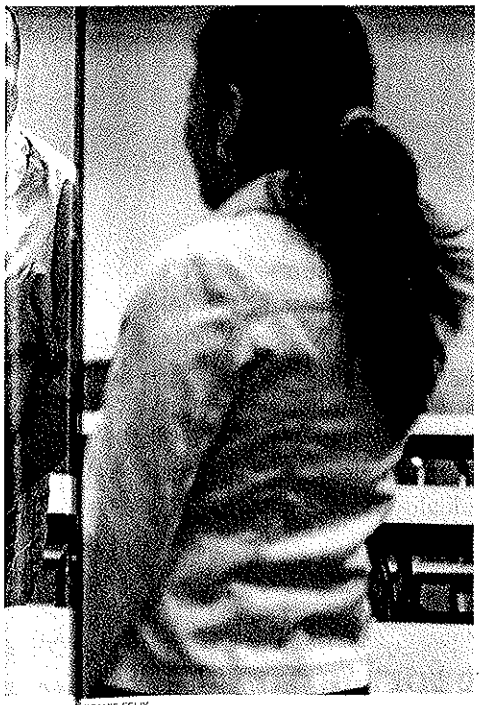

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Learning from Latino Families

When schools offer small-scale activities and outreach with a personal touch, families respond with more open participation.

Susan Auerbach

"A principal needs every possible resource, and we can't overlook the resources of the parents," noted Principal Marie Kramer, leader of a high-poverty, predominantly Latino elementary school in Los Angeles. Kramer's school is known for its dedication to meeting the needs of low-income immigrant families—and for the ways in which parents give back to the school. Administrators, office staff, and most teachers (including several from the neighborhood) are bilingual; an outreach coordinator assists parents with food, housing, and health care needs. Kramer pursues grants for social services, leads parents on learning walks through classrooms, and works with parents and community groups to oppose expansion of a nearby landfill.

Parents take classes not only in English as a second language, but also in vocational skills, such as child and elder care. "We're the community center here," Kramer said. Parents feel safe coming to the school and thus comfortable volunteering. Fathers turn out to help on school beautification days, and mothers cook hundreds of tacos and tamales for fund-raisers. "We spend a lot of time showing how thankful we are to have our lovely community" through certificates, ceremonies, and celebrations, Kramer explained.

At Kramer's school, parent education is key to student progress. Rather than occasional parent workshops, the school offers in-depth six- and eight-session classes in family literacy and math activities, including on Saturdays when more parents are available. Kramer welcomes parents to classes, teaches lessons, and seeks parents' feedback on what they learned.

Kramer exhibits many qualities of school leaders known for their partnerships with families and community groups, with particular sensitivity to Latino immigrant families (Auerbach, 2007). Beyond being visible and accessible as principal, she takes a hands-on approach to parent involvement. She and her staff members know the community well, generally speak Spanish, and see parents as assets. The school honors parent contributions while rallying resources for them and involving them in student learning. Kramer's approach does not take unusual amounts of charisma, time, or funding; more important are caring, commitment, and cultural competence on the part of school leaders and staff.

As a researcher, I've learned about parent engagement both from leaders like Kramer and from parents of color in urban schools.

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My experience as a parent activist in urban school reform, where I witnessed a troubling divide between parents and educators, propelled me into graduate school and a dozen years of qualitative research on family engagement in education. I've led parent programs and studied how parents see their role in their child's education and how administrators see their role in promoting parent involvement. I'd like to share three lessons I've learned, in hopes of sparking more authentic school and family partnerships.

LESSON 1:

Validate Families' Cultures

Although deficit thinking about poor and minority families is less blatant than in the past, some educators still assume that immigrant parents don't care about education. "I get angry when I hear administrators say that in Latino households, education is not that important, [because the] parents don't come to school," said a former local district superintendent in Los Angeles. "You couldn't be any more wrong. Parents *do* care; they just need an invitation. They need an environment that is conducive to their engagement" (Auerbach, 2007). An assistant principal agreed, describing the low-income immigrant parents at her school as "devoted parents, hard-working, trusting, compassionate, and open to change."

Latino immigrant parents have high aspirations for their children that they express at home according to their own cultural scripts. These are not always the same as educators' scripts, which often equate parent involvement with attendance at school events and responsiveness to school requests.

Apoyo

When I first began interviewing immigrant parents, I noticed that they didn't refer to "involvement"; they spoke instead of *apoyo* (support) and the many ways they supported their children's education with verbal messages and *consejos* (narrative advice). "The parent is the one who plants the seed," said the father of a high-achieving student. "I tell my son, 'If you study, you are going to accomplish what you want.' The parent's job is to motivate him so he continues his education and becomes something" (Auerbach, 2006).

