

Celebrate Our Differences

*El Rancho Elementary School
Chino, California*

A bilingual presentation complete with translation headphones was the key to bringing together the school community at El Rancho Elementary School this past winter. On February 28, 2008, the school's Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) hosted the Celebrate Our Differences workshop for parents and teachers to encourage more open lines of communication between the two groups.

Administrators at El Rancho face many challenges in helping all students to succeed in school. Among its students, 41% are non-English speakers and 85% participate in the free and reduced-price lunch program. Cultural misconceptions and stereotypes among teachers, students, and families were growing. The ATP decided to reduce tensions and build cultural bridges by hosting Celebrate Our Differences. They began by advertising the multicultural event in the school newsletter, on the school web site, through fliers, and in the local newspaper.

Preparing for the workshop was truly a group effort! Hispanic parents decorated the school's multipurpose room and the PTA hospitality committee organized refreshments. School administrators encouraged all teachers to attend the event by providing a stipend.

About 50 students and 75 parents participated in the workshop. After a few ice-breaker games, administrators divided the attendees into small groups. Each group received a giant, poster-sized sticky note pad and some writing instruments. They were given a series of questions about their children's education and asked to post their ideas in both Spanish and in English.

For the next hour, the small groups of parents, teachers, and students discussed questions such as, "What are ways parents can show their children that they care about their education?" and "How can we build a communication bridge without barriers?" At the end

of the discussion, each group presented their findings to the full group. At the end of the evening, a school staff member gave a moving speech, summarizing the general findings of the assembly for all.

In perhaps the most dramatic twist of the evening, the general presentation was conducted entirely in Spanish, while English speaking attendees listened to their peers talk through a translator on special headsets. For many folks, this was the most interesting element of the night. Disoriented by the double speaking, some chose to turn off their headphones for a bit and understand what they could in Spanish. Others found it interesting to hear their own English phrases translated back through their headsets. "It was very, very powerful for me, personally, to walk in someone else's shoes," a program specialist commented after the workshop.

Spanish-speaking parents were pleased to have their language spotlighted. "I want to thank you for presenting this evening's event in Spanish and making us feel welcome," a Spanish-speaking mother wrote.

Since the activity, teachers have noticed a dramatic increase in the number of parents at parent-teacher conferences, setting record attendance levels at the school. The school plans to repeat the event on an annual basis. They hope that even more parents will take an active leadership role in next year's workshop.

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