



InET Consortium

Importance of Engaging Parents of Binational Migrant Students

**Jonathan Fernow
MEP, Oregon**

As state migrant director, I have the privilege of visiting migrant programs on a regular basis. When I monitor programs, I interview superintendents, principals, students, migrant staff and parents. Gauging whether an area has a healthy MEP program is measured by the response given by students and parents. The parent meetings provide an opportunity for a two-way communication giving me an acute awareness of areas that need improvement.

The parents of binational migrant students have some unique academic needs that were shared during our meetings. When I first started, I would ask, “Are your children on target to graduate?” Parents would respond that they were. A follow up question would be, “how do you know?” They would respond, they were in 9th grade last year, and now they are in 10th grade. I realized many parents did not have a clear understanding of credits needed to graduate. Many of the parents assumed that like in Mexico, their children would not be promoted if they hadn’t passed the grade level competencies. Now when I have the conversation about credit accrual, parents respond by sharing their students’ current school history and credit accrual.

Understanding the U.S. school system and feeling welcome to participate in schools and district groups has a strong effect in the success of binational migrant students. Some parents believe they cannot volunteer in schools if they do not speak English. That view is changing in many schools. Actual and perceived acts of discrimination can be discussed at meetings. Further discussion with district personnel has facilitated better, healthier relationships between schools and families.

Some families from Mexico were raised believing that student behavior was the role of the parents, while academics were the responsibility of the school. At conferences, parents would start asking about the child’s behavior. That was their responsibility. Then they would ask about the academics which would be perceived as the responsibility of the school. This paradigm has shifted to where parents see themselves as the first and most important teacher of their children. At parent meetings a focus has been to share the importance of the parent’s role towards preschool readiness. Tools and modeling on how to work with their children may be one of the most important things parents can do to help their children succeed and graduate from school. Reading with their children at night and building social and academic foundations in their first language has helped parents empower their children.

We have added parent involvement and engagement as part of our regular end-of-year evaluation. A few years ago the evaluations would have comments like: “We have doubled the number of parents attending.” “We have great meetings. All the parents smile and say they like them.” Number of parents in attendance can be a measure of involvement, but not always. The area that doubled their numbers went from two parents in attendance to four. In other areas many parents were in attendance, but if you asked what they learned from the meeting, they could not share much. We now encourage a pre- and post-assessment tool. Whatever the topic is, we list 3-5 main points that we want to accomplish and write them on a sheet of paper that we will collect at the end of the meeting. After we welcome for the parents to the meeting, we ask them to rank their understanding from a “1” (not knowing anything about the topic to a “5” (can present on the topic”). We explain to the parents the purpose of the 5-point rubric and read and explain each point and visually walk them through it. At the end of the meeting, we quickly do it again and see how much growth has occurred.

Creating a vibrant and transparent school-home partnership is an ongoing process. We have to develop trust and create an opportunity for the parents to have a voice. Additionally, we have to find the best approach to train parents and to seek authentic input from them to help us continuously build our parent engagement program.
