

Latino Parents and School Staff Talk and Work Together At Cannon Road Elementary School

Educators and Hispanic parents at Cannon Road Elementary School understood that the gap in student achievement was tied to the communication gap between schools and parents from different cultures. Together, they have found a way to talk, listen, and act together for the benefit of children.



Photo: Montgomery County Public Schools
A group of Spanish-speaking parents discuss ways to increase parent involvement in Montgomery County Public Schools.

Last fall, parents Ivette Rodriguez and Beatrice Pena approached school principal Judith Thiess to suggest holding dialogues among Hispanic parents and school staff to find ways of bridging the cultural differences, engage more Hispanic parents in the school, and improve communication. Rodriguez and Pena had previously participated in a study circle with Thiess at Cannon Road the year before, and thought the process would work with Hispanic parents if done in Spanish. Thiess eagerly supported their efforts. “One of my main goals is to help Hispanic parents feel comfortable coming to the school,” she says. “We don’t want them feeling that school is something that belongs to other people and not to them.”

After an initial information meeting, 13 Hispanic parents and five staff members, including the principal, a first-grade teacher, an ESL teacher and two other European American teachers—signed up to meet for six weekly sessions. The group met on Friday nights to accommodate parents who work two jobs. They were led by Marta Medina and Ottoniel Perez, facilitators from the MCPS Study Circles Program in the Division of Family and Community Partnerships. An interpreter assisted two teachers and the principal, who do not speak Spanish.



Photo: Montgomery County Public Schools

Otto Perez facilitates the discussion.

Lourdes Chavez explained that many newcomers find it hard to feel at home in the schools. Chavez, who came to the United States from El Salvador 17 years ago, has three children in Montgomery County schools. Sometimes, she has felt unwelcome. “Some teachers go out of their way to say hello,” Chavez says. “But other times, I will smile at a teacher who looks right through me. It’s like I don’t exist. They assume that because of how I look, I don’t speak English.”

Educators who thought that some Hispanic parents didn’t value education were surprised to learn that, in many Hispanic countries, parents are expected to take care of matters at home, and let teachers take care of matters in school. Fabio Rosales, a

physician from Nicaragua explains: “In my country, each teacher has a class of about 40 children. We don’t have the technology you have here. And many of the children have to leave school early to work so they can help their families. The expectations schools have of families are very different.”

Participants in the circle were inspired by others’ stories. “Sharing our early life experiences and how they impacted us, that surprised me,” says Zenaida Pastor. “Reflecting on how I overcame past struggles helped me see that these experiences are part of the strength I offer to my children today.”

Xiomara L. Coca, from El Salvador, says, “During these conversations, we’re learning how to help our children do better in school. As for me, I didn’t finish my own studies because I had to work. I often tell my son how important it is to study now for a better life later. I’ll do whatever I can to help him.”

One mother who cannot help her child with homework describes how she asks the teacher to help. “Other parents, they feel too timid to explain their predicament in English. But me? I recognize that I must send my son along the way better prepared to succeed in this world, whatever that takes.”



Photo: Montgomery County Public Schools
Cannon Road Elementary School Study Circle participants pose for their final meeting.

As the dialogue progressed, enthusiasm grew. Parents discovered ways to help their children succeed academically. “One woman in my circle was glad she came because now she knows she can ask for an interpreter when she goes to a parent/teacher conference,” recalled Chavez.

Rosales felt moved by one woman’s story of learning how to read and write all by herself at home. “She plans to take the ESL class. And she’s grateful for one of the ideas that came out of our circle: having other parents help her son with homework that she cannot help him with.”

When they looked at the statistics, many parents were surprised and worried by the low test scores of Hispanic students. They learned that advanced placement classes are made up mostly of European-American and Asian-American students. They also heard that closing the achievement gap has been a priority in the school district for nearly 20 years, and that studies confirm that strengthening partnerships between schools and the families they serve is key to children’s success.

“Each week, new people kept joining the circle,” says Thiess. “This networking of sorts just took off. It was great to see the parents working together and recognizing that they

have more of a voice together than they do alone. My hope is that, through these conversations, new parent leaders from the Hispanic community will emerge.”

Parents also felt the time was well spent, and the group is continuing to meet, from time to time. Says Lourdes Chavez, “Now I know the principal. I was able to share my thoughts with her through the interpreter. Before, I felt like no one in the school was listening. But the person at the top rung of the ladder was there, sitting with us, listening to our concerns, telling us her plans to make things better for our children. I walked away feeling something will come of this.”

“I was telling the principal that if they ever need my help in the front office, give me a call,” Chavez says. The principal suggested we continue meeting once a month with other parents so she can hear what Latino families’ needs are and, hopefully, address them.”

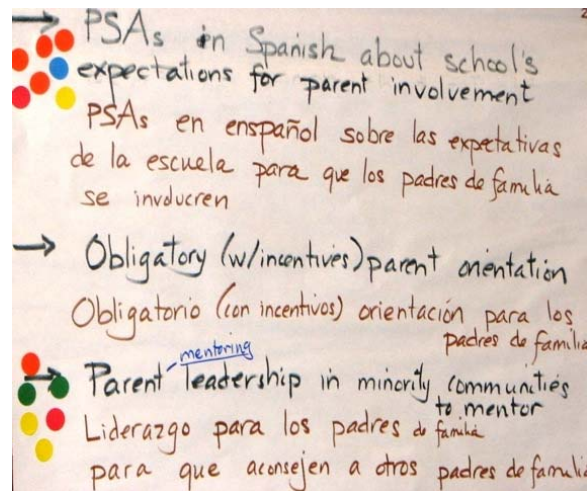


Photo: Montgomery County Public Schools
A flip chart displays parents' ideas in Spanish for improving communication between the Hispanic community and the school system.

The school has already implemented many of the group’s ideas for action:

- A teacher who took part in the circle is leading English classes for parents, once a week.
- Parents have started a Spanish-language phone tree.
- A Spanish translation of the school directory provides information about school policies, and the names and numbers of people to call when they have questions.
- The principal recruited bilingual parents to volunteer at the school on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. The school publicized the schedule so that Spanish-speaking parents know when they can get help.

Improved communication between the school and the Hispanic community is lasting. Says Coca, “The most important thing is to involve parents. We showed the administration that we as Hispanic parents care about our children. And the principal has made me feel welcome. It has motivated me to continue coming.”