ParentSquare

9 Ways to Effectively Engage EL Families

Introduction

Schools often face challenges in their efforts to reach English learner (EL) families. In addition to language differences, multilingual families may not be familiar with the technologies, systems, or norms common to K-12 education in the United States.

To build a learning community that effectively engages all families and invites them to participate in their students' education, regardless of language or resources, it's important for schools to understand and address the barriers that most frequently affect multilingual families.

In this guide, you'll find nine strategies for reaching and engaging multilingual families in your community, from creating a supportive environment to tackling common barriers to sustaining meaningful engagement.
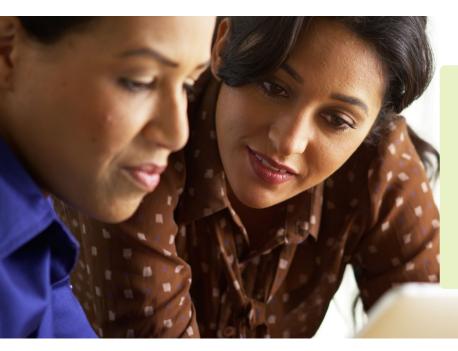
Part 1: Laying the Foundation

#1: Create a welcoming environment

✴ **Provide multilingual parent coordinators**

✴ **Set up home meetings with EL families**

✴ **Include translators at school meetings**

How welcoming is your school environment to EL families? Consider the many touchpoints that families may have with your school. Do you have multilingual staff or greeters? Is school information being translated at the school and class level when families come to campus? And, of course, is there support for the family's home language?

In-person support is often one of the most important assets for multilingual families. Some schools have a paid or volunteer multilingual parent coordinator who becomes a trusted resource for families. To help multilingual families feel more comfortable engaging with the school, other initiatives may include setting up home meetings and providing translators for school meetings.

Providing these resources and removing friction can help EL families feel like a valued part of your school community.

Foster stronger connections with EL families by providing multilingual support for in-person interactions, from morning greetings to school meetings.

#2: Recognize culture in the classroom and at school

✶ **Implement culturally responsive teaching**

✶ **Use photos and images that represent your community**

Recognizing families' home cultures can help them feel more comfortable engaging with your school community. Does classroom instruction incorporate culturally responsive teaching? Does your school celebrate culturally significant holidays? Do the photos and images you share accurately represent the demographics in your community?

When students and families see their cultures acknowledged and reflected in their school community, it can go a long way in encouraging them to engage.

Representing the cultures of EL families in your community can help them feel more welcome and comfortable participating in student learning.
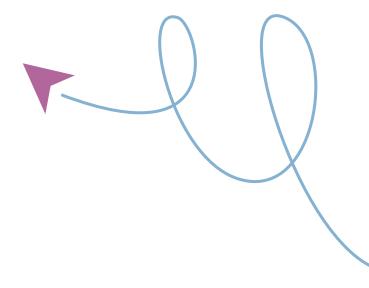
Part 2: Addressing Technology Barriers

#3: Provide multilingual support for new technologies

✳ **Clearly communicate instructions in families' home languages**

✳ **Make multilingual assistance easily accessible**

School and district administrators are acutely aware of the challenges in implementing any new technology that families are required to use, including access, ability, and adoption. For EL families, it's crucial to provide parents and guardians with multilingual support in setting up new tools—especially if these tools will be used for communication.

When you roll out a new technology, make sure clear instructions are provided in families' home languages. In-person multilingual assistance can be instrumental as well. Take advantage of events like back-to-school nights and open houses to set up displays in families' home languages and walk them through the process of downloading, signing up, and logging in to new technology.

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

#4: Keep parent/guardian contact information up to date

✳ **Use delivery reports to assess contactability**

✳ **Make it simple for families and staff to update contact information**

✳ **Develop processes for contacting families with incorrect contact information**

Contact information for some EL families, like migrant families, may change during the school year. If families have seasonal housing, disposable cell phone numbers, or intermittent internet access, emergency cards and Student Information Systems (SIS) may include outdated or contact information, making it difficult to reach them for routine or emergency communication.

If you use a communication platform for engagement, delivery reports and data can help you identify families with incorrect contact information in your system. A dedicated staff member or team can be assigned to maintaining and updating contact records, including multilingual outreach to families who are no longer receiving school notifications.

> Regularly check delivery reports to see which families may no longer be contactable, and assign a staff member or team to update contact information.

Part 3: Parent Communication and Feedback

#5: Identify the most effective channels for communicating with EL families

✴ **Survey EL families about their communication preferences**

✴ **Equip teachers and staff with the tools to they need to communicate regularly with multilingual families**

For districts serving a multilingual population, effectively communicating with every family can pose significant challenges. However, it's critical to remember that every parent should receive updates and communication regarding their child's education, regardless of language or resources.

One of the best ways to do this is by equipping teachers and staff with a communication tool that supports equitable communication. Whether it's classroom messaging or individual messaging—like good news or progress—when a parent receives communications in their preferred language, it allows them to engage with their child's education.

With the support of multilingual parent coordinators or translators, take a quick survey the next time your school hosts a back to school night or parent meeting. Ask EL parents the following questions:

- What devices do you currently use?

- What is your preferred communication method?

- In what language do you prefer to receive district and school information?

Gathering insights into how families prefer to communicate is a vital step in ensuring they have every opportunity to participate in their child's education and the school community as a whole.

> Communicate with parents in the way they prefer and languages they can read and write in. Often, text and app notifications are more popular with families than emails or web portals.

