

HMH Family Engagement

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Family Engagement Forum

EL Academic Success through Effective School-Family Partnerships

Lise B. Ragan

About the Author



Lise Ragan, former English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, has been a publisher, editor, and author of instructional materials for English learners and resources for their teachers for over three decades. In 1993, Lise founded Course Crafters, a curriculum development company that specializes in creating programs for the English learner market. Since then, she has developed scores of successful instructional programs and professional learning offerings to ensure the academic success of the English learner student population, Pre-K through Grade 12. Lise has also been a trainer, coach, and consultant to school districts and educational organizations, including educational publishers, educational technology companies, and non-profit organizations. She is recognized internationally for her research and expertise in the English learner market.

EL Academic Success through Effective School-Family Partnerships

Across the country, public schools are opening their doors to more and more children who speak a language other than English at home. The number of English learners (ELs) enrolled in U.S. public schools during the 2012–2013 academic year was 4.85 million, representing nearly 10 percent of the total K–12 student population. Together, eight states—California, Florida, Texas, New York, Illinois, Colorado, Washington, and North Carolina—accounted for more than two-thirds of the nation’s EL student enrollment in public schools in 2012–2013. (MPI, 2015) However, of great significance is that ELs are in classrooms across the country. Ten states experienced the highest EL population growth between 2000–2001 and 2010–2011: South Carolina, Kentucky, Nevada, Delaware, Arkansas, Kansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Virginia, and North Carolina. While the U.S. EL population grew 18 percent from 2000–2001 to 2011–2012, which is a significant increase, these states experienced EL growth ranging from 135 percent in North Carolina to an astonishing 610 percent in South Carolina (Horsford and Sampson, 2013). Projections suggest that by the year 2025, one in four students in the classroom nationwide will be in an English learner (Klinger, Hoover, & Baca, 2008).

English learners are being held to the same rigorous standards as their fluent-English-proficient peers. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act added important requirements for English language proficiency standards and academic assessment and accountability through both Title I and Title III. Building on the lessons from state ESEA waivers and the introduction of college- and career-ready standards, the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) continues to hold ELs and their schools to high measures of accountability for academic achievement and English language development (Statement from Working Group on ELL Policy, 2016). However, despite some improvement, the achievement gap between ELs and non-ELs is not measurably different now from the gap in 1998, almost 20 years ago (NCES, 2015d). In addition, graduation rates for ELs are much lower than for the general population, 59% vs. 80% (Ross, 2015) and ELs are twice as likely as those with English proficiency to drop out of high school (Callahan, 2013; Belfield & Levin, 2007).



Family Engagement and Academic Success

There is considerable research pointing to the connection between family engagement and the success of PreK–12 students in the classroom (Fan & Chen, 2001; Boethel, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). More than 50 years of research supports the importance of parental and family engagement for improved student achievement, better school attendance, and reduced dropout rates, regardless of socioeconomic background or ethnicity (M. Beatriz Arias and Milagros Morillo-Campbell, 2008).

The most effective family engagement is a shared responsibility in which schools reach out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children’s learning and development. (Harvard Family Research Project, 2009) To take this shared responsibility further, the 2013 “Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships” from the USDOE and SEDL emphasizes the importance of schools and families working as equal partners, with shared responsibility and a common goal:

“... research shows that initiatives that take on a partnership orientation—in which student achievement and school improvement are seen as a shared responsibility, relationships of trust and respect are established between home and school, and families and staff see each other as equal partners—create the conditions for family engagement to flourish.” (Southwest Education Development Laboratory (SEDL), 2013)

Family engagement and the school-family partnership have long been an element of Federal Policy through Title 1 of ESEA, which requires that Title 1 schools develop plans and “school-family compacts” that outline how the two stakeholder groups will work together to boost student achievement. In the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Title 1 stand-alone family engagement provisions remain. However, with ESSA, there is a decided shift from federal control to state and local action plans and initiatives.

