



# Creating an Engaged School Community

## SUMMARY

Some immigrant families may experience stress and confusion regarding school requirements and school communication.

The Cohoes School District, a small, under-resourced district with a very diverse immigrant population, works to integrate English language learners and their families into its learning community. Recognizing the multiple educational and personal challenges faced by immigrant students and their families, district teachers created relaxed and helpful ways to assist the immigrant students' transition into the American school system.

## *Jose is a second grader in one*

of the Cohoes Elementary schools.

He came from El Salvador with his family only one year ago. His English improved enough in one year to communicate with his peers and he always looked happy. One day I found Jose in tears. He was very upset because some of his classmates were playing soccer in an after-school program and he was not enrolled. I asked him why his parents did not sign him up when the forms went home three weeks ago. In response, Jose cried even louder, "Mrs. Kats, so many papers go home every day and my parents don't know what is important and what is not. My mom does not read English or understand anything about my school."

The episode with Jose made me realize how much confusion and stress immigrant families experience in regard to school mail and school requirements.

I was ashamed that, as a Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), I did not identify this problem sooner. After speaking with Jose, I began collecting every piece of mail that went to families' homes and found ways to translate them into the five dominant non-English languages in our district: Pashtu, Arabic, Russian, Spanish, and Chinese. The district administration was open to this project and helped me identify, collect, and translate the correct forms.

Today, there are more than 3.5 million English language learners (ELLs) in United States schools and this number is growing rapidly (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Most often, the families of ELLs come to our country to better their lives and to ensure a better future for their children (Public Broadcasting Service, 2013). They usually settle in less-affluent

*Katya Kats is an English as a New Language teacher in the Cohoes School District and is a member of the Cohoes Teachers Association. Kats is originally from Ukraine and speaks three languages. She serves as interpreter during parent-teacher conferences for families of her own students, and for any other families in need of translation services.*

## Katya Kats, Cohoes Teachers Association

neighborhoods, where schools are often overwhelmed and overcrowded. These schools face unique challenges working with immigrant families (Kozma, 2014). They try to provide many services not only for the children but also for their families. According to Monica Freeland (1991), one of the many challenges for schools is establishing a steady connection between the school and the immigrant families. This article explains the importance of relationship building with the ELL students' families, examines the challenges schools face in establishing lines of communication with such families, and outlines several successful examples from the Cohoes School District, where I work.

There is a diverse population of immigrant families in Cohoes. They come from different countries, speak different languages, and have diverse cultures. Some of the families came to join other family members, others to seek new opportunities in order to avoid economic stress, and still others to escape religious persecution. The Cohoes district welcomes new families and tries to help them establish a new life. We found that conventional avenues for involving parents in schools were often closed due to the language barrier and cultural

differences. Cohoes works hard to provide ELLs with assistance in a culturally competent manner. We do this by trying to learn their culture (and sometimes language) and by engaging parents in school life.

The Cohoes district does its best to provide interpreters in order to enable the immigrant parents to understand the schools' policies, assessments and curriculum. In order to do this, the district uses different resources in the community, as well as a network of interpreters. We ask immigrants who came some time ago and learned English to help with the translations. Most parents do not decline because they remember their own struggles and the assistance they received from the Cohoes schools.

Some of the immigrant and refugee students in our district carry with them the unseen scars of personal trauma or hardships that most teachers can hardly envision:

*Dima and his sister came from Moldova, a small country between Romania and Ukraine. The family came just three weeks before the school year started. They were frightened and anxious. The older sister, Mariana, knew some English and*

*continued on following page*

## Creating an Engaged School Community

Teachers should be trained in cultural sensitivity. This includes knowledge about food, clothing, religion and customs, and, most importantly, the political situations in the native country of their ELL students.

*tried to take care of Dima, who was a Kindergarten student. The cafeteria was one of the biggest challenges. The district helped the parents apply for a free lunch program. However, the children did not eat much of their lunches because they could not identify some of the food offered in the cafeteria. For example, they did not know what peanut butter was and were nervous about trying it, as well as many other foods that were a mystery to them. One day, their teacher became frustrated and insisted that they at least try their lunch. Little Dima began to cry and his classmates laughed at him. The next day Dima did not come to school. When I reached out to Dima's mother, I found out that the family fled Moldova because of the ongoing warfare that started after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Dima's native country, it was dangerous to be outside where tanks roamed and people were killed on the streets. The children spent all their time inside their apartment, anxious whenever their parents had to leave. Clearly, Dima and his sister were deeply affected by the war in Moldova and this trauma had to be explained to the teachers and staff who came in contact with these and other ELLs from that country. I was glad that Dima's mother opened up to me, and I began reading more about the Transnitria*

*War (Hughes, et al, 2002). I noticed that, while Cohoes had quite a few ELLs from Moldova, no one spoke about the reasons they fled their country.*

