

9 Ways to Effectively Engage ELL Families

As schools implement and utilize more technology solutions, challenges surface in reaching English Language Learner (ELL) families.

Some ELL families may feel apprehensive about getting involved because of their limited English skills, lack of exposure to technology, or their unfamiliarity with mainstream culture and the public school system in the United States. However, it is important that schools understand and make efforts to include ELL parents as they bring a level of dedication regarding their commitment to the school community.

Below are nine ways to identify the barriers to reaching ELLs around technology, and increase the likelihood of their participation in school communities.



Part 1: Laying the Foundation

#1 | CREATE A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

How welcoming is your school environment for ELL families? When an ELL family walks into your office, how many bilingual staff do you have there? Do you have some bilingual greeters in the morning? Is school information being translated at the school and class level?

Face to face communication becomes an important cultural factor in helping ELL families understand the technology being used at the school and class level. Some schools have a paid or volunteer bilingual parent coordinator who becomes a trusted resource that parents feel comfortable asking questions and expressing concerns to. Coffee with the principal, ELL home meetings, and translators for school meetings encourage this dialogue with ELL families.



Kickstart conversations with ELL families by providing a bilingual translator who helps encourage participation.

These added measures go a long way to ensure ELL families that they are a valued part of your school community and helps them get accustomed to all channels of school communication.

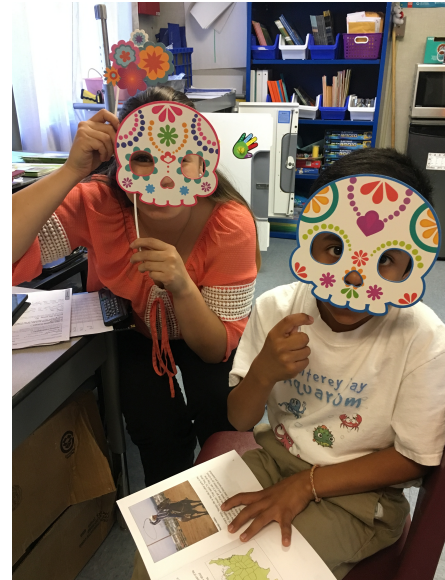
- Bilingual parent coordinator
- ELL home meetings
- Translators for school meetings

#2 | INTEGRATE CULTURE IN CLASSROOMS AND AT SCHOOL

Help ELL families feel welcome by integrating cultural dimensions into your school community. Creating a welcoming cultural environment helps ELL families feel more respected and connected. Do your ELL families feel comfortable at your

at your school? Do the pictures and artwork in the office and in classrooms accurately represent them? When families see more cultural integrations, whether it be a picture on the wall or a flag from their country, they feel like a valued member of the community. Do your teachers integrate cultural history and holidays in lesson plans? Integrated cultural lesson plans are great for students to learn cultures of all types and to share with their parents that the school really cares and respects every culture.

- Display pictures and artwork that represents diversity
- Integrate cultural history and holidays in lesson plans
- Display maps and flags from your students' native countries



Create a welcoming cultural environment to help ELL families feel more respected and connected!





Part 2: Addressing Barriers

#3 | INCLUDE ELL FAMILIES WITH NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Schools and districts are implementing new technologies all the time. Often ELL families are not included in the conversation when new technology is introduced. ELL families need to understand the value this technology will bring to their child or family before they may be willing to cross the technology gap that sometimes exists. When schools or districts roll out new technology whether it is a communication portal or an iPad program, email logins and mandatory registration become barriers with ELL families.

Many ELL families may not have an email or a computer, but we see that most families have a smartphone. Hence, along with email notifications, try to use text messages and app notifications for parent communication.



Anytime a new technology is rolled out, provide a bilingual coordinator who can help walk ELL families through the process of signing up and logging in. Back to school nights and open house are a great opportunity for teachers to set up displays in home language and help parents with

downloading the app and logging in. Registration that requires an email becomes a barrier.

Provide a bilingual coordinator who can help families through the process of signing up/logging in when new technologies are introduced.

- Adopt technology that allows use of smart phones instead of computers, and cell number instead of email
- Educate families about the value the technology will bring to the child
- Use displays in home language at back to school night to encourage registration when adopting new technology

#4 | MANAGE CHANGING CONTACT DATA

A big challenge facing schools is that contact information for ELL families tends to change more often.

Schools with migrant communities often have parents with disposable cell phone numbers and no email communication is possible. As a result, emergency cards and Student Information Systems (SIS) are populated with faulty contact information with no way for families to keep it updated.

Real-time visibility into parent reach and notification delivery reports become critical in finding out parents you are not able to reach

and keeping that information up-to-date. This helps in reaching all your parents, especially in case of a school emergency. Bilingual staff who can contact parents based on notification delivery failures and update their information increases parent reach. Regularly check delivery reports from communication system and ensure 100% reach.

- Delegate an administrative staff member to keep contact data up-to-date
- Keep parents informed about easy avenues to notify the school of changed contact info

Regularly check delivery reports and designate a staff to help keep family contact data up-to-date.



