

Involving Diverse Families

*Beacon Hill School
Seattle, Washington*

Over the past two years, Beacon Hill School, a diverse urban elementary school, has reached out to specific groups of underperforming students and their parents. At Beacon Hill these underperforming students included children for whom English is a second language, children of recent immigrants, children who live in poverty, and children of color. A team of faculty and staff from different grade levels created an after-school tutoring program so that children could work with teachers and instructional assistants in their home language (Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, or English) on the information and skills they learned in class. This focused instruction helped children learn better, provided them with additional practice, and helped them complete their homework.

This extended-day program encouraged parents to be involved from the start. The team hosted parent gatherings to explain school processes to parents in their native language. At the meetings, the team and parents discussed home and school strategies to help students be more successful in school. Based on the parents' feedback, team members crafted activities for parents and students that built on their strengths, needs, and interests. In return, the team asked (required) that parents be involved.

The involvement activities varied for the different language and cultural groups the school serves. For example, the Hispanic families whose children participated in the Before-and-After-School Tutoring program sat with their children, watching the teacher model in Spanish the reading instruction or the homework support, and then practicing it themselves

with their children. The Chinese and Vietnamese parents sent their children to an after-school Homework Club and agreed to attend at least once a week to work informally with the tutors while they were working with the children.

The project supported and involved families in several other ways. Hispanic families formed a monthly support group for all Spanish-speaking families, regardless of country of origin. In addition, they participated in a formal parent leadership training program that encouraged parents to take an active role in the decision-making processes at the school. As a result, the Spanish-speaking parents formed a "mini-PTA" that serves as a sub-group of the school-wide PTA. The school provided an ESL class focused on math and asked each adult participant to volunteer a minimum of 10 hours in a primary classroom, tutoring children in math.

African-American families requested informational sessions about school initiatives such as standardized testing, and came together to address issues specific to their experiences. In addition, the school held group meetings for Asian parents. All of these activities were very productive because they were based on respectful collaborations.

The bilingual instructional assistants called each parent personally, inviting them to attend orientation meetings. In addition, they called parents after meetings to follow up. Parents received a phone call when their children missed their tutoring sessions or when parents missed meetings.

The team kept logs of parent participation and monitored measures of student success through tools such as the Direct Reading As-

assessment and the Qualitative Reading Inventory. They asked parents for feedback and modified the program based on their input. Teachers were also asked about the progress of the children who participated in the project.

Children involved in the project improved in literacy by at least one grade level on measures that the school had available at the end of the year. Some children moved from well below grade level performance to meet or exceed the literacy standard. Participating students expressed pride and confidence in their ability to perform well in school. Teachers realized the importance of family involvement; and appreciated stronger relationships with parents.

Parents feel more comfortable taking an active role in their children's academic success. One parent said in a public forum, "I can model for my children the importance of speaking, reading, and writing well in English. I can also tell them, 'If I can do it, so can you!'" Parents expressed their comfort to the school staff by saying, "Tell us what you need us to do."

Beacon Hill School found that it is critical to ask parents what they need for their children and themselves. Parents appreciated being asked and were more likely to stretch beyond their comfort zone to support their children when they saw that the school was committed to helping the children and their families succeed. Teachers and staff know they still have a long way to go to ensure that every child at Beacon Hill becomes a successful reader and writer. With the support of parents, they will reach their goal. After all, the students are counting on it.

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