My experience with Dima and his family led me to understand that teachers should be trained in cultural sensitivity. This includes knowledge about food, clothing, religion and customs, and, most importantly, the political situations in the native country of their ELL students. In addition, I learned that it often helps for teachers to find out more about their student's siblings, what languages are spoken at home, the ELL's and their parent's educational background, and the system of education present in student's country of origin. It is most critical for school districts to know if the immigrant students experienced trauma in the form of war, natural disaster, etc. This information provides teachers and school staff with a solid foundation from which to identify the services and programs the district can appropriate for the ELLs. Regardless of the conditions that brought the immigrant students to the United States, almost all of them have had some tragic and hostile experiences. At times, maybe too often, they feel alienation, loneliness, and extremely low self-esteem in the face of a new strange world. The district tries to recognize the multiple educational and personal challenges faced by

newcomer students and has created more relaxed ways to help the immigrant students transition into the American school system.

My experience with the families of the ELLs taught me the importance of being proactive in establishing open lines of communication. By consistently reaching out to the parents of my ELLs I learned that the reasons for lack of communication about their situation were many and different. Many parents of the ELLs are often too nervous about not being able to understand or be understood by the teachers. In addition, some of the parents' cultural backgrounds do not encourage communication with authority figures, such as educators. A father of one of my ELL students referred to a school visit as a very fearful experience. According to his country's beliefs, school is a temple of knowledge and a teacher is a priest who brings this knowledge to children. "It's not respectful, and even punishable, to bother the teacher with trivial problems," he said.

Yet other parents told me that they find the American school system to be impersonal and insensitive to their needs and situations. For example, in Cohoes, there are many Russian Orthodox families who are deeply distressed by Halloween. For many years, the Russian students did not come to

school on Halloween in order to avoid participating in the costume parade or listening to Halloween stories. The district confronted this problem creatively. On the day of the Halloween parade, the district also holds a Harvest Festival, which is attended by all students who do not celebrate Halloween. At the Harvest Festival, the students play games, participate in competitions, and earn treats and prizes. Every ELL student from Russia now comes to the festival. It has become such a big event that every year more non-immigrant students join the Harvest Festival. The parents come to observe their children playing and competing in carnival games, as well as to participate as judges.

Cohoes School District's experience with Halloween taught us an important lesson: we need more culturally responsive communication to the parents of our immigrant students. While it can be difficult to engage foreign families in the school community, it is possible. Every ESOL teacher now tries to learn about the culture of his or her students. We have invited parents to school, asking them to talk about their former countries and to bring something representative of their culture. The ESOL teachers often report what they learned about their students' background at the faculty meetings. This approach also enriches the education of monolingual students who learn

*continued on following page*

The Cohoes' message is simple: we acknowledge our ELLs and their cultures. We will provide the changes necessary to accommodate our new immigrant families.

about Chinese New Year, Muslim prayer rugs, Croatian food, Afghani drinks, and Bosnian fairy tales.

Every spring, Cohoes also sponsors an ELL potluck picnic. Parents of most of our ELLs come to this picnic and bring their traditional food, drinks, and games. They meet and socialize with parents from different schools who come from the same country and/or culture. They develop a network of people in similar situations, discuss their children's health care providers, required immunizations (and the reasons for them), and immigration news. They also learn from each other about local social services they can utilize. Many general education teachers also attend the picnic, which offers them one way to establish a relationship with parents who they do not usually see in school.

*At our most recent potluck dinner: Little Aziza is twirling around making pretty sounds with the tiny bells attached to her dress. Aziza is from Pakistan and speaks Pushtu. Her classmate Amar is also from Pakistan, but his family speaks Urdu. Mohamed's family is from Afghanistan and speaks Farsi. They often sit together trying to find a common language, happy to communicate and share their experiences. Although they do not speak the same language, they are happy to be with people who understand their*

*culture and do not dismiss it as "non-American." Their parents are content, too. For some of them, the ELL picnic is a first social event in the U.S.; the first time since immigrating that they put on their best clothes and visit a nonthreatening and nonjudgmental place. They feel proud looking at the children's performances and talking to fellow immigrant parents. They proudly offer the food from their countries and gladly give recipes to anyone who enjoys it. At our picnic, people enjoy the food from a great variety of cuisines: Moroccan, Afghani, Pakistani, Ukrainian, Brazilian, Moldovan, and many more.*

The ELL potluck picnics have become a huge success. The children perform in English or their native language. They recite Mother Goose poems and act out small plays in English. They dance wearing clothing from their native countries. They are proud of their heritage and are not ashamed of their lack of English language fluency or lack of knowledge of American culture. Our picnics are so popular that they had been featured in a local newspaper as an example of successful school outreach. The Cohoes' message is simple: we acknowledge our ELLs and their cultures. We will provide the changes necessary to accommodate our new immigrant families.



Success of immigrant students depends upon many factors. One is equal access to all the information that American students have. This information can lead to various employment and college opportunities.

