

# **Involving Immigrant and Refugee Families in Their Children's Schools: Barriers, Challenges and Successful Strategies**

This report, written in 2003, represents effective strategies to assist schools to reach out to refugee and other immigrant parents. *Involving Immigrant and Refugee Families in Their Children's Schools: Barriers, Challenges and Successful Strategies*, was coordinated and edited by the Adult Learner Resource Center under the auspices of the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Department of Human Services. The report synthesizes the suggestions of the ISBE Parent Outreach Focus Group, a group of Illinois educational and social service agency practitioners who work with refugee and other immigrant group students and families. It is also based upon a survey of school and social service agency staff that used the handbook *A Guide to Your Children's Schools* in their interactions with immigrant and refugee families.

*Involving Immigrant and Refugee Families in Their Children's Schools: Barriers, Challenges and Successful Strategies*, was funded under the federal Refugee Children School Impact Grant Number 90ZE0040. This grant is provided by the federal Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), to the Illinois State Board of Education to improve the performance of at-risk refugee students by facilitating their integration into Illinois schools. The authority for programs funded by ORR derives from various federal legislation including the Refugee Act of 1980 (Section 412(c)(1)(A)(iii) Immigration and Nationality Act [8 USC 1522]).

## PREFACE

This report, *Involving Immigrant and Refugee Families in Their Children's Schools: Barriers, Challenges and Successful Strategies*, was funded under the federal Refugee Children School Impact Grant Number 90ZE0040. This grant is provided by the federal Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), to the Illinois State Board of Education to improve the performance of at-risk refugee students by facilitating their integration into Illinois schools. The authority for programs funded by ORR derives from various federal legislation including the Refugee Act of 1980 (Section 412(c)(1)(A)(iii) Immigration and Nationality Act [8 USC 1522]).

The Refugee Children School Impact Grant (RCSIG) covers 1) some of the costs of educating refugee children incurred by local school districts in which significant numbers of refugee children reside and 2) helps provide educationally-related support services, culturally-related social services and mental health-related services for refugee students, their families, and school staff. The Illinois State Board of Education provides RCSIG funds to the Chicago Public Schools for in-school, after-school and summer school programming and to the Illinois Department of Human Services, which coordinates activities of the Refugee Social Services Consortium to provide culturally-related social and mental-health related services and after-school programs to students and their families.

The Adult Learning Resource Center, as a member of the Refugee Social Services Consortium, provides training for teachers of limited English proficient students and supports parental outreach activities. *Involving Immigrant and Refugee Families in Their Children's Schools: Barriers, Challenges and Successful Strategies*, was coordinated and edited by the Adult Learner Resource Center under the auspices of the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Department of Human Services.

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This report is provided free for use by parents, local school districts and social service agencies and may be reprinted. It may be distributed as a companion piece for the handbook for newcomer parents, *A Guide to Your Children's Schools*.

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## **Involving Immigrant and Refugee Families in Their Children's Schools: Barriers, Challenges and Successful Strategies**

Immigrant and refugee parents may face many barriers and challenges to active participation in their children's educational experiences in the United States. Below are the barriers and challenges identified by the working group.

### **Language**

For the many immigrant and refugee parents who speak little or no English, language is a major barrier to communication between school and home. Some schools do not have bilingual staff available to assist in orienting new families to the school or to translate written materials provided by the school.

Written materials are the primary way most schools communicate with parents. Some written materials are sent home with children to be given to their parents while others are mailed or handed directly to parents. If these materials are written in English only, or at a high level of English, then many language minority parents will not be able to read them. Translating written materials can help, but not all schools have access to translators of all languages spoken by the families enrolled in the school. Even in cases where written materials are translated, many language minority parents have limited education in their native countries and may not read or write their native languages.

Immigrant and refugee parents are often reluctant to participate in school activities where spoken English is necessary. Such activities include telephoning the school to report student absences, participating in parent-teacher conferences, or volunteering in the classroom or on field trips.

In some cases parents rely on their children to serve as translators of both written and oral communication from school personnel. Children are not reliable translators and may not communicate messages from the school with accuracy. Children may feel ashamed of their parents and discourage them from attending school functions.

### **Cultural Expectations**

School personnel may perceive that immigrant and refugee parents are not interested in or don't care about their children's education. However, these perceptions may be based on the language issues described above or on cultural misunderstandings on both the parts of parents and of school personnel.

Language minority parents may come from cultures where parents are not expected to take an active role in their children's educational experiences, or where the role that parents take is very different from the role expected in the United States school system. In some cultures parents simply "trust the school"

and never question the decisions or authority of school personnel. In these cultures, parents have very little knowledge of or input into their children's school day.

