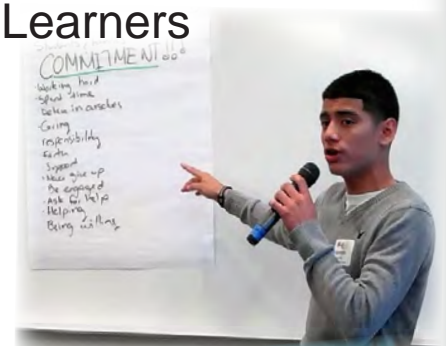


Strengthening Education for English Language Learners

The Bilingual Education Program at the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction hosted an event on June 4, 2011, at Highline Community College to gather recommendations to improve program implementation. Ninety-five participants attended representing the Arabic, Chinese, English, Korean, Nepali, Punjabi, Russian, Somali, Spanish and Vietnamese language groups.



Recommendations from parents, students and staff:

1. Improve communication with families.

"Lack of language prevents me from fully participating in my child's education." Parents expressed that language barriers make it difficult for them to attend school meetings and help with homework.

- **Translate written materials.**

Information is not always translated for language groups with a smaller student population. Parents asked that school calendars, announcements, flyers, and information about student progress be translated. Anything requiring a parent signature should be translated as otherwise parents may not know what they are signing.

- **Hire bilingual staff or provide qualified interpreters.**

Bilingual staff help parents and students feel comfortable at the school. Parents need a person who can speak their language to be available when they visit or call the school. Counselors who speak the home language can help both parents and students feel comfortable communicating with the school.

Students would like bilingual teachers and tutors who can help them learn to read and write their own language.

Parents want to get information directly from school staff. With an interpreter, parents can communicate with teachers without the student. They prefer that their children not be used as interpreters.

- **Increase communication between home and school.**

Parents asked for teachers to provide more frequent reports in the family's home language regarding their children's progress and any challenges they have. When available, parents appreciate the use of an auto dialer to call parents in their home language to notify them of things like school events, school closures and parent-teacher conferences.



Recommendations compiled by the Bilingual Education Program at the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, August 2011. For more information, contact 360-725-6147 or helen.malagon@k12.wa.us.

2. Provide bilingual education.

Families not only want their children to learn English but also to be proficient in their home language. The home language is an asset – students who are multilingual with multicultural backgrounds can be global workers.

“If I know how to speak two languages but can’t write or read them, I can’t help others very well.”

– Somali student

- **Value students’ home language.**

Parents and students shared that they were not encouraged to speak or keep learning their native languages and that teachers recommend that they communicate in English to improve.

Parents want their children to be proficient in both languages. They recognized many benefits, such as the ability to launch businesses all over the world, to develop personally and economically, to be well-connected and to have a better job. They also noted that the home language helps young people to integrate into their own community, to relate to others from their culture, to promote cultural values, to preserve culture, to help others from their own language group, to understand the feelings of different age groups, and to understand their own feelings.

- **Promote literacy in the home language.**

Students want teachers who can teach them how to read and write in their native languages. If this can’t happen in the classroom, recommendations included after-school programs to teach home language literacy skills, tutoring with native language support, or weekend programs offered by community-based organizations in the school to teach the home language.

Parents and students requested access to books and school materials in their native languages. Language groups with smaller concentrations shared that they see books about different cultures in the library, but not their own.

3. Understand and respect customs, holidays and cultures.

School staff should learn about the students that they serve and gain the skills to become culturally competent.

- **Learn about different cultures.**

Parents, students and staff shared things about their cultures they think educators should understand:

- Education in the country of origin may be very different and the education system of the native country needs to be considered.
- Hand signals vary between cultures and can be confusing or insulting for students.
- Eye contact is not acceptable for some cultures.
- Students may be too shy to speak out even when they are fluent in English. They may feel uncomfortable asking teachers questions.
- Some students prefer cooperative learning.
- Some groups may prefer not to engage in music or certain art activities but enjoy storytelling.
- Gender differences vary by culture.
- Some cultures cannot eat certain things, and parents recommended that staff hired to work in the lunch room understand this.



“Students and staff at schools need to have better understanding and respect of other cultures.”

– Iraqi parent

- **Respect holidays that students observe.**

Parents and students asked that holidays for each culture be shown on the school calendar. They recommended that meetings and tests not be scheduled on holidays and that students not have problems taking time off from school due to a religious holiday. Teachers and staff should know about cultural events and have respect for them.

- **Celebrate culture.**

Parents and students recommended that schools strengthen education through multicultural events. The school assembly provides an opportunity for students to share something about their culture with others. Parents want to be invited to participate in cultural events at the school and to learn about other cultures represented in the English language development program – to learn more about their children’s classmates.

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“Cultural events and celebrations at school make ESL students take pride in where they came from and feel included.”

– Chinese parent

4. Involve parents.

At school, parents want to:

- Be welcomed into the school.
- Take English classes and learn basic English spoken in the school setting.
- Take computer classes.
- Meet and exchange knowledge with principals, teachers and other ELL parents.
- Participate in meaningful and reciprocal discussions.
- Attend reading, math and science nights and open house.
- Share input to improve the English language development program.
- Attend classes with their children so that they have a further understanding of the education system and learn about teacher expectations.
- Participate in an inclusive PTA.
- Use space at the school to celebrate and share their holidays.
- Advocate for their children.
- Participate in trainings where family leaders train other parents.
- Attend programs and events to promote the diversity of cultures.
- Volunteer to come in and help students.
- Attend after-school and tutoring programs with their children to learn the material together.

When organizing an event for parents, schools should:

- Provide day care and transportation.
- Ask for parent input when planning the event.
- Provide interpreters and understand that English can be intimidating for parents.
- Consider work schedules when deciding on a date and time.
- Encourage parents to attend.

Parents want information about:

- The educational system in the US.
- The basics of learning a language.
- The rules in school.
- How they can help their children.
- The school's English language development program: how it works, what ELL students will be taught, what the WLPT II test is, what parents' rights are.
- The credit system. "What are the subjects my child will study and how does this affect graduation?"
- What their children are learning (reading, math – additional homework and problem-solving).
- How to use the internet to access grades and attendance.
- Drug prevention.
- Keeping kids in school.



At home, parents do many things to support education.

Parents and students reported that families supported their children's education by visiting libraries, listening to media, reading books and newspapers, socializing with English-speaking friends, providing a quiet place for homework, making sure students do homework and fulfill obligations, checking homework and attendance, asking questions about school, receiving home visits from school staff, helping their children to be ready for school by making sure they are on time and have all the necessary supplies, encouraging their children, sharing their feelings, and providing positive personal examples.

5. Continue improving education for English language learners.



English language development programs

- Offer summer school.
- Group and one-on-one tutoring in the home language.
- Provide buses for after-school programs.
- Provide more vigorous supports so that the students can join regular classes as soon as possible.
- Don't use tests for fluency that don't teach content or word usage.

Basic education

- Hire more qualified and trained staff to meet students' needs.
- Recognize that just because a student doesn't speak English well does not mean the student is not good in other subjects, such as math.
- Hire a volunteer coordinator to bring in volunteers to help teach students.
- Provide extra time for kids to do class work and homework.
- Make special accommodations in reading and writing for students who have not passed required tests.
- Don't require students to study another language other than their home language and English.
- Discipline with extra work. When a student is sent home, he may spend his time playing or watching TV.
- Continue doing things that work, such as hands-on activities, dialogues that are acted out, after-school activities, school sports and projects that involve all kinds of skills and talents.

