WHEN A HIGH SCHOOL IN ALBUQUERQUE, NM, opened a search for a new assistant principal, none of the leading candidates could speak Spanish. From the standpoint of several families, this was a problem in a school with a student population that was 80% Latino. When those parents learned that the school was about to offer the position to an individual who was not bilingual, they organized themselves at one of Albuquerque's school-based family centers and began making calls to the high school. One by one, they articulated the following message: "As a parent with a child at this school, I don't think you should hire someone who doesn't speak Spanish." Administrators at the high school listened, and the school reopened the search. A bilingual assistant principal joined the administration soon after.

Studying School-Family Partnerships
As schools and districts grapple with increasing Latino student enrollment, the educational attainment of these students remains at alarmingly low levels. Among Latinos between the ages of 18 and 25, 48% hold less than a high school credential (Ruppert, 2003). The combination of a rapidly expanding population and persistent underachievement has been characterized by some as a ticking time bomb. Efforts to improve access to post-secondary education hold promise for reversing these troubling trends. But how can school leaders and Latino parents build partnerships that will increase students’ chances of graduating from high school and enrolling in a postsecondary program? This question guided the Parent Outreach Study conducted by the PALMS (Postsecondary Access to Latino Middle-Grades Students) Project. Gathering data from privately and federally funded college access programs, PALMS identified five strategies that are effective in increasing Latino parents’ participation in their children’s schooling:

• Conducting home visits
• Offering parent-child activities
• Promoting skill development
• Employing home-school liaisons
• Encouraging parent ownership.

A growing body of research confirms that parents have a profound impact on their children's educational attainment, particularly in the secondary grades. For example, Epstein and Sanders (2002) found that strong academic outcomes among middle level and high school students were associated with communication between parents and school personnel about the child's schooling and future plans. Schools that successfully involve parents in planning their children's postsecondary education understand that involvement must extend beyond showing up at school functions or volunteering to help with school-sponsored activities. Wimberly and Noeth (2004) recommend that parents should be involved in course selection, interpretation of test information, college admissions discussions, college visits, and financial aid planning.
Yet many Latino parents, particularly those of first-generation college students, lack information and knowledge about what their children need to prepare for college and are less likely to help them select high school courses or discuss college options (Horn & Nuñez, 2000). In a study of how Latino parents acquired information about the steps required to go to college, Tornatzky, Cutler, and Lee (2002) found that parents with greater knowledge about the college-going process were adept at interpersonal networking. That is, they used effective strategies for engaging teachers, counselors, and college representatives in their search for information. Our study of how college access programs engaged Latino parents allowed us to document practices that address parents’ need for information about the education system and facilitate parents’ relationships with school personnel.

**Building School-Family Partnerships**

Although many of the programs we studied were based at universities, all were closely linked to public schools that enrolled Latino students. Each program had a vested interest in increasing parent involvement at the school sites because the program’s originators clearly understood the impact that such involvement has on students’ academic performance. Although each program created a unique approach tailored to the local context, the program leaders all:

- Took time to understand their community well
- Found people to serve as cultural and linguistic bridges
- Helped parents build their advocacy skills
- Gave parents opportunities to use their new skills.

**Understanding the Community**

Schools don’t operate in a vacuum. The community helps define a school’s strengths as well as its needs. As part of their efforts to reach out to Latino families, participants in successful programs became well-versed in the unique circumstances and resources of the Latino community. Participants learned where families worked, what countries they came from, and what challenges they and their children faced.

They asked, “Who is already working closely with Latino families?” and “How can we partner with those individuals to make our school a more inviting place?”

Approaches to understanding the community can range from informal to highly structured, but in all cases, they must be deliberate. Schools might begin by having teams of teachers drive around the neighborhoods where students live and take note of the businesses, institutions, and agencies that exist there. School leaders can also consult with people who are familiar with the different neighborhoods in the community, such as religious leaders or representatives from the local chamber of commerce. Those individuals may already be working with Latino families and can provide valuable information about how schools can best reach out to this part of the community. Having done this research, the school will have an initial inventory of its community’s assets.

When the leaders of Missouri State University’s Hispanic Initiative offer college awareness events for Latino families, they mobilize a host of community resources to promote attendance and organize follow-up activities. One of the program’s signature events is a combined picnic and soccer festival for families living in the city of Springfield. To get the word out, Judith Martinez, the director of the initiative, calls upon clergy, community groups, cultural centers, and her colleagues at Central High School, where she teaches part time. “If it wasn’t for the school personnel and the community leaders helping us, this event wouldn’t happen,” she said. Martinez also recruits local Mexican restaurants to donate the food for the picnic.

