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# Encouraging Spanish-Speaking Parent Involvement: Overcoming the Barriers at Crocker Farm Elementary School

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Encouraging Spanish-Speaking Parent Involvement:  
Overcoming the Barriers at Crocker Farm Elementary School

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Capstone Seminar  
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## **Executive Summary**

The average student spends between six and seven hours in the classroom each day. However, children need educational support that exceeds the traditional school day in order to develop to their full potential, so parents play a vital role in a child's ability to succeed. Parent involvement can take a variety of forms both formally in schools and informally at home, yet Spanish-speaking parents often face a variety of barriers that limit their ability to actively participate in their child's education. While these problems typically occur in urban districts, Massachusetts and the Pioneer Valley in particular have a growing proportion of Spanish-speaking families. In Amherst, Crocker Farm Elementary School is an example of a school where the majority of parents are very active, yet the large Spanish-speaking population has had a difficult time participating in traditional ways. This qualitative case study will use methods including interviews, participant observation, and primary source analysis to conduct a programmatic evaluation of the support being offered by Crocker Farm and a needs assessment of this parent population. This will help align the needs of the parents and the action of the school in order to provide all students with the support they need both in and outside of the classroom.

This study will help to answer three different research questions that can help support and enhance parent participation. First, how do Crocker Farm parents and administration understand and define the challenges of its Spanish-speaking parents? Second, how do the perceptions and administrative roles of the staff affect their understanding of the problems and solutions for this issue? And finally, how can all of the stakeholders' needs and resources be effectively used to create a sustainable system that cultivates an engaged parent population? By working directly with the stakeholders in a variety of roles regarding parent involvement, this case study breaks down the issue into communication barriers, structural limitations, and cultural challenges that face this specific parent population, as well as the institutional limitations of school. By understanding these challenges, Crocker Farm can learn how to effectively support its Spanish-speaking parents by building individual relationships, cultivating school-wide encouragement, and perpetuating systemic change at the district level.

This paper concludes with recommendations for Crocker Farm which can be used to create an environment that welcomes and encourages Spanish-speaking parents to actively participate. By outlining steps for improved communication and coordination, Crocker Farm can utilize its existing programs and initiatives at the individual, school, and district level in order to build a sustainable system that effectively supports parents. These strategies will help to inform Crocker Farm's decision-making process and can also act as a framework for any rural school district facing this challenge in order to increase participation and improve the quality of parent-school interactions.

## Introduction

The average student spends between six and seven hours in the classroom each day. However, children need educational support that exceeds the traditional school day in order to develop to their potential, so parents play a vital role in a child's ability to succeed. Parent involvement can take a variety of forms both formally in schools and informally at home, yet Spanish-speaking parents often face a variety of barriers that limit their ability to actively participate in their child's education. While these problems typically occur in urban school districts, Massachusetts and the Pioneer Valley in particular have a growing proportion of Spanish-speaking families. In Amherst, Crocker Farm Elementary School is an example of a school where the majority of parents are very active, yet the large Spanish-speaking population has had a difficult time participating in traditional ways; 17% of the school is Latino and 60% of these parents do not speak English, so Crocker Farm is the ideal location for a case study on the challenges and implications for Spanish-speaking parent involvement in a rural setting.

This research will use qualitative methods including interviews, participant observation, and secondary data analysis to conduct a programmatic evaluation of the support being offered by Crocker Farm and a needs assessment of this parent population. This study will help to answer three different research questions which can help support and enhance parent participation at this school. First, how do Crocker Farm parents and administration understand and define the challenges of its Spanish-speaking parents? Second, how do the perceptions and administrative roles of the staff affect their understanding of the problems and solutions for this issue? And finally, how can all of the stakeholders' needs and resources be used effectively to create a sustainable system that cultivates an engaged parent population? By working directly with the stakeholders in a variety of roles regarding parent involvement, this case study breaks down the issue into communication barriers, structural limitations, and cultural challenges that face this specific parent population, as

well as the institutional limitations of school. By understanding these challenges, Crocker Farm can learn how to effectively support its Spanish-speaking parents by building individual relationships, cultivating school-wide encouragement, and perpetuating systemic change at the district level which can develop the necessary channels to support this parent population.

## **Literature Review**

### **Parent Involvement as an Educational Support**

While many factors affect the educational experience and success of a child, parent involvement is seen as one of the major educational supplements that can help academic and overall development. Parent involvement is broadly defined as parents' investment and dedication to their child's education. This encompasses a variety of activities and attitudes which can take many forms including volunteering at school, helping children with homework, attending school functions, visiting the child's classroom, guest speaking to share expertise or experiences with the class, and taking on leadership roles in the school and participating in the decision-making process (LaRocque 2011).

By participating in these types of activities, there are a variety of positive outcomes for children, the parents themselves, and for teachers. When open communication exists between parents and educators, teachers can better understand the individual needs of the children and can use class time more effectively (LaRoque 2011). This two-way communication creates a sense of trust that the schools are doing what they should and that parents are accountable to the child's education as well. Trust between parents and teachers leads to high interest from both parties, so this creates a level of commitment and obligation that provides support for children on all fronts (Karakus 2012).

