By Patricia L. Guerra and Leonard A. Valverde

PREVIEW  No matter what their socioeconomic or cultural background, parents are assets to schools and should be encouraged to participate. Two majority Latino school districts combine relationships, rigor, and relevance to achieve success. Dedicated school leaders believe schools must adapt to meet community needs, not the other way around.

Some people look at our kids as disadvantaged because they don’t speak English, because they come from a culture other than mainstream America, because there is crime and tremendous obstacles in our community, because they don’t stand out as individualistic. You know, Latino kids like to hang in groups. And I say if you look at the Fortune 500 companies, what are they looking for? Bilingual, bicultural, collaborative, resilient people.... My kids are who they want to hire.

—Kent Scribner, Superintendent, Isaac School District, Phoenix, AZ

Schools with populations that are mostly, if not entirely, composed of students of color are usually in need of more human, financial, and political capital than state funding can provide. These schools are often located in communities where family income is classified as low, where property taxes generate small revenue compared with revenue generated by taxes of high-wealth homes (San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez, 1973). These communities are old, and school buildings are in need of repair, if not renovation, and increased enrollment calls for new building construction. Teacher turnover is higher than in other school districts (such as those in middle-class communities) as well, because the pay scale is lower than the state average. These and other indicators place many schools that serve students of color at a marked disadvantage.

To date, state support for minority schools has been insufficient to enable them to catch up with schools in middle-class communities. The economics for state-supported schools is changing, however, because of high-stakes testing. Principals and teachers in minority schools must rethink how they educate students, who often have been categorized as underachievers on standardized tests.
What and Why?
Many schools in minority communities have marginalized parental and community involvement. Too often low-income communities have been seen as cultures of poverty, so whatever parents and community partners could contribute to the school was thought to be of little help. But the relationship that some schools formed with Latino communities was even worse (Warren, 2005). That is, educators believed that minority communities had very little to offer and that parents only added to the problems already present. This type of deficit thinking must be eliminated and replaced with the belief that parents and the community have much to offer and, in so doing, can strengthen schools in many ways (Valenzuela, 1999).

Disadvantaged communities must be seen as asset-based contributors so schools can become mirrors of the home and community culture. Students must see their likeness in the curricula if schools are to maximize teaching and learning and make parents and students feel welcomed and at ease. Schools should not be foreign and separate from the home and the neighborhood.

For example, in Latino communities, particularly low-income communities, the home language is typically Spanish. Therefore, schools should use Spanish as much as possible—not only when speaking with parents or with English language learners but also throughout the entire school in formal and informal discussions. Although we, like many other educators and Spanish-speaking parents, believe that students must learn English, common sense tells us that students cannot learn what they don’t understand. Students will learn another language (English) as well as any other subject if they come to know that school personnel are trying to meet them halfway.

In districts we have worked with, teachers and administrators have reached out to Latino parents through home visits and neighborhood activities and events that are sponsored by community-based organizations and by speaking to Latino parents using as much of the Spanish language as they can. These strategies encourage parents to attend parent conferences and ask penetrating questions. Parents will be more likely to volunteer to help in the classroom and act as translators if they are given some English language lessons. By providing parents with guidance and reassuring them that they can do much more than they thought, schools can relieve some of the insecurities that Latino parents have. In so doing, principals and superintendents...
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have found that student attendance goes up, student discipline goes down, and test scores improve dramatically.

The rapid increase of the national Latino population—according to the 2006 U.S. Census Bureau, 44.3 million Latinos live in the United States—has resulted in a commensurate increase in Latino political influence, most visible in the election of local, state, and national representatives (Nasser & Overberg, 2007). Schools must reach out to those Latino elected officials and inform them of their needs. At the same time, political leaders, and in particular Latino leaders, look to support schools that are making a major effort to redesign themselves. Politicians are more willing to create and support bills that help schools that are recreating themselves—not merely bringing more parents into schools, but improving learning.

Connecting School and Community

Administrators in two school districts—Kent Scribner in Phoenix, AZ, and Edward Blaha in Hidalgo, TX—have used their knowledge of the Latino communities in which they work to better engage parents and the community in their schools. Following are a few of the practices they believe have enhanced the school-family connections in their communities and improved student achievement.

Embrace the community. Blaha and Scribner view themselves as integral members of the communities they are trying to engage, and this view is reflected in their words as well as their actions. For example, students, parents, and the community are repeatedly referred to as “my students,” “our community,” and “our parents.” Language reveals attitudes, and such terminology as “those students,” “that community,” or “those parents,” often alienates Latino parents because it indicates the deficit beliefs many educators hold about them, their children, and their community. Deficit beliefs are judgments made by educators who believe that minority students and parents have deficiencies such as lack of intelligence, limited motivation, and poor social behavior (Valencia, 1997).

Practice servant leadership. Because these leaders believe that schools should serve their current communities, not previous ones, they focus on changing the schools, not the students and parents. They realize if parents are to be engaged and students are to be successful, the school and the district must adapt to fit the community’s needs, not the reverse. Thus they use the culture, language, and “funds of knowledge”—the culturally developed skills and bodies of knowledge that are found in students’ homes and communities (Moll, Amanti, & Gonzalez, 1992)—to transform system components (e.g., parent involvement and classroom instruction) into culturally responsive programs, policies, and practice.

