Year Round Involvement of Latino Parents in School Activities

Establish a Relationship
At the beginning of the year identify Latino students. Begin by making introduction phone calls to parents and inviting them to orientation night. Follow up the phone call with a note. This makes the invitation official and lets parents know that they are expected. Then prepare for year round parent involvement by implementing the following techniques.

Once Parents are in Attendance
Create a comfortable environment. Acknowledge their presence as soon as they arrive or as soon as possible. Establish a support system. If you have returning Latino parents ask if they will provide a brief newcomer orientation. Practice your basic high school Spanish, use the terms “hola” {hello}, “buenas tardes” {good evening}, “bienvenido” {welcome}, “como esta”{how are you} and “muchas gracias” {thank you}. It’s okay to use flash cards with the translated term. It shows that you care enough to make a special effort. A smile is most effective and guarantees results each time.

Orientation Night
When you greet parents introduce yourself as “la Maestra/el Maestro de Carlos or whatever your title.” Introduce parents to staff who will interact with their child such as, school counselors, office staff and the principal. Make introductions short, friendly and comfortable. Unless you are dealing with a returning parent assume that they are not familiar with school policies and procedures. Provide parents with the school rules and regulations handbook and highlight attendance and homework procedure. If your school doesn’t have these documents in Spanish find out how soon these can be translated. In the meantime see if at least the most important one-two pages can be translated. Ask parents to participate in school activities and be ready to provide thorough information on the purpose of their participation.

Expectations
Have the same high expectations of Latino/immigrant parents as you would any other parent. Let parents know the important role they play in their child’s education. Keep in mind that parent involvement is an American concept and might not be common in their country of origin. Since your goal is to encourage and increase Latino parent involvement, provide at least one or two training’s that informs parents of their role and their rights and responsibilities in school and in their child’s education. Community agencies such as MALDEF (Mexican American Legal Defense & Education Fund) provide trainings for Spanish-speaking parent groups on these very topics. www.maldef.org

Two-Way Communication
Let parents know the importance of communication between teacher and parent. Make clear that even if they only speak Spanish they have the right to call, speak or write a note to the teacher whenever they have a question or concern. Call the parent at home if necessary. Even if you are speaking in English the parent is aware of the importance of your phone call simply by the fact that you are calling! They, in turn, will find out the purpose of your call.

Parent/Teacher Conferences
Work in partnership with your school Latino Liaison/Coordinator to decide the best way to conduct conferences. If most Latino parents live in the same vicinity, can school personnel plan to take the conferences to them? Is there a nearby church or community center that can be used? Once logistics are final, make phone calls to all Latino parents to inform them of conference details. Oral communication is the key connector. Do not rely solely on the student to communicate conference details to parents. Then, to assure a successful conference have an interpreter(s) in attendance. Most universities, colleges and high schools have students who will volunteer to interpret. Local Latino non-profit agencies can provide a list of professional interpreters. This requires prior planning but it is well worth the effort. Having interpreters avoids placing the parent in the awkward position of their child interpreting the parent/teacher conversation.
Talking to a parent via an interpreter
Make and maintain eye contact with the parent. Direct your comments to the parent and not the interpreter. If possible provide the interpreter with an outline of your planned topics for discussion. During the conversation pause at intervals to allow the parent time for questions/comments, this also permits the interpreter a pause.

Acknowledge feelings of discomfort
Because the majority of Latino parents are newcomers to the American school system it is common for them to experience insecurities, inadequacies, and awkwardness. These feelings stem from the fact that they still struggle to communicate in English. They might still be learning the ins and outs of school requirements/events. Take time to check in with them and ask if they understand or if they have any comments or questions. Use small talk to break the ice. “I enjoy having your son/daughter in my classroom”, “thanks for joining us today”. Empathy is recognized in all languages.

Special Events
Make a special effort to inform parents of student events such as, intramural activities, homework, tutoring classes or school activities like talent shows, Literacy Day, etc. Ask if the child has transportation to and from these activities. If you cannot communicate in Spanish, communicate in English. Most Latino parents understand enough English to figure out what you are saying. Talk slowly. Follow up with a note. And just communicate! To be effective, all written communication to parents should be in both English and the home language.

Attendance at School Events
Keep in mind that many Latino parents have two jobs but only one car. That means that the parent available to attend school functions might not have transportation. Ask about carpooling or let them know if school transportation is provided. It is normal for Latino parents to bring the whole family to school functions. Providing childcare and refreshments will provide a comfortable setting and result in positive outcomes for parents and staff.

In Summary
The key to effective parent involvement is complex. No one technique will have the same effect for all parents. Creating a comfortable and welcoming environment is a beneficial beginning. The common universal thread binding Latino parents to all parents is that they want the very best for their children. They have tremendous abilities and skills and they instill these in their children everyday. The drawback is that Spanish-speaking parents themselves often contribute to the misconception that they can't help their children because “they don't speak English”. By implementing the above techniques you are helping Latino parents understand the important role they play in guiding their child towards achieving a successful education and you will advance your goal of attaining effective parent involvement.

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