



Harvard Family  
Research Project



## FINE Forum

### Diverse Communities

Family Involvement Network of Educators  
Harvard Family Research Project

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For questions or comments about this paper,  
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**About the Family Involvement Network of Educators:** Harvard Family Research Project's Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is a strategic effort to strengthen family and community engagement to support children's learning and development. FINE brings together thousands of educators, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers dedicated to strengthening family-school-community partnerships. Members get the latest information about family involvement research, as well as the opportunity to connect with others in the field.

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## From the Directors

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It's all over the news. The 2000 census confirms that our nation is much more complex and diverse than ever before. Overall, non-Hispanic Whites now comprise about 69 percent of the nation's population, down from 76 percent in 1990. Asian-Americans have increased by 50 percent, Hispanics by 58 percent, and African-Americans by 16 percent.

The Census also showed that young Americans are more diverse than older Americans, which may help explain the cultural gap between teachers and their students and families. A study by the Institute for Higher Education Policy reports that almost 40 percent of U.S. elementary and secondary school students are members of racial or ethnic minorities, but only 10 percent of teachers are. The disparity raises the question not only of how to teach "other people's children", but also how to engage communities of color as partners in education. Very often, teachers as well as parents are not comfortable interacting with each other when their cultural backgrounds are dissimilar.

This issue of the *FINE Forum* provides some promising approaches to preparing teachers to partner with diverse families and communities. We spotlight the University of Texas, El Paso, Department of Teacher Education's Field-Based Program, which provides students opportunities to learn with and teach residents of a border community. In Question & Answer, the staff of Recruiting New Teachers share an initiative with the Council of the Great City Schools and the Council of the Great City Colleges of Education to recruit prospective teachers of color at the high school level. Teacher Talk offers creative tips from Frederick Park on engaging all families to support their child's learning. Across the board, their approaches stress community responsiveness and collaboration as keys to success.

The increase in cultural diversity is also accompanied by an increase in segregation. With this, comes a growing gap in quality between the schools attended by white students and those serving larger proportions of students of color. Parent Perspective contains the stories of parents who address issues of educational equity in the context of new state assessments. Both Ellen Mayer and Larry Ward are parents who describe their opposition to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), a controversial and high stakes test for students in Massachusetts.

Some common themes about teacher education emerge from the programs and reflections of our different contributors. Teacher-training programs must produce teachers who can:

- Learn about the culture and families they teach.
- Understand first hand the communities in which schools exist.
- Look honestly at their own perspectives and biases.
- Create equitable ways for parents to become involved.
- Share responsibility for parent empowerment and training.
- Internalize the value of family involvement and apply it in an organic way.

Finally, we draw your attention to special items in this newsletter. Summer being a good time for reading, our New and Noteworthy contains a bibliography of recent publications on family involvement among culturally diverse populations. We have also added a section on members' reflections about their work in this area.

We look forward to hearing from you.

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**Founder & Director**

**M. Elena Lopez**

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## Program Spotlight

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### Featured Program: Field-Based Program, University of Texas, El Paso

*The Teacher Education's Field-Based Program at the University of Texas, El Paso (UTEP) provides an example of preparing teachers in family and community involvement through the integration of classroom and experiential learning. The program embodies the value of parents, teachers, university faculty, and community groups empowering and learning from each other.*

### Program History

Situated near the Texas-Mexico border, El Paso is the largest binational metropolitan area in the world. According to 1990 census data, it is the fifth poorest Congressional District in the nation. Many families struggle with issues of low educational attainment, illiteracy, immigration, and citizenship. However, El Paso also is characterized by optimism for a better future. For many, UTEP is a symbol of this hope.

UTEP's largely first-generation student population is 65% Mexican Americans and 8% Mexican nationals. Most students are from El Paso County (85%) and intend to stay there. In fact, most were educated by teachers who were graduates of UTEP, creating a "continuous loop" in which students and teachers share common roots.

UTEP has responded to the low-performance of many El Paso schools by reforming teacher preparation to increase student achievement. In 1991, the Dean of Education, Dr. Arturo Pacheco, along with other stakeholders conceptualized the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence. This organization sponsors several classroom and teacher improvement programs to boost academic achievement. UTEP's president, Diana Natilicio, superintendents, business leaders, the mayor, and grassroots organizations are members of the Collaborative.

The College of Education also collaborates with other university departments to fulfill its mission to "prepare effective teachers, counselors, diagnosticians, and school administrators who successfully address the problems of schools and other youth serving agencies, especially in communities with a significant Hispanic population." Faculty from math, history, and science departments all share the responsibility to prepare teachers well.

