

Community Forum Series

*Oltman Junior High School
Saint Paul, Minnesota*

Connecting parents to Oltman Junior High is a priority and a challenge for the school, given that students' families speak as many as 14 different languages. To increase parent involvement, solicit parent feedback and create a greater sense of community, the school launched the Community Forum Series. The intended audience was the parents of the school's English Language Learners (ELL), some of whom had never been in the school.

The forums included dinner and time for questions, comments and informal conversation. Organizers hoped parents would get acquainted with one another and with how they might become more involved in their children's education. The guiding principles of the forums were:

- Establish and cultivate relationships of trust
- Connect with families that have not been involved
- Reassure parents, families and community members that the school values their input in the educational process
- Involve families and community members as participants in school decision-making

Held once a month from February to May, each forum started with a presentation by a community organization on a topic such as post-secondary opportunities, parent-teacher conferences, or recruitment for the school's Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) or Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). Dinner and conversations followed, allowing parents to voice their concerns and to make suggestions on improving the school's parent and community outreach efforts. The forums gave families and community members a rare opportunity to meet the principal, the community involvement coordinator and the president of the PTO, all at the same time.

Four translators staffed the forums so that all the parents understood what was happening and were comfortable speaking. With

the help of the district's translation service, all publicity about the forums, including formal written invitations from the principal and personal phone calls to target parents, were in the native languages of the families.

The series reached its target audience. Most of the more than 40 parents attending each forum had never been in the school building before, not even for a parent-teacher conference. The reason they had not come, they said, was that they did not feel comfortable there. The forum organizers extended an invitation to parents to actively participate as volunteers in decision-making by joining the PTO, the School, Family and Community Partnership Committee or the school site team.

Organizers handed out a 10-item questionnaire about school climate that focused on the quality of communication. Attendees commented that they now felt comfortable bringing genuine concerns to the table and that those concerns would be addressed. The issues raised by parents at the forums were later presented to the whole staff during faculty meetings.

The forums helped start a meaningful conversation about the importance of parent involvement and its contribution to student success. Organizers said the gatherings set in motion a new partnership that will be consolidated in future forums.

Starting in September, forums will be held quarterly. Information from these gatherings will be posted on the school's website so that parents who cannot attend will remain informed and continue to feel included and welcome at school.

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