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Parent Involvement and the Education of English Learners and Standard English Learners: Perspectives of LAUSD Parent Leaders

By: Magaly Lavadenz, Elvira G. Armas, Irene Villanueva | LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

What do parents of English Learners and Standard English Learners say about the education of their children and about parent education and involvement in the Los Angeles Unified School District?

INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement is considered one of the most critical components in the educational outcomes of our children. Accordingly, the primary goal of the *Achieving A+ Parent Survey* was to gather responses to this central question. For minority parents, who represent the majority of parents and students in the city and the district (U.S. Census, 2000; LAUSD Fact Book, 2007), scholars point to the importance of interpersonal ties and connections that cross institutional, ethnic, family and cultures (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000; Horvat, Weinger & Lareau, 2003). Parental engagement in formal spaces such as the PTA is a traditional example of a social network of support. However, minority parents often rely on processes or resources within the school and outside of the school for active participation to take place, which is fostered by shared language and cultural similarities (Arriaza, 2004). Jasis (2004) addresses the development of social networks as parental *convivencia*, or an avenue for empowerment of parents to exercise their rights through collective action.

The parent leadership groups that completed these surveys exemplified some of the structures and processes that led to their active participation in the district; yet when minority parent groups become informed, they are often met with resistance when it comes to making meaningful changes (Christie & Cooper, 2005). Noguera (2006) states that real reform occurs when schools are “more responsive to the parents and families they serve through systems of mutual accountability.”

The survey data collection occurred during a nine-week period between October 2007 and December 2007. Spanish and English versions of the survey were developed by the bilingual

research team at the Center for Equity and Excellence for English Learners (CEEL)¹. The survey was designed to gather demographic information about survey participants and to capture parents’ opinions about parental involvement and support in LAUSD and about the education of English Learners and Standard English Learners in the district.

Through a purposeful sampling process, we administered questionnaires to 15 parent leadership groups within the Los Angeles Unified School District. A total of 513 completed surveys were collected; 366 were completed in Spanish and the remaining 147 were completed in English². Survey participants were assured that individual survey responses would remain confidential and reported in summary form.

SURVEY ANALYSIS

We used a mixed methods approach, incorporating quantitative and descriptive analyses. We entered quantitative data using a double-entry and coding process for inputting and for analysis. We report on key questions related to parents’ ratings of the districts’ efforts in educating English Learners and Standard English Learners, as well as their overall rating of LAUSD’s parents’ sense of parent education. We used Hutchinson’s (2001) constant comparative method to analyze the two open-ended questions in the survey. This allowed us to compare and code data in order to generate themes and patterns.

SURVEY RESULTS

An overwhelming majority of respondents (N=384, 75%) have two or more children enrolled in LAUSD schools (Spanish N=236, 62%; English N=80; 58%). Table 1 is a composite of four of the survey items that asked parents to “rate” LAUSD’s efforts and outcomes in the education of Standard English Learners and English Language Learners, as well as those items that address parent education and parental support. Table 1 represents responses from all 513 surveys, differentiated by parents of SELs and parents of ELs.

Table 1: PARENTS’ RATINGS OF DISTRICTS’ SUPPORT FOR SELS/ELS AND THEIR PARENTS

Using a 5-point scale, 1=unacceptable; 5- Excellent	Parents’ Overall Rating of District Support			District’s Support of Parents of ELs or SELs			Parents’ Rating on Districts’ Education of ELs			Parents’ Rating on the Education of SELs		
	MEAN	%	GRADE	MEAN	%	GRADE	MEAN	%	GRADE	MEAN	%	GRADE
SPANISH	3.05	61	C	2.61	52	D	2.57	51	D			
ENGLISH	2.88	58	D	2.92	58	D	2.87	57	D	2.72	54	D

Overall, the parent leadership groups have relatively low ratings for LAUSD's parent education efforts, along with the efforts of the educational programs for their children. The analysis of the open-ended survey responses provides examples and elaborations on these key issues.

