

SECTION IV

WORKING WITH FAMILIES

In most of our schools, a majority of our volunteers are family members. Families continue to be the most accessible and willing group of prospective volunteers because we already have contact with them. They also have an automatic investment in helping the school succeed in educating their children.

However, that investment does not always translate into action. Some schools find it particularly challenging to engage families. At the same time, our schools are looking more and more to families as partners in educating our students. We are recognizing that our children are learning all of the time, not just at school, and it is important that families are able to support what is happening at school. It is also important that schools support what is happening at home. Below and in the following pages are some suggestions for involving families as volunteers.

❖ **Help your school involve families in more effective ways**

There are a wide variety of ways that your school is and should be engaging families, not just as volunteers.

- Visit the Family Partnerships Project website for ideas on involving families in a variety of effective ways.
<http://www.seattleschools.org/area/fam/index.dxml>
- Network with the PTA, other parent groups and the Building Leadership Team to collaborate and share ideas.
- Find out what your school's policies or goals are in the area of family involvement and tailor your programs to compliment those goals.

❖ **Build relationships before you ask for something**

People are much more willing to be involved and help out when they know and trust the person who is asking them. Schools often send generic letters out to all the families and hope for an adequate response to their requests for help.

- Invite families to events and help them feel a part of the school before you expect their assistance with something.
- ***Work with others at the school to identify those groups of families that are not traditionally involved and find ways to involve them.***
- Many families need assistance to understand the school culture and need special encouragement to be involved.



❖ **Offer them resources**

You most likely have access to a variety of information that can be helpful to families. Your role will also likely make you aware of some common needs for information.

- Help your school find effective avenues for communication with all families.
- Copy or refer families to helpful resources like homework tips on the Internet.

❖ **Find interesting and fun ways for them to volunteer**

There are a number of traditional roles for parents that we see in many schools—PTA, Room Parents, Field Trip Chaperones, etc. These roles may be important and engaging in your school, but it is clear the opportunities for family involvement are much more broad than these traditional roles.

- Identify a variety of opportunities for families to be involved as volunteers, including those that allow parents to work together, work at home and those that directly involve helping their child's class. If possible identify some appropriate roles for parents caring for younger children.
- Make it fun, at least some of the time. Helping out can be fulfilling enough, but families will return and encourage others to take part when they are having a good time.

❖ **Frame things positively**

It is important that we build and maintain confidence for families in what is happening at school. You can help emphasize the important programs and progress your school is making.

- Find your own ways of feeling good about your school. Be an advocate for your programs.
- Tell people about the impact of their work in student achievement.

❖ **Give them credit for what they do**

We might not see some families at school, but they are still supporting their child's education. Most families are involved with supporting their child's learning in a variety of ways, many of which we do not experience personally. Many families trust our teachers and staff to care for their children. In that same way, we need to trust the families in doing what they do, and recognize the value of their efforts.



Ideas for Involving Parents

From Seattle Schools Volunteer Coordinator Meeting 2/5/02

- ✧ Volunteer Interest Sheets that go home to all families at the beginning of the year asking to please sign up to volunteer, what their preferences would be, etc. Then that info can be collected and put into a database.
(Always follow up if they say they can volunteer)
- ✧ Room parents can recruit other parents, be the head of communication for the classroom, do things others don't volunteer for, run auction, get drivers for field trips, etc.
- ✧ Make sure the climate of the school welcomes parent volunteers. Make sure parents have something to do and are treated like partners and colleagues. Encourage parents to come up with their own ideas and are included in every part of the school.
- ✧ The welcoming atmosphere has to come from everyone in the school, from the principal on down.
- ✧ VCs should keep abreast of teacher's needs and how much participation they want
- ✧ Some schools have clearly stated expectations that parents will volunteer in the school for a certain number of hours (i.e. 15-30 hours.) Clearly define what is meant by volunteering. (i.e. for some schools, reading with your child at home counts)
- ✧ Create a directory of parents who would be willing to be contacted to volunteer
- ✧ Create a web site with forms, ways to record hours, etc.
- ✧ Keep PTA always in the loop
- ✧ Use phone trees

