

# *A Guide for Engaging ELL Families: Twenty Strategies for School Leaders*

Written for Colorín Colorado by  
Lydia Breiseth  
Manager, Colorín Colorado

with Kristina Robertson and Susan Lafond  
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## Introduction

Imagine that a new immigrant family has moved into the neighborhood your school serves. What is already in place to make this family feel welcome? What programs does the school offer that would inspire and challenge their children? What still needs some work?

If you feel there is a lot of room for improvement in meeting the needs of your English language learner (ELL) students and their families, you're not alone! With more than 5.3 million ELLs in U.S. schools who make up roughly ten percent of the PreK-12 population (NCELA, 2011), numerous school leaders around the country are, as Buffalo principal Kevin Eberle puts it, "[flying the plane while building it](#)." It's never too late to start engaging your ELL families, however, no matter how limited or ineffective those efforts have been in the past.

### Making ELL Success a Priority

School leaders are in a unique position to create a culture of success within their school community. As with other students, an important aspect of ELL success is family engagement. While you may be fortunate to have an energetic and passionate ELL teacher or bilingual liaison who has worked successfully with ELL families in the past, this is not the job of a single person. Engaging ELL families can only work if *all* members of the community (including administrators, staff, parents, and students) are committed to the broader mission. The road will probably be bumpy at first and will most certainly require you to think outside of the box – the keys to your success may surprise you! In the end, though, the result is the same: parents, students, and educators working together towards a brighter future.

When you find what works for your ELL families (which may or may not be the same as what works for the ELL families at a neighboring school), you will feel as though you have won the lottery. Engaged ELL parents possess depths of dedication and wisdom regarding their children that will take your breath away. They have so much to offer – if the community is ready to embrace them and listen to what they have to say. This is where you, as a school leader, can make important strides in changing the conversation from "What can they learn from us?" to "What can we learn from each other?"

### "Parent Involvement" vs. "Parent Engagement"

In their book [Building Parent Engagement in Schools](#), Larry Ferlazzo and Lorie Hammond explore a distinction between *parent involvement* and *parent engagement*. Parent involvement, as they define it, starts with the school: "The ideas and energy come from the schools and government mandates. Schools try to 'sell' their ideas to parents. School staff and public institutions might feel they know what the problems are and how to fix them, and determine the criteria to use in evaluating success."

Parent engagement, however, begins with the parents: "Ideas are elicited from parents by school staff in the context of developing trusting relationships. They emerge from parent/community needs and priorities. More parent energy drives the efforts (6)." This approach is more sustainable than asking your busy staff to plan numerous parent activities, take on extra responsibilities, and dig even deeper into their energy reserves (2). In addition, the more parents have the opportunity to shape activities and programs that help their families, the more invested they will be in seeing those efforts succeed.

Think of your ELL parents as a team waiting to be mobilized; while it will take some time and energy to get the team up and running (and to help them understand how valuable their contributions are), once everything is working, you will wonder how you ever got along without them!

## Using This Guide

This guide offers twenty big ideas to help you create a new ELL family engagement plan. These ideas are designed to help you:

- Strengthen home-school partnerships on behalf of ELL students
- Recognize and build upon your ELL parents' strengths
- Harness the energy and ideas of staff, parents, and students in shaping those partnerships
- Mobilize and empower staff to become teacher leaders
- Engage school-wide staff members beyond the ELL/bilingual departments
- Create a culture of respect throughout the school community
- Learn how to advocate for and allocate resources on behalf of ELL families
- Encourage all participants to keep trying new, creative approaches until they find what works
- Implement the changes needed to make your new plan successful.

The ideas are organized around six major themes:

- Connecting with ELL Families
- Communicating Important Information
- Parent Participation
- Parents as Leaders
- Community Partnerships
- Creating an Action Plan

Each idea has four components:

- **What you need to know:** Background information and context
- **Reflection:** Questions about your own school setting that can be used for professional development activities with individuals or groups
- **Strategies:** Specific, concrete strategies targeted for an audience of PreK-12 administrators
- **Examples:** Stories shared by educators and administrators around the country

As you get started, we recommend that you look for the ideas that best fit your population rather than trying to absorb all of the strategies at once. You will most likely need to try different approaches in order to find what works best for your families – but the important thing is to keep trying until you do.

**Note:** Links to additional resources on Colorín Colorado and other ELL websites are included in each section, as well as highlighted notes and recommended resources in the appendices at the end of the guide. If you have additional ideas or resources that you would like to recommend, feel free to share them in an e-mail to [info@colorincolorado.org](mailto:info@colorincolorado.org)!



## Part I: CONNECTING WITH ELL FAMILIES

### 1. Learn about your ELL population

#### A. What you need to know

Learning about your ELL families provides an important foundation for everything else you do at the school. Even basic information about students' ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, or the situations from which they have come, can help you match students with the appropriate services and programs.

#### B. Reflection

Answer the following questions about your ELL families using a [KWL chart](#):

- What do you know about your ELL students and families?
- What do you want to learn?
- Who on the staff works most closely with your ELL families?
- What would be valuable for your school-wide staff to know?

#### C. Strategies

If you do not yet know this information about your ELLs, find out:

- What countries your families come from
- How many of your ELLs were born in the U.S.
- What languages they speak (which may be at least two or three!)
- If families who speak the same language, such as Spanish, come from different countries or different regions within the same country
- The educational background of families and the school system of their countries
- If any of your ELLs are [migrants](#), [refugees](#), or [students with interrupted formal education](#)
- If your families have experienced war or another [traumatic event](#) such as a [natural disaster](#).

In order to learn more about your ELL families:

- Start with your ELL/bilingual educators.** These individuals are an important resource whose experience working with ELL students and families can benefit the entire school community – and they will appreciate the opportunity to share their expertise!
- Find out what resources are available from the district and community.** This may include helpful background information as well as a network of interpreters.
- Enlist a knowledgeable staff member, community member, or parent.** If you find such a person, examine his/her background as it relates to what you need. For example, you may know a Somali young adult who is bilingual but doesn't remember Somalia. He may be more helpful as an interpreter than as a liaison for Somali families who have just arrived in the U.S.
- Ask the families.** You may want to include some questions in your [home language survey](#) or a very basic questionnaire that ELL parents fill out with an interpreter during student enrollment.

**Note:** Remember that your ELL population is not homogeneous. The child of a migrant worker from Mexico and the child of a teacher from Mexico probably won't have the same educational and economic needs. Learn what you can about each child's unique circumstances to the extent possible.

#### D. Example

- ❖ An administrator from Minnesota wanted to better understand the needs of the children who were arriving at her school directly from Kenyan refugee camps. She wrote a grant that enabled her to travel to Kenya and visit the camps from which they were coming. What she learned at the camps was not only helpful for her; it was helpful for the entire staff. Based on her experience, she was also able to prevent some major misunderstandings around discipline issues. (Related video: [Understanding Student Background](#), Dr. Cynthia Lundgren)



## 2. Integrate cultural traditions of your ELL families throughout the school

### A. What you need to know

Becoming familiar with and including the cultural traditions of your ELL families within the larger school community not only enhances your ability to create a welcoming and respectful school environment – it has practical considerations as well. These include:

- **Scheduling:** Scheduling around important cultural or religious holidays will help prevent large numbers of students from missing important instruction time, exams, and school events.
- **Classroom opportunities:** Familiarity with ELL families' cultural traditions will provide teachers a base from which to build upon ELLs' [background knowledge](#), create educational opportunities for other students, and foster a sense of respect among students for their peers.
- **Improved communication:** Learning about your ELL families' traditions may help avoid miscommunication or cultural blunders that can damage a budding relationship.