*Andrey is a senior at Cohoes High School. He has been in the U.S. for only three years, but has mastered all of his classes, including mainstream English. He is competitive, hard working and ambitious. He wants a career in medicine. He knows he needs to go to college, but he is not familiar with the U.S. college system. His parents worry about being able to afford college and are unsure about how to search for an appropriate and inexpensive education. Andrey comes to the guidance counselors with a lot of questions. The counselors give him the same answers they generally provide to an American student. But Andrey does not understand. He is too new to the country, too insecure in his American “way of life,” and is afraid to look and sound funny. His classmates give him various suggestions, joking about his insecurities. His ESOL teacher knows about his insecurities and his lack of knowledge of American colleges. She tries her best to help Andrey to apply to the colleges that match his abilities. She talks*

*to his parents, explains about financial aid and guides them through the application process.*

We must respect the immigrant families’ desire to succeed. A great majority of immigrant students have a deep commitment to succeed. They know they have to be “Americans,” but for many adolescents, “acculturation” is situational (C. Mitchell, 2015). They try to present behavior consistent with mainstream U.S. values; they want to be the same as their peers at school. They do not like their accent, they do not like their names (that are often hard to pronounce for Americans), or their limited English abilities. The Cohoes School District is sensitive to these insecurities and tries to address them. For example, the district invites local colleges to speak in front of ELLs and their parents. Translated letters of invitation to this event are sent to immigrant families well in advance. The district’s ESOL teachers are extremely helpful to ELLs during the stressful time of graduation. They introduce students to financial officers and help the students apply for financial aid and scholarships. When ELLs’ parents are not available, lack transportation, or are too intimidated, the district’s ESL teachers even travel with students to visit colleges and advise families regarding their choices.

*continued on following page*

Success of immigrant students depends upon many factors. One is equal access to all the information that American students have.

## Creating an Engaged School Community

The Cohoes School District strives to create a safe space for ELLs, a place where they can succeed and feel confident that the educators are on their side as a support system and where their families are acknowledged as a valuable part of the community.

The district also provides professional development to mainstream teachers, teaching them the importance of maintaining the ELL students' native language. Many are surprised to learn that forbidding the use of their native language in the classroom is not the best approach to teach ELLs English. Time and again, studies confirm that strong native language skills actually contribute to the academic success of ELLs (Wright, 2010). That is why one can hear many languages in the cafeteria or playground of the Cohoes schools. Our ELLs are not afraid to use their native language when communicating with their friends or siblings.

Cohoes School District understands the importance of assuring the ELLs' parents that we respect their wishes and goals for their children. During the parent-teacher conferences, many teachers encourage parents of their ELLs to use their native language at home, whether through reading, in order to help their children's reading skills in English, or through conversation (Robertson, 2011).

The district also successfully addresses the issue of teachers' anxiety about working with ELLs and their families through professional development with experts on educating foreign students (Hwang, 2006). By providing support to immigrant families and their children, the district ensures that ELLs will develop the sense of belonging to our local community and our country.

The Cohoes School District strives to create a safe space for ELLs, a place where they can succeed and feel confident that the educators are on their side as a support system and where their families are acknowledged as a valuable part of the Cohoes community. Immigrant students come to America motivated to learn and eager to adapt to a new home environment. Sometimes they face multiple obstacles and it is the school districts' task to help them to overcome language, social, and academic obstacles and to adapt to the new way of life.

---

REFERENCES

- Breiset, L. & Robertson, K. (2015). A Guide for Engaging ELL Families: Twenty Strategies for School Leaders: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/families/0809.pdf>
- Freeland, M. (1991). The Newcomer Program: Helping Immigrant Students to Succeed in U.S. Schools [www.ncela.us/files/rcd/be018149/pig8.pdf](http://www.ncela.us/files/rcd/be018149/pig8.pdf)
- Hughes, J. & Sasse, G. (2002). Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union: Regions in conflict. British Library Catalog. Special Issue of Regional and Federal Studies. (ISSN. 1359-7566). Volume 11. Rutledge Press.
- Hwang, W.C. (2006). Acculturative family distancing: Theory, Research, Practice, Training, *psycnet.apa.org* 43(4), 397-409
- Kozma, C. (2014, September 7). As Immigrant Population Grows, Schools Adapt to Help Kids Learn English. *South Coast Today*, pp 2, 3.
- Mitchell, C. (2015). In U.S. Schools, Undocumented Youths Strive to Adjust. *Education Digest*, 81(1), 9-13
- National Center for Education Statistics (2013). *Digest of Education Statistics*. Retrieved from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgf.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgf.asp)
- Public Broadcasting Service (Producer). (2013). *Destination America Part 1 — The Golden Door*. Retrieved from: <http://www.pbs.org/destinationamerica/>
- Walker-Dalhouse, D. & Risco, V.J. (2008). Learning from Literacy Successes in High-Achieving Schools. *The Reading Teacher*, 6 (15), pp. 422-424.