- ✧ Hold family dinners that focus on various school cultures.
- ✧ Hold quarterly meetings in the neighborhoods of your students and offer transportation, lunch, childcare, interpreters, etc. Offer video tapes, "how to help your children with homework", break into language groups, give educational games to take home.
- ✧ Make sure parent involvement is provided in a variety of different ways. Don't limit partnerships with parents.
- ✧ Send 1 weekly packet (not every day random flyers) with volunteer opps/school info.
- ✧ Do things after school hours to involve more parents. I.e. stuff envelopes in the evening, provide food and childcare.
- ✧ Have a bake sale. Gives families a chance to participate in some way and feel that they are doing something—makes them feel connected.
- ✧ Have a rummage sale. Helps families feel connected and also provides visibility in the community.
- ✧ Have a Saturday weeding party—make a garden.
- ✧ Develop school traditions.



For Parents Who Work...They Do Have Time!

Coming to school to help can be time consuming and while families may wish to participate more, their schedules often do not allow them to do so. Most of the work done in schools continues to happen during the school day when many families have other commitments like caring for younger children or working. And while some families understandably have little to no time in their schedules to volunteer, others are simply not informed about the various ways they can contribute in ways that would meet their schedule needs.

As we move toward more effective partnerships between families and schools, schools should continue to offer involvement opportunities for the families that find it challenging to come to school and volunteer in more traditional roles. While we need to have families help in ways that are truly beneficial to the school, simply having families participating can be a beneficial to creating a welcoming and supportive relationship between school and home. We encourage you to work with others to identify positive involvement opportunities for families that are hesitant or unable to commit to a regular volunteer role. Below are some examples that may be helpful to your school.

- ❖ Establish volunteer roles that can be done at home like developing instructional material, sewing costumes, fixing furniture or equipment, mending books, translating materials.
- ❖ Organize career days for working parents to talk about their jobs. Or ask them to host field trips to their work places.
- ❖ Encourage family members to take one day off a year to drive for a field trip or assist with another event. Inform them of other opportunities, but respect their commitment to that one day.
- ❖ Invite parents to special evening or weekend events with their children.
- ❖ Establish Internet Research Teams to find information for teachers and students.
- ❖ Organize a phone tree to communicate upcoming needs and activities. Have families work on the school newsletter.
- ❖ Establish a short list of business that parents can contact for donations or participation. Have them collect materials at home.



Working with Bilingual Families

Note for Volunteer Coordinators: One of your responsibilities will be engaging the families of our bilingual students. Below are some general ideas that schools should be working toward. In your role as Volunteer Coordinator, **you should be just one of the people helping your school make these positive connections.** Our efforts must be broader than simply bringing them in to help out at school.

Toward the end of this section you will find a few specific tips on involving bilingual student families as volunteers. The last part of this section will offer some valuable information on communicating and translating information for bilingual families.

Involving bilingual families in schools requires research, thoughtful planning, and commitment from the school staff. In addition to language barriers, many families from other countries are unfamiliar with how our school system works, and expectations for family involvement with school.

Parent groups existing in the school and community agencies should partner with the school for this endeavor. Involvement practices and activities should be integrated into the school system until they become part of the school culture and philosophy.

❖ Learn about the families

School staff (and PTA's) should start by finding out exactly which nationalities and languages, and the number of families from each culture, are represented at the school. This is important information when considering cultural specific programs, translation, and interpretation. This information can be easily found through the Seattle Public Schools Student Information System.

NOTE: The ESL student enrollment list is not a reliable indicator of how many bilingual families are a part of the school. Some bilingual children might not be in this program.

Develop a general profile of your school families: Do both parents work? Are they apartment dwellers or public housing dwellers? Is public transportation available from their homes to the school? Are they families with young children? Which neighborhoods do they come from? Etc.



❖ **Assess the needs of families**

Asking families what they need and how they want to be connected with the school is very important before planning involvement programs. School staff can partner with PTAs or other parent groups to gather this information. Input can be obtained via:

- Home visits (with interpreters)
- Translated short surveys
- Phone calls using a short questionnaire by interpreters
- Culture specific Focus groups – meet with parents of the same culture to discuss their involvement in their children’s education. Use an interpreter as needed
- Parent-teacher meetings with an interpreter

❖ **Establish relationships with the families**

Initial impressions are important. Efforts that the schools make to reach out to families when they first enroll will be recognized and valued. When families visit the school, they should feel welcomed. Staff should be familiar with assisting and including people who look and dress differently, and who may have difficulty speaking English. Welcome signs in translated into multiple languages are a positive first impression.

