Family and Community Engagement

Communication with Families

Translation/Interpretation

Keywords: family, communication, community, EL families, engagement, involvement, translation, interpretation

What Is the Topic

Research shows that intentional and ongoing communication between educators and families of English Learners (ELs) provides and enhances support that is key for the success of these students. Family engagement refers to intentional and ongoing communication between educators and school leaders and families, aimed at providing additional support for the success of students. It involves creating opportunities for collaboration, sharing information, and fostering relationships. Family involvement, on the other hand, encompasses the active participation of families, such as attending parent-teacher conferences, participating in school events, assisting with homework, and engaging in conversations about student academic progress.

The content and resources presented in this brief offer educators and school leaders culturally responsive and practice-based recommendations that have been based on peer reviews and empirical research. The importance of family involvement in classrooms is evident, with documented positive impacts on students' academic proficiency, social skills, increased engagement, and reduced behavioral issues. Additionally, fostering consistent educator-family communication that is culturally responsive, as emphasized by Knight et al. (2022), creates opportunities for timely interventions and support. As educators and school leaders delve into the knowledge, strategies, and practices presented in this brief, it is crucial to remember a fundamental distinction: while many immigrants are English learners (ELs), not all ELs are immigrants. Understanding this nuance allows us to foster inclusive environments where every learner's unique background is acknowledged and celebrated. This understanding can help educators ensure that ELs and their families (regardless of their national origin) have access to information in their home language, such as enrollment-related information, parent conferences, and school services, like English Language Development (ELD) or special education. Translation and interpretation services for EL families also play a vital role in this process. These services involve assisting families in understanding written or spoken information, while also demonstrating to families that school systems value their native language.

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What Is the Evidence Base

Studies consistently demonstrate that when schools establish strategies to engage and communicate with EL families, they are more actively engaged in their children's education (Hoffman et al., 2021). Various scholars support the idea that communication should not only be linguistically accessible, but also culturally responsive (Phillips, Barnatt, and Viesca, 2023). Furthermore, tailoring communication to be more culturally responsive, leads to increased family involvement and a stronger sense of community. Building strong relationships between families and schools occurs over a period of time, and these relationships can be established and nurtured in numerous ways (Conteh and Riasat, 2014). The U.S. The Department of Justice outlines a fact sheet that addresses common questions about the rights of EL parents and guardians that can help educators and school leaders better navigate the frameworks and strategies discussed in this brief.

In addition to the Federal Title programs, the State of Oregon has various programs such as the Migrant Education Program (MEP), which can also serve as a guideline to ensure that ELs who are also migrant students have equal access to resources and opportunities. In general, strategic efforts on the part of districts and schools, such as the ones described in this brief, are likely to improve and increase communication strategies between EL families, educators, and the school.

The following frameworks and models can be effective in developing and strengthening relationships between schools and EL families:

1. **Funds of knowledge model**: It refers to the wealth of cultural, linguistic, and experiential knowledge that students bring with them from their homes and communities (Moll et al.,1992; Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, 1992). An elementary school in the State of Washington, for example, created a model called scholastic funds of knowledge that consists of four characteristics:
   - Connect with parents through home visits.
   - Develop a better understanding of the variety of funds of knowledge and skills situated within students' homes.
   - Learn about the demographic and academic characteristics of ELs and their families.
   - Apply students' out-of-school interests into classroom content.
   - A study conducted by Hoffman et al. (2021) presents a STEM family engagement model, which honors and grows out of EL families' funds of knowledge. Using this model, they organized a "Family STEM Night" event hosted at three elementary schools with high numbers of multilingual families. Recommendations grounded on the findings of this study include:
       - Support families in using their preferred language during STEM activities.
       - Promote engagement from educators and administrators in these events.
       - Discourage stereotypes or assumptions of English learners such as ELs are homogenous, they are all immigrants, their parents do not speak English, among others.
   - The U.S Department of Health and Human Services developed a set of eight strategies to reinforce the value of multilingualism when engaging with families. They also created a planned language-approach, focused on a research-based method for Head Start and

Early Head Start programs to provide effective language and literacy services for English-speaking and dual language learners.

