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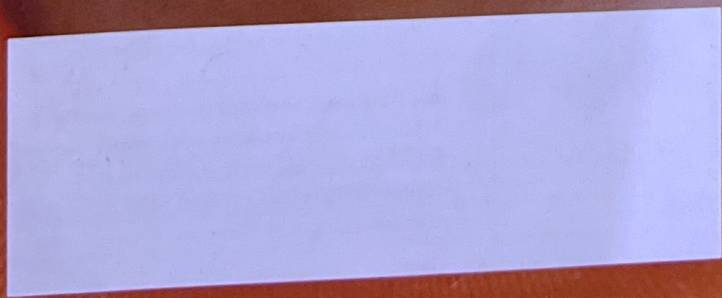
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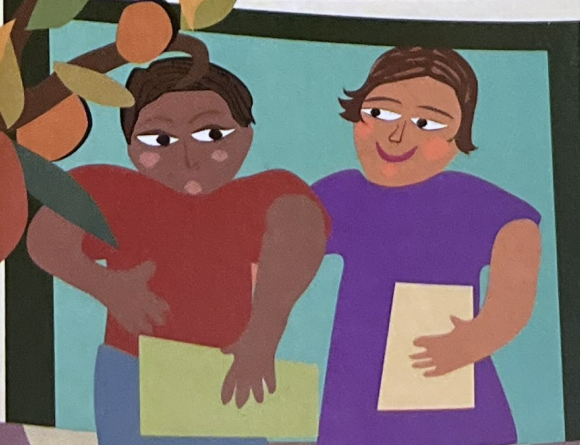
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Inviting ideas
to help teachers
draw *all* families into
the school community **By Judy Molland**

As a veteran second-grade teacher in Simi Valley, California, Christine Brown prided herself on making personal contact with every one of her students' parents. But when it came to Li, whose family had emigrated from China six years earlier, she drew a blank. Brown worried that although Li was doing well academically, he barely spoke to anyone in the classroom. At recess he sat under an old table in the corner of the schoolyard. As the little boy became increasingly withdrawn, Brown knew that she had to talk to his parents, but letters home, phone calls, and e-mails inviting them to come to school to meet with her brought no response.

Brown's dilemma is often all too familiar. On back-to-school night, a group of eager, involved parents and caregivers arrive, anxious to meet the new teacher and find out how best to help their child succeed. But while some parents become classroom regulars, others are conspicuously absent. In fact,

they may never make contact at all—leaving teachers at a loss as to why.

There are numerous reasons behind parents' reluctance to come to school. In Li's case, Brown learned that many Chinese parents consider it inappropriate, even rude, to interfere with the running of the school. Recent immigrants may be insecure about their language skills and feel

sistence, flexibility, and plain insistence can pay off with face-to-face parent meetings. Other schools have realized that their parents will never feel comfortable with the parent-teacher conference, and have created alternative venues. All of these strategies spring from teachers' common desire to become partners with parents and to honor their knowledge and wisdom.

ence. For example, some teachers create bulletin boards that celebrate all the diverse families within the community. Curriculum, too, can reflect this diversity, with a discussion of family in a social studies unit including the many different experiences of family students may have. In this way, acceptance becomes an explicit part of students' experience.



Tips for Reaching Out to Diverse Families

■ Realize that in the U.S. today, family can mean many different things, such as adoptive, grandparent, single-parent, and step-families.

■ Understand the specifics of the culture your families come from and how to refer to their ethnicity. For example, avoid using *Asian* for a Laotian child or *Mexican* for a child from Puerto Rico or El Salvador.

■ See learning about the family's culture as part of your role, rather than encouraging them to fit in with the dominant culture.

■ Take time to imagine what it feels like to be one of a few African-American children or Chinese children in a white class. How have you felt about situations where you saw yourself as an outsider?

■ If possible, make home visits to talk with families about their child.

■ Reflect on the beautiful stories and faces of diversity in the children's literature you read and on the walls of your classroom.

From *The Best Things Parents Do*, by Susie Kohl (Conari Press, 2004).

Create Support Groups

While working with PreK children in Minneapolis, Eva Zygmunt-Fillwalk, assistant professor of elementary education at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, became interested in a growing, yet often-ignored, group—grandparents raising grandchildren. She decided to offer a space and time where these grandparents could meet and share their stories. "Many lamented the difficult work they faced at a time they thought they would be phasing into retirement," she says. "They benefited tremendously from one another's support."

Zeny Muslin, diversity coordinator at Bank Street School for Children in New York, used sup-

port groups to broaden the concept of diversity within the school. "It doesn't refer only to racial differences," she explains, "but to everything that makes us different from other people around us: ethnicity, gender, religion, class, family structure, sexual orientation, physical ability, and learning styles."

