

Supporting School Volunteer and Family Engagement Programs

Immigrant Parent Involvement in American Schools

Helping Parents Transition from Cultural Survivors to Cultural Leaders

Stages of Immigrant Parent Involvement in Schools

Immigrant families are not all the same; some arrive here with limited education and nothing but the clothes on their backs. Others come with enough education and resources to help them more easily understand and navigate the American school system.

In order to support and engage all immigrant families in their children's education, it helps to understand the typical stages of immigrant parent involvement and the extent to which some families acquire a greater capacity to be engaged in their children's education.

The chart below—created by **Young-chan Han**, a family involvement specialist for the Maryland State Department of Education—identifies four stages of immigrant parent involvement in education:



Parents who are cultural survivors struggle to meet basic needs and may have limited direct involvement in their children's education. Whereas, parents with more resources and years of support and training acquire a greater capacity to become cultural leaders.

Han's father immigrated to Maryland from Korea and was later joined by Han, her mother, and three siblings when Han was 13 years old. While Han and her siblings learned English and assimilated to their new country, their parents were busy providing for the family. Although their dream was for their children's success, they had to work 12 to 14 hour days, six days a week to achieve that dream. That did not leave much time to be actively involved in their children's schooling.

Han's parents only came to school twice —when they enrolled her in elementary school and when she graduated from high school. They were **cultural survivors**.

By understanding the needs and roles of parents in each of the four stages of immigrant parent involvement, according to Han, schools and community partners can better address key factors that impact parents' ability to be fully engaged in their children's education and in their communities.



Stage 1-Cultural Survivors

Cultural survivors are focused on meeting the family's basic needs for survival, such as food, clothing, shelter, child care, healthcare, and transportation. At this stage, parents need assistance working through school policies and practices, including registration, bus, attendance, and inclement weather policies, required school forms, school supplies, and free-and-reduced lunch applications.

What schools can do:

- School staff members (social workers, counselors, parent liaisons, and teachers) can serve as parents' primary sources of contact for assistance in meeting these basic survival needs, connecting the parents with FCPS and community resources and helping them understand and comply with school and FCPS policies and practices.
- School "parent ambassadors" can connect families with resources and provide assistance in understanding school policies and participating in events. They can also provide assistance in a parent's native language when needed.
- School parent centers and PTA, PT0, and other parent groups can work together to provide food, clothing, backpacks, and school supplies for needy families.

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Stage 2-Cultural Learners

Cultural learners are better able to become involved in their children's education. They learn about the educational system by participating in parent-teacher conferences and school events, often with the assistance of translated documents and/or interpreters. As they increase their involvement, parents begin to feel more comfortable networking within their own language and cultural groups.

What schools can do:

- Conduct parent programs, principal coffees, and parent organization meetings to help parents become familiar with specific school policies and programs, such as advanced academics, school lunches, bus, attendance, and inclement weather policies, health care forms, report cards, and volunteering.
- Provide interpreters for school programs and events, including parent-teacher conferences and parent organization meetings.
- Provide translated resources when possible and use parent ambassadors and parent liaisons to reach out to parents and personally invite them to school events.
- Send Keep-in-Touch (KIT) messages to families in their native language when possible.
- Provide opportunities for social gatherings and skill development within and across cultural groups, such as international nights, crochet or knitting classes, English and computer classes, and simple volunteer activities. In these comfortable settings, parents can begin to build relationships with other families and school personnel, while learning about the school, their children's curricula, and methods for supporting their children's learning at home.

Stage 3-Cultural Connectors

As *cultural connectors* continue to gain knowledge and learn to navigate the American school system, they can reach out to "connect" cultural survivors and cultural learners with resources and programs in their school and community. At this stage, they are better able to expand their focus from their own needs to the needs of other immigrant families as they adapt to a new educational system.

What schools can do:

- Create a school parent ambassador program. Train multilingual parents to work with school parent liaisons and staff members to support new and immigrant families by providing translations, explaining school policies and procedures, and sharing information about children's curricula. Parent ambassadors are in a unique position to foster trusting relationships and parent engagement practices with immigrant families.
- Provide volunteer training opportunities through the school parent organizations and parent centers and encourage networking with other immigrant parents. Parents can be trained in pairs or small groups by bi-lingual staff or volunteers to increase their comfort level.
- Provide translated forms and interpreters to encourage immigrant parents to join and become involved in the PTA, PTO, or other parent group. Explain what the organization does and how their memberships helps students, teachers, and families in the school.

Stage 4- Cultural Leaders

Cultural leaders become actively engaged in their children's education and expand their skills and knowledge to advocate for others. They take on leadership roles within the school and community and participate in decision-making processes through local parent and community organizations and advisory committees.

What schools can do:

- Develop parent leadership programs through the school's parent organization or parent center that offer opportunities for immigrant parents to expand their knowledge of the school system and understand the important role they play in advocating for their own children and for other families.
- Help parents learn about and make connections with FCPS advisory councils, community agencies, and neighborhood groups to expand their levels of knowledge, comfort, and expertise.

More detailed information on Han's work with immigrant parent involvement can be found in Eileen Kugler's Book: [Innovative Voices in Education](#), Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012, Chapter 12.

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