

## Reaching out to ELL Parents When No One Can Read

By Leila Kubesch

As an elementary school teacher, communicating with parents is not just a luxury. At times, if we don't reach out to ELL families, if we don't reach out to ELL families, it could mean that the child misses out on important opportunities that require a parent's signature like field trips.

I watched the creative effort of staff at my school, noting they do everything from the heart. One teacher takes on the daunting effort of translating all of his lessons to his students, and many other colleagues followed in taking the initiatives to send communication home in the best way they know how. Many discovered the online translation, where pages and pages of text could be cut, pasted and translated. In seconds everything looks amazingly foreign with all the accents we are unfamiliar with. It looks good, we cut and re-paste adding a signature and Voila- it is ready to send home. Unfortunately, these hard working teachers do not hear back. They resolve with the consolation that the information has been conveyed at least one way.

I never read what they sent home, and they never knew the daily calls that I received from confused families. As I became inundated with calls, that time became an additional task to my daily teaching assignment; had even less time to have a dialogue with my colleagues.

Parents who could not read, managed to find those who could, but no one was able to de-cypher what was being sent. Parents began sending those letters back hoping to convey that they did not understand, and teachers were confused why the backpacks of their students were turning into a mess of a filing cabinet. "Parents don't even bother to take them out!" A colleague shared in frustration after all that she had done to send and copy these letters.

To add to the challenge, teachers upheld a team spirit sending letters marked with "2<sup>nd</sup> grade team, or the Office Staff, and so on. When parents call me to inquire, I have no idea who

sent the letter so I may ask. When I inquired with the Office Staff, no one recalls sending anything, as though we have Office Gremlins sending mischievous writing when no one was around! As it turned out, we had received flyers from various buildings to pass on to our ELL families.

When I was lucky and had the parents come to show me the letters that were sent, it became clear what had happened.

### Lost in translation- what the staff intended to say

Teacher Note: Parents, please fill out the shape and return to the teacher.

*Intended Message: Parents, please fill out the form and return to the teacher.*

Teacher note: The diaper rash paper explains about the trip to the field.

*Intended Message: The pink paper explains about the field trip.*

*\*Rosado in Castilian Spanish (Spoken in Spain) means pink. In Mexico it means diaper rash.*

Teacher Note: To help your KDG student reinforce the fabric at school, you can use components desire beans to count, because repetition helps to reinforce his studies.

*Intended Message: To help your KDG student reinforce the material at school, you can use items like beans to count because repetition helps to reinforce his/her learning,*

### A Note about Translation

Some common procedures that we use in the U.S are never employed in other countries. For example, detention is foreign in other nations. Newcomers who receive a detention should get a note home that explains to parents what exactly happened. Instead of writing that the child received a detention, opt to explain that the child was kept from going to recess along with the

reason. Many parents who received a note about detention, kept their child home the following day believing that their child is not allowed to return for a day as punishment.

### **5 Strategies to Convey Your Message to Parents of ELL Students**

1. Use standard fonts for all the written documents. Many people are unfamiliar with certain fancy lettering like this would be hard, and this would seem kiddy, and possibly not an important letter.

2. Use concise writing, enough to get the message across. For example, “We are striving to teach our young friends to sit crisscross applesauce on the floor.” Change to “we are teaching students to sit on the floor properly or to cross their legs when they sit on the floor.”

3. Include the names of the teachers or staff member who sent the letter, instead of using 2nd grade team or office.

4. Consider having a logo for the different department on all letters. For example, letters from the nurse could have the universal Red Cross symbol, like:



*From the nurse's office*

5. Consider including a clipart on top of the letters that would tell what the letter is about. For example a field trip to the park for a picnic could have the following image. Parents shared that the images helped them a lot. For instance, when they misplaced the paper, though they could not read it, they knew what to look for.



### **Addressing Urgent Communication**

ELL parents rely on friends and family to interpret school communication when they feel that the letter is important and requires their attention. When that is not available such as

timely signatures, these are some strategies that have been very successful.

Use a clip art to inform of the field trip when possible and highlight the line that needs to be signed. Inform the students whenever possible. Parents rely on them to tell them what is happening at school. This may not be possible for very young students. Attach a note to the letter such as the sample below



Favor de firmar - - **Please sign** - Veuillez signer - подпись -

Dear Parents,

Please sign and return the permission letter. It serves to receive permission from you to offer English as a Second Language intervention and accommodations that your child needs.

