

CHANGING SCHOOLS IN LONG BEACH

INDEPENDENT REPORTING ON THE GROWTH AND ACHIEVEMENT OF YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

Section B

Spring 2000

PARTNERSHIPS

Parents Need “Standards 101”

In the Long Beach public schools, standards-based reforms make the perennial problem of involving middle school parents in their children's learning even more important—and more difficult.

BY ANNE C. LEWIS

Before parents can become partners with schools in raising student achievement, says Penny O'Toole, principal of Marshall Middle School, “parents must have a chance to know what we are trying to accomplish and what they can do to help their kids.”

Principals and teachers are constantly challenged to find ways to make this happen in schools with great mixtures of languages, with both neighborhood and bused-in students, and with many levels of interest in school affairs among parents. In the Long Beach public schools, standards-based reforms make the perennial problem of involving middle school parents even more important — and more difficult.

“What we are communicating is change, not the status quo,” says Chris Eftychiou, communications coordinator for the middle schools. “We can't rely just on parents' own school experiences. We have new messages to share with them.”

Interviews with principals, teachers, and parents at several schools reveal that schools must use different approaches for different families. Parents of students in Marshall's AVID program, which helps students who are ready for more advanced work, easily fill the school library on their parent night. But it takes many phone calls to entice parents to monthly meetings of the English Learners



Standards-based wallpaper. At Bancroft Middle School, parents who participate in “Standards 101” learn how teachers use standards and rubrics to grade student work — and then help post the work all over the school. With examples all around them, students “see their work in an objective way, instead of subjective ideas of what is expected,” says Tina Richardson (left), whose son Chris “now might understand why he got a 4 and not a 6 on a paper.” Principal Kelley Hurley and parent Evelyn McConnell pitch in.

Advisory Committee. One Marshall strategy: “catching” parents of incoming sixth graders at an orientation that schedules them for half-day workshops, then enlists them for such projects as preparing hot chocolate in the morning to raise funds.

To help explain the district's standards approach to teaching, O'Toole has used parts of a video developed by the district and the Clark Foundation in meetings with parents. The school's report cards offer more than the regular listings of grades — they also stress the progress that students are making on mastering standards. Teachers also included a discussion of academic standards in their talks with parents at back-to-school night, and articles on standards appear regularly in the school newsletter. “If we say things often enough in small increments,” O'Toole believes, “parents will begin to understand standards.”

Still, she is cautious about declaring victory with her second-language parents, who turn out for parent meetings in large numbers, even though the school is far from many of their homes. O'Toole says she is constantly searching for ways to reduce the education jargon and explain the district's teaching reforms in ways that second-language parents “are not uncomfortable” and will stay involved.

Breaking through cultural isolation

Understanding how “culturally different” parents feel about schools that are not close to them — geographically or socially — is critical, says Maria De LaCruz, who has been involved in youth development at several middle schools and authored a report on “The Children of Long Beach” for the Earl and Lorraine Miller Foundation. “Some of these parents have been through wars, are illiterate, and have no idea how schools are run,” she says. “And so often parenting classes and other activities are intended for ‘bad’ parents, when the problem really is language and cultural isolation.”

As for standards, De LaCruz says, “Parents don't know what standards are. Parents are working and don't get involved unless there is something that requires their attention.”

One key is translating the complex ideas and language of standards-based reform so all parents have some understanding for what the district is trying to accomplish. “Parents need to see standards connected to the big picture of what students are learning,” says Juli Kendall, an instructional leader

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EVERYTHING WITHIN OUR POWER

This Parent Outreach Program Puts Student Achievement First

Rogers Middle School enjoys an active PTA and a generous supply of parent volunteers who raise funds, tutor in classrooms, and even run a "sweet shop" for students. But support for student achievement is the school's first parent-involvement priority.



Building parent buy-in. Parent support for student achievement is the first parent-involvement priority at Rogers Middle School. "If we get the parents to buy into education, then we've got the ticket," says community worker Pat Pollock (center), with principal Linda Moore (right) and parent Libby Casper.

BY JOHN NORTON

The November 1st memo from Rogers Middle School was friendly but firm:

"When you signed the contract in the Code of Academic and Behavioral Excellence," the memo read, "you agreed to *provide support for my child to meet the academic and behavioral expectations of Rogers Middle School*. We need to meet with you and your child to share with you the ways we can support each other and develop a plan for 1999-2000 school year for your child.... This meeting is required for those parents/guardians of students who earned a D or F in any class on the first Progress Report and have not met with teachers."

