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School and Parent Interaction by Household Language and Poverty Status: 2002-03

Language minority parents may face a number of challenges when trying to communicate or become involved with their child's school. For instance, the inability to understand English, unfamiliarity with the school system, and differences in cultural norms concerning appropriate levels of parent-school involvement can hinder parents from communicating or being involved with their child's school (Quezada, Diaz, and Sanchez 2003). In addition, on average, language minority children reside in households with lower family incomes than children in families who only speak English at home (Klein et al. 2004). Research has also shown that family income level may be associated with parents' involvement in their child's school (Lee and Bowen 2006).

This Issue Brief describes school-to-home communication practices and opportunities for parent involvement at school as reported by parents of U.S. school-age students from primarily English- and primarily Spanish-speaking households during the 2002-03 school year. Data are drawn from the Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the 2003 National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES), which included English and Spanish language surveys of parents' perceptions of school communication practices and opportunities for parent involvement.¹ English-speaking households are defined as those with at least one parent who speaks English as a primary or first language. Spanish-speaking households are those in which neither parent primarily speaks English in the home or at least one parent primarily speaks Spanish in the home or as a first language.^{2,3} Spanish-speaking children were more likely than children from English-speaking households to live in low-income families (Klein et al. 2004). Therefore, findings are also reported by three levels of household poverty. For this report, the term "poor" will be used to identify those families below the poverty threshold; "near-poor" will identify those at 100-199 percent of the poverty threshold; and "nonpoor" will identify those at 200 percent or more of the poverty threshold.⁴

School Communication Practices

Measures of school communication practices with parents were taken from parent reports about whether, during the school year, the teacher or school sent parents personal notes or e-mails specifically about their child; provided newsletters, memos, or notices addressed to all parents; or called parents on the phone.⁵

Across English- and Spanish-speaking households during the 2002-03 school year, 92 percent of students had a parent

who reported receiving newsletters, memos, or notices from the school or teacher addressed to all parents; 50 percent of students had a parent who reported receiving personal notes or e-mails from the school or teacher about the student; and 43 percent of students had a parent who reported receiving a phone call from the school or teacher (table 1).

Parent reports of school communication practices differed by household language for all measurements except phone calls. A greater percentage of students from English-speaking households (50 percent) than Spanish-speaking households (40 percent) had a parent who reported receiving personal notes or e-mails about the student. Similarly, 92 percent of students from English-speaking households had a parent who reported receiving newsletters, memos, or notices compared with 82 percent of students from Spanish-speaking households. No measurable differences were found between English- and Spanish-speaking households in the percentage of students whose parents reported receiving a phone call from the school.

After taking household poverty status into account, the differences in parent reports of school communication practices continued to exist between English- and Spanish-speaking households. For example, students in poor English-speaking households were more likely than students in poor Spanish-speaking households to have parents who reported receiving personal notes or e-mails about the student (49 vs. 40 percent). Similarly, students in poor English-speaking households were more likely than students in poor Spanish-speaking households to have parents who reported receiving newsletters, memos, or notices (87 vs. 81 percent). Lastly, students in nonpoor English-speaking households were more likely than students in nonpoor Spanish-speaking households to have parents who reported receiving newsletters, memos, or notices (94 vs. 84 percent).

Differences were also found in parent reports of school communication practices for English-speaking households across poverty levels. For example, a greater percentage of students from nonpoor households (94 percent) had a parent who reported receiving a newsletter, memo, or notice than students from near-poor (90 percent) and poor (87 percent) households. In addition, a greater percentage of students from poor households (49 percent) had a parent who reported receiving a phone call from the teacher or school than did students from near-poor (43 percent) and nonpoor (41 percent) households. No measurable differences were found across poverty levels in parents' reports of school communication practices for Spanish-speaking households.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of all students and percentage of students with a parent/guardian who reported the child's school engaged in school communication practices, by household language and poverty status: 2002-03

Characteristic	All students	School communication practices		
		Personal notes or e-mails about student	Newsletters, memos, or notices addressed to all parents	Phone call
All students	100.0	49.6	91.5	42.5
Household language				
English-speaking	93.0	50.4	92.2	42.4
Spanish-speaking	7.0	39.7	82.3	43.7
Poverty status and household language				
Poor				
English-speaking	78.6	48.5	87.2	49.4
Spanish-speaking	21.4	39.8	81.3	43.8
Near-poor				
English-speaking	90.1	51.8	89.8	42.5
Spanish-speaking	9.9	38.7	83.2	44.1
Nonpoor				
English-speaking	98.4	50.3	94.3	40.8
Spanish-speaking	1.6	42.2	83.8	41.9

NOTE: Not all apparent differences in this table are statistically significant. Standard errors are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006086>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the National Household Education Surveys Program (PFI-NHES:2003).

Opportunities for Parent Involvement

Measures of opportunities for parent involvement were taken from parent reports of whether the school held general meetings, such as an open house; parent-teacher conferences; or school or class events, such as a play or sports event, that parents could attend during the 2002–03 school year and whether the school offered parents the chance to volunteer during the school year.

Across English- and Spanish-speaking households, 96 percent of students had parents who reported that the school held at least one general meeting during the school year. Parents of more than three-quarters of the students reported that the school held parent-teacher conferences (88 percent), the school or class held events which parents could attend (77 percent), and the school offered a chance to volunteer (86 percent) (table 2).