Children also learn through observation; if they see their parents engaged in the educational process, they will learn how to participate themselves. Active parents also have access to networks

that can provide resources to children including tutoring, extracurricular activities, or enrichment opportunities that are not provided by the school and children cannot seek out by themselves. This leads to an increase in social capital which can assist children in their cognitive, emotional, and academic development (Bower 2011).

Studies have also shown that successful parent involvement can lead to short-term benefits such as improved academic achievement, school attendance, graduation rates, positive classroom behavior, enrolling in challenging curricula, and favorable attitudes towards school. It can also provide long-term benefits including improved health outcomes, decreased welfare dependence, and reduced crime (Bracke 2012). Overall, the literature points to a clear conclusion: the school day does not provide enough educational stimuli to develop children to their full potential. Therefore, parents play a critical role in their child's development, and active school participation has significant academic, psychological, and developmental benefits in both the short and long term.

Although these clear benefits can come from a variety of methods for parent involvement, many parents do not and cannot take on these traditional roles because they cannot speak English. The three primary obstacles facing this population are communication barriers, structural limitations, and cultural challenges. Communication is a crucial aspect that is necessary to engage in a child's education, and this language barrier immediately excludes many parents from participating in conventional ways. Further, this creates a lack of trust and understanding that is compounded by the low educational attainment and academic knowledge of many of the parents themselves.

Also, while not every Spanish-speaking parent is classified as low income, the majority of the Latino parent population at many schools is of low socioeconomic status. Traditional methods of participating in education often require parents to invest time and money into their child's educational experience. Due to the types of jobs held by this population and their limited economic

resources, these parents are often labeled as uninvolved when in reality the problem is that they do not have the means to provide these resources for their children (Bower 2011).

The literature on parent involvement also points to cultural influences as a major factor that influences how parents participate. Families of Latino heritage often do not contact the school about problems or suggestions because they respect the authority and role of the teacher and school, who are seen as educational experts. Latino families can be deferential to authority, but the school often mistakes this for a lack of involvement instead of a cultural difference (Bower 2011). One study also found that Latino parents do not think in terms of “involvement” but rather of *apoyo* (support), which takes a more holistic view of providing advice for life instead of strategies for navigating the school system (Auerbach 2011). These cultural differences are not inherently bad, but are often misunderstood by schools because they do have an impact on the way and frequency in which parents engage with their child’s education (Smith 2008).

Finally, although parents are facing this variety of barriers, institutional challenges of the schools perpetuate this problem. No Child Left Behind formalized the right for parents to know what is happening in their child’s education, but most teachers are unprepared to deal with the challenges of this population have little training in strategies for parent involvement, especially for non-English speaking families (Bracke 2012). This prevents teachers from reaching out and causes both teachers and parents to retreat and separate instead of coming together to tackle this issue. While each parent’s experience is different, low-income Spanish speaking populations face many of these challenges and as a whole, this group of parents often participates less which prevents children from receiving optimal educational support.

### **Context of Parent Involvement in Amherst**

These challenges are particularly relevant and crucial to understand in the context of Amherst, Massachusetts because of the economic and cultural diversity present in the town. The



Five Colleges bring a lot of middle class parents to the area, so many parents take an active role in the school system above and beyond attending conferences as they volunteer, participate in the school committee, seek out extracurricular activities, and help children with homework. However, many residents are facing economic and linguistic challenges in Amherst. Overall, 79% of residents in Amherst are white and 7% are Hispanic, yet these city percentages differ from the 51% white and 17% Hispanic ratios at Crocker Farm (CensusViewer 2012; “Enrollment Summary...” 2013).

Although Crocker Farm’s proportion of Spanish-speakers is higher than the city average, Amherst schools have worked to make maintain a proportionate percentage of low income students and various racial groups in all of the schools in order to provide improved educational opportunities for all of the city’s students. The Amherst Public Schools passed a motion to redistrict the area schools 2009, which shifted the racial breakdown from individual schools housing a single ethnic population—Crocker Farm being a primarily Hispanic school—to all of the schools integrating students of all races, backgrounds, and languages. The desired outcome of this process was to provide all students with the opportunities to improve their educational attainment.

In reality, the test scores paint a very different picture. Only 41% percent of Hispanic students in Amherst elementary schools are proficient in English and 33% are where they should be for math. While these scores are similar to the state average, Amherst schools have not been improving; language skills have remained stagnant and math scores have declined 10% in the last five years (McCoy 2013). Test scores are not a direct indicator of parent involvement, but due to the proven correlation between increased parent participation and improved academic outcomes, test scores can provide a numerical proxy measurement for overall student achievement.

It is important to note that ethnic diversity itself is not the cause of low test scores, but it is clear that these students are not mastering the same skills as their peers. Further, 60% of Crocker Farm’s Hispanic students have parents who have identified themselves and limited English

proficient and have requested communication and materials to be in Spanish. While this language barrier can be overcome, it has been a significant challenge for Crocker Farm and these families to work together to ensure the academic success of the children in Amherst.