Parents were offered a choice of three meeting times: 9 a.m., 2 p.m. or 7 p.m. Rogers principal Linda Moore admits that attendance could not be enforced, "but it's our job to get them here and get everyone focused on the problem early in the year, when we can do something about it. We have to set the expectation."

The memo and the subsequent meetings are just one example of Rogers' proactive approach to home-school relations. The southside school enjoys an active PTA and a generous supply of parent volunteers who raise funds, tutor in classrooms, and even run a "sweet shop" for students. But support for student achievement is the school's first parent-involvement priority. "We try real hard as early as we can to create opportunities to work with the parents on academic support," says Rogers community worker Pat Pollock. "If we get the parents to buy into education, then we've got the ticket."

Because Rogers enrolls children from well-to-do families, it has a reputation in some circles as an "upperclass" school. But the sprawling Rogers campus, located in a quiet section of Naples, has its

share of low-income families — more than 45 percent of its students are in the free lunch program. And Moore says that when it comes to student support, it's impossible to predict parent behavior based on socio-economic factors.

"Of course there are differences due to education and the time parents have to spend in our school," she says. "Some parents are in a better position to help their kids with school work and so forth. But when it comes to caring, that cuts across all the demographic lines." When parents gathered for her "D" and "F" conference, Moore says, it was obvious to everyone in the room that "you can have a 'D' or 'F' on your report card, whatever part of town you're from."

During the meetings, Moore and another staff member "role-played" typical home conversations between students and parents. "She would say 'do you have any homework,' and I would say 'I did it already.' And then she made it clear she was going to make me sit down and do an hour's worth of something that had to do with school, whether it was homework or not." Moore required students to attend part of the meeting with their parents. "I had them sit together and write improvement goals in the kids' student planners. Someone heard one parent say as they were going out that 'our goal is that we don't have to come to this meeting any more.' Which is fine with me. I don't care how they motivate themselves, so long as the kid does the work."

"Everything within our power"

Over the past several years, teachers and administrators at Rogers have developed an early-warning system to identify every student with academic problems. "I have to feel by the time those kids leave

me in 8th grade, we've done everything we could possibly do to make them successful as students and as young people," Moore says. "Everything within our power with the resources we have."

The Rogers staff has adopted several strategies to provide extra help and support for struggling students. After experimenting with programs before and during school, they concluded that they could be most effective by strengthening after-school programs — offering tutoring, study halls, special instruction and intramural activities. Homework is a major focus for kids who stay after school. "We want to help them develop new scholarly habits early in their experience here," Moore explains. "Writing down your homework, doing your homework, turning in your homework. Those three things are what we emphasize."

Many district leaders consider Rogers' parent outreach efforts a model for other middle schools. In addition to PTA and other typical parent gatherings, Moore sponsors parent coffees to discuss the school's academic focus and its standards-based approach to teaching. The school publishes regular issues of a parent-focused newsletter in English and Spanish. Middle school parent liaison Kathy Scott works with Moore to monitor parent feedback and develop new programs to meet identified needs. Community worker Pollack contacts parents by phone and through home visits when students are flagging academically.

Despite all these effort, Pollack says, some parents refuse to become actively involved in helping their kids. "If you have a parent that says 'yes, I'll help' but doesn't hold to it, then we're back where we started," she says. Thanks to Rogers' expanded afternoon program, however, Moore and her staff are in a position to act even when parents don't. "Even if we can't get them to do anything on their

own, we can usually persuade them to sign a permission slip for their kids to stay after school," Moore says. "We call parents all the time, and we hope they will partner with us. We do everything we can to hold them accountable, but the final thing is, what are we going to do to make this situation better for this child?"

What parents want to know

Rogers, of course, has many parents — perhaps most — who are actively involved in their children's education. Those are the parents, Moore says, who are most likely to attend meetings like the parent coffees last semester, where teachers explained how students are graded in a standards-based classroom. Libby Casper, an active parent who attended one of the coffees, says that as the standards process has evolved and been refined by the district, "it's so much clearer. It's easier for parents to understand. I think the staff at Rogers has helped us see that our kids are thinking more critically and deeply than we ever did in school."

"When a parent comes in to talk to you, it's often a back-and-forth conversation, teacher-parent, parent-teacher," says Rogers history teacher Paul Jenkins. "What standards help us to do is bring the student into the conversation. Here's where the student is failing, here's what they need to do. Then the parent becomes your ally, and that's exactly the kind of relationship teachers and parents need to have. If we take the time to explain the standards and the student work and the purpose of the lesson to parents, that's when the students are going to show some improvement. I have yet to see a time when the parents left a meeting with me unhappy since I've been following this process."