### Program Structure

The Field-Based Program enables student teachers to link theory and practice in the communities where they will work. Students enter the program at the end of their sophomore year and are placed immediately into cohorts where they stay for the duration of the program. This creates a "family" type of environment with a high level of communication, learning, and dialogue.

Students complete one semester in Campus Block, a series of campus-based courses that prepare students in child development, learning theory, and pedagogy. They then enroll in two semesters of course work, Block I and II, that are based entirely in schools.

Education, mathematics, and science faculty come to the schools to teach the courses. In total, students accumulate about 600 clock hours in schools.

#### Field-Based Courses on Families and Communities

The Field-Based program requires a course in family involvement. Dr. Judith Munter teaches “Issues in Schools and Communities” in Block II of the Field-Based Program. The course has two goals: to learn how to engage parents who come to school and to understand parents and other adults in their own community contexts. Students problem-solve about the stumbling blocks to family involvement.

Munter explains, “One of the biggest barriers in family involvement is new teachers' lack of confidence. Teachers haven't had the contact with parents and don't see it as their strength. So that's what we do. We attempt to spend time in schools looking at successful family involvement practice.”

The course has three main components: the theoretical foundation, the community linkage segment, and the curriculum connection to social studies. The course begins with foundations and theories of community and family involvement, moving quickly to conversations about the particular parent involvement program at the school. The class emphasizes creating an atmosphere of trust, making parents feel welcome, and embracing language and culture as empowering.

The course then shifts to an off-school site/community service component with the objective that students come to understand families outside of the school context. The two-pronged approach exposes students to both parents in school and then parents who do not come to school, but are in community settings.

Munter says, “The goal is to impress upon students that not all parents are in the same situation and to have students understand the possibilities of working with parents in meaningful ways.”

Students achieve this by completing structured one-on-one interviews with adults in different community organizations, listening to their personal stories and positive and negative experiences with schools. The conversations raise students' awareness of how to build partnerships and prime them for action.

The final component is an outgrowth of the community and families. Students design social studies units reflecting what they have learned.

Interdepartmental collaborations help students learn about families from various discipline perspectives. A block-course entitled “Schools in Communities,” taught by Professor Kathleen Staudt of the Political Science Department, “deepens the preparation of teachers in training, focusing on schools as organizations in specific political communities wherein people exercise democratic voices in public policies that govern their economic, housing, and education opportunities.” In the class, students are trained to make home visits and then write reports about them. Staudt also organizes meetings with PTA groups and School-Site Council meetings.

### Program Partners

To connect theory and practice student teachers interact not only with UTEP faculty, but also with district-based organizations and other community programs.

Pauline Dow is the Director of Student Service for the Canutillo Independent School District in El Paso. Many of the schools in Canutillo serve as either partner or professional development schools for UTEP. Dow leads the district's bilingual education program, the Parent Power Program, and numerous other programs.

Parent Power Nights represent one way that student teachers and parents work together. Families come to the schools during the evening and rotate through learning stations dedicated to different math and science themes. The student teachers create and present 10-minute lessons to parents and students. Because the parents are rotating, student teachers often present the same lesson five times, giving them practice in their teaching while disseminating important information at the same time.

Dow comments, "It is great organic practice for the student teachers and also great lessons for the students and parents. By having the student teachers doing the lessons it creates an interesting dynamic that makes the parents feel more comfortable and in control. These teachers are practicing and learning from the parents just as much as the parents are learning from the student teachers. It's a reflexive empowerment."

The El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence functions as a broad umbrella for citywide school reform. The Collaborative works with teachers, schools, administrators, school districts, and parents. Its work in school districts provides opportunities for UTEP students to experience the implementation of these reforms and their challenges.

Pilar Herrera, Project Coordinator of the Collaborative comments, "Teachers and preservice teachers in El Paso understand that parents are critical to the process; they are not extraneous. Schools understand that parents are not an optional element to the successful classroom. What I have seen is that student teachers from UTEP understand this at the core."

Student teachers can also collaborate with organizations through the El Paso Inter-Religious Sponsoring Organization (EPISO). EPISO is a grassroots organization that develops centers where parents learn to advocate for better schools.

EPISO-sponsored Parent Academies bring together parents, teachers, principals, and community members to deliberate issues affecting individual schools. In January, Parent Academies organized its first district-wide conference and UTEP students observed and reported on the agenda as well as participated in seminars.

Ivette Sanchez, a parent educator in Ysleta Elementary School, and an active member of the Parent Academies reflects, "Often teachers make the assumption that parents don't care. At the same time parents make the assumption that teachers don't want them around. By participating in these conferences student teachers understand the dilemma."