## **Methods**

In order to examine the intricacies of the challenges faced by the school and Spanish-speaking parents themselves, a qualitative case study design was used to examine the issue of parent involvement in the context of Crocker Farm. Parent involvement is not a definitive concept and varies based on individual experiences and beliefs, understanding of the school system, culture, and educational strategies. This makes a qualitative case study the ideal mechanism for this research because it provides insight into parents' interest, responsiveness, initiative, and action. This methodology also provides firsthand insight into the intricacies of the school-parent relationship at the classroom, school administration, and district level, and the analysis of this data has led to a clearer picture of the situation at Crocker Farm.

In this case study, a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and secondary data analysis were used to explore parent involvement at Crocker Farm. This blend of research techniques provided multi-faceted data based on formal policies, historical initiatives, individual beliefs, and observed actions. By triangulating the data collected from this variety of methods, this study provides a clear picture of the challenges parents face, the abilities and limitations of the administration, and can inform the development of a strategic plan that benefits all involved parties.

## **Sample and Data Collection**

Participant observation was the primary source of data collection to understand the behavior and beliefs of the parents. I began working as a weekly volunteer translator in the main office of Crocker Farm in September 2012, and for eight months I spent two hours every week calling

parents, translating announcements and documents, and assisting the counselor and ELL teacher with outreach projects. This personal connection with the school also allowed me firsthand access to approximately 20 Spanish-speaking families through 25 volunteer sessions in the main office, four school-sponsored evening events, and two individual interviews with parents. This observation allowed me to get a better understanding of the target population and cultural aspects of this issue by analyzing their actions in context.

Semi-structured interviews were another primary data collection mechanism. To gain insight into the administration's perspective, I spoke with a variety of administrators and teachers who represented stakeholders at varying levels of power, responsibility, and parent interaction. Stakeholders included the Crocker Farm principal, a guidance counselor, an ELL (English Language Learner) teacher, the principal's secretary, the special education secretary, and a UMass student who volunteers with the Amherst Public Schools. In order to protect their privacy, they will be identified by their titles instead of their names throughout this paper. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and much of the information discussed built upon previous informal conversations I had while volunteering. Throughout the year, I continuously followed up with the administrators on an informal basis to ask clarifying questions and gain insight into the specifics of their processes. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with two Spanish-speaking mothers and I asked questions relating to their personal experience as well as their perceptions of the broader Spanish-speaking community at Crocker Farm. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated into English for this analysis.

Finally, I gathered secondary data to provide a supplement to my observations and interactions with parents and administrators. To understand the effectiveness of current programs and policies, I examined the response rate for administrative paperwork, event attendance rates, and resources such as PowerPoint slides from meetings. When partnered with local newspaper articles

and a blog maintained by an Amherst School Committee member during the 2009 redistricting, I was able to see a more robust picture of the historic and current situation of parent involvement in Amherst.

### **Issues of Limited Access**

Due to Crocker Farm's policy that limits external contact with students and parents, I faced major barriers when trying to gain direct access to the parent population. Two parents were referred to me by the counselor, but my primary point of entry into the parent population was observation which would have been greatly enhanced with direct conversations with parents. In order to build upon this study design, direct interactions with parents in the form of interviews and focus groups should be used in order to compare and contrast their ideas with their observed behavior.

### **Findings and Analysis**

In order to effectively support Spanish-speaking parents, it is important to define the problem in terms of the specific context of Crocker Farm in order to understand the landscape and properly move forward. The key challenges facing parents at Crocker Farm can be broken down into three categories: communication, structural limitations, and culture. Additionally, the institutional challenges of Crocker Farm and the district create further obstacles for parents which perpetuate this issue. These categories are examined by comparing testimonies of the administration with the behavior and beliefs of parents themselves, and these two lenses provide insight into the overlap and the disconnect between these two groups in terms of understanding of the challenges facing Spanish-speaking parents.

### **Communication Challenges**

In the context of the parent-school relationship, communication is defined as both the dissemination of material as well as active outreach and the back and forth exchange of ideas between parents and the school. When examining relationship between Crocker Farm and its

Spanish-speaking parents, communication is the most upfront and obvious challenge due to the language barrier which logistically prevents parents from becoming involved, even if they want to be a part of their child's education.

### *Administrative Testimonies*

Communication was the first barrier noted by the administrators and was especially emphasized by the secretaries who have the most frequent interactions with parents. The principal's secretary described the communication challenge by pointing to a reoccurring situation that happens often in the main office. She said,

Parents come in and you can pick up that they have a meeting with the teacher, but you can't pick up which class they're in or what time and stuff like that. So you sort of feel a little bit helpless in the situation—that you really want to be there to help them but there's a big barrier there (November 14, 2012).

As the secretary explained, this communication barrier is felt by both the parents who are trying to be involved and the administrators who are trying to support their participation. The secretary identified this problem as a language barrier, but it must be broken down into two distinct needs: translation and communication.

The first of these challenges is the logistical language barrier and the need for translated material. In order to make these parents more comfortable and help boost their participation, the Amherst Public Schools have placed an emphasis on translated documents that are sent home to parents. When the secretary began her job at Crocker Farm ten years ago, she said that nothing was being translated. Now, 90% of district-wide materials such as forms and registration information are translated, but only 20% of Crocker Farm's materials sent to parents are translated into Spanish. The secretary said that the district has a few translators that return translated items in two to three days, but due to capacity issues they can only translate important items that affect parents' decision about the education of their child, such as the conference schedule or standardized testing

information. This often does not include parent newsletters or general announcements, so non-English speaking parents are often excluded from becoming informed of school-wide issues.