Principal Linda Moore is quick to say, however, that the job of educating parents about standards is on-going and never-ending. "It's important for us to have parent education about what standards are — that they are really a way for us to make sure that everybody's kid is challenged to learn and understands what is 'good enough.'"

"I don't expect a parent to be an expert on standards. I would be content if she looks at her student's assignments, looks at his homework, and she knows that there are scoring guides so she can be effective in helping her child with school work at home."

"Some of the standards talk is verbiage. It's not so important that you can say, 'we're a standards-based school; we're a standards-based district,' as it is that you have a pretty good idea of what your kid can do at the end of 8th grade if they've been in this school for three years. Can they do the things they need to do to be successful in high school? That's what parents want to know."

Working Through the "Shock" of Standards

Paul Jenkins teaches seventh and eighth grade history at Rogers Middle School and serves as chair of the history department. Principal Linda Moore has hosted several parent "coffees" during the year where she and selected teachers talk to parents about what goes on in a standards-based classroom. When Jenkins spoke to a group of about 30 people last fall, he shared some assignments and student writing samples (see p. B4) to demonstrate how standards add more rigor to the learning process. In these interview excerpts, Jenkins talks about the value of school-parent communication around standards.

At the parents' coffee I attended, the parents were all very interested in what we were doing, and they were all very concerned, because when you start grading by standard, especially in a content-area course, you're demanding more and grades can suffer. Many of the students here at Rogers write very well, and it's very difficult to explain to a parent that "yes, this is written well; yes, they don't have any typographical errors; yes, there are very few spelling errors or run-on sentences, but it's still a D. And it's a D because the content in the paper isn't what we're looking for."

With the first paper that I gave this year in 8th grade U.S. History, I had at least five or six calls from parents who were upset, and rightfully so, because it was the first low grade that their student had ever received. They were very concerned because they felt I was being unfair. But what we've found is that if we take the time to sit down with parents and show them their student's paper, show them the scoring guide and the criteria by which we were judging the paper, their attitude usually changes. We will say, "We're looking for x, y, and z, and your student only has x. If they add y and z, or expand on y and z, their grade will improve." And as soon as the parents could see that, their reaction would change to: "Okay, that's what needs to be done."

The first paper of the year is usually the big shock. I allow them to revise the first paper, and by the second paper most students have learned that, in the case of history, you need to illustrate your reasoning and conclusions with specific historical examples. My first assignment was on exploration (p. B4) and the students were to write "why did people

explore?" When they listed why people explored, they needed to go into a description about a specific explorer, and more than one explorer, using them to illustrate the larger point. Many students gave a good description of why people explore in general, but didn't give the specific historical examples, which is part of the standard.

By using standards in the grading process, you are able to look past the good writing and concentrate on what they know. Three or four years ago, I would look at a paper, and if it was neat and double-spaced and had no spelling errors and was pretty well thought-out, I would probably give them a pretty good grade, even though the paper was full of generalities and did not reveal much deeper understanding.

The "A" paper I showed to parents at the coffee (p. B5) really illustrates the kind of student work that meets a high standard. That's one of the real values of standards; it creates a common focus for the teacher, the student, and the parent; we can all see where we're trying to go.

When parents see that we have a clear goal and that we are telling their students what we expect of them upfront, then they can take that knowledge back home and they can help us get the students to work toward the higher standards and better prepare them for high school and college.

Another good thing about standards — you can give students more than one opportunity to meet the standard. And when parents understand that, they relax a little bit.

Rogers history teacher Paul Jenkins helps Luke Chaney with note-taking





Exploration & Settlement

Paul Jenkins, history department chair at Rogers Middle School, used this assignment to help parents understand how standards-based grading works. Students received this assignment sheet. Examples of papers earning a 2 (below) and a top grade of 4 (next page) are shown. Jenkins discusses the assignment in the interview on page 3.

Writing Situation

You have just completed a short study of the causes and effects of European exploration and settlement. You have learned that exploration greatly enriched Europe, while often destroying Native American societies.

