



### **Key points:**

- Adapt your family liaison program to local needs
- Invest in liaisons whose backgrounds reflect those of families in your district
- Look for ways to measure your successes, identify improvement areas

### **Rural Colorado district bridges gap between families, schools**

Points of friction between families and your school district can serve as guideposts for where to focus your family engagement efforts, according to leaders in the [Lake County \(Colo.\) School District](#) where language barriers caused tensions to mount between Hispanic families and staff. About 35 percent of students in this small, rural district are ELLs and 60 percent are Hispanic.

When confusion over school bus routes led to hurt feelings between the LCSD transportation department and Spanish-speaking families, the district's bilingual family liaisons jumped in to help. Along with other district staff, the three family liaisons showed up in a local neighborhood early each school day for several weeks to make sure children got on the right bus and to figure out a system to keep the process running smoothly all school year.

It's not that your family liaisons should redesign bus routes, said Kate Bartlett, director of business operations for the 950-student district. Rather, the story is a reminder that a district's family liaison program always needs to have a decidedly local flair. And in Lake County, that meant delving straight into disconnects between Hispanic families and schools. "We were not on the same page all the time and needed to bridge the gap," she said.

Now, after running the district's new family liaison program for half a school year, as frustrations ease up and problems are solved, relationships continue to strengthen between the district and Hispanic families, said Bartlett and Kathleen Fitzsimmons, the district's human resources and community engagement manager.

In an interview with Title1Admin®, Bartlett, Fitzsimmons, and the district's family liaisons -- Eudelia Contreras, Mayela Guerrero, and Blanca Rodriguez -- offered tips based on what they've learned so far.

- **Invest in local leaders.** In hiring the liaisons, the district looked for community members who were well-known, respected and who represented the Hispanic families the district most needed to reach. Ask community leaders for their recommendations, they suggested. Parents of current and former students as well as graduates of your local schools may be your top candidates. Don't forget to check whether local organizations can help with costs or donate staff time. A community agency in Lake County helped the district stretch its resources by funding a liaison part-time who was already doing similar work among families. The other two full-time liaisons as well as other program costs, such as supplies and training, cost about \$75,000 and are paid for through a combination of Title I, Title III, and Title VI dollars, Bartlett said.
- **Stay patient.** Family liaisons may find interactions with families are limited at first. Don't be discouraged, LCSD's family liaisons advised. Trust that as word gets around, more and more families will ask for help, the liaisons said. "Some parents who have never called before feel comfortable calling and seeing how their children are doing," Contreras said. Now, more parents

are volunteering, attending parent-teacher conferences, and calling and emailing the liaisons in Spanish, Rodriguez added.

- **Measure progress.** Although it's early, initial anecdotal evidence shows positive results. "Teachers feel more supported in being able to communicate well and parents feel their literal voice is now more heard," Fitzsimmons said. The district also has baseline survey data from the PTA's [Power of Partnerships survey](#). The district plans to do the survey annually to track progress with families, added Bartlett and Fitzsimmons. Responses from the district's employee support services survey also included many supportive comments about the liaisons' work, Bartlett added. Fitzsimmons and the family liaisons also developed specific goals and action plans to guide their work, and they're learning as they go. "We are still tweaking our goals and being patient with ourselves in this learning process," Fitzsimmons said.

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### **Begin with a template**

Although you'll always want to tweak and modify a family liaison program to suit local needs, it's helpful to start with whatever supports and resources you have, suggested Kate Bartlett, director of business operations and Kathleen Fitzsimmons, human resources and community engagement manager for the [Lake County \(Colo.\) School District](#).

For example, the [Colorado Department of Education](#) provided family engagement training for districts in the state. Read more about the state's training efforts for parent advisory councils [here](#).

Through CDE's workshops, district leaders learned more about the [National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships](#). Such standards can guide your work, help you develop goals and action plans, and serve as a way to measure progress, they added. The standards address:

- Welcoming all families;
- Communicating effectively;
- Supporting student success;
- Speaking up for every child;
- Sharing power; and
- Collaborating with the community.

--[Tricia Offutt](#) covers family and community engagement and other Title I issues for LRP Publications.

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### **Key points:**

- Protect family liaisons' time so they can focus on work with families
- Check in on regular basis to address needs, adjust goals and plans
- Make sure liaisons know it's OK to seek help in answering parents' questions

### **Build up your family liaisons to strengthen school-home connections**

Family liaisons can open up school-home communication lines and serve as friendly faces who families come to know and trust, according to Eudelia Contreras, Mayela Guerrero, and Blanca Rodriguez, who serve as family liaisons in the small, rural [Lake County School District](#) in Colorado, home to three schools that all run Title I programs.

"Every school should have a family liaison," Rodriguez told Title1Admin®. Besides welcoming families and helping them engage in their children's education, liaisons help connect families with school staff and can help both families and staff with interpretation and translation needs, she added. "We listen to their concerns, and we channel them to the right avenue or solution."

However, despite the many positive interactions liaisons often have with families, their roles bring plenty of challenges too. For instance, bilingual liaisons often interpret during meetings between a school and parents. Particularly during difficult conversations, they have to remain neutral, Contreras explained. That's especially challenging in a small community like theirs where they know families well and parents often ask for their advice or opinions in front of teachers or principals, Guerrero added. "I try to tell them this is a conversation between you, the teacher, and principal," she said.

Other challenges, particularly for bilingual liaisons, include juggling the many, and at times last-minute, requests within a school for those interpretation and translation services. It can also be difficult for liaisons to send the message that they're available for all families if a large number of parents within a school need bilingual services.

Here are a few ways districts can help family liaisons navigate their roles of both representing the district and serving as trusted guides for parents.

- **Clearly define roles.** Schools eagerly welcome the help that a full-time family liaison brings, but it's easy for staff in these roles to get pulled this way and that. "Putting a new FTE in a school is like throwing a dead cow in a shark tank; everyone is going to want some," explained Kate Bartlett, the district's director of business operations. "You really have to protect the liaisons," she explained. Make their roles crystal clear to school principals and other school staff "so that they can accomplish this very unique charter that they have," Bartlett advised. It's important that the LCSD family liaisons have a physical space to work and be visible within their schools' front offices as this increases parents' comfort levels when they see a face they know. However, it's also critical that district and school leaders "avoid having these folks get sucked into the vortex of a front office," she added.
- **Touch base regularly.** The LCSD family liaisons meet weekly with Kathleen Fitzsimmons, the district's human resources and community engagement manager. They brainstorm about challenges, any pitfalls, and ways to improve their work, Fitzsimmons said. "A lot of it is training by experience," she said. "As something comes up, we navigate that as we go and try to support

each other." It also helps when principals check in regularly with their school's liaison, added Guerrero. A simple, "How are things going?" makes a family liaison feel supported, she said.

- **Encourage can-do attitudes.** Don't expect your family liaisons to have the answers to every parent question. Instead, emphasize the importance of them providing a positive first impression, developing trusting relationships with families, and serving as connectors to help other staff do the same. Tell your liaisons that if they don't know how to help a parent right then and there, it's OK to say, "I don't know the answer, but I will get back to you," Rodriguez said. "Never say 'I don't know.'"

--[Tricia Offutt](#) covers family and community engagement and other Title I issues for LRP Publications.

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