Martinez and other program leaders find that schools and universities need to be proactive in creating synergistic relationships with the community. They must be willing to ask, “Who is already working closely with Latino families?” and “How can we partner with those individuals to make our school a more inviting place?”
with their communities. All community leaders have a vested interest in the academic achievement of the children who live in their community. Schools can initiate conversations that explore how to align their goals for student achievement and family involvement with the mission of different community groups. With a win-win mindset, schools and local partners can work together to enhance the overall well-being of the students and families they serve.

**Bridging Cultural Divides**

As schools tap into community resources, they must identify individuals who are both bilingual and well-acquainted with the local education system and who can function in a bridging role to facilitate the development of trusting relationships between parents and school personnel. Some schools are fortunate to have on-site community liaisons (or staff members with similar titles) who reach out to Latino parents regularly. These individuals make it their priority to help families navigate the ins and outs of an unfamiliar education system. They take the time to establish rapport with families and often serve as the first school-affiliated employee that parents contact for help.

The GEAR UP program at the University of North Texas employs two full-time staff members to serve as community liaisons at participating middle level and high schools. The one-on-one attention that the liaisons gave Latino parents has “made all the difference in the world,” said the director of the program, Aurelio Hurtado de Mendoza. The liaisons worked especially hard to overcome the sense of intimidation that parents felt about setting foot in the school. As parents felt more comfortable, the liaisons began inviting them to workshops that educated them on specific aspects of the U.S. school system. To extend personal invitations, community liaisons stood outside the school and handed out free coffee to parents as they dropped their children off in the mornings. When report cards were distributed, many of the parents who attended the workshops called the GEAR UP staff to discuss particular concerns about their children’s grades. “The parents didn’t know much about the school system, but they knew enough to call us with their questions, and we could direct them to the right place,” said Hurtado de Mendoza.

Schools that don’t have a community liaison can still find ways to move forward with their outreach efforts. Clergy or civic groups may be able to direct school personnel to individuals in the community who could volunteer to make phone calls or visit the homes of Latino parents. Latino high school students may also welcome the opportunity to be part of such an effort. Having a committed group of bridge builders can go a long way in promoting parent involvement.

**Developing Advocacy Skills**

As students enter the secondary grades, their parents encounter an increasing number of choices regarding their children’s education options. Unfortunately, many parents are unaware that curriculum choices made years before 12th grade—such as whether students take algebra in middle school—have a significant long-term impact on what will be available to their children after graduation. The programs in the PALMS study ensured that parents had this information and could use it to advocate for their children’s education.

![Photo courtesy of Monica Pessina No/oceaN o'Gra Phics](image) Parents display their certificates after completing training to better advocate for their children’s education through Padres Adelante in Isla Vista, CA.

Schools can give parents the skills they need to serve in an advocacy role. A number of organizations have developed curricula to help parents develop communication and leadership skills so they feel comfortable and confident when approaching school personnel. The programs in our study offered classes to parents on how to give a successful presentation, communicate with school officials, and become involved in reform efforts at their children’s school. Programs incorporated school-based English-language courses or computer classes to help parents gain valuable employment credentials while building their self-confidence and increasing their ability to communicate with school staff members.
The North Carolina Math and Science Education Network conducts parent workshops that cover such issues as the No Child Left Behind legislation, the North Carolina standard course of study, and changes in state testing policies. Associate Director Rita Fuller said that familiarity with current issues and education language helps parents feel confident when speaking with their children’s teachers. The network equips parents to interact with school personnel, provides regular access to teachers and counselors, and assigns a teacher or counselor from its participating schools to work closely with the local parent clubs, giving parents frequent interaction with school-based staff members. As a result, parents become more willing to approach the school, as was the case with a parent who successful advocated for her daughter to be placed in an AP course although her teacher had not recommended her.

Providing Opportunity
To truly involve parents, schools must open their doors. Parents need opportunities to put their advocacy skills into action, which means that school personnel must be accessible and approachable. School leaders can foster a welcoming atmosphere for parents through concrete actions such as creating a family center, posting signs in Spanish, having interpreters available, and following up in person with parents after they attend school events. To help parents further develop their communication and leadership skills, schools can ask them to be involved in decision making by soliciting feedback on important issues or including parents on a task force or site-based management team.

Our study gathered compelling examples of how schools can help parents practice their new skills. Once parents had purposeful and effective interactions with practitioners, they began to see schools as places where they could access valuable resources and take an active role. In Isla Vista, CA, Latino parents receive leadership training through the Padres Adelante (Parents Moving Forward) initiative, a component of the ENLACE (Engaging Latino Communities in Education) program run by the University of California–Santa Barbara. Padres Adelante graduates were encouraged to use their new skills to ask for positive changes. Prompted by a concern over a lack of nutritious food, a group of parents met with the local elementary school principal to discuss food options in the cafeteria. Several parents formed a task force to work with the principal and successfully petitioned the district to add a salad bar.