Writing Prompt

Describe the causes and effects of European exploration and early settlement. When describing the effects, pay particular attention to the costs and benefits of exploration and settlement. Papers will be scored on a 1-4 scale using this rubric:

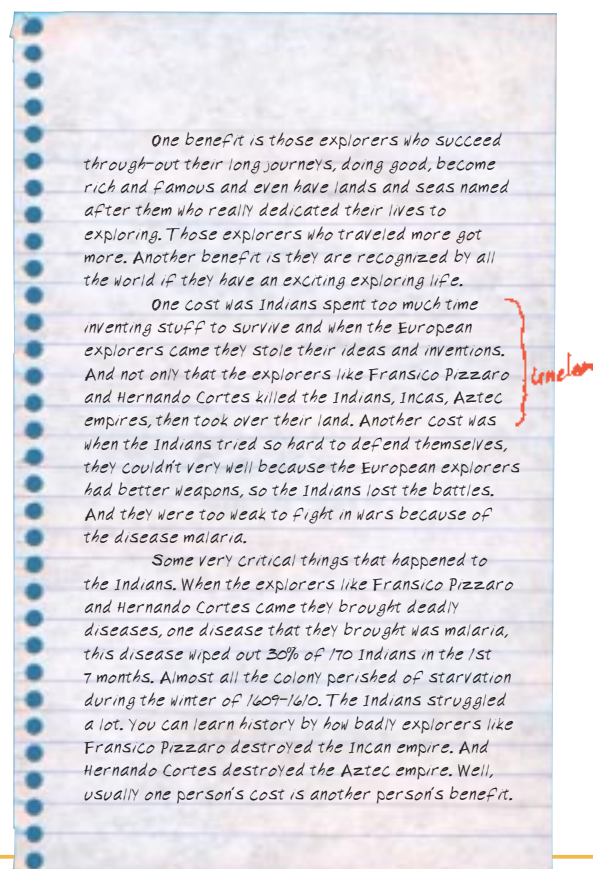
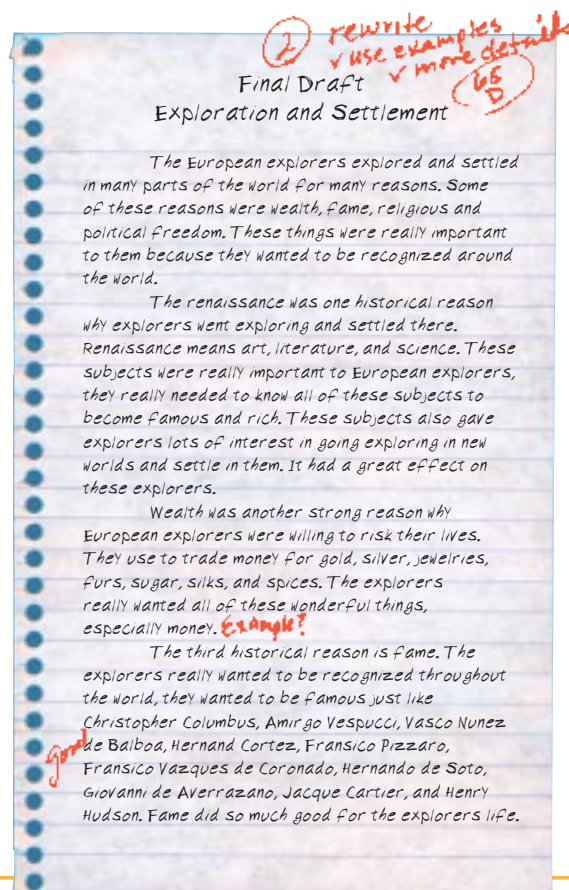
Graded Assignment in 8th Grade History Rogers Middle School

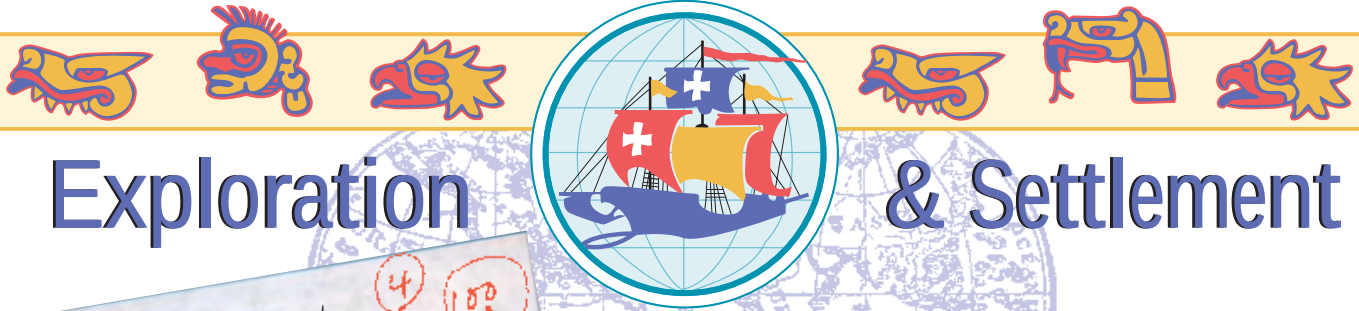
Describes (not lists) three specific historical reasons for exploration and settlement. Describes four specific effects of exploration. Two effects must be benefits and two must be costs. Students when discussing costs must include deadly new diseases and be specific about the disease and why they were so destructive. Students should also note the destruction of native empires such as the Aztec and Inca. When describing the costs and benefits, students should note that one person's cost is often another person's benefit.