## Update – Added January 2003

### New Grant

With a grant from AACTE-Metlife for Project PODEMOS,<sup>1</sup> the University of Texas at El Paso's (UTEP) field-based program has strengthened its preservice teacher preparation in family involvement. Through this project, UTEP collaborates with a neighboring rural school community, the Canutillo Independent School District, which serves as one of its partnership field sites for preservice teachers. Located on the U.S./Mexico border, this community provides opportunities for preservice teachers to learn valuable lessons about parents and communities within a culturally and linguistically diverse context.

### El Paso

El Paso is part of a rapidly growing binational, bicultural community of nearly 700,000 people, more than 75% of whom are Mexican in origin. It is the fifth largest city in Texas and rural areas surrounding the urban center (such as Canutillo) are among the state's fastest growing areas. El Paso County and neighboring border communities are also among the poorest communities in Texas and the nation. About 40% of the children in El Paso County live in poverty, compared to 25% in Texas and 19% nationwide. In nearby Canutillo, more than 80% of the district's K-12 students are recent immigrants (three years in the U.S. or less) and 100% of the elementary school students receive free and reduced lunch.

### Goals

Project PODEMOS, directed by professor Judith Munter, has three main goals.

- To engage UTEP's preservice teacher education students as action researchers, while also deepening their ability to be reflective practitioners and effective educators.
- To develop a culturally relevant model of effective parental engagement strategies by working collaboratively with parents, schools, and communities on the U.S./Mexico border.
- To disseminate products and findings through the Project PODEMOS web-based resource page, conference presentations, and research journals.

### Action Research

“Project PODEMOS has helped us to strengthen students' understanding of research, providing opportunities for them to realize that they have opportunities to be generators of new research and not just consumers,” says Munter. Through action research projects such as those described below, students work on developing culturally relevant frameworks for parent involvement. Some have written essays and articles about their projects and have presented their findings at state and regional conferences.

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<sup>1</sup> PODEMOS is the acronym for Parents Only Deepen Education, Making Our Students Succeed. In Spanish *podemos* means “we can do it.”

1. The **PODEMOS Parent Power Night** is an event that engages parents in dialogue, active learning, and participation in school activities, exposing parents to information and teaching strategies in the content areas that their children are learning.

In the fall of 2002, the Canutillo/UTEP Parent Power Night took place at the Canutillo school and focused on science and social studies activities. Groups of two to three preservice students prepared learning centers (in Spanish, English, and bilingual sessions), where parents explored ways to help their children understand geology, electricity, and other science subjects in interesting and culturally relevant ways. Some of the UTEP students conducted interviews with parents to get their perspectives on their goals for themselves and their children, aspirations and concerns about the immigrant experience, dual language education, and the school as community center.

2. **Service learning** projects provide an opportunity for mutual learning between preservice students and families. Working through community programs (such as a school-based Even Start program equipped with 30 laptop computers), preservice students collaborate with parents on both literacy and computer skills projects. The UTEP students' approach to culturally relevant literacy learning has involved asking parents to talk about their lives and to write about themselves and their children (in both English and Spanish). They have worked with parents, for example, on Web quests to locate information about nutrition, health, and a variety of parenting issues available through information technology.

In turn, these activities have given students opportunities to develop relationships with parents and to reflect on their experiences. The students created a newsletter that featured parents' writing as well as their own reflections. (See the first issue of the UTEP-Canutillo Even Start newsletter [120KB Acrobat file].) Additionally, a group of 45 parents toured the UTEP campus and met with campus administrators who provided information and answered their questions about pathways to college for themselves as well as for their children.

## Collaboration

“Through PODEMOS we connect the community with preservice teacher education,” continues Munter. “For example, our preservice teachers make home visits with in-service teachers, who are themselves graduate students in our program, serving as their mentors and guides.”

Preservice teachers learn to make home visits to reduce the barriers between home and school. They reach out to families, get to know their concerns, and help make them feel welcome. The in-service teacher offers students guidance on how to communicate with parents and how to plan and conduct home visits. The in-service teacher also goes through debriefing with the students after the home visit.

Munter believes that parents play an educative role in these home visits. She says, “They help preservice teachers understand a different reality. Our preservice teachers learn how to approach parents knowing that [the parents and families] have valuable



knowledge to share, rather than focusing on preconceived assumptions about deficits or needs.”

### **Dissemination**

Project PODEMOS is in the early stages of developing its website which contains resources that support parent involvement and teacher preparation in family involvement. One feature in development consists of an interactive page where parents can pose questions and preservice students can respond.

