

XI Addressing Cultural Barriers to School–Newcomer Family Partnerships

The culture of U.S. schools and the expectations explicit or implicit for families will be foreign to most newcomer families (Short & Boyson, 2012). In their home countries, many newcomer families did not collaborate with the school because such action was viewed as interfering with professionals. So they may need help adjusting to U.S. schools' expectation that families take an active role in their child's learning, engage with the school, and take on diverse roles on behalf of their child and school (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). For example, parents of children in U.S. schools are encouraged to

- Advocate for their children and school;
- Encourage their children's achievement, positive behavior, persistence and active participation in learning and school activities;
- Ensure that their children attend school every day ready to learn;
- Communicate with the school about absences and any special circumstances affecting the student; and
- Collaborate, volunteer, and engage in decision-making to improve the quality of the school.

Schools should develop strategies to communicate these expectations to the parents. Additionally, families may need support in building their capacity to engage productively in this partnership on behalf of their children (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Research shows that it can help students thrive when schools and parents establish partnerships that focus on student achievement and school improvement, shared responsibility, trust building, and respectful home-school relationships (Patrikakou et al., 2005).

Schools may need to explicitly reach out to newcomer families and request that they participate in two way communication, and collaborate with teachers and school leaders, to support their child's learning and development. Newcomer families need to know that their voices count, and they need to learn how to be heard in the school. The school can link parents to adult education opportunities as well as social and cultural resources. School leaders can organize family engagement that impacts the quality of the newcomer's transition, taking into consideration the multiple challenges and opportunities newcomer students (and their families) may be experiencing in the United States.

When parents come to the school for events such as student performances and parent–teacher conferences, schools can introduce these families to the wealth of resources the school offers and explain how they can be used to support children's academic, social, and emotional development. Schools should also encourage families to avail themselves of community resources that are free and open to all.

Transportation and busy work schedules are often cited as challenges to parent engagement (Casper, Lopez, & Wolos, 2006/2007; Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). Other factors can also hinder parents' full participation in their child's education. Schools should carefully and respectfully offer recommendations about supports available to help families with sensitive issues such as trauma, domestic violence, health, nutrition, food, social support, and disability. An understanding of the values and cultural norms of the newcomer will help schools become effective resource brokers and help families thrive.