Part 3: Parent Communication and Feedback

#5 | FIND THE BEST WAYS TO COMMUNICATE WITH ELL PARENTS

One of the greatest challenges for schools and ELL families is communication. Remember, parents do want to know what's happening to their child, even if they haven't been able to communicate that to you.

Encourage teachers to regularly send messages home about students' learning and share pictures

and student work. This makes for the perfect for keeping the classroom conversation alive at home.

At the next back to school night or parent meeting, take a quick survey on what devices parents have access to, what communication methods they prefer and the languages they can read and write. We see that texts and app notifications in home language work best with ELL parent communication.

- Take a survey to see how ELL parents like to be communicated to
- Encourage teachers to regularly communicate with families
- Give teachers access to ways they can send messages in home language



Communicate with parents in the way they prefer and languages they can read and write in. (We see that **text & app notifications work best!**)

#6 | PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTS TO COMMUNICATE BACK

Feedback and having a channel of communication back into the school is critical to serving ELL families. Without feedback, assumptions can be made about ELL families and what their needs are.

Administrators often send surveys electronically to parents, but families who do not have a computer are not able to complete these surveys.

Giving families access to these electronic surveys at a parent/teacher conference in their home language increases their completion and provides valuable information.



Bilingual staff attending ELL parent meetings at school is one of the most effective ways to connect with families and hear concerns or challenges.

Bilingual suggestion boxes around school have also been effective in providing anonymous and honest feedback.

Often times, robo-calls will go home and teachers will send home flyers and newsletters to inform parents on events, activities, or student progress but seldom do parents have the opportunities to communicate back.

Although website announcements are great, ELL parents will hardly ever go online to pull information, so pushing information to them in the way and language that makes the most sense for them will help them be more engaged.

- Give families access to electronic surveys at parent/teacher conferences
- Ask bilingual staff to connect with parents at parent meetings
- Open up two way communication
- Push information to parents or give them an easy way to access school-related information

Provide opportunities for parents to communicate back for any message you send home.

#7 | SEEK VOLUNTEERING AND PARTICIPATION

The jump from parent reach to parent engagement for many schools is difficult. Encouraging bilingual leadership increases this parent engagement piece that schools are striving for. ELL parents are often underrepresented in leadership roles on school campuses. Seek and engage ELL parent leaders at school.

leadership increases this parent engagement piece that schools are striving for. ELL parents are often underrepresented in leadership roles on school campuses. Seek and engage ELL parent leaders at school.

Volunteering from ELL families helps improve their student's perception of school and promotes a positive learning environment.



However, volunteer sign-ups are often in English using some form of technology.

Allowing for manual sign-ups facilitated by bilingual leaders or using technology with translation capability goes a long way in harnessing this parent group. Flexible volunteer opportunities outside of working hours also pulls in this demographic with weekend and take home projects.

- Encourage bilingual leadership
- Offer flexible hours for volunteering and provide take-home projects

***Surprise Challenge*:**

Seek and get at least two ELL parents to take a leadership role

#8 | FORM TECHNOLOGY FOCUS GROUPS

Small focus groups that walk ELL parents through the technology used at school goes a long way in getting buy-in and helping families cross any



Hands on exposure to classroom math or reading programs help parents feel more comfortable guiding their children at home and encourages school to home connection, an important factor in

student achievement. Bilingual school leaders can conduct regular ELL group meetings to help ELL parents with technology. Meetings should be held before school or in the evening to help provide avenues for families who cannot attend during regular work hours. Classroom teachers can also serve in this role in explaining the classroom technologies used and the educational benefits that they provide.

- Form technology focus groups for ELL families
- Provide hands on exposure to classroom programs

Walk ELL families through technologies used at school to help them feel more comfortable guiding their children at home.



Part #4: Community Partnerships

#9 | TAKE ADVANTAGE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Community partnerships are a great way to close the technology gap for ELLs. County or city computer programs provide families with refurbished computers, laptops and routers. Often these programs offer classes at the school sites to help families become more familiar with basic computer skills. Low cost internet services may also be included in city and county technology programs.

Local libraries, community centers and adult education programs frequently host free or low cost computer classes with bilingual staff that schools could refer families to.

Tech savvy board members or parents might also be willing to lend a hand in walking ELL families through some computer basics. It takes a village!




- Partner with agencies that provide free or low cost internet and computer to homes
- Inform ELL families about local community resources that provide technology access and learning programs

Work with your PTA to reach out to the local community. You will be surprised at how they'll be able to help!

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, technology barriers can keep ELL families from participating in school communities. Understanding the barriers that exist is the first step to addressing these concerns.

About ParentSquare

 **ParentSquare** an award winning company focused on helping administrators build a positive and supportive school community. ParentSquare simplifies communication by bringing together all communication and parent engagement solutions under one platform.

ParentSquare specializes in:

- Bringing all parent tools under one intuitive platform
- Engaging low-tech, low-income and ELL families
- Boosting parent participation when you need donations, supplies or volunteers

Learn more about ParentSquare here:

<https://www.parentsquare.com/>

Or visit the blog for similar articles:

<http://blog.parentsquare.com/>

Interested in learning more?

Contact us:

P: 888.496.3168

E: schools@parentsquare.com