Although not all material is translated, parents can opt to receive some materials in Spanish by identifying their linguistic needs when they register their children; they can request documents to be translated, calls to be made in their native language, and translators to be present at conferences and school interactions. However, it is crucial that the school helps the families properly identify their needs in order for the system to work. The special education secretary noted a problematic situation as she described, “I print out my IEP (Individual Education Plan) documents and it says ‘English, English, English,’ but I’ve talked to the parent who doesn’t understand English, and then I’ve got to go back and make sure that it’s imputed properly” (April 4, 2013). The initial meeting sets the stage for the rest of the relationship with the parent, so this phase is one of the most crucial in the process.

While translation was highlighted as a key necessity for involving parents, it is not a stand-alone support; active communication and outreach are necessary supplements in order to truly engage parents. Due to their proximity and frequent interaction with families, the principal’s secretary, the special education secretary, and the ELL teacher all identified having an actual person that parents can interact with as a crucial factor for success. The principal’s secretary gave the example of registration: “You have people coming in to register, and we do have all the forms translated into Spanish... but that’s not going to help me because I can’t read the Spanish. So there’s still that barrier” (November 14, 2013). Because this is the first contact the school has with the parents, having a native speaker in the office would drastically help with the intake process and help parents begin to learn how to navigate Crocker Farm’s systems and practices. By actively making parents aware of these services, they are more likely to be utilized to parent can be properly supported.

The district also began a new program in the fall of 2012 to have a volunteer translator help out in the main office of each of the Amherst Public Schools. By taking on this role, I called parents to invite them to school events, ask if parents would be interested in summer programs, and inform them of scheduling changes. Even though I was only in the office once each week, I was able to actively reach out to parents which supplemented the translated material that went home. It took approximately four months before the administration had a steady amount of work for me to do because my role had not been institutionalized, but once they expected me to come each week, they were able to place a higher emphasis on outreach instead of just focusing on translation.

### ***Parental Behavior***

Although many administrators pointed to communication as a major barrier, the parents themselves have seemed to have adapted to their non-English environment in terms of functionality, but the linguistic divide appears to prevent parents from actively reaching out and expressing themselves. However, when activities are run in their native language, this allows parents to break out of that shell. When the district hosted an event in Spanish which had featured Crocker Farm's principal, two ELL teachers, and a guidance counselor who were all Spanish-speakers, a mother raised her hand and said, "We're so glad you speak Spanish. It shows you care about the Spanish-speaking community when we can have events entirely in Spanish without translators" (April 11, 2013). Other parents chimed in saying that translation is beneficial, but some of the meaning and the value is lost when a presentation is given in English and then translated to Spanish line-by-line. When native or fluent speakers are available at the school, it increases parents' comfort level and dissolves the tension felt by parents who do not speak English.

Active outreach in Spanish was also an effective strategy that encouraged parent action. When one Spanish-speaking student broke his glasses and needed a new pair, I called the eye doctor to check the availability for appointments, called the mother to confirm the time and give her

directions to the clinic, and then called the doctors back to ask for a translator to be available for her appointment. The mother was very appreciative and was able to ask clarifying questions about the insurance and appointment process—a conversation she would not have been able to have without a Spanish-speaker from Crocker Farm helping her. Also, without this active encouragement, it may have taken much longer for this child to get a new pair of glasses which were necessary resource for the child to properly learn at school.

In sum, even though the secretaries felt that more documents should be translated, communication was the key factor that encouraged parent participation. Translated documents are an *output*, but this must be paired with *outreach* in order to be successful. While the logistical language barrier hinders communication, this is only a surface level problem for these parents. If an exogenous shock gave these parents the ability to speak English tomorrow, their participation may increase slightly, but the problem runs deeper than just translation or communication.

### **Structural Limitations**

The structural limitations such as long work hours, limited access to transportation, low educational level, and lack of access to local resources present a more deep-rooted problem for parents. Each parent faces different combinations of these challenges, but these barriers which are often put under the umbrella of socioeconomic status are the largest deterrent for Spanish-speaking parent involvement in Amherst.

### ***Administrative Testimonies***

First, time and scheduling were the most difficult obstacles to overcome. Even if the school works hard to plan and implement events or programs, attendance from Spanish-speaking parents is chronically low. This is due to the types of jobs that this parent population holds; many parents



work in restaurants or other service-industry jobs, so they are not available in the evenings, or they work multiple jobs so they cannot come in during or after school hours.

Another challenge that stems from low socioeconomic status is the lack of access to extracurricular activities. This can be due to a variety of problems including limited disposable income and a lack of knowledge that programs even exist. The ELL described,

There's a lot of opportunities like summer soccer and arts that maybe they're not participating in because they don't know about them; or it's a pain to register because they don't have a computer; or if they don't know that they can sign up for scholarships; or they know they're scholarships but don't want to fill out the paperwork to do it (April 4, 2013).

