

Programs to Engage Parents and Other Family Members

SNAPSHOT

Program:

Compadres in Education

School:

Putnam City West High School

District:

Putnam City Schools

Location:

Oklahoma City, Okla.

Grades: 9-12

Enrollment: 1,600

Free/reduced-price lunch: 73%

ELL: 10%

Holding community conversations with Hispanic families

Compadres in Education

Putnam City West High School

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Putnam City West High School serves a rapidly changing, ethnically mixed cross-section of Oklahoma City, Okla. The student body turns over at a rate of 40 percent per year, and more than 70 percent of students come from low-income families. In 2007, with support from the National Education Association (NEA) and the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA), the high school staff and administrators began convening a series of community conversations about closing achievement gaps at the school. The result is Compadres in Education, a program of outreach to Hispanic families.

Since the program's inception in 2007, the graduation rate among Hispanic students has risen by nearly 70 percent and participation at Noche de Padres Hispánicos (Hispanic Family Night) has increased from 50 to more than 250 people. Use of service-learning, a proven means of motivating students, is growing. Putnam City West's student body is 39 percent white, 25 percent African American, 25 percent Hispanic, 6 percent Native American, and 3 percent Asian.

Assistant Principal Melanie Pealor says, "The bottom line is, 'What can I do to help my students to graduate, go on to secondary schools, and be successful?' We must have a partnership between the school, the families, and the community. And it's working!"

How the program works

NEA staff joined Dottie Hager, OEA's associate executive director, in training local community members to facilitate and record community conversation and building local capacity to sustain the program. In 2007, the school held three such conversations with Hispanic families and community members. Parents who attended the first conversation said they did not feel welcome at the school and needed information in Spanish about how the high school works. They asked the school to hire more bilingual staff members who could share information with them. In the ensuing conversations, parents asked for more

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information about college admissions and requested improvements in the English Language Learners (ELL) program.

As a result of this feedback, the school began to hold meetings with its Hispanic families through a series of evening events called Noche de Padres Hispánicos or Hispanic Family Night, each focusing on a specific topic. One evening each quarter, the school opens its doors to students and their families. Many sessions focus on increasing graduation and college attendance rates:

- ▶ Presentations demonstrate the economic value of higher education, showing that students who have a bachelor's degree earn more than those who have only a high school diploma or a GED.
- ▶ Local colleges talk about their programs and encourage students to apply.
- ▶ Teachers help students and their families complete college financial aid forms, including the notorious FAFSA (federal aid application), and applications for Oklahoma's Promise, a state scholarship program for students from low-income families.

Other Hispanic Family Nights have addressed topics such as the legal rights of immigrants, the challenges of raising teens, and tips for success in high school and college.

The school has taken several actions in response to concerns raised in the community conversations:

- ▶ Adding bilingual staff members. Currently, 25 percent of staff are bilingual, including a receptionist, an ELL graduation coach, and instructional assistants in ELL, algebra, and English classes.

- ▶ Offering professional development to enrich teaching of English Language Learners and enhance learning among ELL students
- ▶ Providing course descriptions in both Spanish and English and descriptions of college entrance requirements in both languages
- ▶ Expanding opportunities for students to engage in service-learning (community service activities aligned with the curriculum), especially for students who are at risk of dropping out
- ▶ Adding specific classes as needed in ninth and tenth grade core subjects for ELL students: a bilingual assistant translates for the teacher and provides extra support for the students. During Parent Night, parents visit these classrooms and meet the teacher and the bilingual assistant.

Evidence of effectiveness

From 2010 to 2011, end-of-instruction test pass rates among Hispanic students rose dramatically in several subjects, including: from 63 to 72 percent in Algebra I; from 82 to 95 percent in Algebra II; from 53 to 71 percent in Biology I; and from 84 to 96 percent in English III.

Assistant Principal Melanie Pealor says that since the inception of Compadres in Education in 2007:

- ▶ The graduation rate among Hispanic students has increased by nearly 70 percent.
- ▶ The Academic Performance Index for Hispanic students has risen by nearly 30 percent, from 893 to 1,151 (on a 1,500-point scale).
- ▶ Attendance at Noche de Padres Hispánicos (Hispanic Family Night) has increased from 50 to more than 250 attendees.

Exemplary practices

Providing professional development that focuses on communicating with ELL students: Teachers are learning effective techniques involving visual presentation of information and use of hands-on activities. They are also learning ways to create an environment in which students and parents who are still learning English are comfortable speaking English together, even if they make mistakes.

Listening regularly to parents and families: At Hispanic Family Nights, families and school staff engage in continuous dialogue on topics suggested by families and community members. This regular communication is helping teachers work more effectively with family members and helping families feel more comfortable approaching school staff.

Building community support: The principal and her team have met with representatives from Hispanic organizations, Oklahoma City Community College, Oklahoma State University, faith-based communities, and various community organizations and encouraged them to attend Hispanic Family Night. Their involvement has led to growing numbers of academic and athletic scholarship offerings for Hispanic students and a rising graduation rate.

Outlook

Biannual community conversations and quarterly Hispanic Family Nights have become part of the school culture. Next, Pealor plans to begin a similar initiative for African-American students and families. Many of the practices adopted already have contributed to improved performance among all students at the school and more effective communication with all families.

OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA

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Association perspective

This project was brought to life through collaboration across all levels of the Association (local, state, and national). Its success at the site level relies on administrator and member buy-in and in the Association's willingness to listen to the community.

"I am proud that the staff at Putnam City West High School is working so effectively with Hispanic students and their families. The outcomes for students have been impressive," says Linda Hampton, president of the Oklahoma Education Association. "To ensure that all families and students feel welcome at school, we're expanding this successful partnership model into the African-American and Native-American communities as well. Our goal is to provide the support to ensure that every child has the opportunity to realize his or her potential."

Local contacts

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