School staff should partner with bilingual parents from different cultures to offer culturally relevant events. Parents can help plan the event and contribute stories, music, ethnic dresses, decorations, food or whatever they can. Make sure that their contributions are not a financial burden to them.

Event planning helps families familiarize themselves with the school and staff. Since social events are usually well attended, these are also excellent opportunities to provide an **educational component** i.e. short presentations about school programs, parent-teacher conferences, PTA, parenting skills, family literacy, nutrition, etc. For better attendance, send translated invitations and schedule at least two phone reminders in their native language before the event. Examples of cultural events that could be planned by parents are:

- Multicultural celebration/dinner
- Cinco de Mayo or Dia de los Muertos Mexican celebrations
- Chinese New Year or a secular holiday from other cultures
- Cultural Heritage night
- Ethnic musical performances
- World history/geography night
- Cultural fair
- American secular Holiday celebrations for bilingual families– Halloween, Valentine’s day, Thanksgiving
- Songs and games from around the world

Helping arrange transportation to these events will be very helpful to the families.



❖ Offer relevant services or access to services

The national trend for schools with large bilingual student enrollment is to transform themselves into full-service schools to meet the needs of students and their families. As families become connected to the school building through the services they receive, they are more likely to participate in school activities (parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings, classroom activities, etc.), understand the school system and get to know and be known by the school staff. Examples of services:

- Parenting classes- Raising children in America
- On-site health, social services, counseling, and adult education (ESL, GED)
- Bilingual family reading night
- Bilingual books available in the library
- Cooking classes (American food, consumer education)
- Family computer skills
- Affordable or free after-school programs with homework assistance
- Parent Involvement and leadership classes
- Immigration and citizenship classes
- Job and career information
- Housing, food and clothing bank information

❖ Staff Collaboration

Collaboration between the Bilingual Instructional Staff, the Volunteer Coordinator, the Family Support Worker, the Family Partnerships Coordinator, the Home-School Coordinator, PTA officers and other staff members who regularly communicate with and involve families is important to avoid confusion and duplication of efforts.

Bilingual Families and Volunteering

As with other families in your school, as you deepen connections with bilingual families their involvement with school will likely increase. Keep in mind that volunteering may not be a part of many bilingual families. Here are a few suggestions specific to involving bilingual families as volunteers:

- ❖ Identify volunteer roles that do not depend heavily on English language skills.
- ❖ Involve groups of families that speak the same language and find ways to integrate their activities with other family volunteers.
- ❖ Children should experience and value parents helping at school.
- ❖ Many of our bilingual families have younger children that are not in school. Identify appropriate and helpful tasks they can help with while caring for their younger children. Or help connect them with childcare on an occasional basis so they can help at school.
- ❖ Create and translate a handout that briefly explains some of the things they should know about working at the school, what their role is, who to communicate with, and thank them for being involved.

Communication and Translation

Making sure all families receive and understand school information is a particular challenge with bilingual families. Some useful practices:

- ❖ Translate as many communications as possible, but recognize that not all families are literate in their first language. Video and audio recordings are good alternative ideas.
- ❖ Remember to translate “culturally.” Some words and concepts do not readily translate into other languages. Make sure the ideas that you want to communicate translate in an effective way.
- ❖ Personal contact by someone who speaks their native language is most effective.
- ❖ Avoid using children as interpreters, especially for their own parents. It can upset the parent/child relationship by shifting authority and respect away from parents.
- ❖ Work with the bilingual staff, and community organizations that serve different ethnic communities, to identify effective ways to communicate with your families.
- ❖ When appropriate, use written communications that require a response. This can help identify families that may not be receiving or understanding the information.
- ❖ Have interpreters available at all-school events.
- ❖ Gatherings including simultaneous interpreting should be structured strategically.
 - Clearly identify where people should sit for different languages.
 - Make sure the main presenter speaks clearly, pauses frequently and offers concise information in ways that make translation easier.
 - Participants should know that several people may be talking at the same time.