### B. Reflection

What are your ELLs' cultural behaviors and values? Which celebrations and holidays do they observe? How does your staff feel about the changes in your school population? How do they feel about working with ELLs?

### C. Strategies

- Avoid scheduling important events such as conferences or tests on major holidays and celebrations that large numbers of students are likely to miss.
- Share these dates with the entire staff.
- Share information about cultural celebrations with teachers so that they are able to positively support them and incorporate them into lessons. Even a simple memo that explains why students will be out and offers some ideas for follow-up activities will be helpful. (Encourage teachers to start with children's books, which often have background information and activities, such as these titles about [Ramadan](#), [Chinese New Year](#), and [Día de los muertos](#).)
- Learn about, recognize, and celebrate [special events or holidays](#) throughout the school.
- Invite parents to share food, activities, and music at school events and in the classroom.
- Encourage students to share traditions in school assemblies, talent shows, potlucks, and fairs.
- Offer food that reflects the cultural influences of your families on the cafeteria menu.
- Be mindful that students who are fasting may be less energetic in the afternoon. If possible, avoid school-wide parties or food-centered activities during these times.

**Notes:** Staff may resist the changes happening around them, and they may be uncomfortable discussing those changes. Such was the case of a school custodian in Minnesota who asked a receptionist “why they (the Muslim students) get special days off and we can't even celebrate Christmas.” Dr. Lundgren explains the importance of having an open, non-threatening conversation with the entire staff that acknowledges the challenges of serving a new ELL population and explores steps the school can take to address those challenges. (Related video: [Cultural shifts](#), Dr. Lundgren)

You may find it helpful to bring in a neutral, outside party who specializes in cross-cultural education and communication in order to help moderate these conversations if they seem particularly fraught with tension. An open dialogue with a professional will give your staff the tools they need to adjust to the new reality and create a more positive, welcoming environment for everyone in the school.

## D. Examples

- ❖ Storyteller Lucía González remembers a storyteller-in-residence program she led at a Colorado elementary school. The program was going to culminate with a Spanish-language story hour for the Latino families at the school. On the night of the event, the weather was bad, and few people had arrived as she was getting ready to start. Seeing the small crowd, the principal turned to her and said, “Don't worry if they don't come, because usually they don't come.” At 7:00 p.m., however, the parents began to arrive, led by the excited children who had heard her stories. (Related video: [A dream come true - The Storyteller's Candle](#), Lucía González)
- ❖ A group of Muslim students at Forest Heights Collegiate Institute in Ontario approached principal Jim Woolley about finding a place to pray within the school. After working with an immigration settlement worker and local *imam*, the school reserved a classroom in which students pray on Friday afternoon after the school is closed. They use the classroom and then lock the door when they finish. According to Mr. Woolley, it doesn't cost the school anything and it doesn't require supervision. “We trust them,” he said (D'Amato, 2011).



### 3. Create a welcoming environment for families

#### A. What you need to know

A welcoming environment can make a tremendous difference for all families, including ELL families. Entering a friendly, vibrant atmosphere lets families know that the school is “an integral part of the community” (Houk, 63) and that they are valued members of that community. This is especially important for immigrant families who may be intimidated by the formal school environment and the English language needed to participate.

Another way to think of this is to keep your ELLs visible. ELLs are often treated as an invisible minority, but ELLs and their families should “see themselves” throughout the school:

- On the walls, through student work and photos
- In the classroom, with books and lessons that incorporate their experiences and traditions
- In school-wide cultural activities
- In the faces of staff and volunteers who come from similar backgrounds.

#### B. Reflection

Imagine that you have arrived in a new country where you don’t speak the language and where you will be enrolling your child in a local school. Think about arriving at the school for the first time, only to discover that no one at the school speaks English. Imagine the feeling of leaving your child in the hands of people with whom you can’t communicate. Now envision, instead, that someone who speaks English greets you at the door, and you see a picture of an American flag in the front hallway. What might you be able to accomplish as a parent in the second situation that you wouldn’t in the first?

#### C. Strategies

- Make sure parents know how to get into the building, especially if doors are usually locked during the school day.
- Post signs in multiple languages.
- Display student work on the walls.
- Display student and family photos on the walls.
- Display the maps and flags of your students’ native countries.
- Display a large map in the front lobby where parents can mark their native countries with a pin.
- Enlist a bilingual morning greeter to welcome students and families.
- Ensure that your bilingual staff and volunteers are visible throughout the building.
- Create a parent room (such as a lounge or classroom) with bilingual information and magazine subscriptions, a bulletin board, a lending library, and a computer (Houk, 58, 63).
- Include bilingual books in the [school library](#) and classrooms.
- Consider playing music in the front entryway or lobby.
- Encourage teachers to create a [welcoming environment](#) within the classroom.
- Consult the federally supported [Parent Information Resource Centers](#) (PIRCs) for other ideas. Your state chapter may have a “walk through” protocol, such as this guide from [PIRC Vermont](#).

#### D. Example

- ❖ At [Lincoln Options School](#), in Olympia, Washington, there are photos of the entire school community – students, staff, and families – to greet guests in the front lobby. Each year, the school hires a photographer to attend its annual back-to-school barbeque and take informal photos (Houk, 9). In addition, student work is posted throughout the building (16).



## 4. Make a personal connection with families

### A. What you need to know

Getting to know ELL families helps build an important relationship based on trust, which in turn can pave the way to student success. This approach is most effective when the communication is personal and face-to-face (Hori, 40; Alford 85). While it will require additional time and effort, building a more personal relationship with ELL families early in the year will yield big dividends throughout the rest of the year (Hori, 40). It will also provide opportunities for the staff to see just how deeply ELL parents care about their children's education.

Indeed, as Dr. Lundgren notes, many ELL families have come to this country with the hopes of offering their children a better future, and they are eager to talk with their children's teachers about what they can do to help their child be successful. (Related video: [A better life](#), Dr. Lundgren)

### B. Reflection

What are the challenges in meeting your ELL families personally? What are some ways to facilitate more personal interaction?

### C. Strategies

- Hold a special back-to-school event or picnic for ELL families in which they have time to meet you, other school leaders, their children's teachers, and school staff.
- Create a welcome DVD in multiple languages. This may even be a great student project!
- Provide staff the opportunity to learn some common phrases in your families' languages, as well as cultural gestures.
- Visit local neighborhoods to meet families.
- Connect new families with a contact person who speaks their language as soon as they enroll in the school for guidance and information (Houk, 66).
- Create an "ambassador" program in which students and parents are trained to give tours.

### D. Examples

- ❖ Educator Maricela Rincon in Las Cruces, NM calls a different parent every day to share something positive about his/her child. According to Rincon, some parents say, "This is the first time I've had a positive phone call about my child." While Rincon is enthusiastic about the calls, they weren't her idea - they were required by the school principal (Flannery, NEA.org). (Related video: [Parent outreach in high school](#) under *Adolescent ELLs* playlist, Bobbi Ciriza Houtchens)
- ❖ A group of school educators asked experts from a local university to help them learn more about their ELL community. After the initial conversation, it was clear that the school leaders assumed that the parents' lack of input, communication, and attendance reflected a lack of interest in their child's education. After getting some parent input, however, the educators discovered that the parents weren't enthusiastic about the school letters inviting them to events. They didn't feel that the events were planned with them in mind, and the letters seemed very impersonal. The parents didn't see the letters as the invitations they were intended to be. They expressed preference for more personal contact and invitations from the school, at least in the beginning of the year, in order to establish a strong relationship (Alford and Niño, 81-82).

