

HMH Family Engagement

Fostering Community. Creating Opportunity.

AUTHOR **INSIGHTS**



INTRODUCTION

Families who come to the United States are looking to the future. They have often endured great hardships prior to arriving in the United States, and their resourcefulness, resilience, and adaptability are tremendous assets and models for their children. Research demonstrates that when educators provide concrete, ongoing, and practical support to English learner (EL) families, and when they partner with them in a relationship built on mutual respect, their students can make greater academic progress.

This paper provides background information on some of the varied influences at work in English learner families' lives that can often impact engagement with their children's schooling. This background information, coupled with research, helped inform the core principles of **HMH Family Engagement**. We developed this comprehensive and sustainable program because we wanted to help transform the challenges many districts face and support their efforts to obtain and sustain family involvement and build successful partnerships with EL families. We know that when these partnerships are forged, great things happen—and the scales can and do tip in favor of EL students' academic growth.

HMH Family Engagement is organized around five essential topics that can help English learner families “decode” the U.S. education system and actively participate in their children's education. This paper also provides a brief introduction into each of the topics, and illustrates why they are essential to helping districts build sustainable family and community engagement. These topics are differentiated for specific grade spans in order to maximize their relevance to EL families: Pre-K, K–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12. The topics are: *Welcome to School*, *Academic Achievement*, *Support at Home*, *Technology*, and *Assessment Success*.

The research is clear: teachers and staff cannot rely solely on students to generate and accomplish their academic goals. To realize success, families must be actively involved in their children's education, in partnership with teachers and administrators, despite language and cultural barriers and the burdens of time constraints.

For schools, sending frequent communications to the EL family in their first language is a good start to getting them involved, but much more is needed. Letters alone will not forge the quality, committed partnerships needed to impact EL Scholars' achievement. To achieve and sustain success for EL Scholars, districts may need to turn to a planned, published course of engagement, one with a research-based scope of objectives, skills, and trust-building activities.

As you read this paper, you'll find the term “Scholar” used throughout. This is because, as authors of **HMH Family Engagement**, we believe this term reflects the seriousness of the great endeavor of a child's education. It conveys to families that their children are entitled to, and need to strive toward, a lifetime of learning that is driven by curiosity and that is rich in discovery. Every child is a Scholar!

Sincerely,

Sylvia Acevedo

Lise B. Ragan

Authors, **HMH Family Engagement**

BACKGROUND ON **ENGLISH LEARNER FAMILIES**

Many districts face a variety of distinct challenges in meeting the needs of their English learners. EL families in a district may represent geographic regions from all parts of the world, speak many languages, and adhere to a variety of cultural norms. The range of resources available to English learner families who have immigrated to the United States can vary greatly as well, from those with a strong support network and regular employment to families who have refugee status and may have experienced extreme duress prior to their arrival. Different cultural groups can bring with them unique understanding of and appreciation for education, and this can influence how they get involved in their children's educations.

Compounding these challenges is the fact that English learners enter U.S. schools at varying points in their English language and literacy development. They may be newcomers to the country, or they are just as likely to have been in the U.S. for a while, and have transferred into a new school district. As a result, schools have to be prepared to teach EL Scholars who vary in culture, language, academic preparation, and motivation.

Despite the numerous challenges that can come with supporting EL students and engaging their families in their education, English learners, like all students, bring a wealth of assets to school, including resourcefulness, creativity, intelligence, and wide-ranging skills. They also typically bring varying degrees of proficiency in the English language. These assets provide a tremendous foundation that can flourish when support systems in and out of school are in place.

It is sometimes easy to assume that EL families are aware of the essential ways they can and should be engaging with their Scholar's school and supporting their schoolwork at home. However, this is often not the case. Numerous cultural assumptions, as well as specific barriers, such as language, work schedules, and immigration status, can pose obstacles to engaging with their children's school.

