

# How Parent Liaisons Connect Families to School

Joan Montgomery Halford

**From helping a father sign up for ESL classes to explaining an unfamiliar education term like “gifted and talented” to a mother, multilingual parent liaisons are building a bridge between a Virginia school and neighboring families in need.**

Two posters adorn the walls of the community room at Timber Lane Elementary School in Fairfax County, Virginia. One portrays a Vietnamese couple and their two children playing together with vivid red and yellow toys on the floor of a modest apartment. In the other, members of a Hispanic family embark on a picnic. For parent liaisons Teresa Fernandez, Hahn Ong, and Fern B. True, these scenes are visual reminders of their goal of helping diverse school families maintain a happy home life where learning can thrive.

In neighborhoods of wide socioeconomic and cultural variation, liaisons who speak two or more languages are a vital link between school and community. At Timber Lane, 40 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 20 home languages are represented. A high transience rate complicates the picture; each year, 4 in 10 students are new. In homes served by the program, parents have become more involved at school, and children have improved their attendance and made achievement gains in reading and writing.

## Building Bridges

The liaison concept at Timber Lane emerged from student needs. In recent years, school staff had noticed an increasing number of students coming from homes in which basic necessities were not always met. Though teachers, counselors, and administrators refer cases of serious neglect to social workers, the symptoms of other problems are far more subtle: children who do not bring homework, students who appear hungry or sleepy in class, and parents who don't attend conferences and schoolwide activities.

In 1990, True, a retired Timber Lane teacher, and Cosimo Renzi, the principal at the time, obtained a \$3,000 grant to launch their family outreach program. “When basic needs are met,” they reasoned, “a family can develop trust and a sense of connection with the school, ultimately fostering improved self-esteem and interest in learning by all members of the family” (Lewis and True 1993).

Over several years, the program's original part-time position has grown into three positions to meet the needs of the sizable Spanish- and Vietnamese-speaking communities. As an active local resident and the parent of three children who attended Timber Lane, Teresa Fernandez moved comfortably into the role of Hispanic parent liaison. Fernandez, a social worker in her native Peru, had already developed strong relationships with families, teachers, and administrators.

Hahn Ong, the newest parent liaison, has built a bridge between the school and its Vietnamese families. Though all three liaisons work with local families representing many cultural groups, their linguistic and cultural backgrounds contribute greatly to their ability to connect with specific segments of the school community.

The support of administrators and teaching staff is vital, the Timber Lane trio stresses. As current principal Donna Lewis explains, “We needed to build a foundation of multicultural sensitivity and teacher enthusiasm before we could expect our parent

liaisons to function well. And that foundation is not static. As our teaching staff turns over, we need to continually foster understanding of what the liaisons do.” It's essential that the principal make clear from the start, for example, that the liaisons will work to support, not substitute for, their licensed professional colleagues.

## Meeting Diverse Needs

At Timber Lane, the liaisons have become the community-based branch of the school staff. Members team with principals, teachers, counselors, the school psychologist, the school nurse, and parent organizations to forge community connections that other staff simply do not have the time, resources, or flexibility to pursue. As True explains, “We handle situations in the home that are not severe enough for

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the social worker and beyond the realistic scope of teachers.” When teachers observe causes for concern—such as a student’s obvious need for eyeglasses, inadequate winter clothing, or decline in the quality of homework—they now contact the parent liaisons, who work with the student’s family before the situation worsens.

Before a liaison first contacts a household, Lewis calls the family to introduce the concept. Respect, acceptance, and a comfortable rapport are the goals of these early conversations. Once parent liaisons begin home visits, the ultimate goal is to help families address their problems and foster an environment that is supportive of their children’s learning.

The nature of specific assistance varies considerably. Some families need simple guidance with procedures such as how to enroll parents in adult English-as-a-Second-Language courses. Other households face more serious issues that jeopardize the ability to nurture growing children adequately. Because they speak English in addition to other languages, the parent liaisons can connect children and families with an ever-changing menu of external organizations and school-based collaborations—for example, job training networks, adult literacy programs, financial assistance groups, medical services, and therapists. The liaisons may work with individual families for months or years.