This variety of challenges prevents children from receiving the benefits of their middle and upper class peers and this has academic consequences, especially when children come back from summer break without participation in educational activities.

The educational background of the parents themselves is another variable that plays into the income and structural limitations of Spanish-speaking parents. Multiple administrators highlighted the fact that some parents had not graduated themselves, while others had trouble reading in Spanish as well as in English. This means that there is not only a problem with access to translated documents, but further there is a problem with access to content. Low educational attainment also makes it very difficult for parents to help with homework, but many teachers understand the obstacles of these parents and provide alternative assignments when necessary. While teachers and administrators are working to provide information at a level that can be comprehended by the parents, the special education secretary noted that providing information in a simple way is extremely difficult when dealing with developmental and learning disabilities. Special education uses many evaluation techniques and a lot of very technical and scientific language, so this is often very difficult for parents to understand even if a translator is present at the meetings.

Finally, transportation is an issue that Crocker Farm has been taking in stride. Many families do not have cars and cannot get to events in the evenings, especially if they are district-wide at the high school or middle school. Crocker Farm has a list of parents who need support with transportation and offers free rides to and from events both at the school and to other community events in the district. This service was well-known by all of the administrators, teachers, parents, and volunteers and has truly made an impact on access to school and community events. However, even when this service is provided, attendance is often low because of the other structural issues such as an inability to afford childcare or having the free time to attend.

### ***Parental Behavior***

In terms of structural barriers, parents' behavior and beliefs aligned with those of the administration. When asked what prevents parents from participating in their child's education, a mother described,

It's not because they don't want to do it; it's that they don't have enough time to do what they want to do. They probably want to dedicate much more time to their kids.... want to learn more with their kids, want to share more things with their kids, but there isn't enough time because they're working all day to maintain and provide for their family (April 1, 2013).

For these families, their contribution to their child's education is the ability to have them fed, clothed, and brought to school. I found this to be true when I called parents to inform them of events; many seemed genuinely interested in attending the school and district-wide functions, but they could not attend because they were working in the evenings. For this reason, it is often difficult for them to use traditional mechanisms of parent involvement to enrich their child's education.

One additional theme that emerged from the parents that was not mentioned by the administration was the issue of being undocumented. While this does not describe the entire population of Spanish-speaking parents at Crocker Farm, some parents who are of low socioeconomic status came to the area for employment, but are not legally working here. The fear

of being discovered or deported prevents parents from being responsive to outreach or taking an active approach to their child's education. To calm the fears of these parents, one mother suggested, "For those parents that are scared, Crocker Farm can tell them that they aren't in danger, that it's a secure place.... You know that here you are going to be safe and you can be with your kids, you can share, you can come to the meetings" (April 1, 2013). The fact that no administrators mentioned the challenges of undocumented parents does not mean that it is not on Crocker Farm's radar, but it is an important consideration when trying to plan events and reach out to parents. If they are afraid, they will pull back instead of asking for help, so addressing this issue in a positive, reassuring way may encourage more parents to engage in the school.

Overall, this is the most difficult barrier to overcome due to the fact that the challenges are rooted in the livelihoods and income status of the parents. Even if communication channels are functioning properly and parents are aware of events, they often cannot attend because of these structural challenges. But, it is important to note that some white families who can speak English also face these challenges due to the societal constraints described in this section; this means that the challenges of the Spanish-speaking population in particular are rooted even deeper than communication and structural limitations.

### **Cultural Challenges**

Culture is the most embedded and immeasurable factor that can prevent parents from participating, and this is especially true for new immigrants who are not familiar with the American education system. Culture incorporates a variety of concepts including attitudes towards education, perceptions of authority, the value placed on achievement, and the beliefs regarding the role of the school. The combination of the culture in the home country of these parents as well as their values greatly impact the way they understand education and their relationship with Crocker Farm.

### *Administrative Testimonies*

Culture was an obstacle that was noted primarily by the administrators who had training in pedagogy and educational strategies and it was clear they understood culture plays a role in education. For example, the principal and counselor highlighted that parents either do not know that it is a standard practice to have a certain level of involvement or they are accustomed to their own country's educational practices. The principal explained,

If you speak another language and are from another country, you're actually coming from a place where schools are run differently.... That in itself can be a challenge to determine what are the cultural norms and expectations of the school system that you are in (November 16, 2012).

Understanding the norms of a new system is challenging, especially when paired with parents' individual views of what school should be and its importance.

While the principal described attitudes towards education itself, others highlighted a specific view of authority as a primary reason for parents to step back. Amherst's district Director of Student Achievement and Accountability Marta Guevara said that

Many recent immigrants are so grateful for the schooling their children are getting here that they are deferential to educators and don't realize that they have a voice in the schools. As a result, they are less likely to engage with teachers and administrators, and they often play a less active role in their children's education (McCoy 2013).

Active participation is not only a standard cultural practice in the United States, but it is expected that parents will participate even though schools often do not explicitly teach parents to be actively involved. Many newly-immigrated Latino parents may not be aware of this cultural norm, so Crocker Farm recognizes that they need to reach out to parents instead of just translating documents or waiting for parents to start being involved in the school.