Too often, educators are unaware of the moral and emotional support for learning that Latino parents offer behind the scenes.

Too often, educators are unaware of the moral and emotional support for learning that Latino parents offer behind the scenes; such support might include choosing better schools, reducing chores so students can study, and modeling the value of hard work (Auerbach, 2006; López, 2001). The first step in culturally relevant parent engagement is to recognize these "invisible strategies" and related parent beliefs. Leaders might take a cue from a gifted Latina parent liaison who begins every meeting by first acknowledging the support for education that parents already provide at home.

Educación

In my experience, preservice educators find it eye-opening to learn about the traditional concept of *educación* among Latino immigrants, especially low-income immigrants from small towns and villages in Mexico and Central America. *Educación* is distinct from formal academic education, which is seen as the job of educators; instead, it refers to respectful behavior, good manners, and moral training, which parents inculcate in their children as the basis for academic learning and for the *buen camino* (right path) in life (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Valdés, 1996). Many immigrant parents' view of education itself is bound up with this concept and with collectivistic values of cooperation and interdependence rather than individualistic values of competition and independence (Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Trumbull, 1999).

"Now I see why my students' parents are always asking me about their behavior instead of academics," aspiring administrators often tell me. Schools can guide parents, like Kramer's teachers do, in asking different questions, such as, Did my child complete assignments? What did he learn today? and What can I do at home?

Bridging the Gap

As the Latino population continues to grow, more schools are taking steps to better understand Latino families as assets. Educators are meeting to examine their own assumptions and biases so they can counter deficit thinking. They're opening up dialogue with immigrant parents about shared hopes and dreams for their children. They're sponsoring home visits and parent-led community walks to learn more about students' lives and neighborhood resources, as well as families' funds of knowledge and home-based literacy that teachers can integrate with classroom learning. They're investing in bilingual parent liaisons or parent center directors who can act not only as translators but also as cultural bridges between immigrant families and

the school. Resources such as *Involving Latino Families in Schools* (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004) and *Beyond the Bake Sale* (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007) offer many practical tips.

LESSON 2:
Keep It Small

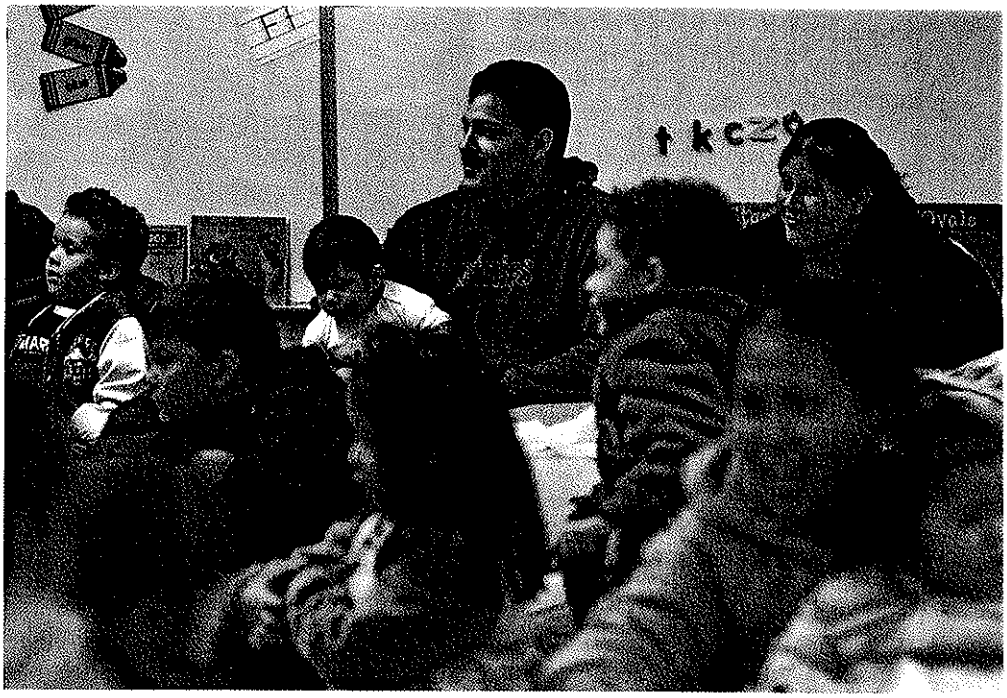
Parents' contact with schools is often marked by formality and bureaucracy, as in one-sided teacher presentations at back-to-school night or procedural runarounds in the front office. These approaches are off-putting for everyone, especially immigrant parents who are less familiar with U.S. schools.