After directing parents to the appropriate social agencies, the liaisons begin helping them develop specific parenting skills that can enhance their children’s achievement in school. Throughout the relationship, the liaisons communicate frequently, both verbally and in writing, with teachers and other school personnel.

Sometimes, parent liaisons identify ways to assist a family that also directly benefit the school. One father, eager to gain more marketable job skills, now volunteers in one of the school’s new computer centers. Beyond his service to Timber Lane, this father’s presence in the building has had a positive effect on his child.

### **Strengthening Ties**

An ongoing challenge for the parent liaisons has been helping immigrant families to decipher a new culture of

schooling—one that may involve fundamentally different approaches to learning than those to which they are accustomed. “For many families,” Lewis emphasizes, “school is perceived as a government institution, not a resource. Through our parent liaisons, we work to change that perception.” If culturally diverse families do not understand complex school issues, administrative procedures, teacher expectations, or their own potential as advocates, their children may not receive the access to educational opportunities that they deserve.

Fernandez, Ong, and True have met with immigrant groups, for example, to explain unfamiliar education concepts, like “gifted and talented” or “special education.” By demystifying various aspects of the educational system, the parent liaisons enable caregivers to work more effectively with Timber Lane teachers. Fernandez proudly cites the story of one immigrant family who, through its increased understanding of the school system, eventually guided two children into the district’s elite Thomas Jefferson High

School for Science and Technology.

Creativity and resourcefulness have fueled the liaisons’ efforts to connect families to the school. With Lewis and other staff, the liaisons have developed and conducted several programs on conflict resolution, behavior management, parenting skills, and financial planning. By holding these workshops at nearby housing projects, the liaisons have reduced the need for families to travel to school, thus eliminating artificial barriers that separate school and community.

Beyond connecting families with resources, the liaisons have also become a two-way cultural conduit between teachers and families. The knowledge and experience they garner in local homes informs curriculum development, helping educators infuse the school with materials representative of the families it serves. Another benefit to teachers has been the increased willingness and ability of parents to support classroom activities.

### **A Powerful Model**

The parent liaison program at Timber Lane has earned high marks from teachers and staff for gains in student achieve-

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ment and family involvement. In the first two years of the program, True and Lewis (1993) documented significant improvements in the writing grades of all students served; approximately half showed similar growth in reading abilities.

Parents themselves reported that relationships developed by the liaisons had led them to see the school as a community center. Families tripled their contacts with teachers, participated in a school science fair for the first time, and initiated contact with Timber Lane staff more frequently for assistance with basic necessities.

And teachers, when surveyed about school needs—including high-tech equipment, math manipulatives, and

alternative assessment training—ranked the services of the parent liaisons as their top priority.

Despite these successes, the multilingual parent liaisons at Timber Lane face an uncertain future. Fairfax County, Virginia, Public Schools—a large, wealthy school system experiencing reduced funding—has not made a permanent fiscal commitment to the parent liaison positions. Administrators have applied limited external funds to piece together the part-time hourly salaries of the Timber Lane liaisons. For the 1995–96 school year, the liaison program suffered a 45 percent funding reduction.

In the meantime, student and family needs at Timber Lane Elementary

School generate a steady workload for the parent liaisons. “This work is so critical,” Fernandez insists, “You cannot imagine the value of these efforts until you talk with the families.” Although its existence is tenuous, the Timber Lane parent liaison program furnishes a powerful model of community outreach for schools responding to many dimensions of student diversity. ■

<sup>1</sup>D. W. Lewis and F. B. True, (1993), “Enter the Home-School Consultant: The Changing Role of the School Toward Families in Need,” *ERS Spectrum* 11, 1: 3–6.

**Joan Montgomery Halford** is Education Issues Analyst/Writer with the Education Issues Unit at ASCD.

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