

## Fostering Collaborative Relationships Between Families and Schools

Clarisa Rodrigues    CEPARE Rapid Research Brief    December 2022

Connecticut's public school system has a rapidly growing number of students classified as English Learners (ELs). In fact, according to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), from 2015-2020, the number of ELs grew from 6.5% to 8.3% of public-school students. Close to three-quarters (72%) of these students speak Spanish in the home. Additionally, other students have been deemed as English proficient by their schools but come from multilingual homes or have parents who do not speak English.

While this growth in linguistic and cultural diversity in our communities should be welcomed and fostered, schools and families may encounter challenges when attempting to partner with each other (Gonzales & Gabel, 2017). In addition to the language differences, differences in cultural expectations regarding parental roles can become a barrier, with schools frequently holding expectations based on the roles that members of the dominant culture have played in educational settings, and families entering with expectations that differ based on their experiences. Some families are transitioning from environments and educational contexts that are vastly different from the public educational settings in Connecticut public schools. These gaps require families and schools to learn together how to incorporate various cultures and languages into the classroom and school community, and to craft shared expectations that support students.

Although Connecticut has [laws in place](#) protecting parent and student rights for program

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choice including bilingual program placement and the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education have released a [parent fact sheet](#) detailing rights of emerging bilingual parents, immigrant and culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families have varying levels of satisfaction regarding their child's school (Hughes et al., 2008; Hughes et al., 2002; Shapiro et al., 2004). This dissatisfaction is largely due to issues with communication, or lack thereof, and limited opportunities for relationship building between families and schools. These concerns speak to the importance of starting from a culturally-sustaining stance that affirms the languages, cultures, and perspectives of students and their families, and sees them as assets for student-learning (Paris & Alim, 2017). Such a stance would not only support ELs who have arrived from other countries, but would also provide a more affirming environment for students and families from minoritized backgrounds whose linguistic and cultural practices have not traditionally been welcomed in U.S. schools (Rosa & Flores, 2019).

The purpose of this brief is to offer suggestions that will help schools engage multilingual and non-English-speaking parents and families to ensure their participation as full and equal partners. In the remainder of this brief, I identify five barriers to building effective partnerships between schools and families. Each barrier is followed by a potential research-based solution or bridge. Each district and school may have different populations with vastly different needs; thus, it is important to be mindful of the cultural backgrounds of students and families each district serves. Respect and responsiveness are embedded throughout each recommendation to best honor and respond to the families engaging with districts.

**Schools should be flexible in creating a partnership plan that is responsive to the families' needs and comfort levels, and rooted in a commitment to mutual trust, respect, and equity (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).**

## **Barriers and Bridges to Partnership**

It is widely known that a parent's involvement in their child's schooling is linked to positive school outcomes, (Hara & Burke, 1998; Tinkler, 2002; Gonzalez et al., 2013). However, systemic issues create barriers to successful partnerships and parent involvement. In addition to language and cultural differences between families and their schools, unclear school expectations, lack of bilingual school personnel, and lack of access to transportation also make it difficult for families and schools to partner equitably (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Gonzalez et al., 2013). These are systemic, complex obstacles that are multi-directional. Schools should be flexible in creating a partnership plan that is responsive to the families' needs and comfort levels, and rooted in a commitment to mutual trust, respect, and equity (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

## **Barrier 1: Communication**

Language and cultural differences between the schools and families impede communication regarding needs and concerns of both parties (Tinkler, 2002).

### **Bridge**

Schools should refrain from calling on the students themselves to translate for the family-school interactions and instead access translators and multilingual staff to facilitate communication. Schools should avoid calling on students to translate between families and school personnel because this places a large emotional burden on these children and disrupts parent-child roles. Schools should also be encouraged to use parent communication platforms or software, (e.g. Language Line, TalkingPoints or ParentSquare) that provide translation for both parents and teachers. Finally, it is helpful to ask family members about their preferred method, (e.g., written notes, phone call, messages), language, and frequency (e.g., once a day, twice per week) of communication, (Breiseth et al., 2022).

## **Barrier 2: Time and Location of School Events**

Schools often hold on-site events and meetings at times when families are working, thus making it difficult for them to attend. This is likely to be compounded for families facing economic barriers, as it may be more difficult for them to access child care and transportation.

### **Bridge**

Schools can be responsive to the lived realities of families, particularly the long and often inflexible work hours that many experience, sometimes from multiple jobs. Coupled with limited access to transportation or childcare, these realities can impede families' ability to schedule meetings or school visits. To address these issues, schools can provide a variety of supports and modes of participation including: 1) virtual attendance through video, phone, or social media; 2) participation options that can be carried out asynchronously and from home, such as working on a class newsletter, creating materials for the classroom, or volunteering for a homework hotline; 3) varied times for school events to accommodate different schedules; and 4) provision of shuttle services, child care, and meals to facilitate attendance at on-site meetings. Families balance many responsibilities and the needs of many individuals (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Schools can respond to this reality by providing and valuing more flexible forms of partnership.

