

Engaging Diverse Families in Education: Lessons Learned

By Barb Ziemke, PACER Center Project Coordinator

PACER Center recently participated in a project with several urban school districts to increase effective engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse families, including a focus on families of children with disabilities.

Building on current research, and supported by parent focus group and school staff involvement, PACER Center staff advocates and multicultural specialists designed customized training and hands-on resources for families and educators. The project provided a unique opportunity for Parent Center staff to partner with local schools in family involvement and engagement efforts.

The following are some of the important lessons learned:

- Meaningful family engagement is highly dependent upon frequent, clear, and positive two-way communication. Many parents indicated they are confused by the use of educational jargon that is used by schools in communication with families. Educators are not always aware that families do not have access to or understand information that is provided.
- Schools that intentionally and proactively used parent-friendly, culturally competent strategies and materials to provide information and support to diverse families of students with disabilities had better family engagement activity outcomes, including higher rates of attendance and more active participation.
- Although there is an abundance of research regarding parent involvement and family engagement in general, the availability of research specific to particular cultural and linguistic groups varies widely. Research specific to families from diverse cultures who have a child with a disability is extremely limited. (See “Parent Involvement and Engagement with Families from Diverse Communities, Current Research Literature, 2007 to 2013,” www.pacer.org/cultural-diversity/research-literature.asp)
- The more divergent an educator’s culture is from the family’s culture, the more intentional they need to be in their interactions. Educators must actively seek to understand by asking questions and by welcoming, as well as responding to, feedback from the family.
- PACER’s focus group activity results indicated that parents and educators alike desire more meaningful family and school engagement. The following statements made by a Hmong parent and an educator at a diverse school are representative of the feedback received:
 - Educator: “We do care and want the family’s support. We cannot do it alone.”
 - Parent: “I am not sure about school expectations and the level of support for such engagement. I feel the school needs to provide encouragement and support for parent involvement.”
- A student with a disability is, first and foremost, a student who is a member of the school community. In order for diverse parents of students with disabilities to be meaningfully involved as a member of their child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, they must also receive help to understand “regular education.”
- Diverse parents need individualized support and communication provided in a language they understand. This will help them to engage more actively in activities that support their child’s academic performance and to become more informed decision makers about their child’s education.
- Schools may misinterpret a family’s lack of questions about their child’s educational progress as disinterest. However, families indicate that they do not know what questions to ask to get the information they need. Families and educators welcomed the availability of translated versions of practical tools, such as PACER’s IEP Meeting Parent Tip Cards and PACER’s School and Special Education Recordkeeping Folders (www.pacer.org/cultural-diversity/resources-for-parents.asp).
- There are many obstacles to family engagement and participation in meetings and activities for both

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schools and families. Some of the most frequently encountered obstacles are:

- o school staff turnover
 - o limited meeting space for activities scheduled during the school day
 - o lack of childcare or children's activities for students and siblings during sessions for parents
 - o limited number of school staff participating in evening activities
 - o lack of language interpreters and translated materials
 - o busy family and school schedules, and full school calendars
- o transportation issues, including parking limitations
 - o inclement weather
 - o cultural liaisons with other work assignments, which limits their time to work with families
- Advance planning from the school is necessary to consider the potential obstacles to family engagement, as well as how the school can remove some of the barriers. For example, a partner school used special funds to provide families evening bus transportation to an all-school event. Another school used cultural liaisons to make activity reminder calls to families and confirmed their needs for translated materials and interpretation.