For purposes of this paper, it is important to note that Local Education Agency (LEA)-based English learner family engagement can be very effective: “The education of EL students could be significantly enhanced by school-based efforts to strengthen parental involvement in the child’s education.” (Mathis, 2013)

Barriers and Challenges to Effective School-EL Family Partnerships

Barriers pertaining to language, school staffs' lack of familiarity with culturally and linguistically diverse families, and parents' unfamiliarity with U.S. schools can all impede effective parent-school collaboration. (National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems (NCCREST), 2008)

Specific barriers cited through research on EL and immigrant families and schools, Pre-K–12, include:

- ◆ EL parents may be ill-equipped for effective engagement with the school due to their own limited facility in English, lack of formal education, limited literacy in their home language, unfamiliarity with the norms of US schooling, and limited time and ability to attend meetings and events—all exacerbated by school-home cultural differences. (Christianson & Sheridan, 2001; Guo, 2006; Turney & Kao, 2009).
- ◆ Barriers begin in preschool. In “Barriers to School Involvement: Are Immigrant Parents Disadvantaged?” Turney and Kao (2009) used data from a longitudinal study of early childhood education, which emphasizes the existence of barriers in the population of immigrant families and which made these families disadvantaged as it related to engaging with early childhood education. They identified barriers associated with available transportation and childcare, language, feelings of not being welcomed, time issues dealing with inconvenience and work conflicts, and finding information from the school irrelevant.
- ◆ An October 2012 article in Education Week: “Schools Falter at Keeping ELL Families in the Loop,” focuses on school districts in the Southern US, which have encountered an influx of immigrant/EL families in the last decade (Maxwell, 2012). These districts have limited or no experience in adequately meeting the needs of EL students and fostering EL family-school collaboration, which has led to the filing of civil rights complaints with the US Department of Education.
- ◆ Guo (2006) in “Why Didn’t They Show Up? Rethinking ESL Parent Involvement in K–12 Education,” discusses potential barriers to effective EL parent-teacher interaction: differences in language, teacher attitudes and perceptions, differing views of education, differences in the cultural interpretation of the home-school partnership, and EL families’ lack of knowledge of the school system.

Although EL families want to be engaged in their children’s education, these barriers, often referred to as “stressors,” affect the amount, depth, and types of interactions they have with the school.

Building Capacity

In “Partners in Education: Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships” (SEDL, 2013), the policy and program goals outlined by the authors to improve family engagement focus on building the capacities of both school staff and families to engage in partnerships. This framework breaks down “capacity” into four categories: Here are the “4 Cs” for EL family engagement, plus a fifth (*Communication*):

CAPABILITIES

Human Capital, Skills, and Knowledge (SEDL, page 10)

- ◆ School and district staff that are knowledgeable about the assets and funds of knowledge available in their community. Skills in cultural competency and in building trusting relationships with families.
- ◆ Families need access to knowledge about student learning and the workings of the school system. They also need **strategies for educational support and advocacy for their child**. Recommending routines and activities to structure learning at home are particularly effective for helping families to support increased educational achievement. (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Dorfman and Fisher, 2002)
- ◆ “Regardless of their race or ethnic identity, educational background, gender, disability, or socioeconomic status” families need to be prepared to engage in partnerships with schools and districts and supported to take on multiple roles in their children’s learning: supporters, encouragers, monitors, models, advocates, decision-makers, and collaborators. (SEDL, 2013)
- ◆ Capabilities must be developed when EL students start school and supported throughout their school career. Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) stresses that **family engagement is continuous across a child’s life and entails enduring commitment** but changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood. (Weiss & Lopez, 2009) Therefore, family engagement programs and practices need to be comprehensive in order to provide appropriate content, Preschool–Grade 12, but sufficiently flexible to accommodate the diverse, often migratory, EL and immigrant population.

CONNECTIONS

Important Relationships and Networks— Social Capital (SEDL, page 10)

- ◆ Networks include family-school staff relationships, family-teacher relationships, family-family relationships, and connections with EL community.
- ◆ Staff and families have **strong, cross-cultural networks built on trust and respect**. Staff understands and builds on EL families’ cultural values. Parents and families are viewed as assets, with something valuable to contribute (Berger and Riojas-Cortez, 2012)
- ◆ School learning communities are an element of the family engagement action plan. “A *school learning community* includes educators, students, parents, and community partners who work together to improve the school and enhance students’ learning opportunities. ...Research and fieldwork show that such programs improve schools, strengthen families, invigorate community support, and increase student achievement and success.” (Epstein and Salinas, 2004).
- ◆ Develop relationships and networks among all stakeholders, including among EL families. While extensive research has focused on the impact of connections between school and family, few studies have addressed the impact of interactions among families in increasing student success. Further research is needed to investigate the growth of self-efficacy and social capital that can occur through families interacting with one another, non-native and native English speakers alike.