- ❖ This is an excerpt from a parent letter to the principal about her first visit to her child's school:

I was very surprised when we were not able to speak to Lupe's teacher, Mrs. Gibbons, individually. In Guatemala we all knew the teachers and the teachers knew the parents...We do not know anyone here nor does anyone know us...we would have liked to tell Mrs. Gibbons how much we value education (Amaya, 53).



## 5. Show that you value families' native languages

### A. What you need to know

As the school leader, one of your most important roles is defining the terms of engagement when it comes to ELLs' native languages. Do you see those languages as a barrier or an asset? Do you see native language literacy and instruction as a crutch or a tool?

Unfortunately, the political climate often dictates district or state policy regarding native language support (Wright, 51), and important information regarding the value of native language literacy is often left out of the debate. Frequently, ELL parents themselves are the party most resistant to promoting their native language at home or in school because they believe it will hinder their child's ability to learn English. While this belief is entirely understandable, the research is clear that strong native language skills contribute to ELLs' academic success throughout their education – in their native language *and* in English.

What can you do to navigate this tricky terrain and encourage the continued development of students' native language skills, as well as biliteracy and bilingualism for all students?

- **Respect parents' intentions:** It is critical to assure parents that you respect their wishes and goals for their children; you can do so by explaining that strong native language skills will help their children learn English. This reassures parents that you have their children's best interests at heart and that you view their native language as an asset, not an obstacle.
- **Encourage native language use at home:** Don't miss any opportunity to encourage parents to use their native language, whether it's through reading (which will help their children's [reading skills in English](#)) or taking the time to talk to each other at home. Look for ways that the school can support this interaction by offering bilingual books, educational materials, and activities.
- **Professional development:** Provide training to all staff on the importance of maintaining students' native language and ways in which they can support students' bilingual development. Understandably, many teachers still feel that the best way to help ELLs is to forbid native language use in the classroom. Often, in this case, the teachers have good intentions – they just need more information. There may also be some anxiety about not being able to understand what students are saying. The best way to address this issue is through good professional development with an expert in [second language](#) or [dual-language acquisition](#). Not only will the staff learn strategies that will help them and their students, they will learn how to answer parent questions about this topic with confidence as well!

### B. Reflection

What is the current attitude towards ELLs' native languages in your school? Is a student's use of his/her native language encouraged or discouraged in the classroom? Do parents know where to get information in their language? How do teachers approach this issue?

### C. Strategies

- Post information in multiple languages.
- Discuss with parents the value of strong native language skills and being bilingual.
- Encourage parents to read or tell stories to their children in their native language.
- Offer parent sessions, workshops, and classes in parents' native languages (Meyers, 44).
- Include [books in students' native languages](#) in the school and classroom libraries (Freeman, 42).
- Make resources available to students in their native languages to support content learning.
- Consider the possibility of adding academic coursework (such as Spanish Literature for Spanish speakers) or AP courses in students' native languages.
- Hire bilingual staff and recruit bilingual volunteers to the extent possible.
- Inform parents that they are welcome to bring their own interpreter to a school meeting.
- Provide training to all staff on why maintaining students' native language is important and how to support students' bilingual development.
- Offer staff guidance on how to respond to parents' questions and comments.

### D. Examples

- ❖ In Illinois' Evanston/Skokie School District 65, parents are continually encouraged to use their native language at home and read to their children in their native languages daily. Washington School, a two-way immersion school, offers a family literacy program funded with a state grant in which parents participate in afternoon and evening literacy activities at the school and public libraries. Parents also learn how to help their children with homework - all in their native language (Yturriago, 51-52).
- ❖ At Webster Elementary School in Long Beach, California, the school library has a large collection of books in Spanish and Samoan, the two dominant languages of the school's ELLs. Parents are encouraged to borrow books and bring younger siblings to the library (Houk, 45-56).



## Part II: COMMUNICATING IMPORTANT INFORMATION

### 6. Find ways to communicate with ELL parents

#### A. What you need to know

One of the greatest challenges for schools and ELL parents is communicating with each other. While educators may feel frustrated that they can't get their message across to parents, parents may be just as frustrated that they can't communicate easily with the school and their child's teacher. Like your other parents, however, ELL parents want to know what's happening with their child. Two important pieces of this puzzle include:

- **A reliable translation process:** In [\*Supporting English Language Learners: A Guide for Teachers and Administrators\*](#), Farin A. Houk underscores the importance of establishing two-way communication on both sides, as well as the necessity for a translation process that is "formal, steady, and reliable" (64). What does not work, she says, is sending notes home in English, talking slower or louder, using students to translate, or asking a friend or relative to translate confidential or detailed information. She also underscores the importance of having options for families with limited literacy skills (65-66).
- **Phone calls:** Offer staff training on communicating in simplified English on the phone. Monolingual staff may be reluctant to call the homes of bilingual students because "they won't be able to understand anyway." As a result, the bilingual staff members are frequently called upon to stop what they are doing to translate. With some guidance, however, teachers can learn how to communicate basic information through a simplified conversation or message.

#### B. Reflection

How would you describe the communication at your school with ELL parents? Have you had some success stories? Have you explored all of your available options? Are you familiar with applicable local, state, and federal regulations regarding translations and parent access to information?

#### C. Strategies

In order to improve school-home communication, Houk suggests:

- Hiring, when possible, staff that matches the linguistic needs of your population
- Developing an ongoing relationship with community organizations
- Scheduling home-school communication time into the school day for e-mails or phone calls
- Using parent phone trees (65-66).

In addition:

- Find out what the applicable regulations are that relate to parent communication.
- Find out what translation and interpreting resources are available in your district.
- Use school staff to help interpret on a rotating or scheduled basis so that the same individuals aren't frequently pulled away from other duties.
- Ask parents how they prefer to receive communication (phone, e-mail, text message, etc.).
- Ask parents which language they prefer – it may be English.
- Inform parents that they can bring an interpreter to the school or that one can be provided.
- Avoid using translation websites, which are imprecise and often inaccurate.

**Notes:** You may have parents with strong bilingual skills that can assist in translating school forms or interpreting. If you do plan on using these parents, however, offer training, provide a list of translated terms, give them enough time to complete the translation, and have other native speakers review written translations (Rodriguez, 48). This is critical because school terms can be complicated and easily misrepresented, especially when translated into varying dialects of the same language.

#### **D. Examples**

- ❖ One educator shares the creative way she used an automated voice message: “Over the entire Christmas holidays, parents heard my recorded voice remind them of the financial aid workshops. That proved very helpful...They just need those reminders. They want our students to go to college, but sometimes that fear about the ability to pay is overwhelming” (Alford and Niño, 88).
- ❖ The Bilingual PreK-3 Teacher Education Program, a federally-funded grant administered through Pacific Oaks College Northwest, was created to increase the number of certified educators from ELL/minority communities teaching in the public schools. One way they accomplish this mission is by helping talented early bilingual childhood educators in the local preschool programs fulfill the necessary requirements to become certified (Houk, 33-34).



## 7. Make the enrollment process manageable for ELL parents

### A. What you need to know

School enrollment is a complicated process for any family. There are forms to be filled out, decisions to be made, policies to be read, programs to learn about, and questions to be answered. For ELL families, a number of other obstacles can arise:

- There is no interpreter available.
- Parents are unaware of services (such as free- and reduced-lunch) for which they qualify.
- They don't understand how bussing works.
- They are confused about their rights and their children's rights.
- They are reluctant to show any form of identification.

In addition, your ELL families may be coming from:

- A school system very different from the U.S. system
- A situation with a lot of mobility (as in the case of migrant students)
- A situation without any schooling at all (such as a refugee camp).

Yet regardless of how it's done, ELL parents **must** have access to the same information as non-ELL parents. Sending information home in English will not ensure that it is read and understood. Getting this information doesn't just help the school operate more smoothly – it can make a critical difference in keeping children healthy and safe.