Describes (not lists) two specific historical reasons for exploration and settlement. Describes three specific effects of exploration. The effects must include both costs and benefits. Students when discussing costs must include deadly new diseases and be specific about the disease and why they were so destructive. Students should also note the destruction of native empires such as the Aztec and Inca.

Lists some reason for exploration and settlement. Does not show mastery of the concept of costs and benefits nor the relationship between causes and effects.

Makes little attempt to even list causes or effects of exploration. Response seems to be a mere retelling of exploration. Incoherent.





Exploration & Settlement

Revised Exploration and Settlement

European explorers set sail with dreams of glory and discovery in the late 1400s. Some hoped to find a quicker route to Asia. Others hoped to find refuge from religious persecution, while others hoped for economic opportunities. By the 1600s, thousands of Europeans were taking long ocean voyages, drawn by excitement of discovery and the promise of life in a New World. The wilderness land that greeted them seemed as large as their dreams, yet not exactly what they expected.

The hunger for new lands came in many forms and for many reasons. First of all, the Renaissance was the revival of classical art, literature, and learning. This revival sparked people's imaginations and drove them to explore the world around them.

Second, there was a revolution in religion happening at the same time. The Protestant Reformation challenged the Catholic religious authorities, who persecuted the Protestants in return. The Protestants wanted a place where they could worship as they wished. Puritans left England for the same reason, searching for a place to establish a strict religious community.

Meanwhile Spain, Portugal, France, England, and the Netherlands were all interested in finding quicker routes to Asia in order to take advantage of the rich trade from that continent. Also, the Spanish rulers and merchants desperately wanted to find a way around the land routes to Asia. They became tired of paying the middlemen, who were getting all the profit.

Full of gold, but they did find gold and silver. Including the sugar grown, making them and Spain fabulously wealthy.

All of this exploring and searching, indeed increased the European countries' wealth. During all of this thought, they opened up a vast area for settlement at the same time. These were two benefits of exploration.

Many problems in Europe drove people to look for new life across the ocean, in the late 1500s and early 1600s. A new growth in population crowded European cities. Religious intolerance led to the persecution of minority sects, and changing economic conditions left many people without jobs or land. Therefore giving people reasons to settle.

Spain was the first to settle in the New World. Spanish missionaries brought their religious faith to the New World. The French settlers who first came to North America, hoped to make their fortunes in the New World. By offering large tracts of land to anyone who brought fifty or more settlers, they were able to build a sprawling colony. England's first permanent settlement was small and ill-fated, but with each

its. Not only did they want gold, silk, and jewels, but also Asian spices to enhance their boring diet. Even more than the desire for exploration and land, was the desire for wealth. People thought there might be a faster and better way to Asia, one of them being Christopher Columbus. After two months at sea, Columbus and his men spotted land, Columbus believed that it was India, but really it was San Salvador, an island in the Bahamas.

Columbus' discovery set off a wave of exploration. The discoveries made were often accidental though. Explorers were more often finding gold than land. Armed with weapons, these conquistadors, or conquerors, were set on plundering whole civilizations. This was one cost of exploration: the death of millions of native people.

For example, Hernando Cortes, a famous Spanish conquistador, marched into the interior of Mexico with 600 men. In a few years, he was able to destroy much of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, and topple the whole Aztec empire. As for Francisco Pizarro, he led his 180 men southward into the middle of Peru in 1531. He captured Atahualpa, the Inca's ruler, and by 1535 he was able to bring down the entire Inca empire.

A steady line of explorers and warriors followed these conquistadors. These were men bent on conquest and on the discovery of gold. Most of the conquistadors acted ruthlessly on their search for riches. They treated the native inhabitants of America cruelly, enslaving them, and most of the time killing them. They left a trail of slaughter and death in their search for lost cities of gold. Nobody did find a city

passing year, more Europeans came to the New World and made it their home, establishing many colonies.