The perception of the classroom, too, may be very different in some cultures. In many cultures children are responsible for their own learning (much of it by rote memory) in a traditional teacher-fronted classroom. Interactive, collaborative classrooms with student-directed learning, while common in the United States, are foreign to many cultures. In addition, language minority parents may not have a clear understanding of special education or special learning needs and be very wary of having their children enrolled in special programs.

Immigrant and refugee parents may perceive that the school is a threat to preserving their first language and culture and thus be reluctant to fully participate in the life of the school.

### **Isolation**

There are many factors that lead some immigrant and refugee parents to live lives isolated from the community at large, including the school community. Limited English language skills often lead to a sense of isolation. Too, some parents are reluctant to venture out into the community because of their undocumented status. Others fear violence in the community. Some parents do not live in areas with ready access to safe, reliable public transportation, so coming to the school is difficult. Still others do not have access to childcare for their young children, making it difficult to attend school functions.

In some cases grandparents are the caretakers of school-aged children. In these cases, failing health or other age-related issues may inhibit grandparents from participating in the school lives of their grandchildren.

### **Busy Personal Lives**

Many immigrant and refugee parents have very busy lives, often holding more than one low-paying job to make ends meet. They may work the swing shift or the night shift, making it impossible to attend school functions or to oversee their children's homework. When given the chance to work overtime hours, parents may choose to earn much-needed income even when this entails being away from home.

Parents may also be responsible for caring for young children at home (both theirs and others). They often lack access to childcare, making it difficult to participate in school activities.

### **Family Trauma**

Some refugee families may be experiencing the aftermath of war, torture, and associated symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Other families may have issues with substance abuse, domestic violence, or child abuse or neglect that impact their ability to be involved with their children's education.

### **Lack of Welcoming Atmosphere in Some Schools**

Some schools do not provide an atmosphere that immigrant and refugee parents perceive as welcoming. This may be due to school personnel who are overworked, lack cultural sensitivity, or do not speak the parents' native languages.

In general, grade schools and middle schools make a greater effort to involve parents than do high schools. This is in part due to the expectation that high school students will be more self-directed in their learning than younger students. Immigrant and refugee parents of high school students, therefore, may be particularly vulnerable to being left out of their children's educational experiences.

## **STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS INVOLVING IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE PARENTS**

Despite the many challenges schools face when working with immigrant and refugee parents, and the barriers faced by the parents themselves, many schools are successfully reaching out to and involving these parents. Below are a number of successful strategies identified by the working group.

### **Translate Whenever Possible**

It is a good practice to translate written materials from the school whenever possible.

Schools may have trouble locating translators for written school materials, especially for low-incidence languages. Schools have successfully partnered with community-based organizations and refugee resettlement agencies to provide translation assistance. In some cases parents from the school community have offered their assistance as translators of written materials.

Telephone support for high-importance written documents sent home from the school is another promising practice. If the school deems an item to be “must read,” then there is a telephone icon on the top of the page and a phone number for parents to call. Parents calling this phone number receive a recorded message in their native language providing a brief oral summary of the written notice. In this way, even parents who lack literacy skills in their native languages have access to essential information.

For school meetings where oral communication skills are essential (such as parent-teacher conferences), parents with limited English language skills can be asked in advance to bring an adult translator (not their children) whom they trust to serve as their translator during the meeting.

### **Offer Orientation Sessions**

Many schools offer orientation sessions for new families at the beginning of the school year. For parents with limited English language skills, translation assistance is essential, as is adequate time for parents to ask questions in their native languages. Schools may choose to hold orientation sessions in different languages, depending on the number of languages spoken by parents. Some schools have successfully used bilingual parents from the school community to organize and conduct these orientation sessions, offering native language support and their insights into cultural differences.

In some cases orientation sessions may be successfully held at locations other than the school. For example, if many refugee families receive social services through a refugee resettlement agency, then school orientation sessions may be

effective when offered at that site (which is familiar and comfortable to the refugee families) with translation assistance provided by the agency staff. Some schools have had success offering orientation sessions on “neutral turf” at public libraries and shopping malls.

It may be useful to address various topics throughout the school year rather than attempting to cover a great deal of information at one orientation session. If various parent meetings are to be held throughout the school year, then a list of the meetings can be prepared and distributed at the beginning of the year so that parents can make plans to attend.

Some schools invite parents (and any younger children in the family) to the school for a school day visit during the school year. Such visits help make the parents more comfortable with the school building itself and with the school community. If the school halls and rooms are decorated with the students’ work, parents can be invited to see their children’s work on display during their visit.