2. **The Dual Capacity Framework** is a model for fostering family-school partnerships. It emphasizes the reciprocal nature of learning and growth between families and schools, with a focus on building the capacity of both families (parents, caregivers) and educators/school leaders to support student success. The U.S. Department of Education describes a set of recommendations (p.25) for using this framework, which include:

   ● Create opportunities for meaningful parent engagement in decision making processes within the school community (e.g., forming parent advisory groups or involvement in school improvement planning).
   ● Establish regular channels of communication with EL families in their preferred language, utilizing translation and interpretation services as needed.
   ● It is important for educators to spend time learning about the cultural and linguistic aspects of the families of ELs to determine which strategies work best.
   ● An important aspect of engaging families, parents, and caregivers of ELs is to build and sustain trust and a sense of belonging. Establishing a sense of belonging fosters an inclusive environment where families feel valued and respected, enhancing their willingness to engage with educators and participate actively in their children's education. Trust further solidifies this relationship, ensuring that families feel confident in the support provided by educators and school leaders leading to effective collaboration. For example, as a way to foster a sense of belonging, School District 49 in Colorado created a home visit program to support newcomer families navigating the school system.
   ● Language can be a barrier in communicating with families (Blair and Haneda, 2021). Effective communication requires bridging linguistic gaps, and making translation and interpretation services indispensable and a civil right (Blair and Haneda, 2021). Learning for Justice suggests that providing translation and interpretation support enhances the quality of communication between schools and families, leading to better understanding, trust, and engagement.

Summary

Review of relevant literature: Theoretical basis	Review of relevant literature: Support of identified research and practice	Empirical evidence on how it serves students and promotes systemic change
Funds of Knowledge: The wealth of cultural, linguistic, and experiential knowledge that students bring with them from their homes and communities.	Bridges the gap between students' home and school experiences (NWEA).	Communication methods such as school events and home visits promote linguistic diversity and cultural inclusivity.
Dual Capacity Framework: It helps create strategies and programs for involving families in schools. It fosters the creation of goals and conditions needed for effective family engagement and communication.	Promotes a more equitable and culturally responsive communication between schools and families of ELs (Baker et al., 2016).	Schools need to embrace systemic changes that prioritize cultural responsiveness and collaboration with families of ELs.

Translation and Interpretation: Enhances the quality of communication between schools and families, leading to better understanding, trust, and engagement.	Enhances communication between schools and families, helps overcome language barriers, and fosters understanding and engagement (COE).	Contribute to systemic change by fostering understanding, trust, and engagement between families and schools.

Equity Considerations

A survey conducted by the Migration Policy Institute in 2012 found that English learners constitute 9% of U.S. students. Extensive research has documented the multiple barriers that ELs and their families often experience within the U.S. educational system, such as unequal access to resources and tailored support services, linguistic barriers, and limited opportunities for academic advancement. These barriers are often rooted in systemic inequalities, and as shown in research, such disparities have hindered the academic opportunities for students and have made it difficult to develop effective communication strategies between EL families and schools (Blair and Haneda, 2021; Gelatt et al., 2014). Moreover, family concerns about cultural assimilation, preserving native language and identity, economic disparities, and immigration status often exacerbate these challenges (Callahan et al., 2009; López, 2014; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). To further understand how such factors impact EL families and students, it is important for educators and school leaders to recognize that all families have different experiences and realities, often based on intersecting cultural identities such as language, race, gender, socioeconomic and immigration status (Crenshaw, 1989; Gonzalez, 2018).