Sincerely,

Your name

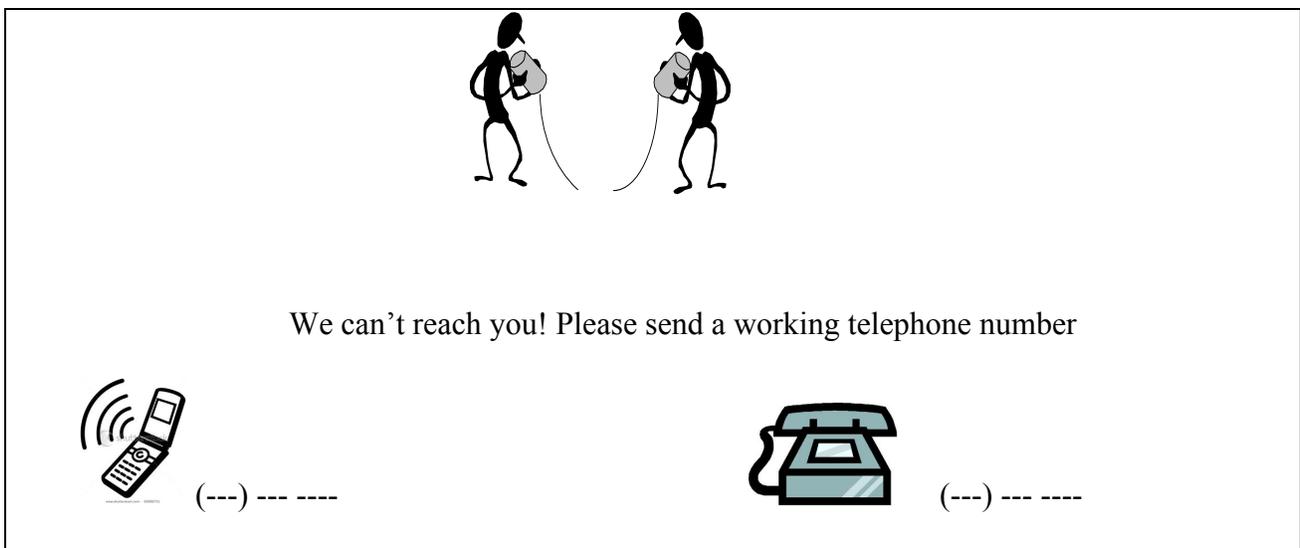
### **When no phone number seems to work: Addressing issues of making phone contact**

Even when an interpreter is available or funds exist to use the telephone interpreting services often there are issues with the family's phone such as--

1. The phone is not in service

2. The phone does not accept messages
3. The phone starts with a very long song that does not end even after 4 minutes.
5. The phone number belongs to someone else
6. No response after a message is left.

Below is a sure way to let ELL families know that you need to reach them and you need them to update their telephone contact with the school.



### **What to do when a dialogue with an ELL family needs to take place?**

There are times when a signature and phone number updates are not enough. For example, if the administrator or teachers need to engage in collaborative communication about the child such as having a Parent/Teacher meeting to include IEP meetings or to disclose pressing disciplinary actions. Many schools have attempted many creative endeavors including bringing in high school students who have completed a year or more of a foreign language. This is a great idea to enlist the help of youth to direct parents to the right location. However, it is never acceptable to have a child interpret or translate. First, these students do not have the technical command to know

vocabulary that relate to serious issues. Secondly as some parents pointed out, “ *Es una verguenza.*” Simply put, they feel ashamed. Often ethnic groups within the same district live near each other and may know each other. Parents do not want private matters to become public, and they merit the same dignity anyone else receives.

*Telelanguage* is a service that many schools use that is supported with Title III funds. It is ideal to use anytime the school needs to communicate with parents by phone or in person. The service has over 200 languages. A school may contact the service a day in advance for less common language and arrange for a time.

Here are the steps to use Telelanguage:

1. Call 800 514 9237
2. Specify the language needed
3. Have your school access number.
4. You will be asked to wait a moment.
5. Turn on speakerphone
6. Begin with an introduction to the family with who is present at the meeting. The phone interpreter will interpret.
7. Announce “End of Call” to signal the end of the interpretation.

Check with your school as you may already have the service. If you don’t have it, consider having it available. Fees are made by the number of calls and wouldn’t have to pay when it is not used. Here is the contact information for inquiring about this service.

*Telelanguage* 514 SW 6TH Ave, 4th Floor Portland, OR 97204 Call toll-free **888.983.5352**

### **Final Advice**

ELL families do not wish to create a disconnect between themselves and the school. They tend to have a high regard for school and staff, but often feel excluded. One of the best way to foster a relationship is to consider sending translated documents in both languages on the same document. Parents who speak Spanish, should not receive a copy in Spanish only. Many of them cannot read in their own language, but could rely on others to help. Consider using the same font, size, clip art and so on whenever possible in sending bilingual communication.