After the Europeans came to stay, an invisible death walked among the Indians of the Americas. Europeans had been building immunity to typhoid, diphtheria, smallpox, and other plagues. But Indians had lived untouched by these diseases, and many Indians died of such small diseases as influenza and the common cold. Yet another cost of exploration and settlement.

Disagreements about land were the cause of tension between European settlers and native inhabitants. This tension soon turned into many battles and wars. Many Indians died and suffered, while the Europeans took their land. Making it a cost to the Indians, while to the Europeans it was a benefit.

The land that greeted these explorers and settlers brought them much pleasure, along with difficulties. But as time goes on, more people came to the New World, making it what it is today.

MIDDLE GRADES LIAISONS

Liaisons Do “Whatever It Takes” To Reach Out and Bring In Parents

Work schedules and language barriers make some parents of struggling middle school students reluctant to participate in school life. Add to this the normal decline in parent activity when students move to middle school, and it's easy to see why LBUSD's “parent liaisons” have a formidable task. But it's one they relish.

Mirna Turcios cuts her calling cards from a sheet of paper typed with her name and phone numbers. She uses a city bus to get around the neighborhood when a home she is visiting is too far away from her “office,” a desk in a room she shares with another support person at Washington Middle School. She is on the phone constantly, but knows it is her personal, face-to-face visits that will have the greatest impression on parents. Officially, she works only part time as a middle school “parent liaison.” Unofficially? Don't ask.

Turcios' work may sound low key, but she believes she has one of the most important jobs at this west side school. For more than a year, this soft-spoken, tireless mother, who has two daughters at Washington, has been reaching out to middle grades parents who live in the neighborhoods served by the school.

Turcios is one of four parent support workers assigned to middle schools as part of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation-funded efforts. They travel from school to school with the goal of helping all parents understand the district's standards-based approach to teaching and learning, and give extra time and attention to the parents of students who are struggling to meet the standards.

Turcios, chosen for her bilingual skills, has worked mostly at Washington this year, spreading her message that “Every kid is smart, and it is important for parents to tell them ‘you can do it.’” She understands the challenges parents in her community face. Many work hard to support their families during school hours, and because of language problems they are often reluctant to become involved at their children's schools. Add to this the

normal decline in parent activity when students move from elementary to middle schools, and it's easy to see that Turcios and her fellow workers have a formidable task.

Even so, the parent liaisons relish their work. They share a common philosophy — that parents are essential partners in helping students turn their academic performance around. “Parents don't have to know everything their children are trying to learn,” they agree. “They mostly need to support them.”

This is the message Turcios brought to Guillermina Salazar, for example, as she sat at the family's kitchen table in December to talk about why Salazar's daughter Veronica, a student at Washington, was making low grades. “You're smarter than this,” Turcios told the seventh-grader as they looked over her grades and work. Turcios shared information from Washington's teachers about the skills they expected Veronica to learn, translating the information from English to Spanish. She offered advice about ways to set up a regular place and time for daily homework and showed Señora Salazar how to check her daughter's school planner regularly.

After several visits to the Salazar home, Turcios began talking about Washington's computer classes for adults, Aztec dances, and drama productions — all in an effort to lure Mom into becoming involved in the life of the school. It worked. Señora Salazar is now a member of the school site council and is in and out of the building regularly. “I'm comfortable about going to the school,” she says, “and I am so happy when I see my daughter there.”

And Veronica — who is now making all As and Bs and actually enjoys math — is proof that Turcios'



Homey touch. Middle school parent liaison Mirna Turcios (center) visits the Salazar home to discuss the academic progress of Veronica (left), a seventh grader at Washington Middle School, with her mother Guillermina.

philosophy can bear fruit. “Mother and Mirna both told me I could do it,” she says. “And I did.”

The “whatever it takes” approach to parent support

Although the parent liaisons were hired expressly to explain the academic standards program to parents and help them find ways to support their children's learning, they have all found that — to be effective — they need to combine personal attention with the education counseling. Stressed-out single parents listen when parent liaison Sadie Perry, a mother of 10 who moved to Long Beach from Chicago several years ago, shares her life story and talks about the impact on her own children of her increased involvement in their education. It's not unusual for Perry to pick up parents for meetings, visit them at dinnertime, or drop by on Saturday mornings to talk about their children's progress.