CONFIDENCE

Individual Level of Self-Efficacy

- ◆ Staff and families, adults and students, experience a sense of comfort and confidence related to engaging in partnership activities and “working across lines of cultural difference.” (SEDL, page 11)
- ◆ **Families learn best when schools view EL families and students as assets**, with strengths and valuable contributions. (Callahan, 2013; Berger and Riojas-Cortez, 2012)
- ◆ **Activities respect and provide support to EL students and their families** for the wide range of educational backgrounds, English language proficiency, home language literacy levels, subject-matter knowledge, and personal experiences associated with coming to and living in the U.S. (Christian, 2006, page 2).

COGNITION

Assumptions, Beliefs, and Worldview (SEDL, page 11)

- ◆ Staff and families alike examine their assumptions, beliefs, and cultural competence needs, in order to **foster trusting, respectful, and collaborative relationships** (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Educators can wrongly assume that lack of EL parental participation in school is evidence of lack of parental interest. (Arias, 2008)
- ◆ **Families view themselves as partners in their children’s learning**. To do that, EL families need to have confidence that they have something to contribute. EL parents can be perceived as lacking resources (e.g., experience, know-how, and education) to provide and support home educational experiences for their children. (Fine, 1993; Finders, 1994) “This deficit perspective suggests that fault and responsibility lie with the ELL population rather than the school, and that the role of the school is to change the ways families interact with schools.” (Arias, 2008)

COMMUNICATION

Two-way Communication and Knowledge Sharing

- ◆ Establishing open, two-way communication and knowledge sharing is key to effective family engagement with diverse families. (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, and Moodie, 2009)
- ◆ Schools establish **a warm, welcoming school environment that makes personal contact with EL parents**. (Scribner, Young, and Pedroza, 1999)
- ◆ Interactions between schools and parents value and take advantage of the families’ resources and culture. (Berger and Riojas-Cortez, 2012)
- ◆ Written communications with EL families are comprehensible and clear—in their home language, if possible—to reflect an appreciation of the possible barriers to comprehension, such as limited literacy in their home language, lack of understanding about the U.S. school system, and school expectations about family involvement and responsibility. (Colorin, Colorado, 2015)

Best Practices for Effective EL School-Family Partnerships

In view of the urgency of improving the academic future of the fast-growing English learner student population, it is critical to identify practices that will develop effective and sustained partnerships between schools and EL families and improving EL family engagement—and EL student achievement.

Research, past experience, and recent observations in the field tests and pilots for the new **HMH Family Engagement** program yields five best practices for developing and sustaining effective partnerships between schools and EL families that eliminate barriers to engagement and support student success.

1. Develop Learning Communities that emphasize teamwork among educators, students, parents, and community partners, who work together to improve the school and increase student achievement.

Research shows that school-family learning communities improve schools, strengthen families, invigorate community support, and increase student achievement and success. (Epstein and Salinas, 2004). *An effective EL family engagement plan:*

- ◆ Re-conceptualizes and expands the definition of family engagement, including the concept of shared responsibility and partnership
- ◆ Provides collaborative learning opportunities for all members of the school staff, EL parents and familial caregivers, and EL students—all learning together and working toward a common goal
- ◆ Facilitates networking and support among all stakeholders, including among and between EL families and EL students.

In Action:

- ◆ In the two full-day professional development sessions for **HMH Family Engagement**, the school team works together to evaluate their current EL family engagement efforts, and to plan the implementation of five *Learn Together Workshops* as an integral part of their EL family engagement action plan. In the professional development sessions in our field tests and pilots, schools saw real advantages to all members of the school team—administrators, EL specialists and teachers, classroom teachers, special educators, and front office staff—actively participating and collaborating.
- ◆ The *Learn Together Workshops* are an opportunity during which all stakeholders collaborate. The 90-minute *Learn Together Workshops* are a component of the program's professional development for educators, because this is a time for them to get to know EL families and students and establish mutual understanding and trust.

2. Tap leadership that champions a strong desire for engaging EL families for school improvement, sets a clear vision, and participates actively and enthusiastically in all stages of the process.

