

Multilingual Communities of the Past, Present, and Future

*Buffalo City School District
Buffalo, New York*

Student dance performances from around the globe brought parents and school administrators together during Buffalo School District's Multilingual Communities of the Past, Present, and Future: Celebrating Our Diversity conference.

District leaders wanted to recognize and support the extraordinary diversity within their region. Of the 37,000 students enrolled in Buffalo Public Schools, more than 2,600 have limited English proficiency. These non-native speaking students and their families come from 50 countries around the world and speak over 70 different languages. Leaders wanted to encourage everyone in the district to learn more about the different language groups in Buffalo and their needs. They also wanted to offer information to these parents about multilingual services available in the area.

The district advertised the celebration on the district's web site and in flyers sent out to area schools. They also made announcements on public access TV and, as the date approached, used its automated phone messaging service to send parents reminders about the conference.

Parents, children, teachers, central office administrators, board members, and community members attended the conference at the Buffalo Academy for Visual and Performing Arts. After registration and breakfast, participants explored a series of displays on African and Asian cultures of families living in the area.

A series of speakers addressed the crowd and six student dance troops performed for the guests. Parents were mesmerized by the quick light steps of Irish dancers, followed by the engaging movement of several African dance troops and a salsa dance team. At the conclusion of the performances, the guests attended sessions and focus groups where they learned about Buffalo's multilingual department, refugee committee, and related services.

Administrators made sure that plenty of translators were available in all sessions, so that everyone could understand the information. District-level personnel also distributed packets in several languages, explaining No Child Left Behind. Day-care was provided for parents who brought their children. The day ended on a high note with international food sampling, more student performances, and cross-culture sharing.

In all, guests discovered many things about Buffalo's international population. "We are lucky to have such diversity in cultures," one parent said. A teacher commented that, "It was a real learning experience."

The event cost roughly \$5,000. The district used Title VII funding to cover the expenses. Buffalo plans to host the conference again next year and will allot more time to plan before the conference.

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