Whether through translated forms or an interpreter, ELL parents need to know about the basics, such as:

- Enrollment procedures
- The school schedule
- Their child's schedule
- Attendance policies and procedures for absences
- Bussing and transportation
- How breakfast and lunch work (such as lunch accounts, codes, or policies)
- Free- and reduced-lunch options
- Holidays and school closures
- Weather delays
- Procedures for alerting the school to their child's medical conditions, medication, and allergies.

ELL also parents need information about their child's academic program, such as:

- Their child's classes and [who their child's teachers are](#)
- The school grading system and report cards
- [Assessments](#) (classroom and standardized)
- [Parent conferences](#)
- Information about the English-language program and placement procedures (121)
- Special services, such as gifted programs or [special education](#) as needed
- Homework help and resources
- The school library
- Clubs, sports, and extra-curricular activities.

Finally, Debbie Zacarian underscores the importance of sharing information about the following in her book, [Transforming Schools for English Language Learners: A Comprehensive Framework for School Leaders](#):

- Student and parent rights
- Emergency contact cards and procedures
- The student handbook and code of conduct (121).

Additional topics are included in the article [Helping ELL Newcomers: Things Your Students Need to Know](#), an excerpt from [The More-Than-Just-Surviving Handbook: ESL for Every Classroom Teacher](#) (3rd edition) by Barbara Law and Mary Eckes.

## B. Reflection

Think through your enrollment process step by step. How does it work for ELL families? Do parents get all of the information they need? What might be some possible obstacles to that process? Which steps do you think need improvement?

## C. Strategies

There are a number of ways to approach the enrollment process for ELL families, including:

- **Bilingual staff:** When possible, hire bilingual staff to work in the main office.
- **Translated forms:** Many of the more general forms are available in other languages from the state education sites, and there may already be some translations available through your district.
- **Enrollment night:** Schedule an “enrollment night” in which families can learn about the enrollment process and school policies with interpreters on hand.
- **School liaisons:** Assign each family a school contact who speaks their language and guides them through the enrollment process (Houk, 66).
- **Welcome centers:** Having a centralized ELL welcome/intake center managed by bilingual staff may help streamline enrollment and placement procedures.
- **Welcome kits:** Put together a “welcome kit” that includes key information, basic school supplies, and educational activities for your ELL families.
- **Technology:** Consider offering translations of your forms online, such as these from [Los Angeles Unified School District](#), or an automated enrollment form in multiple languages.

## D. Example

- ❖ In the article [Lessons Learned from Immigrant Families](#), Young-Chan Han of the Maryland Department of Education shares the story of a young boy from El Salvador who waited outside the locked school on a cold January morning for an hour until the janitor let him in. It was his first day, and it happened to be the morning of a snow delay.



## 8. Make the enrollment process accessible all year long

### A. What you need to know

Keep in mind that your school must be ready to enroll ELLs throughout the school year. Many schools are prepared for enrollment only at the beginning of the year, and anyone who registers after that gets a short-cut “fill and drill,” especially if no interpreters are available. Staff may be pulled from their regular duties to translate and help families fill out forms; this is not an acceptable solution.

### B. Reflection

How does the experience of a new student enrolling at the beginning of the year compare with a student enrolling in November? January? March? How does it compare for ELLs?

### C. Strategies

- ❑ Ask the staff involved in ELL student enrollment (including the main office staff and the ELL/bilingual departments) for ideas on how the school can make the enrollment process welcoming and accessible all year long.
- ❑ Make sure all of the information available for parents and staff at the beginning of the year is accessible throughout the year.
- ❑ Ask parents who enrolled their children after the beginning of previous school years what their experience was like and what could have been improved through a survey or questionnaire.

### D. Example

- ❖ Kristina Roberston shares a creative approach that her school employed in order to limit the impact of new student enrollment on lost classroom time. This involved training paraprofessionals who could be pulled more easily from support work to help enrolling families. The paraprofessionals received training on the packet of information that parents received, and this allowed the school to have more than one person available to assist new families. The school also set up regular testing times after school when teachers would be available, even if a student had already begun classes.



## 9. Provide opportunities for parents to learn more about important topics and skills

### A. What you need to know

For [parents who are not familiar](#) with the U.S. educational system, there is a lot to learn – and it’s pretty complicated! If your ELL families aren’t “involved” in activities and events, one reason may be that they need more background information about our school system in a language they understand.

### B. Reflection

Let’s return to the hypothetical new country where you are preparing to enroll your child. Imagine that you are handed a thick booklet with information about standardized testing, grading systems, and college applications written a language you don’t understand. Where would you begin in order to help your child?

### C. Strategies

Whenever possible, offer parents the opportunity to attend workshops in their native language about complex topics such as:

- The U.S. school system (The AFTs’ bilingual [Pathways to Success](#) brochure is a helpful guide.)
- Information on how to check school websites to track their child’s progress
- Parent-teacher conferences
- Standardized testing
- Gifted programs
- Special education services for speech, hearing, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, etc.
- The college application process
- Information on the benefits of reading at home (Start with Colorín Colorado’s reading tips in [11 languages](#) and [family literacy outreach toolkit](#)).

**Note:** Consider enlisting other staff members, parents, volunteers, or community partners to help organize and run these workshops.

### D. Examples

- ❖ At Greenfield Elementary School, ELL parents participate in an ESL class which teaches computer skills in addition to basic English skills. Parents write a bilingual cookbook of recipes as a final project, and each week they attend a potluck dinner together. Children work on their homework with high school volunteers while their parents are in class (Fugate, 50).
- ❖ A local educator decided to hold a Spanish-language information session about college enrollment at a local church. The meeting was listed in the newspaper, announced at the church, and publicized through personal outreach. The organizer had planned for about twenty parents; instead, more than eighty attended (Alford & Niño, 83).
- ❖ Another educator at a different school helped organize a “Math Power Path Night,” in which class projects were arranged along a guided path so that parents could see the sequence of recommended math classes that their children should take. The principal had expected fifty parents; more than two hundred came (83)!



## Part III: PARENT PARTICIPATION

### 10. Look for ways that ELL parents can help with children's schoolwork

#### A. What you need to know

ELL parents may feel intimidated by or unprepared to help with homework or other schoolwork, especially if they have limited educational or English skills (Zarate, 9). You can help them understand their important role in supporting their child's success, however, with a few simple suggestions. (Related video: [Reaching out to families](#), Kevin Eberle)

#### B. Reflection

What kinds of support do you expect your parents to give their children in terms of schoolwork? What kinds of resources and educational background (and language skills) do parents need in order to give their children that help? What are other ways parents can help?

#### C. Strategies

Encourage parents to:

- Provide a place where children can do [their homework](#)
- Check that homework is completed each night
- Ask their children to tell them about what they learned each day
- Keep in regular contact with a teacher or staff member about their child's progress
- Ask teachers about any questions that arise
- Learn more about homework help programs through before-/after-school programs and the public library
- Read and tell stories in their native language.

#### D. Example

- ❖ Marty Izaguirre is an ELL teacher in Okatie, South Carolina. Her elementary school holds [Family Literacy Nights](#), which take place after school every other month and provide working parents with an opportunity to read to their children in both English and Spanish. Once parents come in, they find read-aloud circles (where teachers read books aloud to a small group), as well as areas where they can go and read with their child separately. The variety of activities provided to the parents allows them to join in an activity in which they feel comfortable. Adults and children are allowed time and space to read together. The school also provides an opportunity for parents and children to create their own special bookmark as they enjoy some refreshments. The events offer parents an opportunity to meet other parents, show their children the importance of reading, and learn how to support literacy development at home (Izaguirre, 2006).



