

The Important Role of Parent Centers

Parent centers are valuable tools for engaging and supporting newcomer parents and families. A thoughtfully designed center can do the following things:

Welcome Newcomer Families

- A parent center can provide a welcoming place within the school for all parents.
- Families should be informed about the center and its purpose. They need to know that it is a place they can get information about the school and the community, feel safe asking questions, and meet other parents.
- Those who staff the center—usually a parent coordinator or volunteer—should be informed about the special needs of newcomer families and ways the center can make newcomer parents feel welcome and comfortable.

Serve as a Hub for Information and Communications

- The parent center staff can introduce newcomer parents to the center and provide orientation materials, such as a fact sheet about the school.
- Parents should be informed that parent centers are places where parents can gather to learn, share resources about external and internal opportunities for learning, exchange expertise, and connect with school and community resources. They provide up-to-date information about employment, medical and dental services, food stamps, and citizenship applications.
- Parent centers often offer a variety of classes, based on families' needs and interests.

Model and Support Parents' Engagement With Their Child's Learning

- Parent centers can help parents identify learning opportunities at home and take advantage of museums, libraries, parks, and other resources.
- Centers often sponsor classes to introduce families with young children to early literacy activities in the language the family feels most comfortable speaking. The children will benefit from reading materials in their home language, and the newcomer parent can become familiar with various cultures by discussing ideas, exploring characters in fiction, and being introduced through social studies to new perspectives.
- Staff in the center may model questioning and engagement strategies that parents can use to facilitate their children's learning at home.
- Families should be encouraged to monitor their child's reading and to talk about text every day; centers can empower families by building their capacity to do so in English and/or the home language.

Provide Disability Resources

- Parent resource centers including Parent Training and Information (PTI) Centers and Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) provide resources to families who have a child with a disability. They can provide information about the disability of the child, early intervening services, school services, therapy, transportation, and additional resources that are available.
- CPRCs may have some additional resources, as they are designed to reach underserved children with disabilities including those who are English Learners (ELs).
- Having a child with a disability may carry a cultural stigma for some newcomers, and parent resource centers can provide supports and help families to navigate the special education process within the school system.

Provide Access to Technology and Digital Know-How

Parent centers provide opportunities for families to use technological resources. Rideout and Katz (2016) found that many immigrant families have mobile-only access (e.g., cell phones), and no home access (that is, no laptop or desktop computer and no internet connection).

Center staff should be aware of newcomers' families' access and attitudes related to technology:

- The main reason some families do not have home computers or internet access is because they cannot afford it.
- Parents use the internet for a broad range of purposes, but mobile-only families are less likely to do certain online activities.
- Children from low- and moderate-income families use computers and the internet for a variety of educational activities, but those without home access are less likely to go online to pursue their interests.
- Parents feel largely positive about the internet and digital technology, but many also have concerns about inappropriate content online, distractions from important activities, online bullying, and the possibility that classroom technology might be a distraction that hurts children's education.
- Children and parents frequently learn with and about technology together, especially in families with the lowest incomes and where parents have less education.

Katz, Levine, and Gonzalez (2015) stated that "parents' relationships with administrators and teachers are crucial to how they integrate technology at home. Many parents depend on teacher-recommended online resources to guide children's out-of-school learning. Schools' outreach to parents when adopting new digital learning platforms—specifically how a district promotes the program to families, and how programs respond to parents' needs and concerns—is also critical to maintaining families' trust."

In schools without parent centers, teachers and administrators may wish to explore other practical and easily accessible and sustainable places to support families' digital use. For example, partnerships with libraries, internet cafes, and public-private ventures may help families gain access to the internet. Schools should be mindful that "rapid, uncritical adoption of technological innovations is very likely to leave parents behind, reduce their capabilities to help with their children's schoolwork, and exacerbate intergenerational differences that ultimately disadvantage students' academic advancement, rather than enhance it" (Katz, Levine, & Gonzalez, 2015).