Empowered parents will ask questions and may occasionally request that decisions made by school staff members be reconsidered. School leaders must ask themselves whether the thought of parents exercising this role makes them uncomfortable and whether they truly believe that building strong coalitions with parents will lead to academic gains for students. Exploring these and other questions about attitudes and assumptions is an important step in creating a school culture that welcomes contributions from families. Building trust between school staff members and parents is neither easy nor quick. But schools that have remained responsive and respectful of parents have found that diverse voices can lead to new ways of tackling pressing problems and to greater achievement for students.

Powerful Alliances
The vignette presented at the beginning of this article came from the ENLACE Albuquerque program, which uses school-based Family Centers as hubs for parent involvement. These centers are staffed by a cadre of parent volunteers who serve as resources to students, families, and school personnel. One of the centers’ signature practices is the “knock-and-talk” visit, whereby designated parents go to the homes of students who have stopped attending school. Volunteers introduce themselves to the students’ parents saying, “I’m your neighbor from 8th Street. I’m not a school employee, but I’m here because I’m concerned that your child hasn’t been going to school.” Families then receive the resources they need to integrate the child back into the school.

The Albuquerque parent involvement model was developed after years of coordinated efforts by schools, parents, and community partners. Interestingly, the driving force behind the work came primarily from a small group of Latina mothers who felt compelled and ready to act on behalf of their children. These examples of parent advocacy serve as reminders to school leaders that while the challenges of building partnerships with parents are many, empowered parents can become strong allies in school improvement efforts.

References
Solving Real Problems
When a reporter called to ask Principal Tom O’Malley about a spring 2006 round of study circles at East Central High School in Tulsa, OK, he reported that at that very moment, people were meeting in his conference room to discuss a student wellness partnership between local health clubs and the schools. Freshmen who took part in the Teen Tulsa Talks study circle program at East Central had expressed concern over student fitness and their desire to have more activities available before and after school. Tulsa Talks Director Carol Cain McGowen says that faculty and staff members had reported significant amounts of obesity and depression among students too.

As a result, St. John Health System, a major Tulsa health care consortium, has been enlisted to provide a before- and after-school boot camp featuring wellness and fitness activities and evaluation for freshmen. The YWCA will offer such classes as water aerobics for students and parents and citizenship preparation for the growing numbers of Hispanic students and their families. East Central also will be working with food-service providers to improve food and beverage choices.

O’Malley noted that the Teen Tulsa Talks participants also expressed views on many issues facing the broader community, including crime, abandoned buildings, recycling, and public transportation. In this way, he said, study circles help empower students and give them a taste of what their roles will be in their lives, jobs, and society at large when they become adults. Community members who served as facilitators for the six sessions of study circles benefited because they were able to gain firsthand knowledge of the school rather than relying on media portrayals of public education.

Addressing Any Issue
School officials are learning that study circles can be used to address just about any issue. At Upson-Lee High School in Thomaston, GA, graduation ceremonies had become increasingly rowdy affairs. The commencement is held in the school stadium, and families had taken to treating it like a football game—talking, moving around, and seeing who could yell the loudest for their friends and relatives. “Parents couldn’t hear their own kids’ names,” said Keith Rohling, a member of the local school board.

Rohling had learned about study circles from the Georgia School Boards Association and thought the process might help build public support for making graduation more dignified. Principal Cleve Hendrix agreed, and a study circle was held just weeks before graduation in 2005. Participants agreed on a number of changes to help boost decorum at graduation, and Upson-Lee has since enjoyed two trouble-free graduations.

This fall, the Thomaston-Upson Schools planned to hold study circles on possible uses for a recently passed local option sales tax for education, and Rohling believes that the community-based conversations also would be an ideal tool to help the district update its comprehensive plan in the next year or so. “To me, study circles give you a tool that I don’t know how you’d get anywhere else,” he said. Growing numbers of school officials agree: study circles are an unusually effective way to build coalitions, engage all parts of the community, and get things done.

The Study Circles Resource Center is the primary project of the Paul J. Aicher Foundation, a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization. It helps communities develop their own ability to solve problems by bringing lots of people together in dialogue across race, income, age, and political viewpoints. Located in Pomfret, CT, the center works with hundreds of communities—including neighborhoods, school districts, towns, regions, and states—across the country.

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