## 11. Look for ways that ELL parents can participate and volunteer

### A. What you need to know

There are a number of ways to include parents in the school community and to bring them together with other families at the school. This might include school visits, volunteering, or activities that draw upon their skills and hobbies.

### B. Reflection

How likely are ELL parents at your school to sign up for events or volunteer? Do they know about all of the opportunities at the school? Are there certain events or places in the school where your active parents tend to gather? Do you know what skills and talents they might have to offer?

### C. Strategies

- Invite parents to visit the school and their child's classroom regularly (Houk, 66).
- Invite parents to speak with their child's class about their native country, a hobby, or their job.
- Encourage teachers to have an inviting activity ready for visiting parents.
- Encourage parents to volunteer in the classroom, main office, lunchroom, or library; during events or field trips; or in a student club or after-school program (Meyers, 45). (Keep in mind that volunteering may include simple things like preparing items for an activity – such as cutting out shapes and organizing supplies.) Judie Haynes offers a number of ideas in [Working with Bilingual Parent Volunteers](#) on [EverythingESL.net](#).
- Find out what your parents' skills and hobbies are, and look for ways to draw on their talents.
- Find ways to bring ELL and non-ELL families together through student performances, a student cultures night, storytelling, workshops, and exhibits (Meyers, 46). Your families might just realize that they have more in common than you – and they – originally thought!

### D. Examples

- ❖ Indiana teacher Miriam Soto-Pressley invites the parents of her ELLs into her classroom during reading time. The parents follow along with their children and they learn about read-alouds and how to interact with text. This helps them work with their children at home to increase reading comprehension.
- ❖ A group of Latino parents at a preschool center in Florida who frequently sat outside in the sun waiting for their children each afternoon built a parent gazebo for the center, as well as a butterfly garden (Alvarado, 2010).
- ❖ Following the arrival of a new group of students from El Salvador and Puerto Rico to a school in Massachusetts, a group of teachers decided to organize a school play that would be performed in Spanish. They distributed bilingual flyers to tell parents about auditions and asked parents to help with costumes and refreshments (based on earlier conversations they had had with the parents). On opening night, the auditorium was filled, and the school held multiple performances to accommodate parents' different work schedules. Word soon spread around the community about the play, and the students were invited to perform at other schools. By the final performance, more parent volunteers were participating in the school community than at any other time in the school's history (Zacarian, 119).



## 12. Think outside the box about parent engagement

### A. What you need to know

One of the most important steps in engaging ELL parents is to realize that they may be coming from a very different cultural perspective when it comes to the educational system and their role in their child's education (Houk, 60). This may be due, in part, to:

- **Deep respect for teachers:** Many ELLs come from cultures which revere teaching and where the teachers are considered the experts, not the parents. As a result, parents may be reluctant to ask questions so as not to question the teacher's authority, or they may assume that the schools don't want them to "interfere" in their child's education. Upon arrival in the U.S., newcomer parents may wonder why they are suddenly a school partner, and why in fact the school is asking the parent to do the teacher's job. As Betty Alford and Mary Catherine Niño note in [\*Leading Academic Achievement for English Language Learners: A Guide for Principals\*](#), you wouldn't expect a doctor to ask the parents which medical procedure they would recommend for their child (80), and ELL parents may feel the same way about what their school is asking them to do.
- **Education vs. *educación*:** These parents are likely to see an entirely different role for themselves in their child's education (Hori, 40). For Latino families, the idea of *educación* focuses on a child's personal and moral development, which has an important impact on the child's academic development. The authors of [\*Understanding Latino Parental Involvement in Education: Perceptions, Expectations, and Recommendations\*](#) note that, when asked, "(Latino) parents believed that monitoring their children's lives and providing moral guidance resulted in good classroom behavior, which in turn allowed for greater academic learning opportunities (9)."
- **The group vs. the individual:** It's also important to keep in mind that many cultures outside of the U.S. are oriented more towards the group (the family, the class, the society, etc.) than the individual. In their book [\*Managing Diverse Classrooms: How to Build on Students' Cultural Strengths\*](#), Carrie Rothstein-Fisch and Elise Trumbull explore this concept as it relates to the Latino ideas of *educación*:

One's social behavior in a group (such as the family or the classroom) is of paramount concern; being a respectful contributor to group well-being rather than focusing on one's own achievement is highly valued. So when immigrant Latino parents come for a parent-teacher conference, their first question is likely to be "*¿Cómo se porta mi hijo/hija?*" ("How is my son/daughter behaving?"). A teacher may find it difficult to stifle her consternation after hearing the same question from 25 or 30 sets of parents, believing that all the parents care about is their child's behavior, when the teacher's goal is to discuss the child's academic progress (13-14).

Nevertheless, what looks like a lack of interest to the teacher actually reflects a deep interest on the part of the parent in the child's personal development and how this will affect the child's ability to be successful in the classroom.

### B. Reflection

Make a list of five things you hope or expect that "involved" parents will do at your school. What do parents need to know in order to participate in these events? What challenges might ELL parents face in participating in these events?

### C. Strategies

Form small focus groups with ELL parents and an interpreter. Ask the parents:

- How they define their role in their child's education
- What their concerns, priorities, and hopes are regarding their child
- What kinds of events they would be interested in attending
- The obstacles that discourage them from participating and changes that would help
- Events where being part of a larger group might make them feel more comfortable.

### D. Example

- ❖ Carrie Rothstein-Fisch and Elise Trumbull share the example of a teacher who redesigned her parent-teacher conferences into group conferences for her Latino parents. She divided children by ability levels and met with the parents of children in similar levels at the same time. She also offered both English and Spanish groups. She explained report card formats, grading, her expectations for students, and what parents could do to help. Parents then had the opportunity for a personal consultation after the group discussion. One of the key benefits was that parents' questions helped each other as they felt confident to speak up in a less threatening environment. She saw all twenty-eight parents in three days (62).



### 13. Consider alternative schedules, locations, and kinds of events

#### A. What you need to know

Sometimes, when families can't come to the school, the school has to go to the families. Meeting families in other settings such as community centers or churches can provide an informal way to start building a relationship, especially if ELL parents feel shy or nervous about going to the school. In addition, going into the community indicates a strong level of commitment on the part of the school to the families (Alford & Niño, 86). You might also try planning parent or family events around the schedules of the families, especially if they are working a couple of jobs or shifts.

#### B. Reflection

Do you experience low attendance at family events held at school? Have you ever held any school events in the community? Were they successful? Why or why not?

#### C. Strategies

- ❑ Visit your students' neighborhoods. Find out where families are congregating and who local community leaders are that can connect you with parents.
- ❑ Collaborate with apartment complex managers to make a recreation room available for families.
- ❑ Plan events in the community and put them on the school calendar before the school year starts, setting aside funds, such as Title I or Title III grants, to provide support for the events.
- ❑ Consider giving parents a few different options for meeting times based on teacher availability.
- ❑ Consider contacting parents' employers about parent schedules or holding conferences closer to parents' workplaces.
- ❑ Don't limit yourself to meetings. Ask your families what kinds of events they would find enjoyable, beneficial, and convenient.

#### D. Examples

- ❖ In Philadelphia, a preschool held a parent meeting in the afternoon for parents who worked in the food service industry in the evening. More than twenty parents (mostly fathers) came to the meeting (Alvarado, 2010) to discuss their children's preschool program.
- ❖ In Oregon, parent liaison [Ma'Lena Wirth](#) wrote a letter to her parents' employers, sharing her goals for building a stronger partnership with the families and explaining that most parents couldn't attend conferences due to their work schedule. As a result, the employer agreed to give parents time off for school events if the events started after the employer's busy season.
- ❖ In New York, Susan Lafond held parent-teacher-translator conferences at the food court where her students' parents worked so that parents could take turns coming to meet with her.
- ❖ In California, a group of teachers organized a meeting for the school's Hmong and Cambodian parents (whose people had been farmers for many generations), in which they would discuss the creation of a new school garden. The teachers were disappointed when just a few parents attended the meeting, and they took that as a sign that there was little interest in the garden. On garden day, however, eighty family members arrived with hoes and dug up the garden in a single day. As one of the parents said, "We don't do meetings. We do gardens" (Ferlazzo, 45).



