

Best Practices

Engaging Limited English Proficient Students and Families
A Teaching Tolerance Guide

TEACHING TOLERANCE

A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER
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Introduction

Fueled by two decades of historic immigration, American demographics are changing. Many school districts are often ill prepared to meet the needs of limited English proficient (LEP) students and families.

This Teaching Tolerance booklet points administrators to best practices in the effort to create a supportive learning environment for all students. Here, we provide guidance for creating a comprehensive communication plan that puts LEP parents on equal footing with English-speaking parents. Our tips will help you steer clear of discrimination during student registration and create a leadership checklist to help your staff make sure the school environment is welcoming to English language learners (ELLs) and their families.

Background

In 2011, Durham Public Schools ELL students and their LEP parents contacted the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) seeking legal help. They complained about limited access to interpreters, untranslated school documents and a general climate of exclusion. The SPLC agreed to work on behalf of more than 6,000 students and their families affected by the North Carolina school district's policies.

Durham Public Schools eventually entered into a voluntary resolution agreement with the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights outlining a plan of action to create a school environment that nurtured every child, regardless of English language ability.

As a project of the SPLC, Teaching Tolerance is disseminating these best practices to districts across the United States. They are intended to help administrators create inclusive school climates.

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Best Practices

Communication

Parents depend on basic school communications—report cards, bus schedules, permission slips—to stay involved in their children’s education. When a school fails to provide translation support to LEP families, these lines of communication can break down.

- Develop a written communications plan to ensure timely and effective communication with LEP parents.
- Maintain a list of LEP parents who require languages other than English and make this list available to all staff members.
- Notify LEP parents annually that free translation and interpretation services are available and explain how to request these services. A multi-language poster by the office explaining the resources available to LEP families can simplify communication.
- Provide free interpretation and translation services to LEP parents at parent-teacher conferences, meetings with the school principal and special education meetings.
- All parent notices (e.g., registration/enrollment forms, emergency notification cards, report cards, bus schedules, field trip permission forms, privacy policies and class schedules) should include appropriate translations.
- Train staff to effectively communicate with LEP parents—when and how to obtain qualified language assistance, use of interpreters when staff receive or make calls to language-minority individuals, and applicable record-keeping procedures.

School Climate

Perhaps your school has had a sudden change in demographics that has led to tension, or maybe ethnic hostility is an old problem. Either way, a strong—and evolving—anti-bullying policy can go a long way towards creating a learning environment that nurtures all of your students.

- Disseminate the schools’ anti-bullying policy—including a section on national-origin-based harassment—to all staff, students, parents and community members at the start of the school year. Don’t forget to print it in multiple languages.
- Administer an annual student survey on school climate—such as Teaching Tolerance’s School Climate Survey on tolerance.org—and use the results

GET STARTED *Have translated forms on hand.*

- Change of Address or Telephone
- Student NOT Riding Bus
- Reason for Absence
- Request for Conference
- Early Dismissal
- You can download a sample booklet of translated information and common documents at tolerance.org/translated-school-forms

GET STARTED *Build a strong relationship with the community.*

- Involve families in events such as Teaching Tolerance’s Mix It Up at Lunch Day to break down cultural barriers.
- Encourage teachers to make periodic home visits.
- Invite families to share their cultures with students either in the classroom or at a special afterschool event.
- You can download everything you need to host a Mix It Up at Lunch Day event at tolerance.org/mix-it-up/what-is-mix

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of the survey to identify and address issues related to harassment, including national-origin-based harassment. Again, be sure to provide the survey in multiple languages.

- Hold community meetings with interpreters present at least twice each year to provide information regarding registration/enrollment and communication services and to receive input from LEP parents and community members.
- Develop cultural sensitivity training for all instructional staff, cafeteria staff, bus drivers, school office staff and school-level administrators.

Student Registration

Even inadvertent discrimination can discourage parents from enrolling their children. Ensure that school publications, policies, practices and procedures are equally inviting to all parents by avoiding these common registration missteps.

- Registration and enrollment forms should not request or require information regarding a student’s, parent’s or guardian’s citizenship or immigration status.
- Registration and enrollment materials should not state or imply that a student or guardian must provide a passport or any other immigration-related document as a form of identification.
- Any request for a student’s, parent’s or guardian’s social security number should clearly state that disclosure is voluntary and explain both why the number has been requested and how it will be used.

GET STARTED

Hold an information session for families before registration begins.

- Have interpreters present.
- Explain your registration process in detail.
- Assure parents that the school’s only goal is to provide their children with an outstanding education.
- Inform parents of their children’s rights with our downloadable bilingual brochure, “Un Futuro Mas Brillante: El derecho de su hijo/a de aprender.” tolerance.org/bilingual-childrens-rights

RESOURCES

Examining Your School’s Climate

Strategies and tools for assessing your school’s climate
tolerance.org/activity/examining-your-schools-climate

Teaching Diverse Students School Survey

Assess whether conditions in your school support teaching that addresses the needs of all students in racially and ethnically diverse classrooms.
tolerance.org/tdsi/schools-survey

Enhancing Teachers’ Cross-Cultural Communication Skills

Methods for developing teachers’ abilities to engage in cross-race interactions with families.
tolerance.org/tdsi/asset/enhancing-teachers-cross-cultural-commun

Inviting Engagement

Strategies for better serving diverse parent populations
tolerance.org/activity/inviting-engagement

Translated School Forms

Downloadable example forms in Spanish and English
tolerance.org/translated-school-forms

Diversity Responsive Schools

A paper for school leaders describing characteristics of schools that are likely to be particularly successful in facilitating the learning of racially and ethnically diverse students.
tolerance.org/activity/diversity-responsive-schools