Schools can promote greater participation when they are mindful of parents' comfort level. When an Oregon district took the unusual step of asking its growing population of Latino parents what would make them comfortable at meetings, they learned that parents did not want to stand out by wearing a translation headset or sitting with a translator at school events; they wanted separate meetings in Spanish. Likewise, when researchers in Texas asked Latino parents how they wanted to be involved in their children's education, they said they preferred informal learning activities at home and more personal communication with teachers (Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999).

Surprisingly, I discovered the appeal of small-scale outreach while facilitating a parent program at a large, diverse high school. Latino parents were underrepresented at whole-school events like an open house or the college fair. But they turned out for meetings of the Latino parent support organization at a local church, led by an especially warm and welcoming Latina parent liaison. They were likewise receptive to personal phone calls from the liaison and their children's history teacher inviting them to small Futures and Families workshops on preparing students for college.

Parent involvement is known to decline during secondary school. But I am convinced that if you build it, they will come—as long as you create a supportive climate for parent activities and respond to parents' concerns about adolescence, whether around college, gangs, or family communication.

In Futures and Families, we used a personal approach to make complex information accessible and meaningful.



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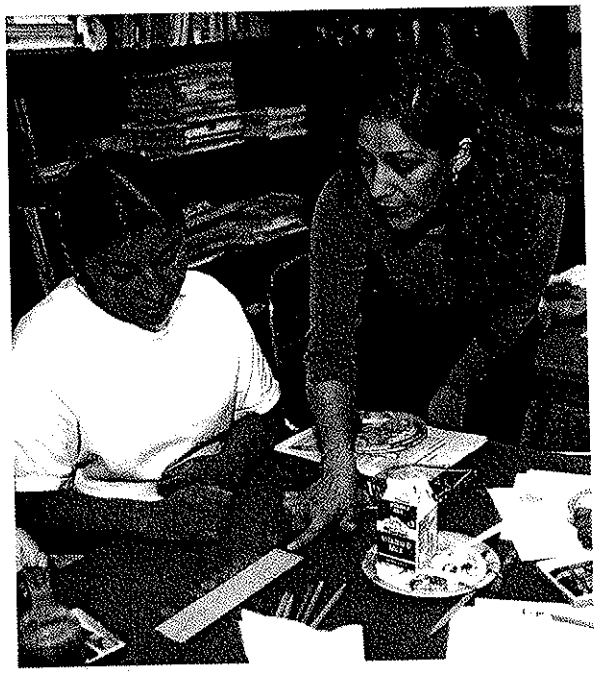
We organized informal panel discussions with guest speakers from backgrounds similar to those of our parents who shared stories about dealing with advanced placement courses, SAT tests, college costs, and other issues. They spoke passionately about struggles that parents could relate to, like the mother who had been afraid to have her child leave home for college and the counselor who had been steered as a student into vocational rather than college-prep courses. Hearing their experiences made it easier for parents to speak up (Auerbach, 2004).

We also built in time for parents to chat around refreshments before meetings and speak individually with teachers, counselors, and the principal about navigating high school and options for undocumented students. The chance for interaction among often-isolated parents and between parents and staff not only raises comfort levels but also enhances the social capital of immigrant families, giving them greater access to information and support.

When educators offer smaller-scale parent activities and infuse personal touches and authentic interaction into outreach, immigrant parents feel less intimidated, and they respond with more open participation (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). For example, in a large year-round elementary school in Los Angeles, Principal Art Franco was inspired by community organizing models to adapt house meetings for parents to the classroom setting. Sitting in a circle with the teacher and a few other staff members, parents discussed why education was important to them, often crying as they described limited

education opportunities in their home countries and their struggles to help their children; staff members also shared their education journeys. Parents who attended the house meetings began to approach teachers more often with questions and to take part more readily in parent workshops.

Staff members at a literacy program at Marie Kramer's elementary school likewise made sure to put parents at ease. The Latina literacy coach shared stories about her immigrant family upbringing, jokes about her children, and updates on her family members in the military. Parents said that it was her *sabor* (flair, enthusiasm) that made them keep coming. The parent center directors warmed up the auditorium with decorations, refreshments, prizes, and attentiveness to parent needs and questions. At the culminating session, parents received certificates and presented letters to their children about their hopes for their children's future. When schools reach out in these personal ways, parents often liken the school to a family in which people care about and help one another.



