

## **Tips for Reaching “Hard to Reach” Families<sup>1</sup>**

### **Personalize**

- Differentiate support for parents so that it is appropriate to their individual needs and strengths.
- Be honest and forthcoming to avoid perceptions of being evasive or guilty.
- Use one-to-one personal connections to build trust.
- Keep communication informal at first.
- Use “family” instead of “guardian” or “parent” in communications.
- Use personal invites from school staff and student volunteers.
- Make events smaller – spread out back-to-school nights over the week with one grade per night.
- Learn and speak simple phrases in families’ native languages.
- Hold dinners for families to target subgroups needing support.
- Create venues for parents to submit questions online and in person.
- Invite families to be cultural brokers and teachers for teachers.

### **Focus on the message and the messenger**

- Market how you want families to communicate in non-traditional places (i.e., grocery store, bodega, bus stops, etc.).
- At all events, promote the “brand” of how families can support learning at home.
- Create family bulletin boards for families to communicate with one another.
- Hire and designate bilingual family-friendly staff.
- Consider organizing student-led conferences.
- Work with community members and groups to connect families and the school as cultural brokers.
- Create a buddy system and phone web for families.
- Arrange networking opportunities so families develop relationships with other families.
- Incorporate students’ demonstrations of their learning into your engagement activities.
- Form a community network to conduct outreach.

### **Get creative**

- Use a variety of communications.
- Share materials (especially video) and personal notes with families who miss events.
- Create magnets to share pertinent information.
- Keep web and phone communications up-to-date and relevant.
- Use newsletters to link families to learning.
- Create an e-mail address and phone “hotline” for parents.
- As an alternative to home visits, go to families’ workplaces to have “lunch ’n learns.”
- Create videos to communicate with parents.
- Develop a school and classroom web page.
- Check your e-mail and make weekly e-mail updates to families.
- Use alternatives in conferencing with families:
  - Student involvement
  - Group conferences
  - Telephone conferences
  - Home visits
  - Community and workplace conferences

### **Watch what and how you communicate**

- Stop using education jargon and communicate more simply.
- Translate in native languages.
- Understand how information spreads and understand that negative information spreads faster.
- Be explicit about “hidden” rules of engagement that may not be shared by all families (i.e., are your “asks” of parents things that acknowledge their cultural, financial, and logistical preferences?).
- Be sensitive to families’ financial needs by not frequently sending home requests for money or supplies.
- Avoid “tourist curricula” focused on superficial aspects of a culture.
- Be aware of costs to support transportation for conferences, events, and fieldtrips.
- Do not assume that families can provide homework help or other kinds of help you ask for – ask them what they can do and what they need help with.
- Recognize the whole family – dads, grandparents, older sibling, aunts, etc.
- Make folders sent home more action-oriented and preparatory rather than passive and historical.
- Don’t think sending stuff home is communicating – ask parents how to communicate.

### **Make involvement easy and exciting**

- Provide food and child care.
- Address the language barrier – translate report cards, testing information, newsletters, and other communications.
- Make events fun and involve the whole family.
- Arrange parent-teacher conferences and events after work hours.
- Include office hours and your contact information in *all* communications.
- Use strategies that meet parents’ basic needs and goals.

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from Henderson, A., Mapp, K.L., Johnson, V., Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the Bake Sale*. New York: New Press. Allen, J. (2007). *Creating Welcoming Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press. Edwards, P. (2009). *Tapping the Potential of Parents*. New York: Scholastic. Constantino, S. (2008). *101 Ways to Create Real Family Engagement*. Galax, VA: ENGAGE! Press.