



School readiness for parents

Classes help immigrant parents prepare for the U.S. school system

BY CECELIA LEONG

When Maricela Parga's second grader said he didn't want to go to school because he was afraid of the teacher, Parga asked the teacher to "take a less harsh approach" with her son. Her request was ignored. But her son "was crying a lot," says Parga, an immigrant from Mexico. So she asked for a meeting with the principal. Weeks went by. Finally, Parga called the school and threatened, "If you don't give me an appointment, I'm going to the district."

"I realized I needed someone to show me how the education system works," Parga remembers. In a parent leadership program at the California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE), she learned how to advocate for her son—and got him transferred to a different teacher.

In the CABE program, Parga says, "I learned you have to be involved in the school. That is one of the keys to getting respect from teachers and principals." And through CABE, "I started thinking about my sons going to university." Before, "I thought finishing high school would be enough . . . education is a high priority for me now."

Parga and other immigrants who benefited from "school readiness" programs for parents identified the key lessons:

Take an active role in your children's education

In the United States, "it's very important that the parents get to know their children's teachers, ask them questions, be informed, and participate in school events," urges Estela Morel. In the Dominican Republic, where she grew up, parents don't participate. There, as in many immigrants' home countries, "the teacher is an authority figure not to be questioned," says Marco Berger, coordinator of Marin County's Parent Leadership Institute (PLI). Through the PLI, which includes both immigrant and native-born parents, Morel found that "by participating, your fear goes away."



A child accepts a certificate for his mother at a graduation for the Parent Institute for Quality Education program.

Work with your children at home to help them succeed

Kryshan Tarazon recalls her immigrant parents struggling to help her with homework: "Even though they tried, sometimes we all failed."

So when their five-year-old was struggling with math, Tarazon and her husband enrolled in a nine-week course offered at their El Centro elementary school by the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE). The course prepares parents to help their children succeed in school.

Now the Tarazons take turns working with their child on reading words, playing math games, and doing homework. Tarazon regularly checks in with her child's teacher and both parents now make a point of speaking both English and Spanish at home so their child will be bilingual.

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Learn about the school's educational program

Many immigrant parents, says San Jose PIQE teacher Angelina Burwell, wonder why their kids are building with Legos, stringing Cheerios, or molding playdough in school: What do these activities have to do with education? It's helpful, she reports, for parents to understand the educational reasons behind school activities.

Learn what grades and test scores mean

Morel learned from PLI how to understand her children's grades. "If you can't understand the grades, then you don't know how to help your kids," she says.

Parents also need to understand the tests their children take—and what the results show about their progress. Carmen Ceja, another PLI graduate, says it was important for her to know that children learning English are tested for English fluency using the CELDT test. She also learned what the test results mean—"which levels are good and which kids need to ask for tutoring."

Get involved in parent groups in your school

Ceja learned about the CEDLT test by participating in her school's English Language Advisory Committee (ELAC—a parent group to advise the school on the education of English Language Learners). Maricela Parga has also served on her school's ELAC, as well as the School Site Council—an organization at each school that's supposed to involve parents in decision-making. Parents can learn about these and other parent groups from the principal, school secretary, or parent liaison.

Get help in navigating the special education system

In the San Gabriel Valley, Chinese-speaking parents help one another navigate the special education system. Some immigrant parents don't know that children with disabilities are entitled to special services. Some "already know their child's diagnosis and have moved to the U.S. for better special education services," says Rachel Chen, co-director of the Community Parents Resource Center, "but they don't know what to ask or how to ask." Other parents may feel a child has been wrongly placed in special education.

So, Chen says, "(our) staff match a new parent with a more experienced parent," who goes along to special education meetings and serves as a translator. Parents need to know that every county has a resource center that provides similar services. (See box)

Join with other parents to advocate for children

Veronica Bravo, an L.A. mother of two, says she attended the Parent School Partnership program because "I'm really concerned, not only about my kids, but also about those kids that don't have the opportunity to get an education." The 16-session course was developed by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF).

"The most important thing we learned," says Bravo, "was the rights parents have and the rights students have." And parents learned how their school and district are organized—that's important, Bravo adds, "because you don't always know who to go to (with questions)."

MALDEF teaches parents how to advocate for their own children—and how to advocate together for all children. As part of the course, Bravo helped organize a forum in which parents got together and discussed what was lacking in the community and the schools. After that, she says, parents began to get more involved.

"Parents are the best advocates (for) their children," says Melina Chavez, MALDEF's PSP director. "They need to take on this role to ensure a quality education for all children."

RESOURCES

- **California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE)**, 626-814-4441, www.bilingualeducation.org
- **Community Parents Resource Center**, 626-307-3837. To find your local special education resource center, check www.taalliance.org/centers/index.htm
- **Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF)**, 213-629-2512, www.maldef.org
- **National Council of La Raza** will soon release "Prekindergarten Parents as Partners," an 8-week curriculum, 213-489-3428, www.nclr.org
- **Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE)** www.piqe.org
- **Parent Leadership Institute, Parent Services Project**, 415-454-1870, www.parentservices.org

For more resources, see www.4children.org/news/107imme.htm