## 14. Look for the successes

### A. What you need to know

Encourage your staff to look for all of the different ways, big and small, that ELLs' families (including parents, siblings, grandparents, and other relatives) support their children's well-being and education. For example, different relatives may be involved in taking the children to school and picking them up, providing child care, or making sure that they are getting fed and getting a good night's sleep. While we expect all families to manage these responsibilities, ELL families may be going to extraordinary lengths to meet their children's basic needs. In addition, [older ELLs](#) have a lot of responsibilities in their family, including working, taking care of siblings, and translating for their parents. What looks like laziness, irresponsibility, or absenteeism may in fact be the result of a lot of responsibility at home.

Some of the successes and strengths of ELL students and families may include:

- Commitment to the family's well-being
- High expectations for children
- Making education a priority
- Respect for the teacher
- Good attendance and behavior
- Well-developed cooperation skills
- A strong sense of responsibility one's self and others
- Resourcefulness

**Note:** ELLs' parents might be largely absent from the picture, whether it's because of difficult work schedules or a family separation (or worse) that happened before moving to this country.

### B. Reflection

What is a typical day like for your ELL students? Does that differ from the typical day of your other students? Where are they sleeping? Who is taking care of them? How do they get to school every day? What do they do after school? What challenges are they facing in their daily lives?

### C. Strategies

- Learn what you can about your ELLs' routines (which will vary tremendously), including the responsibilities they have in their families. Share what you learn with your staff (observing confidentiality rules) and encourage your staff to look for all of the ways, big and small, that ELLs' families and extended families are supporting their children's well-being and education.
- Find out whether these responsibilities are taking a toll on students' school work or health, and if so, brainstorm some ideas with staff members about possible solutions.

### D. Examples

- ❖ Susan Lafond notes that her elementary ESL teachers had students whose families brought them to the restaurant or family store where they worked so the children wouldn't be home alone. The kids helped out on the phone or register and did homework until the parents closed for the evening, which was often 9:00 PM or later.

- ❖ Kristina Robertson remembers a 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade student named Lisbeth. Lisbeth was very conscientious and came to school with neat clothing, clean and braided hair, and notebooks and pencils ready to go. When the staff did home visits, they were welcomed graciously by Lisbeth's parents to their home. In the apartment for a family with four children, the only furniture consisted of two chairs, a kitchen table, and a mattress. The parents spoke about the importance of their children's education and explained that every night they had their children do their homework at that kitchen table even though the parents didn't understand English. The teachers, who had been unaware of the family's limited circumstances, were incredibly moved by what they saw and developed a new appreciation for the parents' commitment to their children's education.
- ❖ Kristina also shares the experience of a 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade student who was missing school frequently. Kristina soon discovered that she was helping her mom (a single mom) babysit her younger siblings since they didn't have regular childcare. The staff met with the mom and helped her find resources to provide affordable childcare support.
- ❖ Finally, Kristina remembers her high school students who attended school from 7:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and then worked from 4:00 p.m. until midnight. All of their money supported their relatives here and in their home country, so they never had extra money (or time) for special activities. Homework was a struggle, but in Kristina's eyes, her colleagues' attitudes were the most difficult challenges to overcome. Once teachers discovered why the students were coming to class so tired and how hard they were working, however, they worked to modify assignments and help the students.



## Part IV: PARENTS AS LEADERS

### 15. Encourage ELL parents to take on leadership roles

#### A. What you need to know

While ELL parents may be underrepresented in leadership roles, some guidance and encouragement from school leaders can go a long way in building their confidence. It may be something small, such as soliciting ideas for school events, or something bigger such as asking them to serve on a parent advisory council or speaking at a school board meeting (Meyers, 45). Your parents know their children and community best, and they are likely to offer successful solutions to problems that the school community hadn't thought of before, particularly if they represent a large number of ELL families.

#### B. Reflection

Do your parent committees reflect your ELL population? Who is advocating for your ELL students?

#### C. Strategies

- ❑ Make sure that qualified interpreters are available so that parents can feel comfortable communicating their ideas in their native language. The negative encounter experienced by a gentleman who spoke in front of a recent [legislative hearing in Texas](#) underscores the importance of having an interpreter who can communicate nuances and intent.
- ❑ Consider developing a branch of the PTA for your ELL parents, organized by language. While it may seem to isolate or favor certain parents, it will allow ELL parents to become comfortable with the role the school is asking them to take on, to learn more about the school, and to build capacity. Once the parents feel more confident, bring them together with the larger PTA on a regular basis, and help the two groups communicate. (As in other cases, the way people respond to this step will depend on how you frame it. If people understand why you think it's beneficial for the entire school for ELL parents to become more involved in the PTA, they are more likely to support a separate ELL parent group. If you can organize such a group, sit in on a meeting to get a sense of what it's like to follow a PTA meeting in another language!)
- ❑ As your ELL parents become more familiar with the school policies and environment, ensure that ELL parents are represented in the PTA and parent advisory groups.
- ❑ Offer your ELL parents frequent and convenient opportunities to share input, ideas, and concerns with you and your teachers in a variety of venues (Houk, 67).
- ❑ Encourage parents to attend and speak up at school board meetings, even with an interpreter.
- ❑ Remind the school board members and district leaders to communicate policies/changes in your families' languages.
- ❑ Take parent input seriously, and don't ask for it until you are prepared to listen. As Houk notes, "Parents should not be 'included' to rubber stamp school decisions, or to provide affirmation for school staff about decisions made with no real input (68)." The message parents send may not be what you want to hear (69) and this may require some more flexibility and cross-cultural understanding on everyone's part. However, once you begin to hear their good ideas, you will realize that the learning curve is worth it!

**D. Example**

- ❖ Marla Hori from Skokie, Illinois describes a program in her district called “Bridge Parents.” One or two parents are enlisted from each language group to serve as leaders in engaging other parents around school during coffee hours at the school or parents’ homes. Marla also notes that these parents have helped the school as translators (40-41).



## 16. Look for ways to make parent leadership more sustainable

### A. What you need to know

Parent leadership can be lost easily as students get older and transition to new schools. Think about putting a mentorship program in place to keep new parents engaged. The mentorship piece is essential because, in these roles, bilingual parents are asked to speak up and make decisions in a new cultural environment – and the cycle of building trust and respect must begin again.

### B. Reflection

Think about your strongest parents at the school. How do you plan to replace them once their children move to another school? What barriers exist to developing bilingual leaders?

### C. Strategies

- Form a panel of ELL parents to address questions and concerns.
- Designate parent leaders in each language group to engage other parents.
- Brainstorm with your ELL parent leaders about ways to recruit and mentor new parents.
- Learn from your parents' experiences and find out what they think will make a positive impact on future parents who are new to the U.S. school system.
- As parents prepare to step away from leadership responsibilities, ask them if they would be willing to mentor new parent leaders who are joining the community.
- Ask them for recommendations of other parent leaders that they have gotten to know.

### D. Example

- ❖ ELL parents serve on a district Bilingual Parent Advisory Committee (BPAC) in Illinois' District 65, as mandated by Illinois Administrative School Code. Parents on the BPAC help the district:
  - Review grant applications and implement grant activities
  - Organize Spanish classes for the community
  - Review standardized assessment data
  - Advocate for programming at school board meetings
  - Volunteer and tutor in classrooms
  - Organize school events.