Munter believes in the potential of expanding PODEMOS to other sites, and this requires expanding the research base of the model. She and her colleagues are collecting documentation that reflects participants' experiences through focus groups, individual interviews, and participant observation. They have also collected quantitative pre-and post-data about the project from parents, students, and preservice teachers.

### **Conclusion**

Reflecting on the accomplishments of the program, Munter concludes, “Through Project PODEMOS, our preservice teachers have increased their awareness and understanding of the potential for teachers in the 21st century to really make a difference. Children learn more when their parents and families are involved, and this program has provided opportunities for future teachers to work with parents as partners in the educational process.”

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## Questions & Answers

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### Recruiting New Teachers, Inc.

*Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. (RNT) seeks to expand the pool of prospective teachers and improve the nation's teacher recruitment and development policies and practices. Over the long term, RNT addresses the disparity between the cultural backgrounds of teachers and their students. This has the potential to increase family involvement among communities of color. Research indicates that compared to schools with few teachers of color, those with a large proportion of African American and Latino teachers, are more likely to foster reciprocal parent-teacher contact and to engage parents in formal school activities.<sup>1</sup>*

*This does not imply that teachers should only teach students of their own cultural backgrounds, but highlights the need to diversify the teaching force and to train teachers to partner with diverse families. RNT's Urban Teacher Academy Project is one such initiative.*

**Q: What is a high school teaching career academy?**

**Anne B:** It's a two- to four-year program or school-within-a-school dedicated to helping students explore the teaching career. These programs try to offer high school students positive images of teaching, practical teaching experience, and opportunities to begin on the path to college and a career in teaching. The students take electives related to teaching, learning, and children. They participate in practice teaching internships with cooperating teachers in local schools, and receive support in enrolling in local college teacher education programs.

**Q: Why did you develop the Urban Teacher Academy Project?**

**Elizabeth:** We developed The Urban Teacher Academy Project as one strategy to help diversify the teaching force. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 36 percent of school-age students are of color, while only 14 percent of their teachers are. In order to build a more diverse and culturally responsive teacher force, it is critical to expand the pool of prospective teachers and to create effective career paths into teaching - particularly for populations underrepresented in the profession. Traditionally students of color do not choose teaching as a profession because of its low pay and low status. They are more likely to enter professions such as aviation or engineering.

**Q: What is unique about the Urban Teacher Academy Project?**

**Anne S:** It is a "grow your own" initiative, offering high-poverty urban high school students the chance to tutor and practice teaching skills in real classrooms, to prepare

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<sup>1</sup> Kerbow, D. & Bernhardt, A. (1993). Parental intervention in the school: The context of minority involvement. In Schneider, B. & Coleman, J.S. (Eds) (1993). *Parents, their children, and schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

them to fill the expected vacancies in these very classrooms later on. The model aims to promote both diversity and excellence in teaching.

***Q: How is family involvement included in the Urban Teacher Academy Project?***

**Anne B:** There are two levels of family involvement in this type of project. The first level is the family role in the life of the high school student. It is not an easy decision to choose an alternative high school route and parents can play a big role in that decision. Programs must stress to families that participating in a program like this helps their teenager learn how to teach and how to learn. Understanding the learning process will in turn aid students' own education. Fortunately, many families have already given very positive feedback about the academies.

The second level of family involvement occurs when students re-enter the community in empowering positions as teachers. Hopefully as the students return to their communities as teachers they will have a better understanding of how to involve families in the educational process. Students who have been imbedded in a collaborative for a large part of their educational career - with schools, families, and colleges - are likely to internalize partnerships and their redefinition.

***Q: What have you learned from your experiences to engage parents in the goals of the Project?***

**Elizabeth:** Finding ways to involve parents can be challenging and requires innovative ideas that fit into parents' busy lives. Holding parent orientations in which interested academy partners speak is one way to give parents an overview of courses, activities, expectations, and issues.

***Q: What suggestions can you offer about getting a program like this started and sustained over time?***

**Anne S:** I suggest engaging stakeholders from the outside and from within. The chances for ongoing success are greater if you convince "higher ups" (superintendents, district administrators, resource directors, state education department members, college administrators, and members of the business community) to become invested in the teacher academy program. It's important to communicate the value and purpose of such an academy and then follow through with an advisory committee with roles for all members. Engaging as many "insiders" as possible is also critical. Principals, teachers, and families need to view the program as added value, not an extra burden.