Example from the Field
In order to partner effectively with linguistically diverse families, teachers, schools, and education programs need to respond to both their strengths and the challenges they experience. https://around.uoregon.edu/content/coe-research-helps-bilingual-children-find-classroom-success

Below, we provide some examples of research that examines how the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of ELs and their families may impact the development and creation of effective communication between them and the schools:
- Research shows that linguistically diverse families (as a group) share many characteristics with mono-lingual English-speaking parents. At the same time, experiences of multilingual families may pose distinct opportunities as well as barriers for parent engagement.
- The Coalition of Essential Schools analyzed research and current best practices to support the engagement between linguistically diverse families and schools. Based on their findings, they suggest that educators consider the following:
  - Respect and acknowledge the uniqueness of the system of each family.
  - Develop and establish a personalized connection with families.
  - Learn about cultural responsiveness to communicate with families.
  - Evaluate process, objectives, and outcomes.

Considerations for Local Context: Strategy Selection

As we consider the optimal next steps for supporting educators to establish meaningful communication strategies with families of EL students, a valuable source of information lies in the local context of the

district and/or school. In this brief, by local context, we refer to the specific factors within the community that may impact the involvement of families in their children's education and that should be considered when choosing strategies to communicate with the families (Figure 1). As suggested by EdResearch for Action, if EL families are unfamiliar with the U.S. school system, then it may not be effective simply to provide them with a word-for-word translation of memos, emails, and other messages from the school. To fully understand those messages, family members may need more background information and explanations about the norms and routines of life in U.S. schools (everything from the need to sign permission slips to the purpose of parent-teacher conferences and the function of the school board).

To support educators and school leaders in developing and establishing communication practices that are responsible, ongoing, and culturally responsive, the questions below can serve as a guide:

- How can strong partnerships with student services staff be built to monitor the needs and progress of students requiring language services?
- What considerations should be made to respect the privacy of families in translation/interpretation services?
- What are the local demographics of U.S-born and foreign-born EL families and what are the possible barriers that influence their engagement with education programs?
- In addressing mental health, emotional, and social support needs, what specific areas does the data indicate as requiring attention?

We also recommend checking the Oregon Department of Education Community Engagement Toolkit. A section that describes levels of community engagement (p.8) might be useful for educators and school leaders to consider when planning family and community engagement activities.

We encourage educators and also school leaders to familiarize themselves with the characteristics of their school communities and programs offered within their schools, as school districts may offer different resources like programs or other initiatives aimed at fostering family and community engagement, for example Portland Public Schools (PPS) and Canby School District offer some initiatives, such as providing information in different languages.
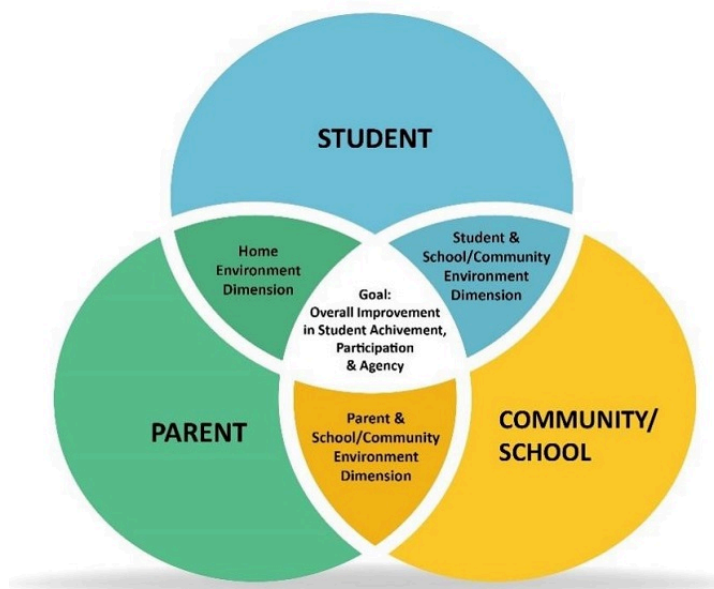
Figure 1. Factors for Local Context

What Can Educators and School Leaders Do: Strategies for Success

While educators are engaging students in ways to make their content comprehensible and relevant to their students, it is equally important to engage families to ensure that they are included, valued, and heard when it comes to their children's education (Morita-Mullaney et al., 2019). The strategies below serve as examples of potential options rather than a definitive set of recommendations. Suitable approaches could support and key in on various factors associated with the school or district, such as the level of engagement the district already has with families of ELs and what programs or initiatives are already in place. The resources below can provide educators with a better understanding of how to identify, adapt, and implement strategies according to the demographics and backgrounds of their families and students.