Bank Street has created several parent groups: an Adopted Families Group, the Gay and Lesbian Families Group, the Parents of Children of Color, and the Learning Styles Group. These groups meet regularly to share their experiences and their concerns for their children. "When an issue comes up," says Muslin, "sometimes the next step is teacher

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unable to negotiate the system. In other cases, parents work two or more jobs and don't have the time. Less-educated parents can be intimidated by the school environment. Single-parent families, adoptive parents, and gay parents may feel socially out of place. Just how can teachers make contact with these harder-to-reach families?

The good news is that all over the country, teachers have been finding innovative ways to make all families feel welcome. Some schools have created support groups, where parents and children with similar experiences can come together for sharing, strategizing, or just hanging out. Some teachers have found per-

Be Proactive

Martha Hakmaat, a health teacher at Packer Collegiate Institute, a middle school in Brooklyn, New York, feels strongly that it is up to each one of us to make our schools places where everyone feels welcome. "With parents who may not own the community, I find if I put myself out there as someone who wants to talk about the issues, parents find me, even parents of kids whom I don't teach," she says. "I ask how their children are doing in school. I'm active on the diversity committee, and I invite people to the meetings. I take risks."

Taking risks may be difficult for teachers in a less diverse school, but individual teachers can make a differ-

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training.” As a member of Parents of Kids of Color, Dan Schultz explains: “One of the parents was worried that academic expectations for his son were not as high as for the white students. The group enabled him to voice this issue, which was then brought to the attention of the dean.”

Richard Lee, a fifth-grade teacher at Bank Street, is excited about how this has helped him professionally. “It’s a two-way process, and provides a great benefit to teachers,” he says. “We hear

come in, she sends a note with a selection of alternative times to meet. “In that letter, I stress the positive, and let them know that I’m trying to help their child be more successful,” Añazco says. If she still doesn’t get a response, she follows up with a phone call or tries to “catch” the parent or caregiver in person.

At Kingsview Middle School in Germantown, Maryland, ESOL teacher Yu-Ying Huang echoes and furthers this advice. To let parents know the importance of information-

form provide a good basis for subsequent discussions. Once a connection has been established, Reyes suggests additional meetings and encourages the informal presence of parents by inviting them to spend time and share information casually before and after school. In her continuing quest to facilitate communication, Reyes checks that parents have read all the information sent home. She makes home visits, returns all calls, and gives out her home phone number.

Share Special Events

Many schools have introduced group events to enhance parents’ feeling of inclusion. Cora B. Darling Elementary School in Postville, Iowa, has embraced teacher Svetlana Vanchugov’s festive approach. “The celebration of cultural traditions has become a key feature in the school year,” she says. “We celebrate special days that are close to the hearts of our families ... American and Mexican and Russian students and parents work together and teach one another about their holidays.”

An annual Sports Field Day is the main event of the spring semester at Oakland Terrace Elementary School in Silver Spring, Maryland, where 30 percent of the students speak another language after school. “We have a Field Day every year, organized by the parents and involving parents and students,” says teacher Synthia Dang. “The kids each choose a country to represent. They study it in depth, and then they compete for that country. It’s incredibly successful in bringing in all members of the community, as well as being a great educational project.” Most important, parents have an opportunity to give back something to the school, says Dang. “It gives them a feeling of entitlement and empowerment when they are asked to contribute.” ■

Judy Molland is an award-winning educational journalist and a French and Spanish teacher.

Diversity doesn't refer only to racial differences, but to everything that makes us different from other people around us."



the parents’ concerns, and also inform ourselves as a staff by seeing what the research says about any of these issues. Then we work at integrating our findings into the curriculum.” Parents who might otherwise feel excluded instead find peer support and begin to take ownership in the school.

Refuse to Give Up

Gina Añazco uses a different strategy to reach all her parents: “I just decide from the beginning that I am going to meet with every single parent,” says Añazco, who teaches ESOL at Rock Creek Forest Elementary School in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

“The first thing I try to do is establish rapport,” she says. “I make a point to get to learn about the family culture and the parents’ jobs and other responsibilities.” If she encounters resistance when asking them to

al meetings, Huang invites all parents individually—by phone, e-mail, or in person at their home. “Be willing to reach out and understand. Go the extra mile, use whatever you can to communicate with your parents,” says Huang.

Go Beyond the Conference

In seeking ways to involve the entire parent body, some teachers have found alternatives to the traditional parent-teacher conference. Alicia Reyes, a kindergarten teacher at Bonita Springs Elementary School in Bonita Springs, Florida, where the student body is 51 percent Hispanic, describes how parent workshop/dinners on school-related topics are excellent alternative starting points for communication. Over dinner, parents talk to one another, as well as to their children’s teachers. Bonds that