Furthermore, EL families can have high expectations that their Scholar reflects well on the family and their community, as many cultures can place a premium on relationships. These expectations may exert a strong influence on how EL families navigate and understand their children's school system. For instance, if the adults suffer from low confidence due to language barriers, they may worry that attempting to engage with the school will embarrass their children, or even their cultural group at large.

Like all families, EL families often care deeply about their Scholar's socio-emotional development because they see and value those skills. They might be very curious about how their Scholars are involved with others, and how they are treating those in authority. Encouraging EL families to ask school personnel questions regarding their Scholars' socio-emotional growth can help build trust in the district, as well as confidence in advocating for their children.

Here are additional details on the types of influences and conditions that may impact the assimilation of EL Scholars into the U.S. education system.

Demographics

Public schools experience a mix of EL Scholars that varies nationally. Throughout the U.S., the largest group of English learners is Hispanic students, and their number has grown dramatically since 2001. The second largest group of English learners is speakers of Asian languages. The term “Asian” covers over 20 cultural/ethnic groups from countries including Vietnam, China (Mandarin), Korea, Pakistan (Urdu), Japan, and the Philippines (Tagalog). Even though this group falls under the umbrella term “Asian,” there are obviously very unique ethnic groups within this broad category, with different languages, religions, cultures, child rearing practices, and approaches to learning.

Most recently, there has been a surge of EL families from war-torn nations in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Many of these families qualify for refugee status and typically come from the nations of Myanmar (Burma), Bhutan, Russia, Iraq, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Nigeria, and Somalia.

One of the great unifiers of the most recent wave of EL families from parts of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa is their Muslim religious identity, which can be a new and challenging experience for schools that are traditionally engaged with Judeo-Christian religious and cultural norms. As an example, common symbols, such as a half moon and stars that may be used in Pre-K or

Kindergarten to represent nighttime, can convey different symbolism to EL Muslim Scholars and their families.

Poverty can also be a significant issue for many EL families. While the national average of children in poverty is 21%, the number of EL Scholars in poverty is between 75-84%, depending on the state in which they live. Providing life basics can be a challenge for EL families—clothing, shelter, and food are daily struggles for far too many of them. Many work two or more minimum wage jobs at once, and this leaves very little time for participating in school events or parent conferences. Losing several hours’ wages to attend a school event can mean the difference between being able to buy groceries or medicine. These constraints can impact EL Scholars’ physical and mental development, and their overall wellbeing.

EL families whose Scholars were born in the United States, but whose parents and guardians do not have legal status, may not know that their Scholars are eligible for many programs and services. These parents do not want to draw attention to their family situation and often do not advocate for their Scholars, for fear of reprisals. Families need to know that there are no repercussions for registering their Scholars for assistance. For some Scholars, the meals and other services provided at school are the only food they may receive that day.

Real-World Scenario

A non-profit organization was touched by the stories of hungry Kindergarten and elementary school Scholars in one Title 1 school. They decided to create a “FiT” (food in tummies) program, in which they planned to fill small backpacks with food (fruit cups, string cheese, power bars, cereal) for the Scholars to eat over the weekend. The Scholars received a filled backpack on Friday and would return it in on Monday so that it could be refilled. The group discovered two unintended consequences. The Scholars shared the food with their family, so they really didn’t get much added nutrition, as the backpack did not provide enough food to feed everyone. Second, other EL families requested transfers into the school with the FiT backpacks. Because of the unprecedented interest in the program, the school district made the commitment to obtain additional funding to provide the FiT program to all of the Title 1 elementary schools in the district.

Cultural differences that influence attitudes toward education

In many EL families, there is great emphasis on getting one’s child into the best preschool and on Scholars doing well on standardized placement exams. These families recognize that these steps offer greater access to higher education, which in turn leads to greater economic and social mobility. As a result, these English learner families are very likely to understand that an improved quality of life depends on education, speaking English fluently, and performing well on assessments.