## **Barrier 3: Interpersonal Interactions and Expectations**

In their interactions with families, teachers and administrators can unintentionally adopt hierarchical roles, use jargon, and expect families to understand school procedures, language, and roles. These expectations can contribute to parents' feelings of uncertainty when faced with "experts" during these interactions. Additionally, non-English-speaking parents may feel like they lack the background or knowledge to understand the practices and policies needed to advocate for

their children (Villalba, et al., 2007). To compound this unease, families may be juggling difficult life circumstances such as implications of documentation status and adjusting to a new education system (Mena, 2011; Tinkler, 2002).

### **Bridge**

Schools should learn about family members' experience with school, literacy practices, goals for their children, and perspectives on their role in the home-school partnership. Gathering this information can help schools build a partnership where families and school personnel feel comfortable (Short et al., 2018). To address power imbalance between families and school personnel, consider providing a structures such as offering access to or information about support groups and protocols families can follow if they are unsatisfied with the experiences they are having in schools.

### **Barrier 4: Dual Identification –Special Education**

Parents of ELs receiving special education services have additional obligations to attend to, participate in, and contribute to their child's decision-making meetings. In addition to the three previously mentioned barriers, this situation also involves complex pedagogical and policy conversations and paperwork that can intimidate and confuse even English-speaking parents with familiarity with the U.S. education system (Chu, 2012; IDEA, 2004).

### **Bridge**

Schools should provide family members with access to additional special education resources in the home language, such as respite services, additional information on speech or other therapy information, and advocacy groups. It is also helpful to communicate with family members through a translator to review upcoming events and ensure that they understand the purpose and intended outcomes, as well as to inquire about their views on their role and how the school can best support them and their child. Additionally, special education procedural safeguards are often written at a 6th grade reading level; therefore, reviewing them verbally in English or the home language as required could be helpful to ensure families' full understanding of their rights (Burke, 2017; Mandic et al., 2010).

### **Barrier 5: Favoring the Dominant Culture**

Schools that favor and uphold the views and power structures of the traditionally dominant culture may unintentionally undermine CLD families' wealth of experience (Herrera et al. 2020). Discriminatory practices such as forcing students into monolingual educational settings and placing value only on English, may leave students and families thinking that they need to assimilate to the dominant culture and language and leave their home language and culture behind (Botello, 2017). In addition, some educators might not have received the necessary training and preparation to address implicit bias and best practices for working with CLD or immigrant families and students.

## Bridge

Schools can create active learning opportunities such as professional development to expand school personnel's perspective on culturally and linguistically diverse students and families. These opportunities can also allow for learning about additional strategies and practices for partnering with families in creative ways. This work can range from internal, reflective work done by teachers and staff working with families to external work done at the classroom, school, or district level.

**The most equitable path to accomplish this goal is through the fundamental first step of creating an environment of mutual respect and rapport where caregivers feel safe as equal partners in their child's education.**

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the goal of an equal and collaborative partnership between families and schools is to best meet the needs of the children and families that schools are serving (Summers et al., 2005; Chu, 2012). The most equitable path to accomplish this goal is through the fundamental first step of creating an environment of mutual respect and rapport where caregivers feel safe as equal partners in their child's education. School personnel are encouraged to shift their thinking from an idealized view of parent roles and relationships with schools to a more realistic conception that considers the realities of students' families, and when appropriate, adapts to their needs to create bridges to partnership (Herrera et al., 2020). This work can include accepting and valuing other forms of participation and beliefs regarding the responsibilities of the parent versus those of the teacher or school. Families may be contributing as partners in their child's education in ways that go unrecognized such as ensuring that their children arrive at school prepared to learn, having had meals and clean clothes, and from a home instilling the value of education, (Herrera et al., 2020).

Developing strong relationships and building trust takes time and practice for both school personnel and families. It may also take time for parents and families to adapt to new environments and roles. For schools, it can take time and internal work to identify and address areas for improvement. Schools should avoid the pitfall of doing only the surface level work of sprinkling in a lesson on culture or hosting a single multicultural night event. While these may be helpful strategies, they should be done in conjunction with a larger set of deeper, intentional practices.

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## Author Biography

Clarisa Rodrigues is a doctoral student and CBER (Center for Behavioral Education and Research) graduate assistant in the Educational Psychology program at the University of Connecticut. She has a master's degree in Educational Psychology with a concentration in Special Education from the University of Connecticut and a bachelor's degree in Special Education from Southern Connecticut State University. Clarisa also taught special education in a self-contained classroom for students with moderate to severe academic and behavioral needs. Working closely with students and families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, she noticed many areas for progress and change in the field of special education towards supporting the CLD population of students and their families. Her research interests include: CLD family engagement, policy around special education rights for CLD students and families, and supporting multicultural and multilingual students and families feel empowered to advocate in educational settings. She can be reached at [clarisa.rodrigues@uconn.edu](mailto:clarisa.rodrigues@uconn.edu).

