

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE PARENT INVOLVEMENT— Teaching Parents the Right 'Questions to Ask' in Schools

Program turns parents into children's advocates

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Modesto, Calif.

It's been a long work day, but two dozen parents have come straight from their jobs in the orchards and packing plants to this classroom in their children's high school. They want their questions answered.

In Spanish, they're firing off queries at the associate principal. Three months ago, these parents understood little about their school. Nearly all are from Mexico, many with little formal education. They come from countries where the schools work differently. But after a nine-week training program, they're brimming with information and new power. And their questions keep coming.

"Have you given any thought to improving student parking?" asks Ricardo Salas, reading his question aloud from a scrap of lined notebook paper. "Some students park across the bridge, and walk over to school, and it's dangerous."

"How often are students tested, and why do you make them take a test in December, when many families travel?" asks Reynalda Muñoz.

These and many other questions volleyed toward Phuc Pham-Goulart, the associate principal of Peter Johansen High School, on a recent fall evening. Blanca Alvarado, a facilitator for [PIQE, or Parent Institute for Quality Education](#), the organization that is conducting the training, served as Spanish-English translator.

It was a scene many schools would envy as they pursue an often-elusive goal: enlisting parents as active partners. It can be particularly challenging in schools with large populations of immigrants, or parents with little schooling; language barriers and unfamiliarity with the school system can keep them from making meaningful connections at their children's schools.

Those connections can make a big difference in students' experiences in school. Research shows that children whose parents are active in their schools have better attendance, perform better in class, are more likely to take advanced courses in high school, and are more likely to graduate on time.

Information as Power

In this almond- and peach-farming community 90 miles east of San Francisco, they're trying to crack that code. The "principal's forum" marks the culminating moment of these parents' training. The deep dive into the American school system has equipped parents to bring their concerns to their school's leaders. And bring they do.

In the course of a 90-minute session, they ask about campus security, bus safety, college-prep courses, and counselors' caseloads. They want to know how they can line up tutors for their children, and why there aren't more field trips to college campuses. Pham-Goulart offers answers and explanations, and tells the parents that she needs their input to make the school better.

This is gratifying to Yesenia Valladolid, whose 14-year-old daughter is a freshman at Johansen High. Born in California but raised mostly in Mexico, Valladolid has a 7th grade education, and wanted to learn how to maximize the benefit of the public schools for her daughter and her son, who is now 10.

"I always wanted to help them get what I didn't have, but I didn't know what questions to ask, where to look for information," she said during a break in the PIQE training. "Now I ask them to show me their grades. I make sure they finish their homework. I know what credits my daughter needs to graduate, and what [additional credits] she needs to go to the University [of California]. I didn't know that before."

Valladolid is about to complete the nine-week course by PIQE. It's offered in versions tailored for elementary, middle, and high school, and taught in 16 languages.

Here in Modesto, it's taught in Spanish, for the many Mexican and Salvadoran immigrants. But less than an hour's drive away, parents are taking the course in Russian, Hmong, and Punjabi. PIQE also offers shorter courses in family literacy, science-and-math education, and other subjects.

But its signature program is an orientation to the American school system, covering topics such as how schools are organized and funded, and how parents can contact teachers and help with homework. The idea is to equip parents unfamiliar with the school system with the skills to get involved, and become agents of change for their schools and their students.

"Programs like PIQE are about leveling the playing field," said Steven B. Sheldon, the director of research for the National Network of Partnership Schools, which works with about 600 schools nationwide to promote parent involvement.

"There are a lot of things you need to know about the American education system that families raised in that system—especially families who've been successful in that system—have a sense and understanding of already," said Sheldon, an associate professor in the Johns Hopkins University school of education. "It's hard to be a good advocate for your children in schools if you don't know the rules of the game."

From and for the Community

Funded largely by schools' program fees and donations, PIQE grew out of a 1987 push to improve schools in the low-income neighborhoods of San Diego, and has since provided training for more than 624,000 California parents.

Activists worked with the Spanish- and Cambodian-speaking parents there, and developed a list of more than 50 areas of school operations that they needed to understand better in order to be meaningfully engaged. That list formed the basis of the PIQE curriculum, said Patricia Mayer-Ochoa, the group's vice president for program development.

In one of those early meetings, she said, "one of the fathers stood up and said, 'We don't know what we don't know, and that's a dangerous place to be. Teachers assume I'm not asking because I'm not interested, but I don't even know what questions to ask,' " recalled Mayer-Ochoa, who attended that session. "It was an a-ha moment."

Parents in the Modesto PIQE course also report that it was difficult to know how to participate in school life. But in the last two months, they've amassed a storehouse of information that's changed their sense of what they can do.

A week before the principal's forum, the parents in the class at Johansen High waded through the intricacies of financial aid, a landscape that even highly educated American parents find daunting.

The facilitator for that session, Liliana Valadez, walked them through the four types of student aid: loans, grants, scholarships, and work-study. One mother, amazed that grants are awarded with no repayment required, said in Spanish: "Is that money really free?"

Valadez reminded the parents of important distinctions as they venture into the world of student loans.

"You don't have to get a federal loan. You can get a loan from a bank," she said. "But remember, the interest rate will be much higher, and you'll have to start repaying it as soon as you get the loan, so be careful."

Two months ago, these parents had never heard of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, a crucial conduit to loans and grants. Tonight, when Valadez asks how they can get low-interest government loans, they respond, in near-unison: "FAFSA." In the weeks leading up to that session, they learned about the **Common Core State Standards**; about statewide and college-admissions tests, what a grade point average is, and why it's important. They learned which courses students need to graduate from high school, and what they should take if they're aiming for the California State or University of California institutions. They learned what the school's counselors do, and, as their "homework," had to call and make an appointment with their child's counselor.

Teachers and counselors feel the impact of the course in their school. Bertha Magaña-Rios, a Spanish teacher at Johansen High, said she can tell when PIQE's in session. "Parents start calling me," she said. "They want to know how to log in" to online portals that show students' grades, assignments, and messages from teachers. "They start emailing me to find out how their kids are doing and what they can do at home to help them get better grades."

A few years ago, when a particularly large group of parents was taking the course, counselors at the 1,800-student school were so inundated with calls and appointments that they had to stay late at work to manage them, said principal Nathan Schar. Olivia Alva, a Modesto parent who's taken several PIQE courses, said that when she first immigrated from Mexico, she didn't see the need to get involved in her son's school. In her hometown, she said, "parents trust and respect la maestra"—the teacher—and don't want to "bother" her. But she quickly realized that to help her children in the United States, she had to master the workings of the school system.

As a result, "she was always checking whether I was taking the right classes," said her son, Leo. With no college education herself, Alva was able to help Leo research and apply to college. He graduated from the University of California-Berkeley in 2016.

Some PIQE graduates have used the training to expand their involvement beyond just their children's schools. Rosaura Muratalla lives in the small town of Planada, about 45

miles south of Modesto. She started a group that's working with the local principal on bullying issues, and also with community agencies to get health care for undocumented people, to improve the local park, and get a streetlight installed in town.

"I feel that I have more knowledge and information now, and that makes me feel like I have more power," she said.

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