the Annandale High center has drawn a great deal of outside attention. The county government saw an opportunity to provide additional services to parents and other members of the community by collaborating with the school system. In 2007, a neighborhood center, coordinated by a community nonprofit agency, will open on the grounds of Annandale High School, working in conjunction with the parent center.

Emerging Changes

Immigrant parents are increasingly taking leadership roles in the school. Two of the five current elected parent-student-teacher association officials were born outside the United States. Graduates of the immigrant parent leadership classes are helping plan and lead a series of targeted parent programs, chosen on the basis of needs identified through phone surveys conducted by the school's parent liaisons. Offerings include a basic computer class for Hispanic parents and a support group for parents who speak Hindi, Punjabi, or Urdu. School programs regularly provide simultaneous translation in several languages.

One of the goals of the initiative was to improve how teachers instruct immigrant students. Many faculty researchers involved with the initiative reported improvement in the academic achievement of their students as teachers became more skilled at connecting with immigrant parents. A group of teacher researchers is now working with the principal to weave the lessons learned into the fabric of the school. For example, at department meetings, faculty members have refined strategies for creating parent partnerships, for example, the best way to use interpreters when working with parents. Faculty members will also conduct a “welcoming walk-through”—a procedure and accompanying checklist Fairfax County developed to evaluate how welcoming a school is to parents of all backgrounds.

As with any project that addresses the school culture as a whole, the support of the principal and administration has been essential. The school remains committed to partnering with immigrant parents, strengthened by its newly developed county and community partnerships. Continued progress will require introspection, evaluation, and change by all parts of the school community.

Andrea Sobel (asobel@cox.net) is an education consultant. She was coordinator of the Annandale Parent Leadership Initiative and currently facilitates the advanced immigrant parent leadership class. **Eileen Gale Kugler** (EKugler@EmbraceDiverseSchools.com), a speaker and consultant, leads Annandale's immigrant parent leadership class in English. She is the author of *Debunking the Middle-Class Myth: Why Diverse Schools Are Good for All Kids* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).