### **Write and Distribute Bilingual Parent Handbooks**

Many schools have produced parent handbooks in a variety of languages. These handbooks address school and district procedures, school activities, and the schools’ expectations for parental involvement. School handbooks can be passed out to parents or included as part of orientation sessions for new school families. (See “Resources”, pages 8-10.)

### **Develop Welcome Videos**

Some schools have produced short videos to orient new families to the school. These videos can be made available in a variety of languages and do not require that parents be able to read their native languages to access information. Video is an ideal medium for customizing content and for providing a visual representation of essential information. Videos can be given or lent to parents or shown and discussed during orientation sessions for new school families.

### **Mentor New Families**

Family-to-family mentoring programs in which families who currently have children in the school partner with new school families are an effective way of providing support and information to families new to the school. Families can be matched according to the native languages spoken.

### **Conduct Home Visits**

Some schools have had success in conducting home visits. For home visits to be effective, bilingual staff (social workers or teachers) visit new families in their homes to provide them with information about the school. It is a good practice for

home visits to be conducted in teams of two visitors due to safety issues in some communities. Too, if there are young children in the home, then one home visitor can entertain the children while the other speaks with the parents. Appointments should be made in advance and the visitors should announce their arrival via a cell phone before entering the home.

### **Draw on the Strengths of Language Minority Parents**

Language minority parents can be invited to participate in a bilingual focus group of parents and school personnel to share their concerns and ideas for successful parental involvement. Parents themselves are the best recruiters of other parents to become involved in school activities.

Some schools have had success in sending home a detailed list of volunteer tasks that require minimal English language skills and asking parents to select one. Other schools have invited parents with limited English to take on volunteer roles that do not require advanced English skills such as math tutor or moderator of the chess club.

### **Partner with Other Programs & Agencies in the Community**

It is a good practice for schools to partner with other programs and agencies in the community. Successful partnerships have been established between schools and refugee resettlement agencies, hospitals, community-based organizations, and other educational providers. For example, some schools have successfully partnered with Even Start or other family literacy programs to provide additional support to LEP families with preschool-aged children. One school offered a very successful family math program during the summer months, training parents to serve as teachers in the program.

### **Provide On-site Adult ESL Classes**

An effective practice is for schools to partner with their local community college or community-based organization to provide general ESL classes for adults on their school premises. Some successful on-site adult ESL programs have used the Adult Learning Resource Center's *Parents as Educational Partners Curriculum* that addresses both English language skills and information about the U.S. school system. (See "Resources", pages 8-10.)

### **Vary the Time of Day/Day of Week of Parent Activities**

Due to the variable work schedules of many immigrant and refugee parents, schools should vary the time of day and the day of the week that parent events take place. For example, one school has had success holding parent council meetings on Sunday afternoons.

It is a good practice to provide adequate advance notice of any school activities parents are involved with so that they can adjust their schedules accordingly.

### **Host Social Events**

Social events (such as potluck picnics) are effective tools for fostering goodwill, understanding, and a welcoming atmosphere among school personnel and language minority families. It is a good practice to extend personal and, when possible, bilingual invitations to targeted families.

All school staff, including reception staff and office workers, are encouraged to attend these social functions with their own families. This practice has proven effective in fostering cultural understanding and a more welcoming atmosphere in some schools.

### **Provide In-service Training for School Personnel**

In-service training for school personnel on cultural considerations and effective methods of communicating with immigrant and refugee parents is an effective tool for creating better communication and a more welcoming school atmosphere.

### **Gain the Principal's Support**

If efforts such as those described in this report are to succeed, it is essential that the principal be supportive of the school's efforts to reach out to immigrant and refugee parents. The school atmosphere is set at the level of the principal, and a welcoming atmosphere is essential for reaching these parents. Training may be necessary to make principals aware of the potential challenges parents and schools face and successful strategies for involving language minority parents.

## RESOURCES

### BACKGROUND READING FOR THOSE WORKING WITH IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE FAMILIES

Summaries of the following four studies are found in *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement* © The National Center for Family & Community Connections in Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002. The publication can be downloaded from [www.sedl.org/connections/](http://www.sedl.org/connections/).

*On Whose Terms? Understanding Involvement through the Eyes of Migrant Parents*, Gerardo R. López (2001).

This study examines the ways in which four immigrant/migrant families in Texas were involved in their children's education. The study found that these parents, whose children were highly successful in school, were actively engaged in supporting their children's educational development, but in ways not commonly recognized by educators and policymakers. The study explores how the concept of "parent involvement," as it is traditionally defined, limits the recognition of alternative involvement forms.