In other circumstances, class and cultural constraints can limit social mobility. Hard work is sometimes understood by those without advanced formal education to be essential to economic security. This can influence family dynamics around encouraging Scholars to attend college or engage in formal training after high school.

Access to educational programs and services

Rapid assimilation often occurs when EL families with legal status migrate into culturally familiar communities in the U.S. that have already forged strong pathways into educational programs and services. These EL families can be very well networked, tapping into or creating support systems that help their Scholars excel. They understand how the U.S. educational system works or are networked to a community that is savvy about how to get the best educational opportunities for their Scholars. As an example, English learner Scholars from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia often outnumber other EL students in Head Start or Kindergarten programs, because they reside in communities that are familiar with how to access these programs. Their families are in communities that reinforce education and network their children into these capacity-limited enrichment programs.

The importance of early childhood education

The early childhood period, typically defined as between birth and age 8, is a time of tremendous growth and development. By the time EL children reach the end of this period, most have experienced multiple childcare and education settings—all with different rules, relationships, and expectations.

The positive impact of the combination of Pre-K and half-day Kindergarten on reading achievement has been found to be the greatest for Hispanic children, African American children, English learners (ELs), and children from low-income families.

Specifically, the chances of Hispanic students and students below the poverty line reaching the basic Grade 3 reading level, “Comprehension of words in context,” increase by 7% if they attend Pre-K followed by half-day Kindergarten, rather than full-day Kindergarten and no Pre-K. Similar results were found for African American students (6%).

For both Hispanic students and students below the poverty line, chances of reaching the more advanced, “Literal inference” reading level increase by 16% by attending Pre-K and then half-day Kindergarten, rather than full-day Kindergarten and no Pre-K. African American students’ chances increase by 15%. EL students saw the greatest increase at 21%.

Most critical is the fact that at the “Extrapolation” reading level, requiring higher-order thinking, the increase is even greater. Hispanic students’ chances of reaching this level increase by 24% when they attend both Pre-K and then half-day Kindergarten, and poor students’ chances increase by 21%. Black students’ chances increase by 17%, while ELs’ chances increase by 25%.

Eighty-five percent of ELs start school in the U.S. in Kindergarten. However, significant numbers of EL Scholars may not have previous preschool experiences for a number of reasons. Without a solid foundation in Pre-K, these students will likely not be as prepared for

the increase in academic expectations that are now the norm in U.S. schools. The numbers speak for themselves; it is extremely important to help EL families advocate for placement in high-quality early childhood programs.

The growing awareness of how critical the early childhood years are in a Scholar’s life has not reached all parents in U.S. schools today. As a result, many U.S. families do not understand or reinforce the important concept that learning begins at birth. Just as with all families, for a variety of reasons there are EL families that prefer to keep their young children home or under the care of a family member instead of sending them to Preschool or Kindergarten. These EL Scholars may arrive in Kindergarten or Grade 1 with little academic preparation.

Hispanic EL families, which make up 80% of ELs nationally, typically under-enroll in Pre-K and Kindergarten. Many of these EL families live in states where Head Start programs are at capacity and alternative Pre-K and Kindergarten programs are costly and not at the same service levels as Head Start. As a result, given the tremendous benefits of early education, it is important to raise EL families’ awareness of how to advocate for placement in quality early childhood programs for their children.

Real-World Scenario

A Vietnamese community in one city came together, and even though their families lived in many different school attendance zones, they lobbied the school district to bus all the Vietnamese Scholars to one particular school, which happened to provide the best academic track for middle and high school. The district knew that this culture placed a high premium on education, and on doing well on assessments. And, since this district needed to improve its overall assessment standing, it decided to provide the Vietnamese families with choice school selection, bilingual instructors, bilingual after school programs, and bus transportation.

Impact of health, dental, and vision needs on Scholars' academic achievement

For young EL Scholars, immunizations, health, dental, and vision check ups are very important, and although they may have screenings at school, their families may not be able to provide the transportation or accommodations needed for receiving the necessary medical, dental, and vision care.