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School leaders send a message to both staff members and families about the importance of family engagement when they interact frequently with parents face-to-face. At a small elementary school in a working-class Latino neighborhood of Los Angeles, Principal Sylvia Perez held weekly *platicas*, or open conversations, with parents, which evolved into Parents as Authors workshops led by Perez and several staff members. Parents, many of whom had limited formal education, were guided through the same steps of the writing process as their children were, from brainstorming to publishing, to create family books. "I hear the parents' stories and make a connection at such a human level," Perez said, noting that this helped repair relations with a previously angry parent. Perez considered parents the "heartbeat of the school" and time spent with them one of the high points of her job.

Parent outreach efforts like these affirm that schools care for families as human beings and recognize the importance of relationships as the foundation of school and family partnerships. Other strategies that have proven effective are personal telephone invitations to activities, events designed to attract fathers, open-ended gatherings for coffee with the principal, and more interactive approaches to back-to-school night.

LESSON 3:
Nurture Parent Voice

Some well-intentioned programs impose school agendas on immigrant and minority parents, for example, parenting classes that aim to "fix" their child-rearing practices or programs in which parents merely receive information and services. In contrast, some of the most promising efforts encourage parent voice and leadership development. These approaches are especially important with immigrant parents who often feel marginalized and rebuffed by urban schools.

Parents come to schools with their own education beliefs and priorities, which may not always match those of the school. In democratic schools, we need to elicit more parent perspectives to jointly shape policies and programs and address inequities. And in the case of immigrant parents whose home countries stress parent deference to education authorities, we need to help them find their voice to be advocates for their children.

Delgado-Gaitan (2004) believes a central purpose of Latino parent involvement activities should be to promote ongoing dialogue between parents and educators for mutual understanding and accommodation. A former Los Angeles principal took this approach in trying to "co-construct the school" with mostly immigrant parents through weekly discussions. "The number one complaint wasn't about academics or their kids' futures," she recalled, "it was about food and the cafeteria. So I thought, that's where I'll start. . . . It started with cafeteria food, and by the end it was about curriculum and philosophy, so it grew into something very powerful" (Auerbach, 2009).

In a poor gateway neighborhood for immigrant families, Principal John Zavala saw parent engagement as intertwined with social justice and community revitalization. He brought in the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) to train parents in their rights, the U.S. school and political systems, and leadership skills. Then he enlisted parents and teachers in planning an annual parent

conference on César Chávez Day.

They chose the theme of "Breaking the Cycle of Poverty and Violence through Education" for an event that drew more than 250 families on a Saturday, with free meals and bilingual teachers in charge of registration and children's activities. Parent leaders presided over an opening session that featured an inspirational poem read in Spanish, English, and the indigenous Kanjobal language of school families from Guatemala, as well as a keynote address on crime by a city councilman. Workshops led by parents, teachers, or community experts covered topics ranging from tenant rights and immigration law, to charter middle schools, to talking with your preteen about sex, to traditional academic topics like math games. Compared with parent activities designed to meet district needs and school agendas, this unusual program raised parent awareness and addressed community needs as a bridge to meeting school goals.

As parents of color become more aware of education issues through leadership training or community organizing, they often undergo personal and political transformation. Some immigrant mothers in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood schools, for example, were emboldened to pursue higher education for teaching careers after being trained as parent mentors (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). Latino and black parent activists in Southgate, California, organized a boycott to protest a year-round school calendar and a strike to demand adequate textbooks guaranteed by law—and won (Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2005). Former Miami-Dade County Superintendent Rudy Crew (2007) said we should welcome and cultivate "demand parents" who hold urban schools accountable.

Instead of fearing parent power, said Principal Zavala, tap into it with parents as your allies. Instead of exercising *power over* families and teachers, work with them to develop relational *power to* accomplish goals of common interest (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). Resolving conflict becomes much easier when schools have built a foundation of respectful relationships and dialogue.

What matters most is bringing parents to the table in a true spirit of partnership to learn and work together.

The Essential Ingredients

There is no fail-safe recipe for parent engagement just as there is none for school improvement. I've suggested a few essentials that schools can adapt and combine with other elements in their own unique mix. What matters most, with Latino immigrant families as with others, is bringing parents to the table in a true spirit of partnership to learn and work together for the mutual benefit of schools, families, and communities. EL

Author's note: All names of principals are pseudonyms.

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