Parent reports of opportunities for involvement with the school differed by household language for all measurements except parent-teacher conferences. Students from English-speaking households were more likely than their counterparts from Spanish-speaking households to have a parent who reported that the school held a general meeting (97 vs. 89 percent), the school or class held an event that parents could attend (78 vs. 65 percent), or the school had opportunities for parents to volunteer (88 vs. 58 percent). The percentage of students whose parents reported that the school held parent-teacher conferences was similar for both English- and Spanish-speaking households.

After taking household poverty status into account, the differences in parent reports of opportunities for involvement with the school continued to exist between English- and Spanish-speaking households. Parents of students from poor and near-poor English-speaking households were more likely than parents of students from poor and near-poor Spanish-speaking households to report that the school held a general meeting (94 vs. 87 percent for poor; 96 vs. 92 percent for near-poor) or that the school had opportunities for parents to volunteer (84 vs. 55 percent for poor; 85 vs. 58 percent for near-poor). In addition, students from near-poor English-speaking households were more likely than students from near-poor Spanish-speaking households to have a parent who reported that the school or class held an event that parents could attend (73 vs. 66 percent).

Of students living in nonpoor households, those living in English-speaking households were more likely to have a parent who reported that the school had opportunities for parents to volunteer than those living in Spanish-speaking households (91 vs. 72 percent). Similarly, students from nonpoor English-speaking households

were more likely than students from nonpoor Spanish-speaking households to have a parent who reported that the school or class held an event that parents could attend (82 vs. 66 percent).

Differences were also found in parent reports of school involvement opportunities for English-speaking households across poverty levels. Students from poor households were less likely than students from nonpoor households to have parents who reported that the school had opportunities for parent involvement. For example, 69 percent of students living in poor households compared with 82 percent of students living in nonpoor households had parents who reported that the school or class held an event that parents could attend. Similarly, students living in poor households (84 percent) were less likely than students living in nonpoor households (91 percent) to have a parent who reported that the school offered a chance to volunteer. Furthermore, students living in poor households (94 percent) were also less likely than students living in nonpoor households (98 percent) to have a parent who reported that the school held general meetings for parents. No measurable differences were found across poverty levels in parents' reports of opportunities for parent involvement for Spanish-speaking households.

Conclusion

Some measures in this study indicate that there are differences in school communication practices and opportunities for parent involvement between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking households. A greater percentage of students in English-speaking

households than in Spanish-speaking households had parents who reported receiving personal notes or e-mails about the student; receiving newsletters, memos, or notices addressed to all parents; opportunities to attend general meetings; opportunities to attend school events; and chances to volunteer. Differences were still apparent after taking poverty status into account. For instance, a greater percentage of students in English-speaking households at each poverty level had parents who reported receiving newsletters, memos, or notices addressed to all parents and chances to volunteer than did students from Spanish-speaking households at the same poverty level.

While the primary focus of this Issue Brief is on household language, it is important to note that the poor and nonpoor levels of household poverty status appear to be associated with students from English-speaking households when examining some school-to-home communication practices and some opportunities for parent-school involvement. For instance, this study found that poor students from English-speaking households were less likely to have parents who reported receiving newsletters, memos, or notices addressed to all parents than students from nonpoor English-speaking households. Furthermore, no measurable differences were found across poverty levels in parents' reports of school communication practices and opportunities for parent involvement for Spanish-speaking households.

References

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Table 2. Percentage distribution of all students and percentage of students with a parent/guardian who reported the child's school offered various opportunities for parent involvement, by household language and poverty status: 2002-03

Characteristic	Opportunities for parental involvement				
	All students	General meeting	Parent-teacher conference	School or class event	Chance to volunteer
All students	100.0	96.4	88.1	77.1	86.0
Household language					
English-speaking	93.0	97.0	88.1	78.0	88.2
Spanish-speaking	7.0	89.0	88.0	65.1	58.4
Poverty status and household language					
Poor					
English-speaking	78.6	93.8	87.7	68.6	83.5
Spanish-speaking	21.4	86.5	87.1	63.9	55.2
Near-poor					
English-speaking	90.1	96.3	89.1	73.3	84.9
Spanish-speaking	9.9	91.6	88.8	66.4	58.1
Nonpoor					
English-speaking	98.4	98.0	87.8	82.0	90.5
Spanish-speaking	1.6	92.4	89.3	66.4	71.9

NOTE: Not all apparent differences in this table are statistically significant. Standard errors are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006086>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the National Household Education Surveys Program (PFI-NHES:2003).

Vaden-Kiernan, N., and McManus, J. (2005). *Parent and Family Involvement in Education: 2002-03* (NCES 2005-043). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Endnotes

- See Vaden-Kiernan and McManus (2005) for a report on parent involvement in schools using data from the 2003 NHES.
- The sample includes 12,167 students from English- or Spanish-speaking households who had a parent or guardian who reported on school communication practices and opportunities for parent involvement. The analysis was weighted using the variable FPWT (final population weight), which resulted in a weighted sample size of 51,394,188.
- Students from English-speaking households represented 91 percent of the national sample and students from Spanish-speaking households represented 7 percent of the national sample. Non-English and non-Spanish-speaking households (2 percent) were excluded from this analysis.
- Household poverty status was determined using Census Bureau weighted average poverty thresholds for 2003 (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/threshld.html>). Data on household income and the number of people living in the household are combined with estimates of the poverty threshold to classify families as "poor," "near-poor," and "nonpoor."
- A limitation of the study is the lack of school-level data, which were not collected as part of the Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the 2003 NHES. See Carey, Lewis, and Farris (1998) and Chen (2001) for NCES reports of parent involvement using school-level data. It should be noted that school reports of school-to-home communication practices and opportunities for parent-school involvement may differ from parent reports.

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