The BPAC parents were also instrumental in successfully lobbying the school board for a new two-way immersion program despite the board's initial resistance (Yturriago, 50-51).



## Part V: COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

### 17. Build partnerships with the local community

#### A. What you need to know

[Community organizations](#) are a valuable ally in engaging ELL families, whether it's by providing key services such as interpreters and medical care or educational opportunities such as GED, ESL, and citizenship classes. These partnerships can benefit your family and your partners alike, and they may lead to great opportunities for your students as well!

#### B. Reflection

Have you built any relationships with organizations in the community? If so, what are the successes and challenges you've experienced? Which social services do your families need most?

#### C. Strategies

- ❑ Consider offering local organizations free space in your school as a way to encourage them to bring their services closer to your families (Houk, 70).
- ❑ Ask your families which organizations they think would make good partners for the school community and which issues are of concern to them.
- ❑ Find out if your district has a community education department that might be able to support a partnership with a local organization.
- ❑ Invite members from the community to inform parents about their services, such as a local librarian, a nurse, or a firefighter.

**Note:** When inviting guests from the community to the school, assure parents that identification will not be checked and explain that they do not need to show proof of legal residency to sign up for a library card.

#### D. Examples

- ❖ Christine Pearsall from New York shares the following on the National Education Association's website: "Our school hosts monthly Latino Family meetings - hosted and conducted entirely in Spanish by Spanish-speaking staff. The turnout is incredible every time. We discuss issues of concern to the parents and community, as well as periodically bringing in outside speakers (i.e. reps. from the library, Census bureau, etc.)." She also recommends using students from local adult ESL programs as translators in these informal settings as "it helps them practice English, get extra credit for themselves" and support their fellow country people (Flannery, NEA.org).
- ❖ Highland Elementary School in Montgomery County, Maryland was chosen as a Blue Ribbon turnaround school by the Maryland State Department of Education in 2008. Part of its success, according to school principal, was its increased inclusion of the families. According to *The Washington Post*, "The school positioned itself as the center of its community, offering weekend soccer tournaments, English and computer classes for parents, and an array of other community services, from housing assistance to mental health counseling (de Vise, 2008)."



## 18. Get to know your neighbors

### A. What you need to know

Changing demographics can lead to tensions in the local neighborhood. (Think Clint Eastwood's character in the movie *Gran Torino*.) You may find it very productive to build a stronger relationship with your school's local neighbors, for your sake and theirs as well!

### B. Reflection

What is your school's relationship like with the local community? If your local demographics are changing, what is the community's response to that change? What are some of the needs of your local community? What are the social/emotional/health issues your students face that community agencies might be able to help with?

### C. Strategies

- ❑ Look for ways that students can contribute to their neighbors (especially those who have young children or the elderly) by doing neighborhood clean-ups and volunteer work.
- ❑ Inform local neighbors about the opportunity to tutor, volunteer, or donate used goods to the school and ELL families.
- ❑ Look for places where interests and activities overlap. Consider posting a community board where everyone can post what they need or can offer.
- ❑ Look for fundraising opportunities, such as a local yard sale that raises money for a new parent center.
- ❑ Tell the community about the challenges your ELL families are facing. For example, if you have a new group of refugees arriving, collaborate with their placement agency to collect household items, furniture, and winter clothing.

### D. Examples

- ❖ When the Extreme Makeover™ show came to Buffalo, NY, the students at [Kevin Eberle's school](#) took on an "extreme" neighborhood clean-up and food drive, raking leaves for the neighbors and collecting a record-breaking 85 tons of food. Their efforts did far more to change the attitude that local residents had about the school than any meeting could have done, and they attracted great publicity for the school's students.
- ❖ Following the 2010 Haitian earthquake, the phones at [Evans High in Orlando, FL](#) began ringing off the hook and the office was filled with visitors as concerned neighbors asked how they could help the school's more than 600+ Haitian students and families.



## Part VI: CREATING A PLAN OF ACTION

### 19. Solicit ideas

#### A. What you need to know

A good place to begin developing a new approach to family engagement is by soliciting ideas from the school's ELL community – they know what they need. Remember, however, that no matter how many good ideas your teachers, parents, and students have, those ideas won't go very far without the support of the administration. The "idea well" will run dry if people feel that their ideas aren't welcomed by school leaders.

#### B. Reflection

Is there currently an avenue for teachers, parents, and students to share ideas about family outreach ideas at your school? Who tends to come to you with ideas about engaging or supporting your ELL students and families? What steps can you take to start that conversation and let the community know that their ideas are welcome?

#### C. Strategies

Ask for feedback from:

- ❑ **Staff:** Ask people across the school community what could be done to better engage ELL families. This includes ELL teachers, bilingual teachers, mainstream and content-area teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, counselors, the school nurse, cafeteria and custodial staff, and coaches. In what kinds of situations do they interact with ELL students and families? How could that interaction be improved?
- ❑ **Parents:** Get feedback on bilingual families' perceptions about the most burning needs for improving bilingual family involvement. This could be done through a survey about setting initial priorities and followed up with focus group conversations on selected topics. While it's not geared exclusively to ELL students, *Beyond the Bake Sale*, edited by Anne T. Henderson, Vivian Johnson, Karen L. Mapp, and Don Davies, offers a number of surveys as a starting point.
- ❑ **Students:** Don't forget to ask the students what they think – even the young ones! What information would really help their parents? What would make school events easier for their families to attend? How might their parents be able to contribute to the school? Since ELLs tend to have a lot of responsibility in their families, they often are unusually attuned to their parents' needs and strengths, as well as their own.

Once two or three priorities are set, the school can look at the resources available and think about how best to proceed in implementing these approaches. A small committee of staff members, parents, and students may also be helpful in designing an action plan.

#### D. Example

- ❖ At an early childhood program that Farin A. Houk visited, parents are encouraged to share ideas for monthly parent nights during their first meeting of the school year. Program leaders ask parents to think about what information they would like to have, and families might request help with topics such as supporting learning at home or discipline.



## 20. Look for the funding

### A. What you need to know

Perhaps the juices are starting to flow and you are excited, but you know that it will be tough to find the necessary resources for your ELLs in this budget climate. The good news is that, with creativity and effort, you can fit some of these strategies into your existing structures. More importantly though, as a school leader, you are in the position to make ELL family engagement a priority by allocating the resources, no matter how limited, needed to make it happen.

### B. Reflection

What sources of funding are you currently using for ELL family outreach? Are you familiar with Title I and Title III guidelines? Who offers local grants for family literacy and outreach?

### C. Strategies

- ❑ Find out how familiar your staff or district contacts are with Title I/Title III possibilities. If you need more information, get in touch with your district grants administrator or your statewide offices for ELLs and federal grants. (The names of these offices and positions may vary from one district to the next.)
- ❑ Look for grants targeted to ELL, minority, Latino, and at-risk students, with a special focus on family literacy, parent outreach, and science and math initiatives (such as STEM). Possible sources include local foundations and businesses, as well as larger national family literacy initiatives, such as Reading Is Fundamental or FirstBook. Verizon, Dollar General, Toyota, and Target also sponsor nationwide literacy initiatives. Lee & Low Books offers a list of [literacy grants](#) on their website.
- ❑ Look for volunteers such as ELL staff or parents with fundraising experience to search for grants.
- ❑ Consider pooling your resources with other schools in the district for family events and outreach initiatives. You may even be serving the same families who have children of different ages!