**Anne B:** Also, I would say, don't "reinvent the wheel". You do need money and people to run your program successfully. However, this need not be an overwhelming proposition. Find ways to inventory existing school/district/college resources, reallocate funds and

materials, and use existing human and financial resources to enrich a teacher academy program.

***For more information on RNT, go to their website at [www.rnt.org](http://www.rnt.org). For more information on The Council of the Great City Schools, you can visit their website at [www.cgcs.org](http://www.cgcs.org).***

## Parent Perspective

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### Featured Program: Family as Faculty

*This Parent Perspective shares excerpts from a Family-School Partnership course, in which two parents and one student comment on their opposition to the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System). Instituted in 1998 and designed to align with state curriculum frameworks, the MCAS is a series of standardized tests on a variety of subjects, which is administered annually over several weeks at the end of the school year to certain grade levels. The tests are controversial, partly due to their length and their "high stakes" nature - students must pass the tenth grade test to graduate from high school.*

*Ellen Mayer and her fourth-grade son Nick Pittman explain their decision to boycott the MCAS:*

My children attend a school with much racial and class diversity, a rich integrated curriculum, and a strong family involvement component. Parents are involved in governance activities, and support not only their own individual child, but also advocate for all the children.

I began to focus on the MCAS in the spring of 1999. I knew I needed to learn something about the test, as my children were scheduled to take it the following year. I needed to figure out how to talk to them about it. The school's approach at the time was to make the test a non-event and talk very little about it. In March there was a district-sponsored MCAS informational meeting held at the school, so I went to check it out. I was open minded at first and wanted to learn about the test. I was impressed by the untimed component because children could take as much time as they wanted, but I was aware of the downside being that the rest of school life would be disrupted. However, the meeting turned out to have a sole focus on how to help your child do well on the test, and there was no discussion of pros and cons of the test.

That spring I made the decision to oppose the test for three main reasons:

1. The consequences of the test at the school level - I was worried that the curriculum of our school was endangered. Already one wonderful curricular unit - the Mayan Museum, where kids make and display their own Mayan artifacts - had been replaced by test taking.
2. The CARE (Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education) listserv - on this listserv were discussions about what makes for a good and bad test. People talked about the importance of high standards and not standardization for teaching and learning. It was eye-opening and fascinating. I felt like I was part of a social movement. Listserv discussion also provided tactics about protesting.
3. The teachers - the 7th and 8th grade teachers in our school organized an educational meeting to explain the tests to parents and make parents aware that there was controversy over the test. Teachers' voices have always been very important to my husband and myself, and here they played a large role in

informing my thinking about the test. It became clear that teacher morale was really low by the end of the year. In the meeting they clearly expressed their concerns about the test and what it was like to give the test.

Once my husband and I decided to oppose the test, we discussed it with our son and daughter. At age ten, our son Nick developed his own reasons for boycotting the test, as he explained in this essay written during the testing:

*I have some very good reasons for not taking the MCAS. I normally like long tests, but the MCAS is out of the question. One, 16 hours is way too long for a test. It is longer than the test to become an official lawyer! Also, I think it is a very bad way to evaluate a school. If a child is not present or is boycotting, he or she gets a zero!*

*I think the governor made a very bad choice to have such a horrible test. I think it was very wrong. For instance, if a kid is very smart and a good student, but has test anxiety, he or she might feel very bad if they didn't pass, and failed. I think the governor should take away these tests as soon as possible.*

*Another issue is that if a high school student in tenth grade fails the test, he or she would not be allowed to graduate. I really think these tests are horrible.*

*Larry Ward, also a parent of school-age children, reflects on his experiences organizing African American and Latino parents against MCAS and in support of greater school equity:*

As a parent, I wondered who was bringing us this test and why anyone would give children a 17-hour test. In my mind, it was a way to keep certain portions of the population down. But I needed to be convinced of it. I went about understanding the test, the construction of the test. I questioned whether it was a good exam. I knew it would be a long battle - many people can see the detriment that it's doing to our school system. Many of us have come to believe it will end up in the court system before it will actually go away. When you get involved, you realize this is a law and no matter how much ranting and raving you do, because it's a law, you need to go through legal channels to change it. So I thought, Sit down and fasten your seatbelt.

As a statewide organizer, I began talking to people and teachers to find out, 'What is wrong with this thing?' What was the intent of the 1993 Reform Act? It was to have multiple assessments, not just one exam. It was a push to change the way education is delivered in this country.

When we looked at the scores, African American versus white, it was not a surprise because that was typical of any standardized testing that had gone on in our country. If you want to know how someone will do on a standardized test, find out what their family income is and just split people up and the results will fall out accordingly. It is the single measure that is found to be the determinant of how people do on standardizing testing.