Note: The primary reason for elementary school absences is dental pain. Some Scholars suffer from serious tooth decay, because their families are not familiar with preventative dental care and used soda in their babies' bottles. Title I schools with a significant number of EL Scholars can support their academic achievement through programs that offer free medical and dental services.

Ten percent of all Title I Scholars in the US have vision problems that go untreated, even though they have been screened and given vouchers for eyeglasses. Their families often do not have the capability to obtain the necessary vision services for their Scholars.

An assets-based district culture

It is immediately apparent whether a district recognizes and acknowledges the diversity of its community when walking into its schools. A welcoming atmosphere of appreciation for all cultures is reflected in the art on display, on the bulletin boards lining the hallways, and in the dedication to services, such as designated translators and bi-lingual office staff. This climate helps ensure that EL families feel safe in approaching the school and in getting involved, despite language and cultural barriers.

Scholars benefit from a culture of mutual respect as well. When their teachers express admiration for the EL families' qualities as the opportunities arise, it helps Scholars feel that they are equal participants in their school community. This, in turn, builds confidence. And as the years pass, when Scholars witness their family members working hard and long hours and engaging in the Scholar's education, this confidence continues to grow substantially throughout their academic careers.

THE FIVE **LEARN TOGETHER WORKSHOPS**

Welcome to School

When EL families are made to feel welcome at their Scholar's school, they are more likely to stay in communication for a variety of purposes, from conducting daily routines, such as calling to report their Scholar's absence, to asking questions about a school event. Most important, when families participate in the **Welcome to School Learn Together Workshop**, they come away with the confidence that they can advocate for their Scholar. After this *Learn Together Workshop*, the school and its personnel are much more approachable; indeed, families now know that they are partners united in a shared goal.

Academic Achievement

Providing solid background on a district's academic expectations, policies, and procedures, and offering validation that parents are the critical link in supporting their Scholar's academic progress, all go a long way in helping EL families partner with their school for academic success. However, much more support may be needed to overcome specific cultural barriers that are based in long-held beliefs about schooling and achievement. For instance, many EL families come from cultures that adhere to the belief that an individual has certain innate talents and attributes that are immutable. The EL Scholar may be seen as talented in music or in reading, but not in math. These perceptions can both define, and in some cases limit, a Scholar's potential. The **Academic Achievement Learn Together Workshop** engages families in understanding the importance of holding high academic expectations and cultivating a growth mindset focused on the idea that it is practice over time, rather than innate talent, that brings about success.

Support at Home

Even when barriers such as language and academic attainment are present that could inhibit EL families from supporting their Scholars at home, the research is clear that "what a family does to support a Scholar's education is more important than family income or education" (U.S. Department of Education, 1994, p. 6).

The **Support at Home Learn Together Workshop** instills confidence in EL families that there are countless practical and actionable steps they can take to support their Scholars at home, including helping them track essential testing and assignment dates, obtaining free educational resources and services, such as tutors, and engaging them at all ages in active conversations that build vocabulary and awareness of their community and how it connects to the world at large.

Equally important, families are also encouraged to build and maintain strong skills in their home language, emphasizing how this gives Scholars a powerful head start in school, because they will learn English more readily if they have a solid base in their first language.

Technology

When EL families gain access to technology resources and become adept at using them to communicate with their school, their ability to engage with the school 24/7 rises incrementally. There are challenges associated with reaching this level of familiarity, and the **Technology** *Learn Together Workshop* bridges these gulfs in relevant and engaging ways.

Technology needs increase dramatically for EL families when their children enter Pre-K or elementary school. Suddenly, they must learn to use technology to access information about their Scholar, especially if the school has an online reporting system for parents, but also to use technology socially, to connect with other families and build a network of support.