- When looking at areas of improving communication with families of ELs, a place to start could be the National Education Association's four methods of communication, which include:
  - Find families' contact information.
  - Help families keep their contact information updated.
  - Ensure that families know how to contact you or the school.
  - Find out how families prefer to communicate.
- When considering what is and what is not appropriate to do when interacting with families, one may consider the Learning for Justice's dos and don'ts of communicating with families of ELs. These include:
  - Be clear about the purpose of meetings with the parents.
  - Be mindful of the potential power dynamics (p.13) between parents and educators, and school leaders.
  - Provide a translator if you don't speak the parents' primary language fluently.
  - Do not use the student as the translator.
  - Do not assume that any multilingual adult will be a successful translator.

- Another resource to consider is the Family Engagement Assessment Tool (Figure 2). This tool evaluates educators' practices based on four domains interconnected through asset-based beliefs which forms the foundation for effective family engagement and communication. For instance, Kea et al. (2023) showcase a practical demonstration of how educators and schools can establish partnerships with linguistically diverse families using components of the model in Figure 2. Kea et al. (2023) emphasize the implementation of four key strategies for impactful family engagement, namely building relationships and trust, effective communication, embracing cultural diversity, and fostering collaboration and partnerships. This tool can be helpful for educators to assess activities like home visits, welcome calls, and school events.
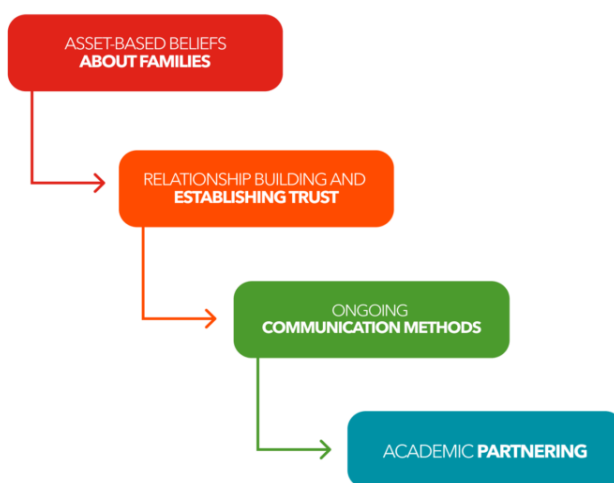

Figure 2. Flamboyan Foundation's Assessment Tool

Below are potential strategies to assist educators and school leaders in establishing meaningful, culturally responsive, and ongoing communication with families of ELs.

Strategy 1: Planning a Homevisit

Primary audience: educators and school staff

Description: Home visits are proven to be critical in building relationships with ELs and their families. Using this strategy provides essential insights into students' home lives, supporting academic progress and socio-cultural integration. Linked to improved attendance and academic outcomes, these visits also establish trust as a foundation for school-based parent engagement (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002).

How to use it: Begin by scheduling visits in advance to ensure the family is prepared. An appropriate length for a visit is typically 30-60 minutes, allowing ample time for meaningful conversation without overstaying. If a language barrier exists, find information about translation and interpretation services available in your district that you can use to facilitate communication. Also, be mindful of non-verbal communication, such as body language and visuals (e.g., posters, cards, iPads, etc.). Approach the visit with cultural responsiveness, honoring the family's native language, customs, and traditions.

How is it beneficial and who benefits from it? Home visits are beneficial as they establish strong connections with families and foster trust and understanding. This benefits both students and parents, and educators, as these connections improve student success.

How does it support changes in the systems? This strategy promotes systemic changes by fostering more inclusive and linguistic cultural awareness in educators. Home visits also help break down communication barriers, promoting a sense of belonging and trust.