What really surprised me was how poorly white kids performed. The reality is they had no idea that the number of white kids that would fail would be so high. They thought

they'd lose out on 15 - 20 percent of the population and they figured that was something they could live with and it could be used as an equity argument. When 53 percent failed, all hell broke loose, yet they would not back away.

Parents started first talking about ways to impact what was happening with the test. We wanted to make sure that the boycott didn't fall on the backs of students. We started to write and organize on a listserv.

This is when we began to do some serious organizing. Some said that the test would only affect the suburban touchy-feely curriculum and that the urban schools needed the test. The urban schools are bad. There is a split in terms of whether or not they need the MCAS, but this is also suburban. The one thing that we found that really brought people together around the MCAS was the equity issue. Just how completely this is not an equitable situation. We took people on secret tours in Boston schools where there are 35 - 36 kids in a classroom, no science books, yet held to the same standards. We started talking about these issues and how to get people to mobilize around these issues. Most people are scared. The dropout rates are going up and then kids take these exams.

To organize people you need to have tons of information. We had to find people to do reports, find teachers to talk about experiences, understand the Ed. Reform law of 1993 and take it to the community. To do this we started house parties. We would go to a house and when we'd get to be too big for a living room, we'd take it to a library or a school. Bringing issues to the black and Latino communities continues to be a struggle because we're dealing with cultural issues. In the Latino communities, anything a teacher says you have to do, or you're in trouble. The Department of Ed., therefore, knows what's best for everybody. Not until the families see results, realize their kids will not pass and many of their hopes for the future will be dashed if it depends on this single test does change start to happen. We go into communities and the people become politically savvy quickly. The question is, 'Where do we go to organize and bring people together?'

CARE (Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education) also had to organize within itself. They had to come up with tactics, figure out which way to go and what do we do and whom do we organize first. Boston has a unique set of problems. Many of the whites have pulled out and are in private and parochial schools, which has caused a lot of problems in the public schools. Many of the problems that the Latino and blacks are facing are different than the ones faced by the suburban children in the more affluent communities. As organizers we have to bridge those gaps. We have to have people of all spectrums working together. Everyone comes with his or her own agendas.

For African American families the issue is not that standardized testing is bad. The initial reaction of families is that this is just one more thing we have to show them we can do. If we study hard we can show them we can pass. I say don't take the test because if kids never take the test then you can focus on the fact that its an inequitable situation. Until you can provide labs with water and books, it is a complete set up. If you are going to do any kind of organizing you must have a base. Explain in three or four sentences what the petition is and get them to sign it.

Ultimately it is a political battle, difficult and murky. You build a base with names and signatures. When it comes to twelve thousand names, legislatures start to listen. We

put pressure on people to start to listen to us. School Boards tried to get them to pass anti-MCAS resolutions. Once someone goes first it makes it a lot easier. When School Boards say it's a bad thing the Department of Education is worried. So we take it further and talk to legislators and they give you the dead ear. So we did an unbinding referendum. We knocked on doors and got people to sign on. It is the people that bring forth the issues. We want to show that there must be equity before you can have the MCAS. Our job is to show parents that public school education is not working.



## Teacher Talk

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*Frederick Won Park teaches at an urban public school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 1998 the White House recognized him as an exceptional educator. Park is one of the few teachers in Massachusetts to be certified by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. He shares his strategies for reaching out to diverse families and preparing student teachers to support families.*

**1. Understand diversity.** A teacher must be constantly aware of the many forms of diversity in the classroom. Diversity is not just about race and gender, but also culture, economics, family structure, and exceptionalities. A teacher must also be in touch with their own culture and social identity, and realize how they impact one's relationships with students and families.

**2. Go the extra step.** It is part of a teacher's job to reach out to families - it's not just tangential. It is a teacher's job to realize that some families have different needs and that might mean having a parent teacher conference in an environment outside of school - like a coffee shop, a student athletic event, or the family's home.

**3. Assess your own perspective.** Teachers must assess their own culture and determine how that comes into play in working with families. As a Korean American I am a minority, so I understand the dominant culture from an outside view, but I still need to look at how my lens might differ from that of various groups. Everyone's experience is unique. I ask all of my student teachers to do the same. I ask them to think about how they are going to be perceived both by students and by families. I ask them to write about how they think their students will see them, how they want to be seen, and what supports are necessary to accomplish their vision of themselves.

**4. Let parents know you care.** All parents want teachers to love their children. But often times parents come to school having heard so many negative things about their kids. We have to let parents know that we love their children and are on the same side, even if we do have different approaches to their children's learning. It's a give and take regardless of the culture.