This *Learn Together Workshop* begins with engaging EL families in non-intimidating activities that are relevant, and that also build confidence. The workshop progresses to include support for setting up email addresses, using the web to search for information, accessing the district's parent portal, and finding educational resources online.

After this *Learn Together Workshop* families are more proficient in using technology to communicate with the school and to find educational resources online, and they are knowledgeable about community resources that provide access to computers if there are none in their home.

Assessment Success

Being able to understand and interpret the purpose of varied assessments, including language proficiency assessments, their results, and their implications for placement in specific levels and grades, including in special services when warranted, is critical for EL families, beginning in Pre-K.

The **Assessment Success** *Learn Together Workshop* builds awareness of the various types of district assessments, from classroom or curriculum-based, to the nature and importance of standardized tests. Most important, families learn about specific routines they can engage in with their Scholars to ensure they have practiced the formats of all types of tests, to keep track of testing dates, and to understand how to read test scores. Learning and practicing these critical routines on an ongoing basis with their Scholars will go a long way toward helping them achieve academic success.

A WORKSHOP IN ACTION

On a warm evening in early September, the doors of the district's Middle School are open to the night. Numerous adults and middle school Scholars enter the building and are greeted with a banner written in English and Spanish that welcomes the families to their first of five *Learn Together Workshops*. The families are directed toward the cafeteria, which has been transformed into a space for tonight's workshop, **Welcome to School**.

The expressions and demeanor of the adults are as varied as are the cultures from which they originate. Some look around furtively, as if this is their first time in the building and they are not sure what is expected of them. Some stay close to the middle school student who arrived with them, as if relying on him to be their translator. Others appear more at ease, and some walk in with the confidence that comes with the prior experience of being involved with the school on a regular basis.

Despite the differences in expectations and confidence levels, one thing is clear. Every family present shares the same value: they all want what is best for their child, and that is why they have come.

Walking into the cafeteria, the families who appeared uneasy seem to relax. A table is set up, and individuals are behind it, smiling and passing out materials. There is also someone at the registration table speaking their language, and this person guides them to their table and assures them she'll be sitting with them to act as translator.

The workshop begins with a welcome and introduction from the district's Assistant Superintendent. She shares the excitement her educators feel over having the opportunity to partner with families and work together toward improving the achievement of their Scholars. The Program Leader then launches into an overview of the evening's agenda, and shows families how they can follow along in their own take-home *Family Guides*, which are full of practical tips in accessible English. A Spanish version is also available.

It doesn't take long before the room is awash in purposeful, albeit lively discussions on specific topics. At each table, families work alongside educators, asking and answering questions in order to get to know one another. Then, they view a video on a topic relevant to the night's activities. It sparks a new discussion facilitated by the educators at the table.

The Scholars themselves have moved to another room; they're working with educators as well, and are deep in thought and discussion regarding the qualities that make someone a Scholar. They're collaborating with students with whom, in the past, they only conversed in passing. Tonight, they're getting to know one another better, and they're forging positive social connections that will continue to strengthen when they return for each of the remaining *Learn Together Workshops*.

And the adults? They, too, are learning how to decode the school their scholars attend, better understanding the personnel, expectations, who to call for specific purposes, and what the expectations are for supporting their scholar’s engagement with school—from attendance and arriving on time, to helping their Scholars set goals for their future.

As they engage in conversations with one another, the lines between ‘educator’ and ‘family’ begin to blur. Before the evening ends, each table will have forged bonds of trust and a spirit of mutual support and collaboration. Most important, families and educators leave the workshop feeling as though, despite numerous obstacles, they now have actionable steps they can take to ensure better advocacy for their Scholars.

As the workshop draws to a close and families begin to file out, one comment is typically heard: the workshop was too short! Most participants feel as though they are just getting started. And, they are—they have now started down the crucial path of building the trust, confidence, and open communication needed for family advocacy, for sharing in the work of supporting their Scholar’s achievement throughout his or her school career.



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