*Parent Involvement: Influencing Factors and Implications*, Dolores C. Peña (2000). EJ615791

This study looks at how parents in one urban elementary school in Texas, with a population that was 95.5 percent Mexican-American, were or were not involved and what factors influenced their involvement. The researcher identified several factors that influenced parent involvement. Parents also offered suggestions for how the school might build better collaborative relationships with parents and increase their involvement.

*Building Collaborative Relationships with Parents*, Jay D. Scribner, Michelle D. Young, and Anna Pedroza (1999).

This study addresses parent involvement in high-performing Hispanic schools along the Texas-Mexico border. The authors use data based on case studies of three elementary, three middle, and two high schools. The authors discuss the formal and informal activities that parents participate in, the collaborative relationships that parents and school staff create, and how the school staff established a "people-orientated, professional atmosphere."

*Engaging Latino Families for Student Success—Understanding the Process and Impact of Providing Training to Parents*, Janet Chrispeels and Elvira Rivero (2000).

This study examines the impact of a program intervention called Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) on a group of 198 Latino immigrant parents in San Diego, California. The researchers explored the effect of participation in a series

of parent information classes on immigrant parents' sense of place in their children's education. The findings suggest that parents developed higher levels of engagement both with their children and with the school, especially with the teachers, as a result of participation in the PIQE program.

## **MATERIALS FOR IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE FAMILIES**

*A Guide to Your Children's Schools: A Parent Handbook*, Adult Learning Resource Center, Des Plaines, IL (2002). Can be downloaded from the ISBE English Language learning web site at [www.isbe.net/bilingual](http://www.isbe.net/bilingual).

This handbook contains information for parents on the U.S. school system, enrolling in school, school procedures and parental involvement. Available in English, Arabic, Bosnian, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

*Parents as Educational Partners (PEP): A School-Related Curriculum for Language Minority Parents*, Laura Segal Bercovitz and Catherine Porter (1995). Adult Learning Resource Center, Des Plaines, IL, (847) 803-3535, [www.thecenterweb.org](http://www.thecenterweb.org).

This is a reproducible, multilevel curriculum designed to encourage ESL parents to take active roles in their children's education as well as increase their proficiency in English. The curriculum combines instruction about U.S. schools with participatory classroom techniques and includes numerous illustrations.

*Understanding American Schools: The Answers to Newcomers' Most Frequently Asked Questions*, Anne P. Copeland and Georgia Bennett (2001). The Interchange Institute, Brookline, MA, (617) 566-2227, [www.interchangeinstitute.org](http://www.interchangeinstitute.org).

This book is designed to help non-native parents choose schools and understand the U.S. school system.

New Learning Concepts, Inc., (800) 925-7853, [www.destinationlearn.net](http://www.destinationlearn.net)

This catalog of parent involvement products includes books, videos, and bilingual bookmarks for parents (English and Spanish).

The Center for Law and Education, (202) 462-7688

[www.cleweb.org/catalog.htm](http://www.cleweb.org/catalog.htm)

The School Improvement Catalog has resources such as *Urgent Message for Parents* and *Parents are Powerful* which contain information on topics such as parent rights, advocating for your child, and improving student achievement in English and Spanish.

## ERIC

[www.eric.ed.org/resources/parent/parent.html](http://www.eric.ed.org/resources/parent/parent.html)

This site has brochures for parents (many in Spanish) available in print or online on topics relating to the education of children.

## ERIC.EECE Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education

[www.ericcece.org/pubs/digests.html](http://www.ericcece.org/pubs/digests.html)

These are digests (short articles) on topics relating to schools, pre-schools, language learning and other education issues for teachers and parents. Many are available in Spanish.

## National PTA Education Resource Libraries

[www.pta.org/programs/edulibr.htm](http://www.pta.org/programs/edulibr.htm)

These are numerous short articles (many in Spanish) on parent involvement issues from early childhood education through high school.

## *Raising Children In Troubled Times.*

This set of 15 videos and facilitator guides (in English and Spanish) address general parenting topics and school-related topics including *Studying*, *Homework*, and *School Behavior*. American Guidance Service Publishing, (800) 328-2560, [www.agsnet.com](http://www.agsnet.com)

*Welcome to the United States: A Guidebook for Refugees*, prepared by the Center for Applied Linguistics, Refugee Service Center. These materials can be ordered by contacting the Center for Applied Linguistics at <http://www.cal.org>. This book and an accompanying video are being updated. A new version will be available in 2004.