**5. Build classroom community and culture.** At the beginning of the school year, I devote at least six weeks for building classroom community. Teachers must create a sense of meaning, place, and purpose for their students. When new children start, the older students and I collectively teach them the culture of the classroom explicitly. We start with the most basic social skills such as shaking someone's hand with eye contact, or exploring the value of saying thank you with a smile. Students must participate in the process of making rules and establishing classroom expectations. It is the teacher's role to provide a safe environment for them to explore, succeed, and fail. The room must be reflective of various groups both in what is on the wall and what is covered in the

curriculum. It is also the teacher's responsibility to inform families of their children's efforts as well.

**6. Do your homework.** There is a lot of information on how to work with families - you as a teacher have to do the homework. I often use the family resource center and our school's parent liaisons, and ask direct questions about other cultural groups and customs. Remember you can also ask former teachers of your students as well. Learn from their experience. Find out where your families hang out during the weekend, and what they like to do in their free time. Ask the kids too.

**7. Create equal access.** All parents are capable of contributing in different ways and teachers must understand and use parents' cultural capital in a positive way. Children in my room come from homes where some are less advantaged than others - but in the classroom, the teacher must establish a level playing field. Because each child has different needs, I need to get very specific and individualized. To create equal access and make everyone feel valued, I might ask different things of different families. To treat families fairly we must realize what is equitable in terms of what they can give. Just because a parent cannot visit the classroom doesn't mean they aren't involved or don't want to be. Many simply cannot free up their time. Allow parental involvement in diverse ways by giving opportunities outside the confines of the school day.

**8. Make the classroom a neutral meeting ground.** Teachers have to realize that the classroom must be a neutral and safe ground. It is a great opportunity for all parents to come together. With children of divorced parents this especially holds true. If both parents are at a conference it sends an important message to the child that there is unity around his or her success and achievement. I know that often times parents don't even want to be in the same room as one another (and sometimes legal mandates necessitate this), but often I will ask them to put aside differences and present a unified front for their child. A conference is an opportunity for the child to present his or her work - it is not about parents' differences.

**9. Make communication explicit.** Communication is key. Reports home must be clear, concise, to the point and convey the intended message. Conferences must be organized and notes should be taken on both sides. If possible, try to keep a classroom log recording specific events in their child's learning. It doesn't have to be detailed, but just enough where you can paint an accurate and vivid picture of what their child does during the school day. Remember, for at least six hours each day, many families haven't a clue of what's happening in school. Who do they sit with, how long did a lesson take, and why are they learning to solve problems this way? When they do get answers, it is often from the child's perspective. This is your chance to give them the details and explain your pedagogy.

**10. *Get student teachers involved.*** I always include my student teachers in parent conferences. Learning to teach children is also learning to work with families. In the beginning of the year, I have them organize an outreach project. For example, I might put them in charge of facilitating a family potluck. It is through this seemingly simple task, that a number of underlying issues unfold and true learning takes place. The issues of equity, busy schedules, and logistics and communication all come to a point in an organic way. When they have their own classrooms, they already have first hand experience with some of the issues. Most teachers only have their students for a year. Families have their children for a lifetime. It is important to recognize, respect, and support their long-term educational goals. Working with a child's family is ultimately working with the child's primary teachers.

## Reflections on Diversity

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**How do you prepare teachers to work with culturally diverse students and their families?  
What skills should educators develop to do this successfully?**

*Carol S. Huntsinger from College of Lake County writes:*

In my own research, I examine the parenting beliefs and practices of immigrant Chinese American families, as compared to European American families. In my classes we discuss cultural belief systems and view videotapes that compare different cultures. Often students haven't thought about what their beliefs are. When they talk about these issues they begin to define their own beliefs and practices, and to become aware of the perspectives of other class members. One assignment in my class involves an interview of a parent from another culture regarding child-rearing techniques. The students use an interview questionnaire I've developed and used in my research. I ask the students to conduct the interview, transcribe it, and then answer the questions themselves. It is interesting for them to compare their own beliefs with the beliefs of the parents interviewed. We reflect on and question our own practices and learn to appreciate those of others. This exercise enables us to be more culturally sensitive to parents and families.

**Dr. Carol S. Huntsinger**  
**Professor of Psychology and Education**  
**College of Lake County**  
**Grayslake, Illinois**

*Peter Bak-Fun Wong, principal of the Josiah Quincy Upper School in Boston, Massachusetts explains:*

I look at schools as if they are leather wine skin. If the skin is old, it cracks. It is not that the wine is bad, but rather that the leather skin must be reworked. We created the leather skin. The new leather skin must be more global. Our schools are now diverse and must be flexible to allow for our differences.