Although cultural aspects such as these are seen as obstacles, it is important to emphasize that the administrators also viewed culture as a valuable way to integrate Spanish-speaking parents. The district holds Latino heritage nights each year to celebrate the Hispanic community, and

administrators noted incorporating Latino culture into the classroom as well as school events. At an informational night, administrators also emphasized that reading in *any* language—not just English—is beneficial for children. This positive attitude towards the Spanish language and Latino culture demonstrates Crocker Farm’s dedication to this population and their expectation that they need to work with them and not just force them to assimilate into the traditional American school culture.

### ***Parental Behavior***

These cultural observations of the administration were echoed by the views and actions of the parents. One parent who was very involved attributed her active participation to the high value she places on education. She said other families struggle with parent involvement because

It depends on what kind of values you have for your family. If you don’t give school that kind of importance, your children won’t have those values. So it depends on how parents feel about school. Many of them didn’t finish school themselves, so they need to be educated about the benefits (April 12, 2013).

If parents are not aware of school culture or do not know that an emphasis should be placed on education, those beliefs trickle down to their children and impact their educational views as well.

Additionally, multiple parents expressed the value they stressed on teaching their children how to speak, read, and writing in Spanish. However, this cultural practice varied between parents; one mother said she worked with her children as best as she could, but perceived her inability to help in English as a barrier for her child. However, another mother took a more defensive role saying that her children only spoke Spanish in their home and that school would not interfere with her children’s ability to write letters to their grandfather in Puerto Rico. The first parent saw her support in Spanish as a “best alternative,” whereas the second mother held firm to the fact that Spanish was an important skill to be practiced at home. These cultural differences are important for Crocker Farm to note so that they do not make the mistake of grouping the entire Spanish-speaking

population into one cultural bundle. Every parent has different values and cultural beliefs, so Crocker Farm should continue to work to understand and build upon the background of their parent community.

### **Institutional Challenges**

While the three distinct themes of communication, structural barriers, and culture are present, they are all intertwined and the combination of these factors all leads parents to retract instead of engage. The guidance counselor explained that any one of these factors makes it difficult to participate, but the combination set up a barrier that is extremely difficult to overcome. She explained, “The same problems occur with white families who have less education, low economic status, etc., but it’s a perfect storm with class, race, and language” (November 14, 2012). This perfect storm is different for each family, so the administrators have taken on the role of interpreting their needs and translating them into services and supports. However, the institution of Crocker Farm itself faces challenges that prevent the administrators and teachers from helping these families in the most effective way possible.

### ***Administrative Testimonies***

Crocker Farm staff and administrators are all very passionate about helping parents, but the lack of resources has prevented them from pursuing all of their desired channels of outreach. The limited number of translated documents at the school level is a clear example of this capacity problem. If only 20% of the materials are reaching parents and more cannot be done due to limited translators, this excludes parents from the majority of communications.

Another major issue is the timeliness and the quality of translated documents. The special education secretary noted that she has a program that can translate forms instantaneously, but it has major limitations. She described,

It will translate the date and time of a meeting, but in terms of an IEP (Individual Education Plan) where it talks about testing and talks about the needs of the child, the strengths and weaknesses of the child: none of that gets translated. And it was taking a good six to eight months to have them translate it and get that mailed out to the parents after that (April 4, 2013).

Thus, the information about their student that is critical for the parents to read is coming home nearly a full school year after an evaluation. This is a significant amount of time in which students can greatly progress or decline, so this greatly limits parents in terms of special education. The turnaround time has been improving, but a significant lag still remains between the assessment and the dissemination of Individualized Education Plans.

While the quality, availability, and awareness of translation have continued to improve, translation cannot increase parent involvement on its own; active and engaging communication is necessary to supplement translated materials. To achieve this end, the principal's assistant felt that it was crucial to have more accessible staff that can translate, reach out with phone calls, and be available during the school day for meetings and general communication—and these were resources that are currently not readily available. The special education secretary echoed these conclusions and she suggested that the secretaries should take Spanish classes to have the basic skills to communicate with parents, even if it is just telling them that a translator will follow up with them. She brought this idea up and she described,

I know I had offered to take a class in Spanish, but there wasn't a class for us. The secretaries don't get professional development. I at one point I know they had a Spanish class for the younger grades, I didn't pursue it much further but I just mentioned that I wouldn't mind going in there and just learning some of the basic Spanish too. But it would be nice if they would offer the professional development for us to get Spanish (April 4, 2013).

This demonstrates that the problem not a matter of dedication to this issue, but rather due to a lack of resources.

Finally, a major institutional challenge is the fact that parent involvement is not a concrete, measurable topic. Without being able to measure the effectiveness of a program, it is difficult to ensure sustained dedication to it. The secretary identified that she counts how many forms were sent home by the school and compares that with the number of forms that parents complete and return. However, other than response rate and attendance, there are very few metrics or evaluation criteria that can be used to judge if a program is truly successful. Also, because parental involvement is secondary to traditional classroom education, parent involvement often gets put on the back burner.