Perry's demonstrated success in generating more parent involvement grows out of her willingness to do “whatever it takes” to show them that she and the school system care about their kids. She even volunteered to sing “Amazing Grace” at the funeral of a Hamilton Middle School student's mother, killed by a boyfriend. “Sadie is getting kids back on track,” says Elizabeth Flynn, principal at Robinson Middle School, which Perry also supports. “She can talk Mom to Mom and find positive solutions, where if the advice came from another school official, parents might get defensive.” (Flynn is so taken with Perry, in fact, that she's convinced her to become a full-time teacher at Robinson next year.)

Each school uses the parent liaisons according to

their needs. Liaison Kathy Scott works with principal Linda Moore to set up meetings with the parents of multiple D and F students at Rogers Middle School. Scott and Moore work together to convince parents to take advantage of after-school programs and other support services available for failing kids, and they help parents and failing students set improvement goals together. At another middle school, Scott worked on plans to recruit new parents into volunteer activities as soon as they walked in the door. At another school, she helped organize a parent group where none had existed before. She also serves as a parent representative on a district committee that's designing a new standards-based report card that will premiere next year.

Breaking in the principals

The liaisons frequently present information and lead discussions during parent meetings at their schools. "They are developing a full bag of tricks to get the standards messages across," explains Chris Eftychiou, the district's middle grades communications coordinator, who helps supervise the parent support staff. The liaisons take advantage of videos and other materials prepared by a national communications company expressly to explain LBUSD's standards program. "They've also developed talking points, glossaries, handouts on the use of student planners, general good-parenting tips," he says. "They pick and choose among them to give the right presentations to the right audiences."

Scott, for example, showed parents how teachers use a rubric to make sure students understand the kind of work expected of them on various

standards-based assignments. Liaison Anita Griffin helped parents solve the mysteries of the SAT-9 state testing program and how it fits with the district's own assessment plan. She also voluntarily attended a conference to learn more about GEAR-UP, a program at two of her schools that encourages middle-grades students to prepare for college.

When the parent liaison program kicked off last fall, some principals who had not been well-briefed on the program's purpose were slow to take advantage of the new parent communications resource. Unwilling to be ignored or underutilized, the liaisons began to find ways to make themselves useful. "We started by getting on the principals' agendas and letting them know how we could help," says Scott. Not surprisingly, they made the most headway in schools where principals were already committed to strong parent-community outreach.

By mid-year the four women were in great demand, and all of them work far beyond the original 10 hours per week allotted for the jobs. "Now, I'm treated like a queen," said Perry, who often turned up at her schools early in the morning to greet parents. Working in tandem with Lucretia Espinoza, a student intervention specialist at the some of the schools where she is a parent liaison, Perry reinforces the same messages as Turcios — get involved with what your children are doing at school, provide quiet time, check the planners.

Each of the liaisons, to varying degrees, acknowledges they often must help students with personal problems before addressing academic ones. It's a role they believe they can fulfill more informally than school counselors. Eventually, however, they reach parents with their "bag of



Change agents. "What we are communicating is change, not the status quo," says LBUSD middle school communications coordinator Chris Eftychiou, with Linda Bueno-Alawal, administrative assistant for the middle grades.

tricks" and get down to standards and school work. When language barriers arise, Scott says, each of the liaisons has identified translators who can help get their messages across.

"Parents don't know all the acronyms or everything that is out there to help them," says Scott. "It's part of our job to untangle all of that and help them help their kids be more successful in school." Griffin adds that while there are ample opportunities available for parents to be involved, many reject traditional groups such as the PTA. "They want to work with kids directly."

One of the traditional barriers to parent involvement, especially among low-income and limited-English speaking parents, is the school office. Many parents feel unwelcome when they visit their child's school, the liaisons say. Perry presented one of her principals with a parent survey indicating that Hispanic parents felt "no one is listening to us." The principal immediately set up meetings with the parents to search for solutions.

Principals and teachers often say they want more parent involvement, but for the most part, they are not trained to work effectively with parents. It's a skill they develop on the job, if at all. At the same time, parents often want to find ways to help out and be more involved in the life of the school. The parent liaisons, as Turcios says, are there to provide a bridge, ultimately drawing parents into higher expectations for their children.

The problem with this picture, observes student intervention specialist Espinoza, who found that Sadie Perry was spending more than 40 hours a week with her parents and children (much of it uncompensated) is that the "liaisons are only part time." There's just more reaching out to be done than four people hired for 10 hours a week can accomplish.



Doing whatever it takes. With support from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Long Beach Unified's middle school parent liaisons help parents find ways to support their children in a standards-based school system. (Left to right) Mirna Turcios, Anita Griffin, and Kathy Scott.