Known or potential cautions? What not to do? Educators must reflect on their own identities, how they can be perceived by students and families, and the bias they hold to avoid inappropriate assumptions, stereotypes, and judgments. Educators should refrain from making promises they cannot keep.

Strategy 2: Using Translation and Interpretation Resources

Primary audience: families, educators, school leaders, and students

Description: The goal of using these resources is to ensure meaningful communication with parents. First, educators, administrators, and school staff should be aware that families of ELs have the right to access information in their home language (consider reading the dear colleague letter). Besides the services of translation and interpretation that may be available in the districts, there are also online tools that could be considered such as translation apps that might help establish better communication with parents**.**

How is it beneficial and who benefits from it? This strategy benefits not only EL families but also educators, school leaders, and students, as it helps to foster stronger partnerships, leading to increased engagement and involvement that ultimately can improve academic outcomes of the students.

How does it support changes in the systems? By prioritizing language access and equity in communication practices, schools contribute to broader systemic changes aimed at dismantling language barriers and addressing disparities in educational outcomes for EL students.

How to use these resources? To implement translation/interpretation resources, educators should first familiarize themselves with available translation services in the district. Also, it is recommendable to have pre-meeting discussions with interpreters, addressing concerns and cultural factors to ensure a smooth communication process during family meetings. When considering using translation apps, make sure to:

- Assess the app's reliability in accurately translating messages to and from the home language.
- Verify if the app utilizes a combination of artificial intelligence and human translators for precise translations.
- Consider the accessibility of the app for both educators and families, ensuring ease of download and use on various devices.
- Evaluate the app's ability to handle multiple languages spoken within the district.

Known or potential cautions? What not to do?

It is essential to avoid relying solely on automated translation tools without human oversight, as these may inaccurately convey nuanced meanings or cultural contexts. Additionally, educators should refrain from assuming homogeneity within language groups and should instead seek to understand the specific linguistic and cultural needs of each family. Also, keep in mind that some translation software produces inaccurate translations and/or language that is not known to native speakers.

Strategy 3: Finding Families' Preferred Method(s) of Communication
Primary audience: families, educators, school staff, and administrators
Description: This strategy involves identifying and respecting the diverse communication preferences of families of ELs. This approach emphasizes the importance of considering sociocultural aspects and individual preferences of the families, while being mindful of potential challenges, such as technological barriers and privacy concerns (Hooks, 2008).
How to use it? Educators can conduct surveys, direct conversations, or observe existing communication patterns. It is crucial to consider diverse needs, assist with access to devices and the internet, and respect privacy concerns. Communication methods should align with the preferences of each family. Preferred methods of communication could include:
- Phone Calls: Begin with a call using an accessible platform, especially for families without internet access; however, be mindful that some may not answer while at work.
- Texts: Some families may prefer text communication, allowing for convenient responses. Consider using WhatsApp, a platform commonly used by EL families in group texting.
- Social Media: Schools successfully use social media like Facebook for effective communication with EL families, providing multilingual updates and messages.
- Email and Online Communication: Emails and newsletters may not be effective for EL families. If no responses are received, consider calling or texting, and explore alternatives like video chats, surveys, or sharing online learning resources.

How is it beneficial? Who benefits from it? Educators, family, and students. Educators can gain valuable insights into preferred communication channels and timings, enabling more targeted and meaningful interactions. Families, in turn, feel valued and included in their children's education.
How does it support changes in the systems? This strategy aligns with broader efforts to create equitable and culturally responsive educational systems. It can also promote change towards more diverse and personalized communication practices.
Known or potential cautions? What not to do? Be mindful of district policies on student privacy and online communication with parents. Try not to overwhelm families with too many questions, especially if there is hesitation to share personal information.

Implementation Considerations

As we embark on creating a plan and proceeding with implementation, it is useful to consider topic-specific aspects as well as general factors and guiding questions that can increase the likelihood for successful implementation. The Oregon Department of Education offers critical information to support engaging the community in school decision making under the integrated needs assessment tools (p. 113). Also, consider answering the following questions as educators and school leaders develop plans to enhance communication with EL families and implement strategies to improve interpretation and translation:
- What do we know about linguistically diverse families and how parents in these families support their children's learning development and academic success?