The role of the principal is critical in initiating and sustaining the environment necessary for achieving positive home-school connections with English learner families. (Grant and Wong, 2004). *An effective EL family engagement plan has school leaders who:*

- ◆ Set a clear vision for what successful EL family engagement will look like and how it will specifically improve the school and their EL students' academic success.
- ◆ Collaborate with the school team (including other administrators, family engagement personnel, EL specialists, teachers, and staff) to develop goals and specific strategies for a family engagement action plan that minimizes barriers that can impede effective parent-school collaboration
- ◆ Set the tone regarding welcoming EL families into the school community, actively participating and engaging in EL family-school events, demonstrating commitment and accessibility.

In Action:

- ◆ In the full-day professional development sessions in **HMH Family Engagement** in our field tests and pilots, district and school administrators worked side-by-side with teachers and school staff, setting the vision and tone, enthusiastically helping to plan for the first *Learn Together Workshop*, Welcome to School.
- ◆ All administrators in our field tests and pilots worked with the school team to discuss and evaluate current district/school EL family engagement efforts and to engage in goal setting and action planning, using rubrics in the program.
- ◆ In the *Learn Together Workshops* for the field tests and pilots, administrators warmly welcomed the families, introduced the Workshop and set the tone, and collaborated with Program Leader and table teams (educators, adult family members, and students) during the 90-minute sessions. Having access to the principal and seeing how engaged the administrator was made an impact on the EL families.

3. Collaboratively develop a standards-based EL family engagement action plan, which incorporates current successes as well as new research-based programs and practices.

Dr. Joyce Epstein, Director of the Center for School, Family and Community Partnerships, said this in a recent article in *Education World* (2016): “There needs to be systemization and planning and thinking for family and community involvement. For centuries, it has happened by chance.” (Education World, 2016) *An effective action plan for EL family engagement:*

- ◆ Is developed collaboratively by the school team, who starts by evaluating what the district or school is already doing to engage and communicate with EL families, to determine how that is working and how it could be improved
- ◆ Solicits input from all stakeholders on family engagement practices within the school, including EL families
- ◆ Uses research-based standards as the basis for plans, activities, and strategies
- ◆ Incorporates programs and practices that are comprehensive and flexible in order to provide appropriate, grade-specific knowledge and skills for EL families, whose children may be entering school at any grade level, Preschool–Grade 12.

In Action

- ◆ Schools in our field tests and pilots used simple surveys to solicit input from EL families on their preferences for communication, their evaluation of the *Learn Together Workshops*, and other topics they wanted to know more about.
- ◆ School teams use rubrics that are standards- and research-based to evaluate their current family engagement activities and to develop an effective action plan. The rubrics in ***HMH Family Engagement*** use the National PTA® Standards for Family-School Partnerships as the basis for current program evaluation and action planning.
- ◆ Schools in our pilots integrated the five *Learn Together Workshops*—Welcome to School, Academic Achievement, Support at Home, Assessment Success, and Technology—as core components of the action plan, and added their current, successful activities in the district as well as new plans. These Workshops, and the Family Guides and videos used at the Workshops, are developed to include appropriate content and critical issues for five grade-level spans: Pre-K; K–2; 3–5; 6–8; 9–12.

4. Nurture understanding, respect, trust, and confidence among and between school staff and families.

Successful family engagement efforts with EL families are those in which schools acknowledge the importance of engaging families, understand and build on parents' cultural values, and view families as assets (McBride, 1999; Berger and Riojas-Cortez, 2012). *An effective EL family engagement plan includes these elements:*

- ◆ Professional development during which all school personnel—administrators, teachers, and staff—are encouraged to examine assumptions and possible misconceptions about EL students and families, which may be an obstacle to full partnership
- ◆ Activities with EL families that respect and provide support for the wide range of educational backgrounds, language proficiencies, home language literacy levels, subject-matter knowledge (Christian, 2006, page 2)
- ◆ An asset-based view of EL families and students: EL families and students learn best when schools view them as assets, with strengths and valuable contributions (Callahan, 2013; Berger and Riojas-Cortez, 2012).

