

Parents Get More Involved at School

Immigrant parents are strengthening their role in decision-making at San Francisco's Cesar Chavez Elementary School. Parents are "part of critical conversations" through a school advisory group that advocates for English Language Learner students (English Learners Advisory Committee, ELAC), says Ario Salazar, Director of Mission Graduates' Parent Partner Program. Parents worked with Mission Graduates and school officials to mobilize more families to participate in ELAC.

"[ELAC] is one of the most powerful forums for empowering immigrant families," adds the school's Parent Liaison Violeta García. "When families invited new families to participate, the response was very positive. Parents tend to trust other parents, especially when they share language and purpose."

Concerns Spark Action

Parents came together because they were concerned that many children were not doing well academically—and few parents were actively involved at the school. Then parents attended Mission Graduates leadership trainings on school decision-making. The trainings focused on how parents could help children succeed by taking an active role in the school's ELAC.

"We learned our participation is key, [focusing] on developing partnerships and searching for solutions," says Maria Rocha, now a parent leader and active ELAC member. "[The training] was crucial to increasing parent involvement at our school."

Outreach to Families

To get more families involved in ELAC, parents focused on outreach. They planned a "Picnic Familiar" (Family Picnic) to bring families



MISSION GRADUATES

Parents attend a Mission Graduates leadership training.

together. They also discussed ways to build relationships with teachers.

"We bombarded [families] with messages about our children's situation in the school," says parent leader Rosario Girón. This helped parents build relationships and develop confidence about finding solutions to their concerns, she adds. Parents talked with families individually, including those from different ethnic groups.

More than 100 families attended the Picnic and learned about ELAC. The parent leaders provided food, childcare, games, and prizes. Families talked about "the importance of organizing as a [decision-making] group in a fun, community environment," says Rocha.

As a result, "ELAC meeting attendance has increased considerably!" says Salazar.

School Provides Support

There was a "deep sense of collaboration" between parents and the school, says Salazar. The principal provided space for parents to organize and has been a strong presence at ELAC meetings. She used ELAC as a forum

to distribute information about how English Language Learners (ELLs) are doing in school and how families provide support at home. She has also talked with parents about how the school is addressing these children's needs, adds Salazar. The principal was not available for comment.

Parents Play Active Role

"We are making our voices heard," says Rocha. The school invited parents to the yearly budget meeting and to help develop an innovative school scorecard. Parents are drafting an action plan about how ELAC can support children learning English.

"I was very shy," adds Noemi Barajas, now ELAC President. "Giving voice to the needs of my children made me work up the courage to advocate for their education. Now I speak with teachers and make presentations to peers." ●

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● By Zoila Cartagena, Ario Salazar, and mothers at César Chávez Elementary