

English as a Second Language for Parents

*Eastern Elementary School
Hagerstown, Maryland*

Eastern Elementary is having no problem finding parent volunteers. The challenge lies, rather, in communicating with them. The families at the school speak 10 different languages with Spanish and Russian the most prevalent. The school wanted to enable more of these families to communicate in English with teachers, doctors and other community members.

In March, Eastern Elementary started offering English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for parents. The class is held from 8:30 to 9 a.m. every Monday and Wednesday in the media center with two teachers in charge.

One of the teachers has experience teaching adults as a volunteer with the Literacy Council of Washington County. The other teacher speaks Spanish and teaches ESL to students. The school principal gave these teachers permission to spend an hour a week to teach parents who were interested, and the school staff pitches in to take over their other duties.

To publicize the practice, the school sent home fliers in English, Spanish and Russian. The teachers and the Family and Community Partnership Coordinator (FCPC) talked to families about the class. Finding parents to attend was initially a challenge. This was solved by encouraging students to talk about the option with their families and by having the teachers and administrators publicize the classes to boost attendance. This year, 11 parents and other caregivers took the classes.

During the first week, the teachers evaluated each parent's English proficiency and divided them into two groups based on need. The county's Literacy Council provided materials. The first parents who attended the program helped recruit other parents and networked with each other after class. The FCPC, with Title I funds, occasionally provides breakfast to the parents.

Many parents said they like the class. By the end of the year, the school staff has noticed that some of the parent volunteers speak English more often in the volunteer room, and more of them are coming in to volunteer right after their English class. Teachers are hoping they will be better able to communicate with these parents, who will then have stronger connections with their children's school and education. Another benefit is that the Literacy Council has reached families it may not have without this program.

The school plans to offer the classes again next year and hopes to recruit more parents through the methods they tested. The school also plans to adapt the program for different proficiency levels so that the classes will fit parents' needs and help them advance their English language skills.

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