In Action:

- ◆ Professional learning opportunities in **HMH Family Engagement** focus on an “asset-based” view of EL families and students and, through role-play, hands-on activities, readings, and reflection, and help educators develop insights and strategies for effectively engaging EL families.
- ◆ Supporting and informing EL families about school values and expectations and working with parents to help them become advocates for their children are important elements of effective family engagement. In each *Learn Together Workshop*, educators facilitate activities with families using visual, accessible English and Spanish Family Guides, which families can take home for ongoing reference. Families also have access to videos that present key concepts, such as the importance of setting high expectations (*Every Child is a Scholar!*).
- ◆ The Welcome to School *Learn Together Workshop*, always the first of the series, introduces EL families to school rules, policies, and key components for success, including the people at school, the critical importance of attendance, and keeping and using their own school calendar at home. This Workshop is the foundation for the other four *Learn Together Workshops*, each of which focuses on key information specifically for each grade level span (Pre-K; K–2; 3–5; 6–8; 9–12): Academic Achievement; Assessment Success; Support at Home; and Technology. HMH field tests and pilots included Spanish-speaking families as well as families from Chinese, Vietnamese, and Arabic-speaking backgrounds, who participated with their children (Grades 3–5).

5. Build effective two-way communication and knowledge sharing.

Establishing two-way communication and knowledge sharing is key to effective EL family engagement (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, and Moodie, 2009). *Effective communication with EL families reflects these best practices:*

- ♦ Communicating by phone or inviting EL families to come to school for a personal meeting may be far more effective than communicating in writing or using technology. Newsletters and other notices and letters sent home—even those that have been translated into the family’s home language—sometimes are unread because a number of EL families are not fully literate in their home languages. EL families may not have computers or Internet access at home, and some do not use email.
- ♦ Provide interpreters to communicate critical information directly to adult family members. It’s important not to rely on EL students to communicate this information, or for students to be the interpreters or intermediaries for their families with the school.
- ♦ Announcements on the radio, TV, or other media used by the EL community can be an effective way to reach families about important school events and issues.
- ♦ The best method of two-way communication is the one a district and its students’ families determine to be the most effective. One of the easiest and most effective ways to find out how EL families want to receive information is by using a survey.
- ♦ Opening the door to effective communication for EL families is key. Knowing that they are welcome at school and that their child’s teachers—and the school principal and other administrators—are accessible to them and available to answer questions will go a long way toward building trust and two-way communication.

In Action:

- ♦ A critical person at the **HMH Family Engagement Learn Together Workshops** is the Table Facilitator. This person speaks the language of the families at their table, so that they can communicate the important information to the adults and answer any questions they may have. Having this direct communication with someone at the school who speaks their language empowers EL adult family members to speak up, ask questions, and get information so they can be active, engaged, and knowledgeable participants in their child’s learning.
- ♦ In the Technology *Learn Together Workshop*, EL families have an opportunity to use computers and the Internet to learn about how the school uses technology to communicate. HMH provides adult family members with the opportunity to establish an email address at this Workshop, to learn how to check and send email, and to understand how to find important information on the

district or school website. Because a number of EL families do not have computers and/or access to the Internet at home, schools provide information on places in the community where families can gain free access.

- ♦ An excellent opportunity to survey families occurs when they are attending one of the *Learn Together Workshops*. One of the HMH field test districts asked families survey questions when they registered for the Workshop. At another field test site, Table Facilitators worked with the families after the Workshop to complete a written survey, as well as asked them the questions verbally. At that time, they also asked families what issues and topics they would like to learn more about, so the school could cater their future action plan to these topics.
- ♦ The *Learn Together Workshops* give families an opportunity to meet with and have access to the principal, as well as with other specialists and staff at the school. At the Workshops, families get information on how they can contact their child's teachers, the principal, and other specialists (ELD/ESL; school counselor; special education) directly with any questions or concerns. Families also get information on other events at school during which they can communicate with school personnel, such as Back-to-School-Night and Parent-Teacher conferences.

In Conclusion

In the words of the Department of Education's Dual Capacity-Building Framework:

...In order for family-school partnerships to succeed, the adults responsible for children's education must learn and grow, just as they support learning and growth among students." (SEDL, 2013, page 26)

It is our core belief, backed by research, that when districts engage in a partnership with EL Families that is grounded in mutual respect and the shared goal of raising student achievement, students will benefit in ways that last a lifetime.

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