### ***Parental Behavior***

Although the primary barriers facing parents are due to their linguistic, economic, and cultural barriers, the institutional limitations do have an impact on their actions. The status quo is to have limited access to translated documents and Spanish communication, so when documents are translated or parents are called in Spanish to attend meetings, they are more responsive. Some parents are also inclined to participate in the programs put on by the administration, but school's capacity to follow up and follow through is limited. One Spanish-speaking mother attended a meeting that was held specifically to target Latino parent engagement. After the initial session, the group made plans to have another meeting, but one mother in attendance described,

We were supposed to meet again to brainstorm ways to get more parents involved. We were supposed to meet in February and now it's April. The school just doesn't have the money. Before, they had funding and they did more. They had more parents (April 12, 2013).

While funding is not the only factor that influences involvement, having dedicated staff in combination with the resources to carry out their innovative plans is crucial for projects to move forward. Due to the systemic funding challenges across the country, it does not appear that funds will be readily available anytime soon, so Crocker Farm has recognized that they must move forward with their existing resources even through these institutional challenges.



## **Taking Action**

### **Parent University**

Despite the variety of barriers facing parents and the institution of Crocker Farm, the Amherst Public Schools piloted a program in January 2013 which specifically addresses all of these challenges. The program is called Parent University and works to provide information to non-English speaking parents who are new to Amherst school district. For this initiative, parents are invited to meetings each month where dinner and childcare are provided, while parents learn about a specific topic that provides insight into navigating the school system. The district specifically targeted families if they have been in Amherst for less than three years, if they are a low-income family, if they are English language learners, and if they are first generation immigrations. Seventy families were identified under these criteria and sixty-five of them are Spanish-speaking, so the meetings have been held entirely in Spanish without translators. This program is still in its infancy and therefore cannot be objectively evaluated at this time, but it demonstrates the strong effort by the district to address the communication, structural, and cultural barriers facing the Spanish-speaking population.

### ***Administrative Testimonies***

First, this program demonstrates the district understands the individualized needs of this parent population. Marta Guevara is the leader of this program and has worked hard to strategically develop a way to engage these families. “We talk about differentiation in the classroom,” she said. “Yet we don’t do that with families. We’ve been treating all families the same” (McCoy 2013). This gives the district an opportunity to directly target the needs of Spanish-speaking parents use the proper techniques in order to encourage involvement.

In terms of communication, it is clear that providing the sessions in Spanish has been very successful. This encourages parents to attend, interact, and ask questions and have engaging

conversation with the administration. Martha Guevara is a native Spanish-speaker and Crocker Farm's ELL teachers, guidance counselor, and principal presented in Spanish at the session in April. This created an environment where parents felt comfortable and could have their questions answered in a straightforward way without the communication barrier.

By providing transportation, dinner, and childcare, the administration was able to address some of the structural needs of these parents. The meetings take place on Thursday evening so some parents still had to work, but providing these other services lessens the burden for parents attending the event. Also, a volunteer who helps coordinate and run the program said that they are hoping to have morning and evening sessions when the program continues next fall.

Finally, this program seeks to use culture as a mechanism for building relationships and increasing knowledge. Martha continuously related the experience of learning about the school system in Amherst to participating in education in her home country. The February session featured an activity where parents and children made books together describing their experience moving to Amherst and adjusting to the new culture. Even though many families are from a variety of different countries spanning across Central and South America, these strategies all helped the parents to relate to each other's experiences and learn from one another.

### ***Parental Behavior***

This program has been very well-received by the Spanish-speaking parent community. Parents attending the event were very lively and engaged with each other and the administration. However, one communication challenge arose during the April meeting; while the meeting itself was hosted in Spanish, the PowerPoint was in English so parents had a difficult time understanding the information. I observed a strong sense of appreciation for the Spanish explanation, but the information provided on the PowerPoint was completely lost as parents looked at the slides with a

sense of confusion and disconnect. While translation is often not an option, Crocker Farm's guidance counselor had asked me to translate just the titles of each slide into Spanish and not the entire presentation. This shows that bilingual supports are available, but are not being used to their full potential and my role as a volunteer translator is not a systematic part of the parent engagement process when it can and should be. Parent University is set up to provide holistic support, but needs to more effectively communicate the program and utilize its Spanish-speaking resources to make the session truly helpful for parents

In terms of structural barriers, attendance is a solid indicator to determine if parents are able to break past these limitations. While attendance had been up to nearly fifty families for the first two sessions, the most recent one only had eight families in attendance. Part of this is due to communication, but the other aspect is the fact that Parent University is not yet an institutionalized practice for the administrators or the parents. The first two meetings were held on the first Thursday of the month in January and February, but the March session was cancelled due to the weather. Without the continuous routine, it was clear that a few parents valued the sessions highly and sought out information about the program's schedule, but many parents did not see Parent University as part of their normal agenda.

Despite these limitations, culture was effectively used by the administration and the parents to increase knowledge and create a positive environment. Parents spoke of their own experiences living in their native countries, immigrating, and integrating into the Amherst school system. They also discussed the role of the Spanish language in their child's education, and these discussions can help the administrators to understand the logic behind parental decisions, values, and action.