- How can schools and districts ensure the accuracy and reliability of translated materials and interpreted communications to ensure that EL families receive correct and relevant information?
- What resources and funding opportunities are available for schools to invest in comprehensive translation and interpretation services?
- Considering diverse family backgrounds, what barriers may arise and how can educators address these barriers to foster inclusive school-family relationships?
- What strategies can educators use to identify families' preferred methods of communication, and how can these strategies benefit both educators and families in creating inclusive school-family relationships?

Local Context

- How does the local context influence the engagement of ELs and their families, considering factors like transportation, time constraints, and the sociopolitical environment of the community?
- To what extent is the implementation plan sensitive to the unique local challenges and opportunities in promoting engagement with multilingual and EL families?
  - Is the plan to elevate the voices of ELs and their families reliable and realistic in the long term?
  - What measures are in place to ensure the sustainability of the plan over time within schools and across the district?
  - How consistent is the implementation of the plan—both within individual schools and across the entire district—in fostering ongoing engagement with ELs and their families?

Also consider:
- Geographical Factors:How do the location and size of the district/school impact the practical aspects of plan implementation?
- Learning Mode: What considerations are needed based on the learning mode (in person/remote/hybrid/other) prevalent in the local context?
- Duration: How long is the plan designed to last, and what measures are in place for its continuous effectiveness?
- Reliability: Is the implementation plan reliable and realistic given the local context, and what factors contribute to its sustainability?

Implementation Plan and Process

The following questions and answers grounded in empirical research can further enhance clarity and provide practical guidance for educators and school leaders as they navigate the implementation process and monitor progress effectively.
- **What is our capacity for implementation?**

The implementation of the different strategies discussed in this brief may require strategic approaches to effectively engage families and ensure successful buy-in. For example, Porter et al. (2023) and

DeNicolo (2016) suggest that an information campaign has the potential to connect with families by providing comprehensive details on the program's structure and benefits of the strategies presented.

- **How are families involved in the implementation of the plan?**

Soliciting input from families regarding program design and implementation will enhance their involvement and ownership. The capacity of educators and school leaders for implementation relies on the commitment and the level of buy-in from stakeholders. Educating parents on how they can support their students outside of school, such as encouraging language practice at home or attending bilingual literacy workshops, enhances family engagement and involvement (Lillie et al., 2012).

- **How will we know if the implementation is successful?**

To gauge the success of implementation, DeNicolo (2016) recommends monitoring various indicators, including student academic progress, family engagement levels, and program satisfaction surveys. Regular assessments and feedback mechanisms will inform adjustments and improvements, ensuring that the implemented strategies effectively meet the needs of ELs and their families.

- **What resources do we need to implement the program, plan, or strategies?**

During the implementation phase, various costs may arise, including expenses for additional professional development, materials, and administrative support (Lara-Alecio et al., 2010). Understanding these financial implications is crucial for effective resource allocation and program sustainability. These resources may include funding for interpreters, culturally relevant materials, professional development for staff, and outreach efforts to engage families. Research by Henderson and Mapp (2002) emphasizes the importance of allocating sufficient resources and support for family involvement initiatives to ensure their effectiveness. While funding may not always be readily available within school budgets, educators and school leaders can explore external funding opportunities. For instance, Oregon's Department of Education offers grants and funding opportunities, and organizations like the Spencer Foundation may provide additional financial support. Additionally, fostering financial stewardship and involving District Equity Committees in the budgeting process can help prioritize resources based on student and community needs. Also consider the Oregon Department of Education's Guideline to spending funds responsibly.

- **Are accessibility supports in place?**

Ensuring accessibility supports involves providing user-friendly platforms for both educators and families to access these services. For instance, educators can ensure that translation apps or online platforms are compatible with various devices and operating systems commonly used by families, such as smartphones and tablets. Additionally, offering training or tutorials on how to download and use these resources can help overcome potential barriers related to digital literacy.

Learn More

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