Empower parents through knowledge. These administrators and their staff members teach parents about school programs, operating procedures, parents’ rights, and the implicit rules of schooling for the express purpose of equipping Latino parents with the knowledge and skills they need to question, advocate, and participate in school. Gatherings that bring parents and administrators together—such as Monthly Coffee With the Principal (in Hidalgo, TX) and district advisory councils (in Isaac, AZ)—are opportunities for administrators to hear about how the schools can respond to students’ and parents’ needs, not occasions to inform parents about how they should support the school.

Further, parents learn about topics that are not generally discussed in schools because they are considered either sensitive or taboo, such as not letting the lack of English intimidate and prevent them from participating in school and asking teachers questions about teaching methods and curriculum during parent-teacher meetings.

Dispel the myths. These leaders constantly work to dispel the myths about the Latino community with individuals outside the community but, more important, with those inside, such as students, teachers, and staff members. By confronting and challenging the myths about culture, language, and poverty, these leaders visibly demonstrate that they respect, value, and support the Latino community as well as engender their community’s trust and loyalty.

Value and incorporate the home and community culture. Because these leaders and their staff members view culture and language as assets, not obstacles, they incorporate the home and community culture in all parts of the school, such as curriculum, instruction, and staffing. For example, rather than a one- or two-year bilingual program or one or two years of ESL instruction, Hidalgo Independent School District
has a dual Spanish-English program that runs from preK to grade 7 and has plans to extend the program through high school. During the summer, teachers who participate in the district’s advanced leadership academy work in jobs similar to those that their students and their parents have (e.g., construction and food preparation). Teachers use the knowledge they gain from those jobs to include real-world examples in their curricula, which helps students see the relevance of the material and increases engagement and learning. And it shows that teachers value the knowledge that students and parents have about these jobs.

Develop strong personal relationships. In addition to using regular school communication channels, these leaders develop strong personal relationships with students, parents, and community members through frequent, individual contact and by attending school and district events where parents and the community gather. Latino parents prefer such informal social gatherings and personal interactions over impersonal communication, such as newsletters and notes that are sent home. Because the goal of developing strong personal relationships is a priority for Scribner and Blaha, they make the time to visit with parents through phone calls and home visits, plan and hold cultural celebrations, and communicate in Spanish.

Enlist all staff members. It takes a collaborative effort that ranges from the school board and superintendent to teachers, custodians, and bus drivers to engage Latino parents and the community in schools. The superintendents and the school boards of these two districts have established an expectation of engagement, and this expectation is constantly communicated to all staff members.

Generate financial and political capital. Because of their districts’ limited funding, these leaders constantly search for opportunities to build partnerships with individual citizens, small businesses, large corporations, foundations, and powerbrokers. For example, to increase their students’ access to college, Hidalgo Independent School District partnered with the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation to establish Early College High Schools in their district that enable their students to earn a high school diploma while earning either an associate’s degree or up to two years of college credit for a bachelor’s degree. And when the Isaac School District needed a pedestrian bridge built in front of one of their schools to ensure students’ safe passage, the superintendent worked closely with city council members and local political groups to organize the effort to get one constructed by the state.

Conclusion

Schools with a large proportion of minority students often experience lack of support from the state and from their parents and communities. Administrators in these schools can build support among parents and community members by identifying and acknowledging the assets students and their parents can bring to school and by redefining the school culture to match the culture of the community. Once Latino parents feel welcomed, respected, and valued by schools, their engagement and involvement increases.
In turn, this involvement results in more staff accountability, increased student engagement, and better learning and achievement—and consequently more human, financial, and political capital. 

**REFERENCES**


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Authors’ note: Olivia Hernandez, the principal of Hidalgo (TX) Elementary School, contributed to this article.

**Hidalgo Independent School District**

- English classes for parents
- GED instruction for parents
- A partnership with the local community college and district encourages parents to attend
- Monthly coffee with the principal
- Annual parent conference
- Parent Academy
- Individual calls to parents
- Home visits (including high school)
- Calendars delineating benchmark dates (i.e., elementary, middle level, and high school graduation along with application to college and graduation)
- Students study the history of their community through interdisciplinary units (i.e., reading, math, writing, technology)
- Mother’s Day celebration
- Fiesta Mexicana (September 15th)
- Cinco de Mayo celebration
- Parent Nights by grade level in high school to address specific needs (i.e., testing vs. college application)

**Isaac School District**

- Dedicated Active Dads in Schools (DADS)
- District advisory council
- Intel partnership
- Local car dealership gives the district a percentage of money from car sales for scholarships
- Partnership with local family provided a building for the Boys and Girls Club
- Each school has a bilingual coordinator who lives in the community and serves as a liaison between English-speaking educators and Spanish-speaking parents
- After-school programs consist of academic (i.e., tutoring) and enrichment programs (i.e., sports, chess club, music lessons)
- Parents are invited to present to classes and become role models
- Daddy–daughter dances are held in middle school
- Dads learn to read with their kids, regardless of whether it’s in Spanish or English
- Dads help organize leisure and enrichment activities
- Dads help with security at school or district events
- Community clean-up days
- Superintendent attends Coffee With the Principal
- Principals hired are expected to exhibit values congruent to those of district (i.e., high expectations, service mentality, desire to integrate parents) and to be willing to engage the parents and community through compassion, respect, and dignity