Engaging Immigrant Families: The Latest Thinking

Immigrant families vary greatly in country of origin, the circumstances of immigration, parental education, parental fluency in English, and socio-economic status. Despite these differences there is evidence that these families share a deep commitment to their children's education, although the ways they understand their roles in the process can be very different from schools' traditional understanding and expectations. In the last decade there has been an explosion of research on immigrant families and there is an emerging body of research on immigrant children. Educational researchers have also found a substantial body of evidence linking parent involvement in education with positive outcomes including academic improvement, better school attendance, and student self-esteem. To date there has not been much research on methods of engaging immigrant families in their children's education, but studies are beginning to emerge. There is a sense of urgency to examine this topic because immigrant children, both foreign- and U.S.-born, form a rising percentage of the school-age population.

There is growing evidence that in order for schools to engage immigrant families both traditional models of engagement and newer non-traditional approaches should be used in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways. The forms that parent involvement typically take follow Epstein's model, which focuses on six types of involvement: 1) Parenting—promote positive parenting; 2) Communicating—inform parents about school programs and student progress; 3) Volunteering—recruit family members as volunteers or audience members; 4) Learning at home—involve parents in homework assistance and home-learning activities; 5) Decision-making—involve families in school decision-making, governance, and advocacy; and 6) Collaborating with community—coordinate community resources and services for families and assist families to engage in community service.

A recent study examined strategies used to effectively engage immigrant families in schools in metropolitan areas, which have a tradition of working with immigrant families, and in smaller towns and rural areas that have recently become home to immigrant families. Researchers highlighted the important roles played by “cultural brokers”—school staff members who share religious, country of origin or other culturally relevant characteristics with families. These staff members not only provide positive role models for students but also are able to recognize and interpret cultural differences that may show up in parents' attitudes and behaviors and be misinterpreted as indifference or lack of engagement.

A recent study of immigrant Latino families found that one of the main challenges for parental involvement in their children's education is that children often acculturate—increase their English proficiency and socialization into American rules and laws—more quickly than do their families. In some cases students develop into effective language brokers for their families. In other situations, there is a maladaptive shift in power within the family leading...
children to overpower their parents, which impacts parental discipline. Family-based literacy programs have shown promise in addressing this concern by increasing English proficiency and acculturation for all family members.

Non-traditional approaches show great promise in addressing significant barriers to school involvement that immigrant families may face. Some key strategies emerging from the research include:

- Increase family English proficiency through family literacy programs.
- Facilitate greater school accessibility by working within parents’ schedules and preferred communication styles.
- Provide support services, such as school psychologists, social workers, and family liaisons, for immigrant families.
- Provide parenting workshops and parent support groups for immigrant families.
- Incorporate staff training and professional development activities that address both individual self-awareness and knowledge of other cultures.
- Support efforts to decrease linguistic intolerance and anti-immigrant hostility.

There are things you can do right now to welcome and support immigrant families in your school or site:

Download the Annie E. Casey Foundation fact sheet on children in immigrant families in your state: http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/PublicationsSeries/ChildrnImmmFamFactShts.aspx

Explore many types of parent involvement at Johns Hopkins' National Network of Partnership Schools site: http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/nbps_model/school/sixtypes.htm

Implement an intergenerational family literacy program. Learn more at The National Center for Family Literacy: http://www.famlit.org/

Resources & Notes:


6 Marschall, Shah, & Donato, op. cit.


8 Glick, op. cit.