ANALYSIS OF PARENT SURVEYS: OPEN-ENDED PROMPTS

Two open-ended questions were posed to parents of English Learners and parents of Standard English Learners. Both groups of parents identified similar themes; however, there was a variation in the number of times a specific topic/recommendation was mentioned for each theme as well as in the emphasis provided by each group of parents, as evidenced by the delineation of their "representative comments." These comments are included to elucidate parent voices since all parent leadership groups surveyed emphatically expressed the desire to have a collective representation of parent voices be heard throughout the district. Five recurring themes emerged from the analyses of both parent groups' open-ended responses to question #1: "What should LAUSD do to educate English Learners and Standard English Learners?" and to question #2: "What information do parents need?"³ These themes include: (1) school and home collaboration, (2) preparation and professional development, (3) curriculum and instruction, (4) accountability, and (5) extended learning opportunities. The themes are reported holistically in the next section according to whether the survey was completed in Spanish or English. We used language of response as a proxy for parent group membership (Spanish for designating parent of English Learners; English for parents of Standard English Learners). There were 3 Korean, 1 Chinese, 1 Vietnamese, 1 German, for a total of 6 responses given in English; these were also considered part of the English Learner parent group.

THEME 1: SCHOOL AND HOME COLLABORATION

There were several sub-themes that parent leadership groups identified as being critical for their participation in the district. These centered on respect and building collaboration, improving communication between home and school, and specific requests for education and workshops for parents. Clear and concise information was requested about program options, criteria for identification, monitoring, and reclassification.

Parents of English Learners:

- *Hay que crear conciencia en que se les eduque en la casa y la escuela es para aprender* (Create awareness that moral/values education is provided at home and school is a place for learning).
- *Información a los padres sobre servicios y programas* (Information for parents about services and programs).
- *Involucrar más a los padres y no solo con información, también aceptando ideas y opciones* (Involve parents, not only with information, but also accepting ideas & opinions).

Parents of Standard English Learners:

- Genuine parent involvement and customer service that serves the actual population. Only through AEMP program is there any support for Standard English Learners; they need to feel a part of the district.
- Strategic collaboration-building between parents and teachers, staff and parents, staff to staff.
- Need more town hall meetings with the teachers and the principals together with the parents, and need to feel less intimidated so they can really speak to the issues.

THEME 2: SCHOOL AND HOME COLLABORATION

Parents commented on the need for better or well-qualified teachers, principals, coordinators, counselors, school personnel, and requested that educators be familiar with students' home language, cultural backgrounds, and the instruction of English.

Parents of English Learners:

- *Educar primero al distrito escolar, a los directores en la oficina, y a los maestros que entiendan el idioma y la cultura* (Educate the district first, principals in the office, and teachers so they understand the language and culture).

Parents of Standard English Learners:

- Need more teachers who are culturally aware of their students (learn about the community's culture) and to teach accordingly.

THEME 3: CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Parents mentioned **curriculum and instruction** both in general terms and specific to curricular areas including Reading/Language arts, instruction of English, class size, and other subject areas. Parents of English Learners recognized the significance of valuing, using, and supporting **students' home languages, bilingualism, & biliteracy** as contributing to their children's school experience and academic achievement. Parents of Standard English Learners referenced a need for **culturally relevant curriculum** and expressed an interest in developing a second (non-English) language for SELs.

Parents of English Learners:

- *Darles clases de inglés adicionales no solo la instrucción en inglés porque al no entender el idioma el estudiante se frustra* (Give students additional English classes, not merely provide instruction in English because a student can become frustrated if he doesn't understand the language).
- *Más apoyo en el idioma que habla como primer idioma y permitir en todas las escuelas la educación bilingüe para valorar el lenguaje que ya tienen* (More primary language support and allow bilingual education in every school to value the language they have).

Parents of Standard English Learners:

- I think each Standard English Learner needs support. SEL students are being left behind. Students need dual languages and culturally relevant curriculum. It's hard for them to compete for jobs. Dual languages will help in our community.
- Continue support for the AEMP program. Need more money and support to fund the AEMP program so that other schools may benefit from the program.

THEME 4: ACCOUNTABILITY

In the area of accountability, parents addressed the importance of holding all district personnel responsible for the education of ELs and SELs. Their comments reflected suggestions for accountability.