## **Recommendations and Conclusions**

In order to improve on the success of Parent University as well as the other school and district-wide initiatives, Crocker Farm must develop a strategic plan to move forward. In order to effectively provide support for children through channels both in and out of school, progress must be made on an individual, school, and district level. By cultivating individual relationship between administrators and families, building school-wide sense encouragement, and initiating systemic change at the district level, Crocker Farm can effectively unify its efforts and take on the challenges of these parents.

### ***Individual Relationships***

First, individual relationships must be cultivated in order to build trust and break down the rigid classifications of the “school” and the “parent community.” Administrators and teachers must reach out to parents to make them feel that they are valued as individuals, as well as a significant part of the Crocker Farm community. To do this, individual administrators and teachers need to be aware of the cultural differences of this parent population and teach parents how to effectively participate rather than assume they are unengaged. For example, teachers could speak with parents at the beginning of the year and encourage them to bring up any concerns, critiques, or questions that they may have. By reinforcing this idea at each interaction, parents may start to adjust their view of authority and their expectations for the role of the school. Administrators should also make it a priority to contact families once each semester—or more if possible—to have an informal, positive discussion about children’s progress. If all calls home are for disciplinary or educational problems, parents will not be encouraged to actively participate. Building trust through positive relationships with the staff in the classrooms and the office is a crucial step to make these families feel that they are welcomed and valued member of their school community.

### ***School-wide Encouragement***

As a school, Crocker Farm needs to recognize the structural limitations of these parents and work with them to overcome these barriers. To do this, parents must be included in the agenda-setting process in order to determine their actual needs. For example, one parent suggested having a support group for Latino parents. She described,

You could have something more relaxed, a little lecture about the benefits of parent involvement. We could maybe have a support group because we have a big number of Latino parents. Maybe we could do a monthly or bimonthly meeting and we could get each other's phone numbers to follow up. So that way if someone can't make it to a meeting they can still find out what happened and we can call each other (April 12, 2013).

Because she is aware of the structural and schedule limitations of the parents, she made a suggestion that can fit within their restrictions, so this demonstrates the fact that maybe parents would prefer a different format to support instead of speakers or evening events. Without the parents included in the agenda-setting process, Crocker Farm could be providing the wrong type of programs and therefore not reach their target population. Crocker Farm needs to learn how to use this parent community as a resource instead of allowing parent communities to shut themselves off from the school.

### ***District-level Systemic Change***

Finally, the district also plays a vital role in the success of Crocker Farm's parents. They have the resources and the connections to inspire systemic change, and they must take on this role in order to develop a sustainable system. The Parent University volunteer noted sustainability as a major goal of the program. She described, "I think it's sustainable if it becomes routine, if people just get used coming" (April 12, 2013). They hope that providing a high quality service will encourage parents to continue attending and continue striving to learn how to help their students. By developing these services at the district level and encouraging all of the schools to use these strategies, it can unify and streamline the variety of approaches that are being used now.

## **Next Steps**

In order to achieve individual relationships, school-wide encouragement, and systemic change, Crocker Farm must take steps to strategically support this effort. While the challenges of parents and the institution are clearly large hurdles, it is clear that opportunities for active participation are available, but parents as well as administrators, teachers, and community members need to be made aware that these important programs are happening. Communication between the district and the schools, within the school itself, and interaction with parents are the primary steps that need to be taken. Developing a district calendar that is properly maintained and used by all staff and administration will keep the school informed, and they can then inform their parents of events and programs. Developing a database of current and past initiatives would also prevent administrators from recreating and redeveloping programs, which would encourage a sustainable system that functions when new teachers or administrators join the school.

Because the school is under resourced and the key stakeholders themselves have a hard time finding the time to cultivate the communication networks, area students from the Five Colleges could act as interns throughout the year to focus on improving these communication channels and aligning all of the school and district-wide programs. Students could develop, update, and maintain the calendar and database in order to minimize the administrative burden of the program. Further, the database could be used as a mechanism to evaluate and measure parent involvement; interns could record important data such as the number of people called, the number of attendees, costs, and other relevant metrics that can be used to improve processes and inform decision-making. By actively maintaining and widely disseminating this information to all administrators, councilors, ELL teachers, and volunteers, everyone can be kept up to date instead of having each school individually pursue the same goals. By doing this, it will create a systematic way to provide services to parents that can be sustained year to year regardless of the policy champion or resource

availability. Also, if university students are invested, they can ensure sustainability year to year by recruiting new volunteers to replace them so that progress can be made and volunteers do not need to start off each year with no knowledge of the previous year's initiatives.

## **Final Conclusions**

Despite the multidimensional challenges faced by Spanish-speaking parents, Crocker Farm and Amherst Public Schools have a many people who are dedicated to supporting this population. However, this study has painted a fragmented mosaic of ideas, initiatives, inspiration, and actions. A variety of channels exist from translated documents and phone calls to literacy nights and the Parent University program. This shows that people care about this issue, but the coordination between these initiatives is more problematic than actually designing effective ways to include parents. However, if the currently fragmented tiles can be connected, the existing support system can be effectively utilized to help all stakeholders set the agenda, increase access for parents, and create sustainable improvements that can have true educational outcomes.

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