#6: Create opportunities for EL families to share feedback

✳ **Make two-way communication easy to access**

✳ **Provide automatic two-way translation on any device**

Establishing a channel to receive ongoing feedback from parents is essential for helping schools make informed decisions—as well as adjustments based on stakeholder feedback and needs.

EL families should be provided with accessible, low-friction opportunities to share feedback with school staff and teachers. If your district uses a communications platform with two-way translation, parents can receive and send messages in their home languages without requiring any additional translation tools.

If your district doesn't have this capability, EL families can share feedback in the following ways:

- Using translators or multilingual parent coordinators to communicate with parents during in-person meetings

- Providing multilingual suggestion boxes in an easily accessible area to invite feedback

- Including a translation option on school and district websites

The more opportunities that families have to share feedback, the more they feel heard and part of a collaborative school community.

> Provide options for families to reply to messages they receive from the school or their student's teacher.

#7: Support EL families in participating in school activities

✳ **Send out multilingual notifications about opportunities for involvement**

✳ **Provide multilingual support for sign-ups and activities**

Many circumstances can keep families from engaging with activities at school, but language barriers should never be one of them. To encourage involvement, schools need to take a proactive approach to inviting and supporting EL families in participating in school activities, from volunteering to campus events.

This includes sending out multilingual notifications to make sure EL families are informed about opportunities for involvement as well as providing accessible avenues for signing up and participating in parent activities. Along with having multilingual parent leaders or staff to facilitate the process, using technology with automatic translation capabilities can help lower the barriers for EL families to get involved.

Challenge: Are there opportunities for EL families in your community to take a leadership role in parent activities? What resources are necessary for them to feel supported in these roles?
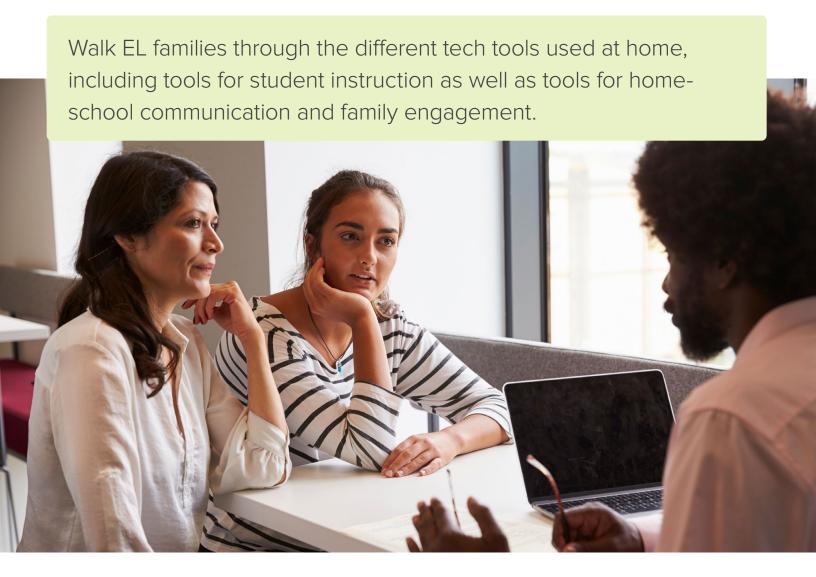
#8: Establish multilingual technology focus groups

✳ **Set up technology focus groups for EL families**

✳ **Provide hands-on exposure to technology used in the classroom or at home**

If your district is struggling to engage EL families with technology, it may help to establish small focus groups that walk parents and guardians through the tools used at and for school, from programs used for student instruction to communication apps for school-home communication.

With appropriate multilingual support, school leaders, staff, and even classroom teachers can introduce technology tools, explain their role and benefit, and provide hands-on instructions for setting up or using them. Meetings should be held before school or in the evening to provide an avenue for families who aren't able to attend during regular work hours.

Walk EL families through the different tech tools used at home, including tools for student instruction as well as tools for home-school communication and family engagement.

Part 4: Community Partnerships

#9: Leverage community partnerships and resources for EL families

✴ **Partner with local agencies, organizations, and businesses**

✴ **Inform ELL families about local community resources**

Community partnerships are a great way to provide additional resources for EL families, especially related to technology. County or city computer programs frequently provide families with refurbished computers, laptops, and routers, and may include low-cost internet services as well. Sometimes, these programs offer classes at school sites to help families become more familiar with computer skills.

Local libraries, community centers, and adult education programs often host multilingual classes on a number of topics that schools can highlight for EL families. They may even be receptive to partnering with your district to offer classes that address a specific need or area.

Work with your PTA to reach out to the local community. You may be surprised at how they're willing to help!

Conclusion

When every family feels supported, they are more likely to be actively involved in their child's education, leading to positive student outcomes. While language, technology, and other barriers may impact how EL families participate in student learning, understanding them is the first step to addressing these concerns.

About ParentSquare

ParentSquare is the leading provider of digital family and community engagement solutions for K-12 institutions, serving over 20 million students across all 50 states. Districts rely on ParentSquare's unified platform for mass notifications, classroom communications, school websites, translation in 130+ languages, and other everyday parent interactions. Seamless integrations with existing school information systems (SIS) easily connect schools with families to advance communication equity and impact student success.

Founded in 2011, ParentSquare has experienced over 500% growth in the last three years. Explore how it is shaping the future of school-home communications at **parentsquare.com**.