Parents of English Learners:

- *Monitoriar los directores sobre los planes de educación que se está llevando en las escuelas* (Monitor principals in regards to educational plans that are being implemented in schools).
- *Que el Plan Master se implemente en las escuelas* (That the Master Plan is implemented in the schools).



Parents of Standard English Learners:

- I believe that schools should be held accountable (principals), make sure teachers are being effective and that children are learning on a daily basis.
- Establish a monitoring system that measures the progress of Standard English Learners. The system should be district wide and AEMP should be instrumental in monitoring the Standard English progress.

THEME 5: EXTENDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Parents requested **tutors and academic support** for students, suggesting both in-and out-of-classroom support through differentiation, after school tutoring, Saturday classes, and summer school. Additionally, parents of Standard English Learners expressed a need for more resources and increased support for the AEMP program.

Parents of English Learners:

- *Sería excelente que se les diera la oportunidad de tener más apoyo, ejemplo tutor o mentor uno a uno por estudiante 2 horas por semana dentro de la escuela (... Provide opportunities for additional support, ex.: tutors or mentors one-on-one for students, 2 hours per week during school).*
- *Más programas en las vacaciones para los niños y después de escuela (More programs during students' vacation and after school).*

Parents of Standard English Learners:

- Additional educators (teachers and tutors) and one-on-one tutoring is needed.
- Supply us with all the valuable resources to assist us to achieve and more books, resources and a variety of educational tools.

IMPLICATIONS: EDUCATIONAL AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The purposeful sampling of parent opinions and voices collected through the A+ English Learner Parent Survey provides a critical perspective for avenues for change with regards to the education of English Learners and Standard English Learners within the Los Angeles Unified School District. The following are recommendations for responding to key issues as a result of the survey:

School and Home Collaboration

- Additional educators (teachers and tutors) and one-on-one tutoring is needed.
- Investigate successful models of Family Literacy programs at elementary, middle and high school levels to determine best practices for English Learners and Standard English Learners.
- Identify successful parent/community centers within and outside of the district to emulate across schools.
- Investigate research and implications for incorporating student's cultures and backgrounds within parent and community groups as a foundation for student learning and teacher-parent collaboration.
- Identify personnel and procedures at the local level for collecting additional parent voices and create a system for two-way communication between school and home.
- Review policy and procedures for informing parents of English Learners and Standard English Learners of all instructional models and program options.

Professional Development, Curriculum and Instruction, and Tutors/Support

- Define, coordinate, and communicate with parents regarding the programs and outcomes of district professional development efforts on English Language Development/Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English and include parent leaders as co-learners.
- Review curriculum for cultural relevancy.

- Review research and models for the use of primary language as a vehicle for second language acquisition, including bilingual program options.
- Explore procedures and possibilities for increasing support and resources for the AEMP program, including school design models.
- Investigate successful models of tutoring/support that include in-classroom and after-school opportunities.

Accountability

- Examine district infrastructure to determine how to best monitor school site implementation of programs, beyond the submission of written plans.
- Work collaboratively with teacher and administrator unions to review process and procedures for monitoring the implementation and quality of programs.
- Establish a system for supporting school site administrators in identifying and meeting the needs of English Learners and Standard English Learners within their sites.

CONCLUSION

Authentic parent involvement and engagement occurs when parents' voices are purposefully and intentionally a central part of any district or school-level change efforts. Improvement in the educational experiences and outcomes for Standard English Learners and English Learners can happen by capitalizing on the existing parent leadership in LAUSD.

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¹ There were a total of 16 questionnaire items in the Spanish version and 19 in the English version (the additional questions distinguished between the education of SELs and ELs).

² The LAUSD has selected not to implement an identification process for labeling Standard English Learners in part out of concern for the further marginalization and segregation of SELs from mainstream instruction and partially because of the high percentage of the African American, American Indian, Hawaiian American and Mexican American student population (estimates are between 75-80%) who are potentially Standard English Learners.

³ These are the question stems for the entire questions. The questionnaire is available upon request.



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