

## **Reconceptualizing Home Visits: How Schools can Promote Language Rights and Access for Latino Parents**

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In the late summer of 2015, Ariel Gordon, professional school counselor at Cedar Shoals High School invited Melissa Perez Rhym, Spanish teacher at Cedar Shoals High School, to accompany her to visit the homes of Latino parents whose children were transitioning to high school that fall. Historically, Latino families have been underrepresented at informational school-sponsored events creating both a perception of disengagement from the school's perspective and a sense of disconnectedness among families. We believed that by reaching out to parents early in their home language, we could establish a positive rapport and impart a sense of connectedness to their student's new school.

The thought of a home visit from a school official is rarely seen as a positive event by the parents being visited or the school support staff visiting. Typically, home visits are conducted by school social workers and the assumption is that they are attempting to reach unengaged, avoidant parents or to inform parents that something has gone wrong at school. This negative connotation of a home visit prevents schools and districts from exploring their potential as tools for family engagement. While we know family engagement is a critical component for student achievement, schools generally operate from the belief that family engagement lies on the responsibility of the family. Further, families are often judged by their level of participation and interaction with the school without consideration of myriad barriers that could impede parental participation. We are proposing that schools and districts examine family engagement through a social justice lens and work to eliminate the barriers families face that prevent access and participation. Therefore, what would happen if we could reimagine the home visit as a vehicle for establishing positive relationships between families and schools?

At the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year, we conducted early, positive outreach visits in the homes of our Latino families. From those visits, the overwhelming response we received from the parents was that there is a need for the schools to reach out to the community. Parents expressed a

sense of frustration with the lack of access to information; they also encountered barriers when trying to communicate with the schools. The community in Athens-Clarke County has a large Latino population which continues to grow significantly, comprising more than 20% of the student population at Cedar Shoals High School in Athens, Georgia. The community experiences chronic and severe poverty with 33-35% of all families living below the poverty line (U. S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2012). Athens' largest and most dense Latino neighborhoods are concentrated in geographically isolated areas that are not necessarily near the two area high schools. In addition, few options are offered to these residents in terms of public transportation. With a lack of affordable, reliable transportation, these families remain in these isolated zones and are frequently unable to secure transportation to come to their student's school.

Compounding the transportation issues, many of the Latino parents are limited in English proficiency and this presents another barrier to parental involvement. While the Clarke County School District offers various translation services to help support families, these supports are implemented to varying degrees at the school level. Schools have limited Spanish-speaking staffs, some school documents are translated into Spanish while others are not, and most school events for parents are conducted in English. Parents may feel uncomfortable attending school events or communicating with teachers because of a lack of confidence in their language skills (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). As a result of linguistic, geographic, and economic barriers that keep Latino parents from participating in school events, teachers might erroneously perceive Latino parents as uninterested and unengaged in their children's education because they are often absent or underrepresented at these events. This is unfortunately not an issue unique to our school as minority families are often perceived by schools and educators as deficient and uncaring since the model of parental participation and engagement is based on a white, middle class norm of what parental engagement should be (Chapman & Bhopal, 2013; Williams & Baber, 2007). This narrow view of parental involvement fails to account for the ways in which families support and value education in less visible ways, such as instilling character education and their participation in cultural activities (Valencia & Black, 2002) as well

as for the barriers preventing them from increased participation. The reality is that these families desire resources, information, access, and a welcoming atmosphere to be involved in their student's academic experience.

Prior to beginning the home visits, we determined that we would target Latino parents of rising 9th graders since we felt that they needed the most support as their child was transitioning from middle school to high school. In the first month of the school year, we conducted eight home visits to Latino families in various East Athens neighborhoods. During those visits we shared their children's schedules of classes, school contact information, and a comprehensive parent guide to 9th grade and high school planning (all in Spanish). Before our visits, parents expressed to us that they had difficulty communicating with the front office staff at our school. We provided parents with a bilingual reference card that they could use to help communicate with school staff. The reference card contained common parent issues and phrases in both English and Spanish. Parents could present these cards to our front office staff and receive assistance. Parents asked questions about grade reporting, course rigor, and school rules. Parents also expressed fears about high school students skipping class and taking advantage of more freedoms. At the conclusion of each home visit, parents expressed their deep gratitude. They were thankful that a counselor and a teacher would take the time to conduct these conversations in their homes and in their home language. It appeared that parents felt disconnected and anxious upon our arrival and after our presentation of materials and answering of their questions, they seemed to feel much more clear and confident in knowing high school expectations. The goal of these visits was to inform and support parents so they would in turn feel more confident in taking an active role in their student's academic experience.

As educators, we know the power of the home visit to establish and create personal relationships that can lead to such positive effects as increased school attendance, higher student achievement, and fewer discipline issues (Fan & Chen 2001; Harris & Goodall 2007). Further, the benefits of conducting home visits are not limited to the students, as teachers are also positively affected by helping them better understand the home environment of their students. Prior to conducting the home visits, we were not prepared for the influence it would have on us personally. Parents who

initially met us with suspicion later opened up to us about their thoughts, feelings, fears, and concerns. The students whose homes we visited early in the school year felt that a personal connection to the staff had been created. Hearing from the parents about their desire to have greater access to the school but not knowing how to go about it, or what resources are available to them, allowed us to reflect on ways in which we could do more to initiate contact and open the door for more opportunities for parents. Community schools do not operate in isolation from the community they serve, but rather are integral in the community and should take into account the social, cultural, and linguistic needs of their families. When schools and educators account for the needs of their families and work to redefine their perceptions of family engagement, they work towards ensuring all families are afforded access to participate in their children's education.

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