"Parents Need 'Standards 101'"

Continued from page B1

at Hill Middle School who helped develop the district's second-language learning standards two years ago. "A teacher may have students playing with ping pong balls to learn Newton's Laws. But it's easy for a child to lose the 'why' of what they are doing on the ride from school to home, and parents wonder what in the world they are doing at that school. What we tell parents about what we expect and why we are doing what we do needs to be simple and explicit."

Kendall works mostly with bilingual parents. At the same school, Randi Gibson, who teaches several RISE classes, finds that her parents also "are not interested in understanding the specifics of every standard. They want to know how the standards relate to what the students are being graded on. A lot of parents' eyes glaze over when we talk about standards."

Hill principal Robin Samana agrees that many of her parents are not interested in the details, but she hopes that the more they learn about how standards can help hold schools accountable for every child's success, the more they will realize the purposes of accountability beyond the SAT-9 scores. Hill parents attending PTA meetings believe there is too much emphasis on the SAT-9, a major reason why Samana wants to direct their attention to standards because "they represent the skills that kids need."

Middle schools lack a structure for parent involvement

Hill's teachers are so familiar with standards, Samana believes, that they have internalized them and can explain them to parents, "but often it is a struggle to reach parents who really need to know about them." One strategy used by the school is parent-teacher conferences. Hill was the only middle school to make the choice to pay for Saturday conferences from school funds after the state disallowed the use of professional development days for that purpose.

Teacher-parent conferences "are a valuable conversation piece that helps parents understand their children's progress," says Samana. "As an elementary teacher, I knew how much parent involvement impacts on student learning, but at the middle school we do not have a structure for it. Our parents missed the conference time they had when their children were in elementary school."

The Saturday schedule encouraged even greater parent participation, she says, with more than 200 parents picking up report cards compared to fewer



Parents need to know. Before parents can become partners with schools in raising student achievement, says Penny O'Toole, principal of Marshall Middle School, "parents must have a chance to know what we are trying to accomplish and what they can do to help their kids." O'Toole (center) meets with parents Mary Ferregur and Debra Hawkins.

than 70 when the conferences were held on a teacher work day during the week.

To Robin Cordell, a parent at Hill, the communication about standards-based instruction has been seamless from elementary to middle school, and she believes the district's efforts to inform parents have been excellent. "They listen really well, and we get answers," she says, "but so much change can be confusing for parents." Kim Watten appreciates "knowing if my child meets the standards, and I like it when teachers give us the curriculum guides" that describe what will be taught all year.

"Standards 101" at Bancroft Middle

At Bancroft Middle School, parents are at the point where they "can talk about standards and scoring guides," instead of being talked at, according to Principal Kelly Hurley. He began with a "Standards 101" open house, using part of the video on standards with all parents, then sending them on a scavenger hunt to look for signs of a standards-based classroom. Parents learned, for example, "that students do well because they do a lot of writing with lots of drafts," he says.

Hurley has used the video and forum discussions several times to keep the interest high, and parents learn even more by taking responsibility to post student work — along with standards and objectives and a scoring guide — throughout the halls of the school.

With examples of graded work all around them, students "see their work in an objective way, instead of subjective ideas of what is expected," says Tina Richardson, whose son Chris "now might understand why he got a 4 and not a 6 on a paper." Nancy

McFee's son was so pleased when some of his work was posted "that he is now setting standards for himself, applying them in Scouts and baseball, too."

Talk about standards dominates teachers' lives at Bancroft, where teachers are becoming comfortable with critiquing student work together and "are beginning to plan assessments before planning specific lessons," according to Lou Kearns, literacy expert for the school. "Because we are looking at student work closely, we are looking at ourselves. In the teachers' lounge, the talk is about how kids are learning, not what they're doing."

Hurley believes the focus on student work helps explain Bancroft's high performance on state and district assessments, but he admits that not every teacher is "on board" — some, for example, still question the value of using scoring guides for important assignments. Still, Hurley believes teachers are becoming more and more comfortable with the standards approach as it becomes a more integral part of the school's operations.

Parents also feel more at ease with the standards lingo. Time set aside for parents at the sixth-grade orientation focuses on small-group discussions of standards and student work. Now, when Nancy Hackert's child brings papers home from school, "I see new ways of grading and understand what the rubrics mean."

While parents may not show up at school meetings as often as principals and teachers want, Hackert says, "there are a lot of coffee klatches going on in the neighborhoods where the talk is all about standards and what's happening at the schools."

When that kind of talk becomes commonplace in every neighborhood, the Long Beach community will know that standards-based education has truly taken hold.