In Chinatown, the opportunity for education is crucial. Families give up everything to come over here. There is a lot of stress on these families and social economic pressure to succeed. In the community there is uncertainty and a fear of failure. Looking at the issues facing today's youth and their present realities we must educate and encourage everyone to love and respect other people, their cultures, others' points of views, and themselves.

The four pavilions we follow in our school are critical to the Chinatown community because they are the essence of the combination of the Eastern and Western styles of education. The pavilions are for both students and families. The cultural pavilion concentrates on world cultures, race, and ethnicity, and acknowledges that school and family cannot exist without harmony in society. We have so many things in common. So, we talk about the commonalities first. Then, we talk about our diversity. A lot of people don't appreciate other cultures because they don't know or appreciate their own. We help to involve parents in the process by holding school meetings on Saturdays in different areas in the neighborhoods so that they can actually attend.

**Dr. Peter Bak-Fun Wong**  
**Principal**  
**Josiah Quincy Upper School**  
**Boston, Massachusetts**

***Diane Burts from Louisiana State University writes:***

The trends initiated by NCATE or NAEYC demonstrate that we want students in pre-service programs not only to know about families, but also to interact and work with families from diverse backgrounds. New state guidelines are discussing ways teachers can interface with families and work with less traditional ways of interaction. At LSU we teach classes specifically in family involvement in the graduate and undergraduate level and look at strategies for involving families from diverse backgrounds. Research shows community leaders are becoming more involved and teachers must be aware of how to link with other agencies and what resources are available that sometimes families are less likely to know about. Teachers need to work on more positive and open attitudes. Teachers need to have positive attitudes and beliefs that there are possibilities for collaboration. They must have the willingness to reach out. They must understand the possibilities and issues that exist. Students must learn the environment they teach in, especially if they are separated from it, to understand all the possibilities.

**Dr. Diane Burts**  
**Professor, School of Human Ecology**  
**Louisiana State University**  
**Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

***Martha Dever from Utah State University writes:***

In recent decades, our national perspective on community and family involvement has evolved. Historically, family involvement was primarily mothers volunteering or accompanying classes on field trips, particularly in the early grades. Parents who did not participate were often considered parents who did not care. Now, we are acknowledging a broad variety of family value systems. For example, in some cultures, parents consider it to be intrusive to come to school and rude to challenge a homework assignment.

Family diversity must be a central component in teacher education programs. Teachers need to understand family structures, embrace diverse family values, demonstrate tolerance, and be prepared to reach families of all types. The objective of teacher educators should be to emphasize the importance of the many ways to include parents in the learning process and promote learning at home.

**Dr. Martha Dever**  
**Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education**  
**Utah State University**  
**Logan, Utah**

## New & Noteworthy

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### **Family involvement among culturally diverse populations: A selected bibliography**

This bibliography contains selected journal articles and books from 1999 - 2001 relating to culturally diverse populations and family involvement. It also contains a section on preparing teachers for diverse schools and communities.

### **Clewell, B.C. & Villegas, A.M. (2001). *Ahead of the class: A handbook for preparing new teachers from new sources*. Washington: The Urban Institute.**

This report explores pathways to solving the teacher shortage and also covers the topic of building bridges between home and school.

### **Ruiz-de-Velasco, J. & Fix, M. (2001). *Overlooked & underserved: Immigrant students in U.S. Secondary Schools*. Washington: The Urban Institute.**

Findings in this report emphasize the need to improve an education system that is currently failing many immigrant Latino students.

### **Trumbull, E., Rothstein-Fisch, C., Greenfield, P.M., Quiroz, B. (2001) *Bridging cultures between home and school: A guide for teachers*. CA: Lawrence Erlbaum & WestEd.**

This guide provides a framework for learning about culture. It describes many teacher-created strategies for making classrooms more successful for students, particularly those from immigrant Latino backgrounds.

### ***Educational demographics: What teachers should know***

This paper by Harold Hodgkinson looks at the key demographics affecting educational policy and how teachers can make good use of demographics in their daily practice.

### ***Teaching and Cultural Competence: What does it take to be a successful teacher in a diverse classroom?***

This article by Gloria Ladson-Billings outlines some of the challenges facing the teaching profession and explains the concept of cultural competence.

### ***The transnationalization of families: Immigrant separations and reunifications***

This paper analyzes findings from an ongoing longitudinal study of over 400 immigrant children. Carola and Marcelo Suarez Orozco of the Harvard Immigration Project are principal investigators of the study.