### D. Example

- ❖ As part of its mission, the [Toyota Family Literacy Program](#) focuses on increasing “basic language and literacy skills among Hispanic and other immigrant families.” According to the program website, Toyota has funded 256 family literacy sites in fifty states.



## Final Thoughts

Let's take a breath. This is a lot to think about! As we mentioned in the beginning, an important first step is to focus on a few small changes that fit your population. Even small steps help set the right tone and show the students, staff, and families that ELL family engagement is a school-wide priority. One small success will lead to another and before you know it, staff members, parents, and students will be coming to you with new ideas and energy that you didn't know they had. Rather than building the plane and flying it at the same time, you may just find yourself flying a brand new plane!

## Final Reflections

- ❖ Which ideas would best fit your ELL population?
  
- ❖ Are there any that you could implement within the next month?
  
- ❖ What about in the next year?
  
- ❖ If you are only able to focus on one major area this year, which will be the most important/plausible within your school community?
  
- ❖ What are your next steps for getting started?
  
- ❖ Who will be your partners in this effort?
  
- ❖ Are there any successes, ideas or resources you would like to share with our audience? Feel free to send an e-mail to [info@colorincolorado.org](mailto:info@colorincolorado.org)!



## **Appendix A: Resources from Colorín Colorado**

### [Recommended Bilingual Books for Children and Teens\\*](#)

[Building Strong Parent-Educator Partnerships\\*](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2008)

[Connect Students' Background Knowledge to Content in the ELL Classroom](#) (Robertson, 2007)

[Culturally Responsive Instruction for Holiday and Religious Celebrations](#) (Lundgren and Lundy-Ponce, 2007)

[Family Literacy Night](#) (Izaguirre, 2006)

[From the Heart Interview: Ma'Lena Wirth](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2008)

Graphic Organizer: [KWL chart](#)

[Helping Students Cope with Global Disasters](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2011)

[Helping Your Child Succeed at School\\*](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2007)

[Helping Your Child with Homework\\*](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2007)

[How to Create a Welcoming Classroom Environment\\*](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2007)

[How to Know When Your Child Needs Extra Help\\*](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2007)

[Identifying Language Proficiency for Program Placement\\*](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2007)

[Lessons Learned from Immigrant Families](#) (Han, 2010)

[Let's Read\\*](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2007)

[Meet the Author: Lucía González\\*](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2010)

[Meet the Expert Interview: Kevin Eberle](#), Buffalo, NY (Colorín Colorado, 2011)

[Meet the Expert Interview: Dr. Cynthia Lundgren](#), Hamline University (Colorín Colorado, 2011)

[Reading Tip Sheets for Parents in 11 Languages \(PreK-3\)](#)

[Resources for Migrant Student Success](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2010)

[Resources for Refugee Student Success](#) (Robertson, 2008)

[Resources for Supporting Students with Interrupted Formal Education](#) (Robertson, 2008)

[Social and Emotional Needs of Middle and High School ELLs](#) (Lawrence, 2009)

[Testing: An Introduction for Parents\\*](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2009)

[Toolkit for Teachers: Reaching Out to Hispanic Parents of English Language Learners\\*](#)

[Things Your ELL Newcomers Need to Know](#) (Law and Eckes, 2010)

[Welcome Kit for New ELLs](#) (Robertson, 2008)

[Who's Who at Your Child's School\\*](#) (Colorín Colorado, Reading Rockets, and AdLit.org, 2008)

[Working with Community Organizations to Support ELL Students](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2009)

[Why Reading to Your Kids in Spanish Will Help Them Become Better Readers\\*](#) (Colorín Colorado, 2007)

[10 Ways to Support ELLs in the School Library](#) (Jules, 2009)

*\*Also available in Spanish*



## Appendix B: Recommended Reading and Resources\*\*

Alford, Betty J., and Niño, Mary Catherine. *Leading Academic Achievement for English Language Learners: A Guide for Principals*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2011.

[American Federation of Teachers: Pathways to Success Brochure](#). (Available for order)

Campos, David; Delgado, Rocio; and Soto, Mary Esther. *Reaching Out to Latino Families of English Language Learners*. Alexandria, VA: 2011.

[EverythingESL.net](#): K-12 Resources from ELL expert Judie Haynes

Ferlazzo, Larry, and Hammond, Lorie. *Building Parent Engagement in Schools*. Denver: Linworth, 2009.

Hamayan, Else V., and Freeman, Rebecca, eds. *English Language Learners at School: A Guide for Administrators*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing, 2006.

Houk, Farin A. *Supporting English Language Learners: A Guide for Teachers and Administrators*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005.

Law, Barbara and Eckes, Mary. [The More-Than-Just-Surviving Handbook: ESL for Every Classroom Teacher](#), 3rd edition. Winnipeg: [Portage & Main Press](#), 2010.

National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools: [Strategy Briefs](#).

[National Parental Information and Resource Centers: PIRC Network](#)

Rothstein-Fisch, Carrie. and Trumbull, Elise. *Managing Diverse Classrooms: How to Build on Students' Cultural Strengths*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2008.

Wright, Wayne E. *Foundations for Teaching English Language Learners: Research, Theory, Policy, and Practice*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing, 2010.

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[World Refugee Awareness Month: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#).

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\*\*Many of these books are included in Colorín Colorado's [ELL Strategies Booklist for Administrators](#).



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## About the Authors

**Lydia Breiseth** has been the Manager of Colorín Colorado since 2008. In this capacity, Ms. Breiseth oversees the bilingual content, multimedia production, partnerships, and outreach on behalf of ColorínColorado.org, including collaboration with Colorín Colorado's major partner, the American Federation of Teachers. Ms. Breiseth has presented Colorín Colorado's resources to educators and parents at a number of national professional development conferences, including TESOL, NABE, CABE, NAEYC, OELA, the AFT's QuEST Conference, and the Latino Children's Book Conference. Ms. Breiseth has written extensively for Colorín Colorado's educator and parent audiences, and her article "Reading Comprehension Strategies for English Language Learners" was published in the ASCD Express in March, 2010. Prior to working at Colorín Colorado, Ms. Breiseth taught both English and Spanish to high school students and adults, and she spent a year in Ecuador teaching English to graduate students with the educational exchange program WorldTeach. She resides in Arlington, Virginia.

**Kristina Robertson** is an ELL specialist with extensive experience as a classroom teacher and professional development leader. Kristina is the current Titles Coordinator and Teacher on Special Assignment for the Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District in Minnesota. Kristina has 20 years of education experience as a teacher and leader in English language instruction, with licenses in ESL, Administration, and Reading. She started her career as a Peace Corps volunteer in Sri Lanka and then returned to Minnesota, where she has taught many language and cultural backgrounds in the K-12 setting, as well as ESL teacher preparation courses at the college level. Kristina is a member of the American Federation of Teacher's ELL Educator Cadre and has authored a number of our [Bright Ideas articles](#). She is also featured in a Colorín Colorado [Meet the Expert](#) video interview. Kristina resides in Minnesota.

**Susan Lafond**, a Nationally Board Certified Teacher in English as a New Language (EAYA ENL), has 20 years of combined experience teaching ESL and foreign languages. She currently works as a professional development assistant for educators with New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). Susan was appointed to the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) English as a New Language Standards Committee in February 2009 to review and revise the existing English as a New Language Standards and most recently participated as a member of the ELA Work Team for the Common Core State Standards Initiative. She won the Union College Excellence in Teaching Award and the Employee Recognition Award in her own district, and she serves on the American Federation of Teacher's ELL Educator Cadre. She also has served as an expert practitioner and advisor to Colorín Colorado and is featured in the AdLit.org / Colorín Colorado webcast [ELLs in Middle and High School: An Introduction](#). Susan resides in upstate New York.

